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February 2010
Vol.33 No.2



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Vienna Acoustics Klimt The Kiss

WES PHILLIPS

LOUDSPEAKER

DESCRIPTION Three-way, stand-mounted loudspeaker with integral stand. Drive-units: 1" (25mm) enter-vented silk-dome tweeter coincident with 7" (180mm) proprietary Flat-Spider-Cone midrange; 9" (230mm) proprietary Spider-Cone woofer. Frequency range: 36Hz–20kHz. Sensitivity: 89dB/2.83V/m. Nominal impedance: 4 ohms. Recommended amplification: 50–180W.

DIMENSIONS Loudspeaker: 21.3" (540mm) H by 10.75" (273mm) W by 21.3" (540mm) D. Weight: 95 lbs (43kg). Stand: 29" (730mm) H (including spikes) by 10.75" (273mm) W by 21" (530mm) D. Weight: 50 lbs (23kg) each.

FINISHES Piano Black, Sapele.

SERIAL NUMBERS OF UNITS

REVIEWED 92100 L/R.

PRICE \$15,000/pair. Approximate number of dealers: 50. Warranty: 5 years parts & labor.

MANUFACTURER Vienna Acoustics, Rysergasse 60, 1230 Vienna, Austria. Tel: (43) (0)1-8896815. Fax: (43) (0)1-8896599. Web: www.vienna-acoustics.com.
US distributor: Sumiko Audio, 2431 Fifth Street, Berkeley, CA 94710. Tel: (510) 843-4500. Fax: (510) 843-7120. Web: www.sumikoaudio.net.

Almost every assumption you might make about Vienna Acoustics' Klimt The Kiss loudspeaker by looking at it would be wrong. It is *not* a stand-mounted two-way loudspeaker. It's a three-way, with a coincident tweeter-midrange. And that ain't no stand—it's an integral part of the speaker. It does *not* have a conventional cabinet—there are two separate enclosures, complete with micrometer control of both vertical and horizontal axes. And those sure aren't plain-vanilla drive-units—they're about as unique as they come.

When I say *you*, of course, I mean *I*. When I first saw The Kiss (\$15,000/pair), when Vienna Acoustics debuted its newest addition to their Klimt series at the 2009 Consumer Electronics Show, I misidentified every one of those characteristics. Then I listened to the speakers—and that drew me in for a far more thorough examination.

Impressed by its performance before I was intrigued by its potential—it proved a fitting prelude to a Kiss.

Let's kiss afresh, as when we first begun

About that "stand"—with only a single, slightly bowed side-pillar, it struck several of my visitors as looking incomplete. You'll love it or hate it. But if you buy the concept, you buy the stand—it's included in the base price, and its height is calculated into The Kiss's performance parameters.

At the heart of The Kiss is the 7" (180mm) flat, radially ribbed coincident driver first seen in Vienna's Musik. The flat-spider-cone portion of the coincident array is made of a compound that incorporates a proprietary material called X3P, and covers everything from 100Hz to 2.6kHz, where a 25mm silk-dome tweeter carries the response out to 20kHz.

Why ribbed? Well, that's for rigidity—many coincident drivers are conical because a cone has better dynamic stability than most lighter, flat pistons. Vienna Acoustics' chief designer, Peter Gansterer, used finite-element analysis (FEA) to obtain a maximum rigidity that interferes as little as possible with a flat response.

The 9" cone of the woofer, also of X3P, is similarly ribbed and designed in-house specifically for The Kiss. It uses a multiple-radius profile to maximize stiffness and minimize mass, and is mounted on a port-loaded woofer enclosure.

The midrange/tweeter array is mounted in its own enclosure, which Vienna calls the Music Center, atop the woofer cabinet, and "decoupled" from it by a swivel joint of drawn aluminum. That joint allows the Music Center to be



Vienna Acoustics Kliment The Kiss loudspeaker

ERIC SWANSON

moved in the horizontal and vertical axes relative to the bottom cabinet, the adjustments controlled by two precision-threaded screws on the rear of the cabinets. Each has its own adjustment “meter” to ensure repeatable and consistent results. The idea is to get the placement of each speaker about as right as possible, then fine-tune the rake and toe-in as needed.

The Kiss also has two small switches, labeled “T” (treble, duh) and “B” (bass, ditto). Neither greatly affects the sound—by design, claims Vienna Acoustics. They’re there for minute room-acoustic compensation, especially “T,” which was included to add air to overdamped rooms.

The Kiss has substantial low-profile binding posts with big, knurled knobs—it’s easily on my short list for Least Fussy Speaker Connections Ever. The crossover is first-order.

