

April / May 2009

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THIEL CS2.4SE Floorstanding Loudspeakers

With only 150 sets made, those who buy a pair are very lucky.

Review by Tom Lyle

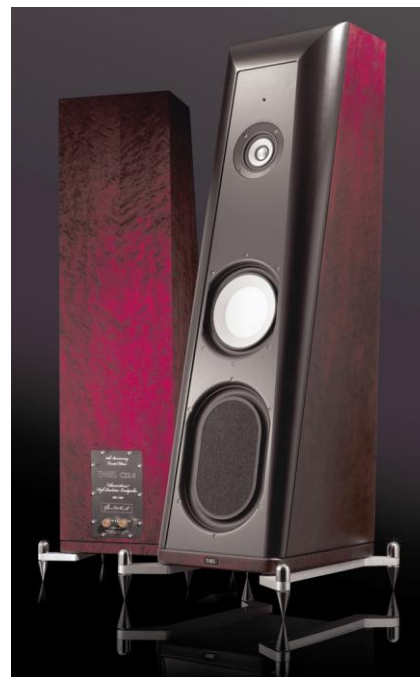
I didn't know to start this review on the subject of these marvelous loudspeakers. My first thoughts were that most folks would read this review with the assumption that I was just going to rave about how great these speakers sounded, so, with that in mind, I would keep my chin up and do my best to put in words why they *did* sound so fantastic, and at the same time make it an entertaining and informative read for the audio-voyeur. I then thought about starting this review by talking about my non-recession-proof day-job, and how although things aren't so great on the economic front I still find the means to make rather frequent hardware and software audiophile-related purchases, and how my situation might translate to the potential purchaser of this speaker. Accordingly, I would explain that I sometimes had fleeting thoughts that my priorities were all screwed up — that the maxim "I would gladly spend my money on records and audio equipment in lieu of food" might get me into trouble one day. I would continue the review by saying that in my conversations with other audiophiles/music-lovers, I've found that I'm not alone — there is a large contingent that considers audiophile related purchases "needs" rather than "wants". So, even though \$8000 might seem like a lot of money to some (although to me it seems awfully reasonable for such a high quality floorstander, but it sure must sound just plain whacky to the uninitiated), I'll just go with my gut instinct and start this review by stating that these speakers are worth every penny of their asking price, and I wouldn't mock *anyone* who chose to include them as part of their system.

Carefully Chosen

The CS2.4SE is a significant upgrade of THIEL's popular CS2.4 speaker, thus the SE in its nomenclature denotes Signature Edition. The standard CS2.4 crossover network uses very high quality components, including polypropylene and custom-made polystyrene capacitors. But in the Signature Edition they have carefully chosen very high grade "boutique" capacitors, which they consider a cost-no-object approach. Like the standard CS2.4, the Signature Edition uses all-metal diaphragm drivers which are designed and built by THIEL. It has a 1-inch tweeter, a 3.5-inch midrange driver, and an 8-inch woofer. Supporting the low-end is a 7.5 x 11 inch passive radiator. THIEL uses very short coil/long gap and copper-stabilized motor systems in their drivers to, in their words, "dramatically reduce distortion". They pair this with low resonance diaphragms and specially selected electrical network components to achieve "a very high level of clarity and tonal accuracy".

They have also decked out the CS2.4SE with hand-selected Birdseye Maple using a deep red stain specifically chosen for the CS2.4SE. THIEL also included in the design of the cabinet a beveled groove between the deep black baffle and the cabinet walls, designed to denote the Signature Edition from their standard issue. They also use stainless steel hardware to secure the drivers to the baffle, and a high contrast THIEL logo in chrome relief at the base of each enclosure. A heavy aluminum spiked support which THIEL calls an "Outrigger", is provided with each speaker. As a final touch, on the bottom rear of each cabinet has a laser-etched aluminum plate that includes the maker Jim THIEL's signature.

