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THIEL'S SMARTSUB THINKS FOR ITSELF.

BY STEVE GUTTENBERG PHOTOGRAPHY BY
IMPACT PHOTOGRAPHY AND DAVID CUBINE

At first blush, you might expect that any reasonably accomplished subwoofer will have what it takes to satisfy your bass desires. No doubt, all of the bigger subs produce room-shaking rumble, but the double whammy of room acoustics and the complexity of interfacing a subwoofer with your main speakers too often render untoward bass boom and bloat. With the introduction of Thiel Audio's fleet of radically new SmartSub subwoofers, help is on the way. By the time Buddy Holly's "It's So Easy" is over, the company's highly adaptable SS2 subwoofer is ready to rock my world.

Jim Thiel, the co-founder and chief product designer of Thiel Audio, could have built a "me-too" subwoofer by simply stuffing a large woofer and a powerful amplifier into a massive cabinet as many of his competitors have done. He instead confronted the pitfalls of bass reproduction, spending four years on research that resulted in two U.S. patents. The patents cover the SmartSub's design breakthroughs—the abilities to match precisely the subwoofer's response to the characteristics of the main speakers, and to compensate for the effect that a room's shape and construction have on bass reproduction. The patent coverage includes the design concept, not just the circuitry. So yes, as its appellation suggests, the SmartSub is downright

clever. The advantages of this elegantly proportioned and meticulously finished subwoofer are more than skin-deep.

The SmartSub line includes four models, the SS1, SS2, SS3 and SS4. They share common technologies and design concepts, but differ in cabinet and woofer size. All of the models provide superb bass reproduction, but the larger subwoofers can fill the most spacious home theaters. That said, for this review I am using the second model up in the line, the SS2,

which boasts two 10-inch woofers, and can accommodate rooms up to 4,000 cubic feet. The SS3 features twin 12-inch woofers, and a pair of 15-inch woofers supplies the muscle for the 290-pound SS4. Looking for something a bit smaller for a more intimate home



Thiel Audio employs a veneer specialist, which is why the SS2 (above) looks like fine furniture. Each of the dual 10-inch woofers (above right) features a massive magnet structure (right).



theater room? Check out the baby of the group, the 55-pound SS1, which uses a single 10-inch woofer. Each of the drivers features an oversized magnet to minimize distortion when the dinosaurs' footfalls are rattling your fillings. An integral 1,000-watt digital amplifier provides the power for the SS2, SS3 and SS4 while a 500-watt amplifier drives the SS1.

These subwoofers minimize the effects of room acoustics without resorting to time-consuming microphone measurements or extensive signal-processing trickery. The SmartSub's onboard electronics compensate for "boundary" wall reflections that create uneven bass response. Your installer just enters the distances from the SmartSub to the adjacent side wall, and to the wall directly behind the sub. Even if your installer mounts your SmartSub flush in a wall, he or she can use the boundary compensation to get ruler-flat bass. But then again, SmartSubs are unusually handsome and are available in a wide variety of gorgeous wood and painted finishes, so you may not want to hide this subwoofer. Although the largest model, the SS4, should be adequate to fill even large home theaters with bass, extravagantly spacious rooms are best served by multiple SmartSubs.

If you are lucky enough to own large main speakers that produce substantial bass, your installer can simply hook up the SmartSub like any other high-quality subwoofer, with just a single cable running from your surround-sound processor's LFE output to the SmartSub. But since most of today's home theater systems rely on small "satellite" speakers, Jim Thiel

designed the SmartSub SC1 Integrator to finesse the transition between the satellites and the SmartSub. The combined talents of the SmartSub, the Integrator and any set of high-quality satellite speakers will produce the sort of exquisitely balanced performance you would expect to hear from a set of towering full-range speakers.

The slim, silver, microprocessor-based Integrator takes the guesswork out of subwoofer adjustments. In fact, the Integrator offers no standard subwoofer controls such as volume, crossover frequency and phase. Instead, your installer just presses a few buttons on the front panel to input information about your speakers and amplifiers—12 parameters in all—and the Integrator does the math. The Integrator's memory can also store up to five groups of settings, so you can have bass tailored to fit your mood: boosted "party" bass, enhanced ultra-deep bass for action-movie DVDs, reduced bass ideal for late-night soirées, and smoothly articulate bass for acoustic music.

An all-metal remote lets you select the Integrator's presets from your easy chair, or it can be controlled by a touchscreen remote, such as a Crestron or AMX. Connectivity options include speaker-level inputs as well as complete sets of XLR and RCA line-level inputs, so the Integrator should work in any system. Thiel Audio also offers the PX Series Crossovers, designed specifically to match the SmartSub with Thiel main speakers.

The purity of the SmartSub's bass stands in sharp contrast to lesser

designs' turgid bass throbblings. The clarity of SmartSub's unerring bass response may initially sound like a lack of oomph to some listeners, but extended listening sessions will confirm this subwoofer's grace under pressure. Its ability to sculpt nuanced shadings of a plucked standup bass or to unleash the almost unlimited power of the earthquakes, tidal waves and massive floods coursing through *The Day After Tomorrow* DVD is unparalleled in my experience.

Beyond the obvious benefit of superb bass reproduction, the SmartSub adds a wonderful sense of spatial depth to the sound of my Dynaudio Special Twenty-Five speakers. I am aware of the increased dimensionality even on CDs and DVDs that are not particularly bassy, and when I turn the SmartSub off, the sound is smaller, flatter and less interesting. My CDs now approach the dimensionality I associate with 5.1-channel surround sound.

Thiel's SmartSub is on the cutting edge of technologically advanced subwoofers that achieve excellent performance even if they are not installed in that "just right" place in the room. Bravo! **HE**

■ **PRICE:** SS1 \$2,900, SS2 \$4,900, SS3 \$6,900, SS4 \$8,900, SmartSub SC1 Integrator \$4,400
PX02 \$350, PX05 \$500

■ **CONTACT:** 859.254.9427, thielaudio.com

By using the Integrator's six front-panel controls to input parameters such as main speaker type and wall proximity, an installer can easily fine-tune any SmartSub's sound.



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