Kiss me and be quiet

In my room, The Kisses ended up about 4' from my front wall and about 2' from the sidewalls, with a fair amount of toe-in. Adjustments via the speakers’ caliper knobs were minimal: I needed only a

reckon, but not necessary in my room.

Although The Kiss is (sort of) a stand-mounted speaker, dainty it ain’t. Almost 2' deep, it occupies about the same footprint as many floorstanders. Also, despite a higher-than-average specified

THE IDEA IS TO GET THE PLACEMENT OF EACH SPEAKER ABOUT AS RIGHT AS POSSIBLE, THEN FINE-TUNE THE RAKE AND TOE-IN AS NEEDED.

slight declination in the Music Center’s rake (I sit high, as they say), and a more moderate additional toe-in. However, after getting the speakers sited pretty well (I thought), those slight final adjustments truly locked in the sound. Neither the “T” nor the “B” switch added substantially to my musical enjoyment, so I left them in their neutral positions. Nice to have, I

sensitivity of 89dB, it wants a bit of welly from accompanying amplifiers.

My only other setup-related thought is that the asymmetrical stands may not anchor The Kiss as well as a less stylish solution might. Even with meticulous leveling, mine rocked a bit, until I placed 25-lb York barbell plates on their bases—inelegant but effective.

MEASUREMENTS

Other than the in-room and nearfield measurements, for which I used an Earthworks QTC-40, the quasi-anechoic measurements of Vienna Acoustics’ Klimt The Kiss were all performed using DRA Labs’ MLSSA system and a calibrated DPA 4006 microphone. The Kiss’s voltage sensitivity is specified as 89.0dB/2.83V/m; my estimate of this was significantly lower, at 86.5dB(B)/2.83V/m. This was not unexpected, as the speaker didn’t play appreciably louder (at the same drive level) as the Denon SC-CX303, which has a measured sensitivity of 85.6dB (and which I write about in this issue’s Follow-Up section). The Kiss’s electrical impedance didn’t vary much with the positions of its rear-panel switches. The upper traces in fig.1 were taken with the Bass and Treble switches in the up position, the lower traces with them in the lower position. Not only is The Kiss a demanding load, with an impedance that drops to 2.6 ohms at 100Hz, and awkward combinations of 4.1 ohms and a 30° electrical

phase angle at 77 and 150Hz, but there is a large disparity between the low-frequency impedance and that between 1 and 3kHz. With tube amplifiers having a typically high source impedance, this disparity will emphasize the speaker’s balance in the low treble.

The traces in fig.1 are free from the glitches that would suggest the presence of cabinet resonances. Investigating the cabinet walls’ vibrational behavior with a plastic-tape accelerometer did uncover a couple of resonant modes between 600 and 800Hz, but these are low in level on the sidewalls and highest in level on the midrange enclosure’s top panel (fig.2), where they will have the least effect on the sound. A mode at 100Hz on this panel was absent on all other surfaces.

The broad saddle centered between 30 and 40Hz in the impedance-magnitude trace implies that the tuning frequency of the bass enclosure’s 2.5"-diameter reflex port lies in this region. However, the minimum-motion notch

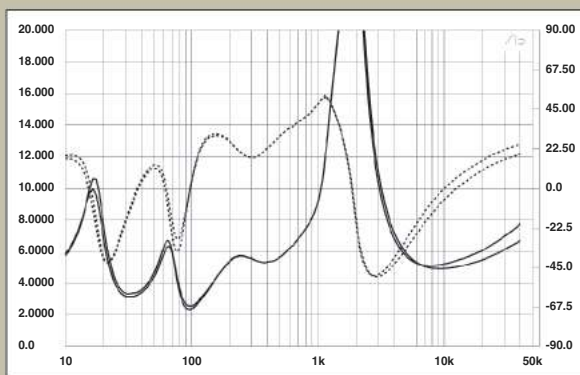


Fig.1 Vienna Acoustics Klimt The Kiss, electrical impedance (solid) and phase (dashed) with T and B switches in upper positions (upper traces) and lower positions (lower traces). (5 ohms/vertical div.)

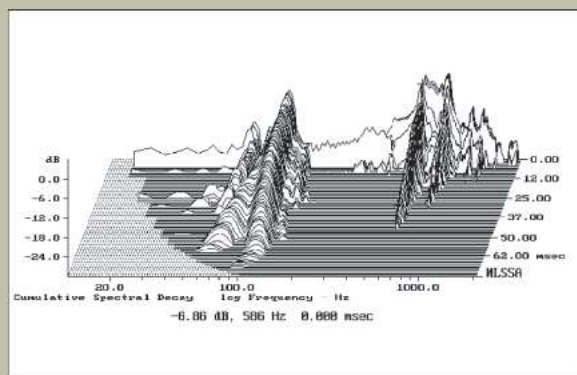


Fig.2 Vienna Acoustics Klimt The Kiss, cumulative spectral-decay plot calculated from output of accelerometer fastened to center of midrange-enclosure top panel (MLS driving voltage to speaker, 7.55V; measurement bandwidth, 2kHz).

