

HOME THEATER FOR MUSIC LOVERS

The Vandersteen Audio "Home Theater" Speaker System

TOM MILLER

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The sonic struggle between home theater enthusiasts and music loving audiophiles resembles nothing so much as the battle of sexes - videophiles are from Mars, audiophiles are from Venus.

Should you optimize your sound system for music or movies? Is there a difference? Most people think there is and many believe the only solution is two systems. Richard Vandersteen, however, thinks that's hogwash. He believes that video and audio sound systems can and must coexist successfully in a "coed" environment and, to support the point, offers a "home theater" system comprised of mixed Vandersteen speakers - some designed for music, some for home theater. All with sonic accuracy in mind.

HOW GOOD CAN THIS MARRIAGE BE

The answer to this question arrived in some seriously sized boxes that did not have serious price tags attached. Mind you, the Vandersteen system is not cheap or even inexpensive - it is, however, a great value in high performance sound reproduction.

The system starts with the \$2,595 Vandersteen Model 3As as the main speakers. The Model 3A is a full range loudspeaker, a "music first" design that features a 1-inch metal tweeter, a 4.5-inch midrange driver, an 8-inch bass driver and a 10-inch woofer that is an active acoustic coupler. All packed into a slim cabinet 48 inches tall by 16 inches wide and 10.75 inches deep, weighing in at a hefty but manageable 98 pounds. (At \$200, the custom-designed Model 3A stands, by Sound Anchor, are highly recommended.) Vandersteen specifies the Model 3A's frequency response as reaching from 26Hz to 30kHz (plus or minus 3db).

On its own, the Model 3A combines an easy, natural sound that will never cause fatigue - with a relatively high level of accuracy in both tonality and resolution. It is also something of a rarity, delivering satisfying extension into the bottom octave without messing up the rest of the sound. At its price, this performance is exceptional. In the Vandersteen home theater system, it is only the start.

Next up are the Model 2W subwoofers - once again, a "music first" design. The \$1250 Model 2W is a powered design, featuring a built-in 300 watt amplifier that drives three 8-inch woofers (see review, May '95). The Model 2W's crossover design is unique. In simple terms, the full range signal from the preamplifier (or

surround processor) is fed into a high pass filter connected directly into the amplifier driving the main speakers. The high pass filter rolls off the bass frequencies below roughly 80Hz (the precise frequency ; depends on the amplifier and the setting of the filter).

Consequently, the main amplifier's power output is attenuated below the crossover frequency, and the Model 3A is relieved of the burden of producing the bottom octave. The subwoofer inputs are connected to the output of the main amplifier and the high frequencies are rolled off. The level of the subwoofer's output is then set with a volume control on the back of the Model 2W. Once this setup has been fine tuned, it is almost impossible to detect the subwoofer - until your listening chair starts to mambo during really low level passages of music or movies.

The next piece of Vandersteen's wedding-set is the \$495 VCC-1 shielded center-channel speaker, designed, obviously, for home theater. Vandersteen has hewed his own path in theater sound; the VCC-1 does not comport with the THX specifications promulgated by Lucasfilm (indeed, none of this system is THX certified, but designed more to the standards of good audio configured for home theater's extra channels). The VCC-1 is a tidy little box about 12 inches wide by 9 inches high and 10 inches deep. It uses a 6.5-inch woofer and a 1-inch tweeter coaxially mounted. Vandersteen designed the VCC-1 with a "proximity switch" that attenuates the speaker's output below 500Hz for those occasions when, for example, it is placed atop a large rear projection monitor (which would boost the bass). This keeps the sound from becoming congested.

Finally, Vandersteen engineered the new wall-mounted speaker, the \$895 VSM-1, for surround channel duty. The VSM-1 uses the same driver complement and configuration as the VCC-1 in a larger, shallower box: approximately 12 inches (w) by 23.5 inches (h) by 5 inches (d). With a frequency response of 60Hz to 21kHz, the VSM-1 is nearly a full range design, which some have paired with the Model 2W subwoofer for use as main speakers in home theater systems.

