



It was widely accepted in the beginning of the home-theater revolution that simply adding run-of-the-mill surround and center-channel speakers to a good two-channel system would produce excellent performance. "They're only effects; you won't be able to tell the difference," was the common misconception, though this *logic* was usually applied to Pro Logic systems. Then it became apparent that something was wrong, especially with the advent of discrete surround channels. The holographic soundfield that users were used to hearing in stereo mode was not being produced to the same effect in the theater. This was happening despite level matching and paying very close attention to the placement of the multiple-speaker system.

Times change. It is common knowledge today that speakers *must* be timbre-matched in order to create a cohesive, seamless soundfield. It's only natural when you think about it; if I were talking in front of you and instantly varied the pitch and tone of my speech, you would instantly pick up on it, and it would not be very difficult to hear what was happening. Why should it be different when we are *reproducing* sound as opposed to *producing* it?

Loudspeakers in a manufacturer's line must be interchangeable these days; the ability to mix and match is very important when building a home-theater system. It is a great luxury to

be able to choose the best speakers you can buy now for two-channel music and movies, knowing full well that you will be able to add additional speakers to your system by choosing from the same line. It is also nice to have a system designed to work together from the start.

Enter the \$12,000 Thiel MCS1 system. Jim Thiel and the folks from Kentucky have made it easy for those of you seeking a perfectly matched home-theater system. The MCS1 is interchangeable in front, center, or surround duty, or in virtually any configuration you care to name. The MCS1 matches other speakers in the Thiel lineup too, but it is probably best used along with other MCS1s to keep everything identical.

The MCS1

The five MCS1s that I received for review were finished in a very nice amberwood veneer. It was apparent right away that build quality was first class and attention to detail was high. I'm a stickler when it comes to high-end products and their construction quality. A \$2200 speaker should be flawless in appearance and offer only the highest-quality construction and hardware. The Thiel MCS1 easily passes my quality-assurance test.

The MCS1 is a large bookshelf-style speaker—that is, not a floorstander—and it can be vertically or horizontally orientated. At 61 pounds, it is not light in weight, however, so placement requires a sturdy stand, shelf or other mounting device. At 28.5" high (or wide), the MCS1 is larger than most bookshelf speakers as well, so care should be taken when selecting a location for placement.

The MCS1 uses a phase-correct electrical crossover and a tweeter coaxially mounted in the midrange driver—two design parameters championed by Thiel. The two bass drivers flank the coaxial driver, all of which are designed and manufactured by Thiel, yielding a three-way design. Dual flared ports are located on either side of the bass drivers and are integral to the front baffle. The steel-framed grille tightly outlines the contoured baffle, relieving the manufacturer from having to drill holes into the otherwise clean face. Two sets of high-quality binding posts are recessed into the rear of the speaker. Plastic caps cover recessed metal inserts that are used for the MCS1 stands.

If I were ordering these speakers and did not intend to use the stands, I'd have Thiel leave out these inserts, as they do mar the exquisite finish. Thiel states the efficiency as 90dB, which is somewhat higher than has been typical for Thiel designs.

Five as one

The process of dialing in a home-theater system through level matching and proper processor calibration is a fairly straightforward proposition these days. However, this does not ensure that once done, the system will speak as a whole, instead of as a collection of speakers. The Thiel MCS1 *does* speak as one, and that quality alone is perhaps the best argument for purchase. The cohesiveness achieved with five MCS1s is absolute. All the descriptives apply here—the sound is holosonic, seamless and cohesive. Front to back and side to side, the MCS1s are simply a *system* instead of five speakers. This makes watching movies and listening to multichannel music unique experiences because you are not constantly reminded that there are *speakers* around, but rather an enveloping *sound* instead. Sounds appear behind the listener, but the sources of those sounds are not revealed. Vocal presentation does not alter when a side-to-side pan is in the soundtrack either. What you have is 360 degrees of whatever the soundtrack has to offer. The whirling devils in the *Pitch Black* DVD are a great example. The flying creatures terrorizing the crew of the downed spaceship circle the room. There are no dropouts or discontinuities to be found with the MCS1s constructing the soundfield above the listener/viewer's head. This is as the director intended, and it works great with the MCS1s running the show.

Loud and clear

The second most obvious characteristic of the MCS1 system is its clarity. There is no added warmth or cabinet coloration to be heard. When you've listened to a well-designed speaker that uses a massively constructed, dead-as-a-doornail cabinet, you know how important this is. The MCS1 has this quality in spades. Vocal presentation in particular is crystal clear and properly scaled. I can't state this strongly enough—the Thiels are clear, clear, *clear!*

The *Gladiator* soundtrack provides a great test of vocal projection and dialogue intelligibility. When Maximus gives that foreboding speech to his soldiers, and when they are plunging headlong into the woods approaching the battle, his voice remains locked into the soundstage and is wholly understandable, regardless that there are numerous effects

vying for attention. The Thiel MCS1s just give it to you straight, without editorializing. Another example: the Rebecca Pidgeon track "Jonnie Cope" from her *Four Marys* CD [Chesky JD 165] gives a striking demonstration of how clear voice *should* sound. The MCS1 was up to the task and then some in either Dolby Pro Logic or stereo. Pidgeon's voice was reproduced with excellent detail and was devoid of blurring or artificial coloration. I feel completely comfortable in stating that the MCS1 system is up to the demands of future multichannel music releases, which may be a consideration for someone buying a five-speaker array in its price range. Conversely, if you are going to start with two MCS1s for stereo and then add more later, you won't be disappointed. The MCS1 does *old-fashioned* two-channel sound very well, thank you very much.