Kill then, and bliss me / But first come kiss me

When I listened to John Surman's composition "Stone Ridge," from Tomasz Stanko's *From the Green Hill* (CD, ECM 1680), Anders Jormin's powerful double bass propelled the music along with authority and an astonishing amount of physicality. It wasn't so much that I had to keep reminding myself that The Kiss is a full-range three-way—the sound took care of that—but I was consistently amazed by how extended the bottom end was.

At the same time, Dino Saluzzi's bandoneón was remarkably present—I could hear the breath through its reeds, not to mention the shimmer of their harmonic overtones. Ah, and then Stanko enters. Holy Moly! The Kiss had jump factor aplenty. Stanko's trumpet was powerful, mellow, and utterly convincing.

That sense of presence wasn't a coloration, as demonstrated by "Oh Shenan-

doah," from *Rambling Boy: Charlie Haden Family & Friends* (CD, Decca B0011639). Pat Metheny's guitar and Jerry Douglas's dobro had pop and zing for sure, but The Kiss clearly revealed that Haden himself is no professional singer—his wispy voice lacked the projection of the pipes of daughter Petra Haden and guest

not one of them. Part of its cuddle factor may well have been the seamless response of its midrange driver. Certainly, Vienna Acoustics isn't wrong when they point out that this driver alone covers the entire vocal range—which you'd think would beat any multiple-driver combination, which of course

I WAS CONSISTENTLY AMAZED BY HOW EXTENDED THE BOTTOM END OF THE KISS WAS.

star Rosanne Cash. That's not a criticism of Haden or The Kiss—in fact, the combination made me tear up every time I heard it.

The Kiss was exquisitely capable of revealing the emotional core of every type of music I played through it. There are speakers that I judge accurate but never really warm up to. The Kiss was

would require the services of a crossover somewhere in there.

Not to slight The Kiss's tweeter—the crossover to it was seamless and perfectly balanced. All of Haden's guest string players on *Rambling Boy*—Metheny, Douglas, Sam Bush, Ricky Skaggs, *et al*—sounded immediate (and, of course, different), with the requisite amount

in the woofer's nearfield response, which results from the port resonance's back pressure holding the cone still, lies higher in frequency, at 42Hz (fig.3, blue trace), and the port itself features slight peaks below and above this region (red). There are also a couple of peaks apparent in the port's midrange output, but these are at a low level and will be even further suppressed by the fact that the port faces away from the listener. The woofer itself has a narrow bandpass, peaking between 70 and 150Hz, while the flat midrange unit (fig.3, green trace) rolls off slowly below 300Hz. This results in quite a degree of overlap between the outputs of the woofer and midrange unit. Together with the upper peak in the port's output, this leads to a somewhat boosted output between 80 and 160Hz. Yes, this is exaggerated in this graph by the nearfield measurement technique, but finding the optimal room placement for The Kiss will be critical if the speaker is not to sound overripe.

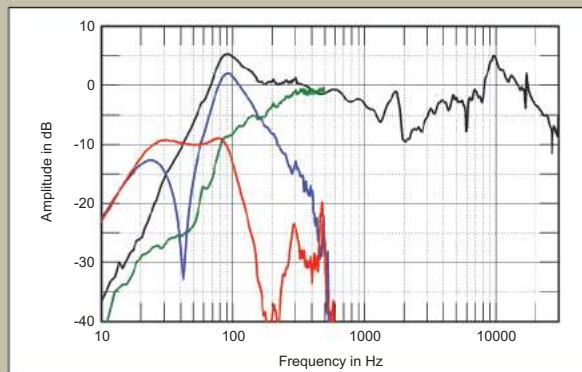


Fig.3 Vienna Acoustics Klimt The Kiss, anechoic response on tweeter axis at 50°, averaged across 30° horizontal window and corrected for microphone response, with nearfield responses of midrange unit (green), woofer (blue), and port (red) plotted below 500Hz, 600Hz, and 600Hz, respectively, and complex sum of nearfield responses plotted below 300Hz.

Higher in frequency in fig.3, the midrange and treble response (taken with the B and T switches down) suffers from a lack of energy in the low treble and a slight on-axis boost in the octave between 8 and 16kHz. Whether this behavior will affect the speaker's perceived balance depends on the dispersion, but I was a little alarmed by the presence of the peak just below 2kHz, which I could hear with pink noise.