LISTENING + LOOKING

set up the Vandersteen system with the Audio Research SDA-1 four channel power amplifier, while a Rotel RA980-BX power amp handled the VSM-1s, which were mounted on the walls behind the listening couch. The VCC-1 was placed atop a 50-inch Pioneer rear projection monitor with the proximity circuit engaged. The digital sound signal - music or video - came from a Theta Data II transport/laserdisc player and Assemblage DAC-1 converter. Initially, I used the Acurus ACT-1 Dolby surround sound processor/preamp as the control center. But I just had to see what the Vandersteen system would do with music, so I replaced the Acurus with the Audio Research SDP-1 for surround processing and the McCormack

TLC-1 for preamplification. The Audio Research unit uses a non-Dolby surround processing matrix that produces exceptional results with standard music recordings and decodes movies somewhat differently than the typical whiz-bang of Dolby Pro-Logic steering (see review, April '95). In this setup, the Vandersteen system not only proved itself capable as a music and video speaker marriage, it validated the Audio Research unit for movies as well as music.

So - I listened. The Eagles' CD *Hell Freezes Over* acquired an enhanced sense of environment. A subtle alteration of space around the listener transformed the acoustic signature of the room so shamelessly I could have sworn the Audio Research unit was turned off. It wasn't. When I did turn it off, the illusion collapsed back into standard two channel stereo. Regardless of the surround processor, the VSM-1 speakers were not audible as separate sound sources. The key to making them disappear: dialing in the right amount of delay for the set up.

As impressive as *Hell Freezes Over* sounded, it was child's play compared to Peter Gabriel's concert laserdisc *Secret World Live*. This doesn't possess the pinpoint sonic imaging of *Hell Freezes Over*, but it more closely resembles the slightly dispersed sound of a live rock concert. The Vandersteens captured the finest nuances of Gabriel's band and cleanly separated the instruments from the voices - something that many fine speakers have a hard time doing. More impressively, the blend between the Model 3A and the 2W subs could not be heard. This was particularly important with the superb bass guitar work of Tony Levin that supports the music. It came through solid, extended, rich and defined. Lordy, how sweet it is! And on the Eagles' *Hotel California*, the 2W subwoofers fully reproduced the deep resonant boom of the stage beneath the drum kit, flexing on each beat.

Okay - it's no surprise that Vandersteen speakers shine on the music - even surround processed music.

BUT WHAT ABOUT THE MOVIES?

True Lies. If the lie could be put to Vandersteen's claims that music and movies can reside in one system, this is the movie to do it. Bombs, machine guns, helicopters, missiles, jets, horseback rides through a hotel - was there ever a movie that screamed more loudly for home theater sound? I have watched it (or parts of it) innumerable times through innumerable systems. Some very expensive systems can intimidate the listener, reduce them (me) to a quivering lump. Impressive, but is that the point? The Vandersteen system will play loudly (within limits - there is some dynamic compression on the peaks), but it refuses to bludgeon you. It seduces you by reproducing the subtleties in the soundtrack and then, when Arnold says, "This is my invitation" (opening sequence), the following explosion startles, lifts you out the seat. Not in pain, but surprise. What a pleasure!

In many ways, the VCC-1 is the little speaker that could. A center channel must, above all, sound natural. Listen as Mr. Muscles climbs out of the iced-over pool and steps across the Frozen ground. The sound of his neoprene wet suit crunching on the snow is completely believable. You'll shiver. The clink of the bottle as he applies a little aftershave. Catch a whiff of that! The quiet chatter of voices as he moves through the crowded ballroom. It is all so effortless, so easy to understand, so natural. As a result, it heightens the sensations, deepens your involvement. This is a seduction. Not the coup de grace.

That comes with the music. There the advantage of the Vandersteen system hits you square in the heart. In movies, nothing is more emotionally evocative than the music. - The score of True Lies or Batman Returns or The Nightmare Before Christmas is as important a part of the movie as any foley effect. More important. With the Audio Research SDP-1 and the Vandersteen speakers, the music stands apart from the sound effects and dialogue. But not at their expense. You can hear it, even if you do not listen to it. And it moves you, subconsciously. The Vandersteens' power, as speakers designed to recreate music first, cannot be underestimated. They add that much to the movie experience.

A WEDDING INDEED

The Vandersteen "home theater" system demonstrates that music and movies can come together in a single sound system, and shine. It stands four square for the proposition that to do movies well, a system must be able to do music well. If there is a lesson here it is that, like bride and groom, movies and music - image and sound - are better together than apart.