

WallArt

Thiel Audio's PowerPoint Speaker System

Over the past four years of reviewing and 20 years of speaker engineering, I have tested a dozen different on-wall and in-wall speaker systems, most of them to my property manager's dismay. She seems to age another year or two with each sheet of gypsum board she witnesses entering my apartment. To see her distress, one would imagine it was her walls I was cutting holes in, instead of my own little "wall sections." She is simply terrified that I will do some awful structural damage, installing speakers in the walls.

Once I had the Thiel PowerPoint speakers set up, I took mischievous delight in inviting her over to

watch a movie. Well, she knew I still had the 61-inch Sony so she was a pushover. Yet it was the Thiels, rather than *A Woman Under The Influence*, that were the hit of the evening. These sleekly profiled white molded plastic enclosures sit on, rather than in, the wall, and their innocuous shape belies their extraordinary performance.

Good Things Come In Odd Packages

There is no convenient word to describe the PowerPoint's profile; however, flat-faceted teardrop is a good start. Concealed within this odd shape is a coaxial drive unit of rare technological prowess. Built into a 165-mm chassis, it is fitted with a foil-covered, foamed plastic cone, and bears a 25-mm metal-dome tweeter at its apex. The woofer's short voice coil sits in a long magnetic gap, capped with copper for low distortion and driven by a cluster of powerful neodymium magnets. The benefit of all this raging technology is that designer Jim Thiel has created a very capable driver that is also perfectly symmetrical in its dispersion pattern, providing incredibly even sound quality throughout the listening room.

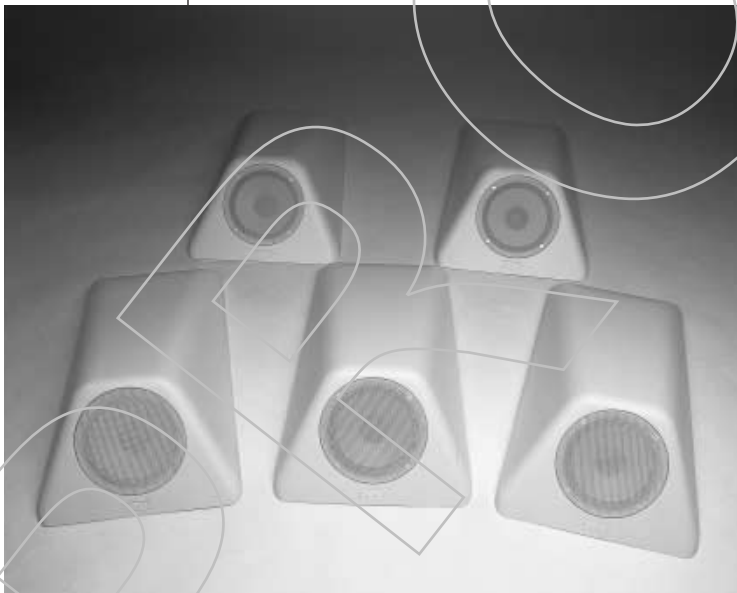
Not to dwell on the internal stuff unduly, the crossover network that mates the technically delightful woofer and tweeter is the product of similarly fastidious attention to detail. Steep crossover slopes make this old speaker engineer very happy. All this is fitted into a space that looks barely large enough to hold it, let alone provide some air space for the driver to work in.

Keeping the external size to a working minimum means that the bass response is limited to about 60 Hz, which is entirely reasonable and respectable for this size of driver. We did not explore the upper extremes of the PowerPoint's power handling range, since (I cannot say enough good things about this excellent amp) my QSC DCA3022 had the ability to deliver something well over a 1000 watts into each, ensuring their rapid and expensive demise. I can say that five of them, with a couple of hundred watts apiece, will go louder than anyone over 25 years of age will ever need.

With an unusually smooth 4-ohm impedance profile, they can be driven by almost anything—a point I proved rather succinctly when I listened to

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PHOTOGRAPHY BY
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a pair of them on my beloved Mary-Anne tube amplifier—with a scintillating 3 watts per channel. OK, not so loud, but sounding amazingly consistent, and wonderfully satisfying.

Installing the On-Walls

Hanging the PowerPoint's was the easy part. One screw hole is hidden by the nameplate at the "business" end of the system, and three more are placed along the back edge. The PowerPoint driver is angled away from the wall at 45 degrees, so I found the ideal spots for the left and right front channels on the ceiling with the back edge of the enclosure in the corner. The center channel went onto the ceiling above the big Sony, and the angles worked out very well for me. The texture on the ceiling hides the concrete slab above it, and once the Thiels are taken down, a little putty and paint will conceal the plastic anchors, too.

The rear channels posed quite a bit more effort. However, after much thought and cider consumption, they were mounted five feet up on the rear wall pointing upwards. This position scattered their sound onto the ceiling before it reached me, softening their focus, and giving them some more "air." I could have put them in the same orientation on the sidewalls, or mounted them overhead, pointing backwards to scatter off the back wall. Both of these options were considered, and almost certainly could have done the same job. Flexibility—thy name is Thiel.

At about 10 pounds each, the weight of the PowerPoints was not an issue at all, so the mounting hardware was small and simple, in stark contrast to some recent speaker hanging hardware that looked like something from the battleship Potemkin.

Now, Listen

This is the part where you find me sitting on my sofa, drinking a steaming mug of tea, or a glass of cider, and listening to my favorite tunes. I love this part. OK, the very first thing that will strike you is that the bass is a tad shy. While our man Jim Thiel is working on his subwoofer for the system, we got the chance to revisit a couple of Northern California Audio Labs



12-inch powered subs, replete with 250 RMS watts apiece, to ensure that no further doubts about bass were going to arise.

Female vocals have an uncanny presence that made them sound closer than they should have been, imparting the sensation that one could touch the singer, probably instigating an unsavory lawsuit. The same was not true, however, of male vocals, which while rendered superbly, lacked the holographic quality. Jennifer Warnes' *Famous Blue Raincoat* brought a tear to the eye, while Peter Gabriel's *Don't Give Up* and *Wallflower* were powerful and emotionally charged. On the lighter side, the wild surround effects and relentless beat of Grace Jones' *Slave To The Rhythm* really demonstrated how coherent the coaxial driver sounds with very complex program material. Listening hard, I could not hear the slightest trace of the crossover, either as a bump, a dip, or as a change in texture, which may not seem amazing to you but after 20 years of this stuff, it will.

Even watching the network news is enhanced when the events and the sonic signature of every news location are so vividly portrayed, although, like other good speakers replaying TV sources, the annoying tonality variations from channel to channel are also presented without benefit of any softening.

In Conclusion

I was a little skeptical about these odd shaped speakers. So many clever enclosure designs are crippled by tragic drivers that it has actually become the norm. Mercifully, the Thiels pack their clever enclosures with leading edge engineering, and it really shows in their impressively neutral, immensely satisfying sound. ♦

Thiel PowerPoint speakers

Bandwidth (-3 db):	75 Hz-20 kHz
Amplitude response:	75 Hz-20 kHz +/- 3 dB
Phase response:	minimum 10 degrees
Sensitivity:	89 dB @ 2.8V-1m
Impedance:	4 ohms (3 ohms minimum)
Recommended Power:	30-200 watts
Size:	19.75" W x 5.5" D x 12.25" H (horizontally oriented)
Weight:	10 pounds
Warranty:	10 years