

VANDERSTEEN

MUSIC-AND-CINEMA SPEAKERS

THOMAS J. NORTON

STEREOPHILE GUIDE TO HOME THEATER

The Vandersteen 3A is a higher-end variation on the theme established by the company's first loudspeaker, the 2C. The latter is still available, though much updated into the current, highly popular 2Ce. A four-way design, the 3A has separate sub-enclosures for each drive unit; the whole affair is covered with a knit grille-cloth "sock" with wood-trim end pieces. A rear-mounted metal brace allows the user to vary the tilt-back, an important consideration for best performance with this loudspeaker. Both the VCC-1 center channel and the thinner VSM- 1 surrounds (non-dipole) use a similar coaxial, two-way driver. Such a design will, in theory, result in a more uniform dispersion pattern, particularly important in a center channel. The VCC-1 also incorporates a switch that will modify the frequency response to compensate for the effects of nearby walls. I left it off in my listening.

Vandersteen uses an unusual hook-up method for its 2W subwoofer. A passive high-pass filter is placed at the input to the main loudspeaker amplifiers; the woofer signal is tapped from the output of these amplifiers, and the bass of the 2W is boosted in the latter's own amplifier to make up for the high-pass bass rolloff at the main amps. Since this is the only recommended method of connection, the 2W is probably best used to supplement Vandersteen's own loudspeakers. The 2W has a level control but no other user adjustments.

THE 3As IN STEREO

When I reviewed the Vandersteen 3As for *Stereophile* (Vol.18 No.4, April 1995), I commented on their smooth, sweet sound, a sound more forgiving than analytical. Nonetheless, they revealed plenty about associated equipment. As with all loudspeakers, especially high-end designs, careful system matching with the 3As paid real dividends.

Properly set up, the sound of the Vandersteens had genuine openness and detail to go with their fundamental, natural warmth. It combined a pristinely clean top end and a clean, clear, yet subtly shaded midrange. Soundstaging was precise, though better focused with a slight toe-in to the left and right loudspeakers rather than the straight-ahead setup recommended by Vandersteen. Moreover, the 3As had real weight in the bass, handling virtually everything I could throw at them with aplomb. Only an occasional challenge caused them difficulty, the opening drumstrokes on the CD soundtrack from *Jurassic Park* (MCA), for example. On video-based material, in fact, Vandersteen recommends a subwoofer (or two), and I concur. Vandersteen's own 2W subwoofers only extend slightly deeper into the bottom octave than the 3As by themselves, but significantly increase the overall dynamic range capability of the system.

THE CINEMA SOUND

When I first connected the full Vandersteen surround system in my audio/ video room, I was not particularly happy with the result. The sound was lean, the top end rather bright (surprisingly, considering the sound of the 3A in my listening room). Since the new additions (center, surrounds, subs) had not had any obvious break-in (though I suspect the subs had seen use prior to my receiving them), I removed the subs and the center to another room where I could "burn" them in four days straight with "pink noise" and other material. The surrounds stayed in place (they were mounted high on the walls and could not be easily moved) and were broken in with normal, daily use.

There was a definite improvement when I returned to the system, less edginess on top and more ease in the bass. But there was still room for improvement. I looked to the rest of the system. The loudspeaker placement was the best possible, given the normal restrictions of audio/video setup. On a hunch, I changed the interconnects between the laserdisc player and surround-sound processor, as well as the interconnects from the processor to left and right main front amplifiers. I had been using Monster M1500 cables. I switched to Cardas Hexlinks, an early Cardas design. I know this will be hard to credit for those not into the effects of cables but the sound was now significantly improved. On an absolute scale, the difference was small, but it made all the difference in the world in my impression, and enjoyment, of the system. A natural warmth returned. I was now hearing the 3As as I remembered them, enhanced by the addition of the subs, center, and surrounds. This was now a surround-sound array that excelled on both music and video. While I continued to find the sound a bit lacking in gutsiness through the upper bass/lower midrange region, the Vandersteens were still very satisfying on all program material.

The subwoofer blending of the Vandersteen system, despite or perhaps because of Vandersteen's unusual hookup, was superb. As with any good audiophile sub, which is what the 2Ws were originally designed to be, the bottom end lacked any unnatural emphasis or boom. While the 2Ws were less awe-inspiring than a few other subwoofers I have had in my A/V room, I would be hard pressed to note any shortcomings in them without making direct comparisons. And the Vandersteen subs sailed through my high-level bass torture tracks, from Geronimo, Jurassic Park, and Aladdin, without so much as a whimper. The Vandersteen is a system for lovers of both music and movies.

CONCLUSIONS

In the final analysis, I would still argue that all of the loudspeakers in this article are marginally better with music than with films. There is a dynamism and sheer gutsiness, combined with an appropriate top-end balance, to a system like the B&W THX array, that none of the systems reviewed on movies quite gets right. But they come close, very close. The Boston Acoustics, Apogee, and Vandersteen loudspeakers may have been primarily designed for music, but when they're properly augmented, they won't leave you feeling shortchanged no matter what you play back through them.