The MCS1 also has the ability to track the dynamic nature of soundtracks without audible compression or limiting. This is a combination of the ability to play loud and move fast. One descriptive that comes to mind is *agile*, because the music never seems to outmaneuver the speakers. The system as a whole keeps its composure when the going gets rough on, for example, the *Gladiator* soundtrack [DECCA 289 467 094-2] from Hans Zimmer. During "The Battle," the pace becomes furious, and the dynamic range is vast. Lesser systems will show signs of breaking up, which may not be noticeable on small-scale works, but which just ruins the fidelity on large scores such as this. When low-level fidelity is called for, the MCS1s come back down to earth and reveal all that is available on the recording, and keep this quality until it is time to rev back up again.

The MCS1 system as reviewed does not include a subwoofer, although one is now available from Thiel: the very intriguing SW1. Even so, the low-frequency extension is good to about 50Hz, which does give a good fundamental rendering of bass lines and midbass punch, such as found in the *Mission: Impossible 2* score. A tad more weight would be nice, as the system doesn't have the visceral impact that is possible. To be fair, however, this would in all likelihood be ameliorated with the addition of Thiel's subwoofer. It does bear mentioning, though, as some systems with a full-range front pair can get by sans a sub.

The good stuff doesn't end with clarity, dynamics and cohesiveness. High-frequency reproduction is clean and extended as well. The apparent level of detail is quite high, giving effects like raindrops clarity that is refreshing. It must be noted that I don't particularly like the muted, overly warm

sound of many audiophile speakers; therefore the Thiels suit my preference for treble performance just fine. I like detail done right, which the MCS1s reproduce quite successfully.

Comparisons

The Thiel MCS1, at \$12,000 for a basic five-speaker system without subwoofer, is not inexpensive by anyone's standard. Add in a Thiel subwoofer and crossover and you are approaching \$20k really fast. The Silverline home-theater speaker system reviewed in February was also without a sub, but the main Corona IIs are closer to full range than the MCS1s. Having said that, it is an obvious fact that the Silverline system as reviewed is more comfortable without a sub than five Thiel MCS1s. You will get more of the LFE track with the Silverline system. This, along with a more relaxed treble, *warms up* the Silverlines quite a bit in comparison with most speakers, including the Thiels. Many folks will find this appealing. The Thiels, though, counter successfully with some convincing characteristics. They possess cohesiveness that the Silverlines can't match. Clarity of voice with movie soundtracks and music is superior, and the ability to track the natural dynamics of excellent recordings (with less compression) is fantastic. The MCS1 system is more accurate in my opinion, and it renders sounds without the baggage of artificial warmth or any tonal coloration.

In comparison with the Wilson super system reviewed in March, which does cost a *lot* more than the Thiels even with a subwoofer, the MCS1s do surprisingly well in a couple of categories. First, cohesiveness of the soundfield is a dead heat. These two systems are simply the best I've heard when it comes to creating a seamless, integrated whole. It is obvious that both manufacturers paid the utmost attention to this area, which will pay off to customers who buy their

system in steps, as many will. Also, the dialogue capability of the Wilson Watch Center and the MCS1 is very close. It is hard to fault either, which again is testimony to the extremely high level of performance from both systems. I am one who adheres to the mantra that as components get better, the sound will converge and become more similar. This is certainly a fact borne out by these two systems when compared with any lesser-quality system I've heard.

In sum

The Thiel MCS1 array has so many qualities that make it an ideal choice for a do-it-all, flexible system that I hardly know where to begin my summation. I guess the upshot is that if you want a *system* as opposed to five loudspeakers, you've come to the right place. You would have movies, multichannel music and two-channel audio done equally well—no small feat. I really do think that the incredibly cohesive quality of this system is the overriding reason to buy it. In that respect, it is up to the demands that will no doubt be placed on speakers, as the software gets better and flaws in the playback system become more apparent. Also, if you choose to have even more channels, you have the option of adding additional MCS1s. Or, if you chose a larger Thiel speaker, such as the CS7.2 reviewed a while back by Wes Phillips on *SoundStage!*, you can always move the MCS1 around to a different location.

The one variable is that of the subwoofer—or lack thereof in the system I tested. If the subwoofer is as seamlessly integrated within the system as Thiel purports, then you know you have *all* your bases covered. I know I would feel comfortable throwing anything at five Thiel MCS1s, and that confidence really says it all. The Thiel MCS1 system is a winner.



<p>Features:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Coaxial tweeter/midrange driver with 3.5" midrange and 1" tweeter Two 6.5" metal-diaphragm woofers with cast-magnesium chassis Time coherent Phase correct crossover Dual ports Magnetically shielded Horizontal or vertical orientation <p><i>Available in a variety of wood finishes and black laminate.</i></p>	<p>Model: MCS1</p> <p>Price: \$2200 USD each</p> <p>Warranty: Ten years parts and labor.</p> <p>Dimensions: 28.5" H x 10"W x 12.5" D</p> <p>Weight: 61 pounds</p> <hr/> <p>Thiel Audio 1026 Nandino Boulevard Lexington, Kentucky 40511-1207 USA</p> <p>Phone: (859) 254-9427 Fax: (859) 254-0075 E-mail: mail@thielaudio.com Website: www.thielaudio.com</p>
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COMPANY INFO

Review System	
Processor/receiver	Denon AVR-5800, Kenwood VR-4090-B
Amplifier	Krell KSA 250 (2)
Sources	Pioneer DV606D DVD player, Technics DVD-A10 DVD player
Cables	JPS Labs speaker cables, Apature interconnects, Audio Alchemy digital cable
Monitor	Sony WEGA FD Trinitron direct-view

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