The speakers arrived by truck with both boxes on a single pallet that the driver wheeled to my front porch with a huge hand truck. Each speaker, with packing that included plywood boards on the inside top and bottom of each box, weighed almost 100 lbs and was a bit over four feet tall, so getting them up two flights of stairs to my listening room was a virtually impossible job for a featherweight such as me. Rather than bother my neighbor, I bribed the driver for assistance. Done. Upon opening the top of the carton I noticed that THIEL thoughtfully includes unpacking and packing instructions. Thank you. The speakers were hooked up and positioned within a half an hour, and only about a couple of hours of auditioning I found a suitable position for the speakers. After that I easily affixed the outriggers with the spikes firmly fixed the speakers to the industrial grade carpeted floor. I located the speakers about 3.5-feet from the back wall, further from the side walls, firing straight ahead.



I powered the speakers at various times during the review period with three different amplifiers: a 250 wpc solid-state Krell, the 250 wpc hybrid conrad-johnson ET250S that has a tube input stage and a solid-state output stage, and a pair of tubed 60 watt PrimaLuna monoblocks. The preamplifier was either a tubed Balanced Audio Technology VK-3iX or an Acousticbuoy Scorpio. The preamps and the Arcam and Oppo digital front end's Virtual Dynamics power cords were connected to a PS Audio Power Plant, and a Basis Debut turntable with a Tri-Planar VI outfitted with a Lyra Helikon cartridge was connected to its own Power Plant. The phono preamplifier was either the excellent onboard phono section of the BAT, or the nearly impossible-to-beat-at-its-price Lehmann Black Cube SE with its heavy-duty power supply. When I used a Velodyne subwoofer, its power cord was connected to a Chang Lightspeed power conditioner. The speaker cable was MIT, and interconnects were a mix of MIT and Virtual Dynamics. My listening room has Echobuster room treatment panels installed on the walls and sloping ceiling.

Received

The well written manual recommends leaving the grills in place while listening, so that's what I did. The speakers were already broken in when I received them, so as soon as they were suitably positioned I started my "serious" listening sessions. I sometimes read reviews in computer magazines where reviewers describe the sound of a pair of plastic computer speakers as "filling the room with sound". These reviewers obviously *never* heard a competent high-end speaker, and obviously *never* heard a speaker such as the CS2.4SE. I set them to what I thought would be a suitable volume — and they proceeded to nearly knock me over with their amazingly wide and deep soundstage. I thought I might have missed something — did these speakers have some hidden rear firing drivers? Of course they didn't: the rear panel of the speaker only included the autographed name-plate and the two gold-plated brass speaker terminals. The depth of the soundstage made the rear wall of my listening room disappear; the extent of the soundstage was only limited by the recording and the associated gear. When I closed my eyes whilst the music was playing the location of the two speakers was very difficult to locate, again, the width of the soundstage was only limited by the competence of the recording. The soundstage filled the space between the speakers and projected into the room only when the recording deemed it necessary; as a result they never gave the impression that they were forward-sounding speakers. I've heard soundstages like this in mega-treated retail showrooms, but never before in my humble abode.



On Pendereki's *Violin Concerto* performed by violinist Anne-Sophie Mutter and the LSO conducted by the composer, it was as if I could draw an accurate picture in my mind of the layout of the orchestra. As the piece quietly begins the cellos enter a few feet inward of the right speaker, with the basses surrounding the cabinet and beyond its outer edge. The violins are spread out from the center to the far left beyond that speaker. When the solo violin enters its outline is clearly delineated, with the instrument magically floating between the speakers appropriately located in front of the orchestra. As the volume builds the horns spread out across the stage further rearward, and despite the increase in volume the soundstage's scale remains stable. Then, the winds enter the picture in their own space, as does the percussion in the far rear or the orchestra beyond the back wall of my room. From the beginning to the end of the piece, the separation and precise positions of the groups and solo instruments was remarkable.

The CS2.4SE's soundstage prowess would be for naught if the rest of the speaker's sound were not as good. But it *is* as good, and exceeds it in many areas. It seemed as if whatever the speaker was reproducing it seemed to "know" what the actual sound of the instruments were like in the studio or concert venue. The speaker triggered the part of my brain that can be fooled into thinking, at least for a split second when the instrument enters, that it was hearing the real thing. When I was spinning The Horace Silver Quintet's LP of *The Cape Verdean Blues* on Blue Note, it sounded as if I was sonically peering through a clear window into Rudy Van Gelder's studio. Now, many folks, sometimes rightfully so, think that Mr. Gelder's technique of hard panning instruments to the left or right is unnatural. But with this exceptional recording the sound of each instrument bleeds slightly into the other's microphones. Not only does this create a "soundstage" that makes the sound of the studio clearly audible, but makes the sound of the individual instruments very focused and believable. Combined with the CS2.4SE's excellent transient response from the midrange on up makes, for example, the cymbals on Roger Humphries' drum kit sound exceedingly "real". Not only that, Woody Shaw's trumpet and J.J. Johnson's trombone have the requisite blat, combined with a palpable timbre that enters the room with a lifelike sweetness. This is accomplished not only because of the speaker's proficiency, but obviously because of the players' gifts, which are unmistakably apparent thanks to the speaker's transparency.

My musical diet contains a large dose of hard rock, so those who know me would be very, very surprised if I didn't challenge these speakers with some of these offerings. I'll admit that AC/DC is not high art, but that bothers me not one iota. When I threw on their *Back in Black* CD and turned up the volume to an appropriate (ahem) volume — goodness gracious, great balls of fire. "Hells Bells" features some growling guitar thanks to Sir Angus, and John "Mutt" Lange's production puts the guitar amplifiers front and center... and to the left and right...and up and down. Yes siree, there was a wall of sound. The drums and bass are of course a major component of the album's power, and despite my general cynicism in regards to passive radiators, the THIEL's low end performed admirably. Things went down to about 30 Hz, and although the sound was a little wooly around its lowest extremes (and just might be these speakers only slight shortcoming); the bass was still tight enough for me to pay no heed to that fact.

Up above those frequencies things were aggressively appealing, yet the sound never became fatiguing regardless of volume — at least to me. Unfortunately or not, the speaker's resolution honesty revealed this recording to be the big budget recording that it is. The overly-processed compressed/limited/overdubbed *ad nauseum* mix sounded as natural as a PVC drain pipe, and it revealed that their studio budget was probably more than a Pacific Island nation's GDP. Things sounded much better from an audiophile standpoint on The Melvins' *Bullhead* album. If it could be said that there is a "purest" method to recording a power trio, this would be it. Each relatively unprocessed instrument was separated in the space of the soundstage, and I could easily make out details such as the snares on the snare drum vibrate from the sound of the rest of the kit. Yet that wall of sound was still present, as a result there was still enough roar coming forth from the speakers to rock the house. Ok, it must seem as if I'm allotting a disproportionate amount of space to the CS2.4SE's reproduction of rock music. But this music was an ideal method of displaying what I like to call the "whomp" factor — the transducer's macrodynamic slam whilst exhibiting a miniscule amount of distortion when reaching these peaks. And although some might feel differently, if a speaker cannot handle all types of music, it is of no use to me. The THIEL's would be perfectly at home in my listening room.

Aural Memory

If you own a pair of the original CS2.4 (*sans* SE) or have recently auditioned a pair these original models in a showroom or a friend's listening room, my comments above must seem awfully recognizable. The CS2.4 is not a popular speaker by chance. I have heard them in audio salons, and let me tell you I was very impressed by these speakers. Needless to say I'd rather not rely on my fuzzy aural memory to compare the original and the fine-tuned Signature Edition that currently resides in my listening room for this review. I did not have the luxury of a side-by-side comparison. Yet if even if the Signature Edition only *slightly* improves upon the standard CS2.4's sound I think you are in for quite a ride. There are only going to be 150 pairs of the CS2.4SE produced, so those who land a pair should consider themselves lucky. The THIEL CS24SE's bountiful sonic qualities and their superb cosmetics are a winning combination. No doubt about it.

Specifications

Type: Full range floorstanding loudspeaker
Frequency Response: 33 Hz to 37 kHz (-3dB)
Amplitude Response: 36 Hz to 25 kHz (\pm 2dB)
Phase Response: \pm 10°
Sensitivity: 87/W/m
Impedance: 4 Ohms (3 Ohms minimum)
Recommended Power: 100 to 400 Watts
Dimensions: 11 x 14 x 41.5 (WxDxH in inches)
Weight: 70 lbs.
Warranty: 10 year limited
Price: \$8000

Company Information

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