Fig.4 shows the Vienna Acoustics' lateral dispersion, normalized to the response on the tweeter axis, which is thus portrayed as a straight line. The speaker becomes somewhat directional between 1 and 2kHz, which will work against the audibility of the on-axis peak in the same region. The off-axis flare above 2kHz looks worse than it is because the on-axis suckout between 2 and 3kHz fills in rapidly to the speaker's sides. The tweeter does get quite directional above 10kHz, which means that the excess

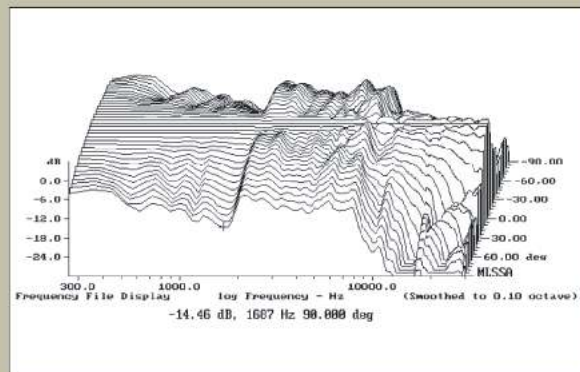


Fig.4 Vienna Acoustics Klimt The Kiss, lateral response family at 50°, normalized to response on tweeter axis, from back to front: differences in response 90°–5° off axis, reference response, differences in response 5°–90° off axis.

of floating overtones. Accurate, yes, but not overdone.

As a counterpoint to the Haden disc, I listened to the dance movement of *Suite Castellana*, from David Russell's *Music of Torroba* (CD, Telarc CD-80451). Russell's classical guitar had a darker tone than the steel-string dreadnaughts on *Rambling Boy*, of course, with a duller (albeit still vivid) overtone structure. Russell was also unambiguously placed within the acoustic of his favorite recording venue: Mechanics Hall, in Worcester, Massachusetts. While Russell was clearly somewhat closely recorded, The Kiss got out of the way of the hall's acoustic, allowing me to hear the support and amplification of that good room.

The Kiss also surprised me repeatedly, even when I wasn't listening attentively. Waiting for my wife to get off work one day, I had my music server on Shuffle and up popped "The Jezebel Spirit," by

David Byrne and Brian Eno. Distracted by that week's *New Yorker*, my first thought was, *I've always liked this song*. After a minute, it occurred to me that, this time, I *wasn't* really liking this song. I

the punchy bass, bright percussion effects, and various screeches I'd thought I remembered so well.

I listened once, turned up the volume and listened, and did my little white-boy

I TURNED UP THE VOLUME AND LISTENED, AND DID MY LITTLE WHITE-BOY DANCE— AND THEN I DID WHAT ANY AUDIOPHILE WOULD DO: I DELETED THE FILE FROM ENO BOX II.

wandered over to the server's display and saw that I was listening to an old mastering, 1993's *Eno Box II: Vocal* (CD ripped to ALAC, Virgin 39114) rather than the superior 2009 remastering of *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* (CD ripped to ALAC, Nonesuch 79894). So I switched, naturally, and was immediately greeted with

dance—and then I did what any audiophile would do: I deleted the file from *Eno Box II*.

On another day, I was idly listening to the Mothers of Invention's *Burnt Weenie Sandwich* (CD, Rykodisc RCD-10509) when I was knocked out by the live-sounding drums in "The Little House

measurements, continued

high-treble energy can be balanced in a given room by experimenting with the toe-in of the midrange enclosure (which swivels independently). In the vertical plane (fig.5), The Kiss maintains its balance over quite a wide angle, which is a good thing considering that with the speaker on its integral stand, the tweeter is around 46" from the floor, 10" above the average ear height of a seated listener. Unfortunately, the top octaves start rolling off a little earlier below the tweeter axis than above, presumably due to the additional baffling effect of the woofer enclosure. Again, the fact that the upper, midrange enclosure can be tilted down to point directly at the listening position will allow the listener to fine-tune the speaker's top-octave balance.

In Wes Phillips' listening room I performed my usual spatially averaged measurement of the review samples' response. The result for The Kiss is shown in fig.6. I derive this graph by averaging 20 measurements taken for each speaker in a rectangular grid measuring 36" by 18" and centered on

the position of the listener's ears in his listening chair. I used an Earthworks omni microphone and a Metric Halo ULN-2 FireWire audio interface, in conjunction with SMUGSoftware's Fuzzmeasure 2.0 running on my Apple laptop. The resultant graph shows the effect of both a loudspeaker's on-axis response and its power response. I have found that it quite accurately reflects a speaker's perceived tonal balance.

The broad peaks in the low and midbass are mainly the residual effects of room resonant modes that have not been eliminated by the spatial averaging. However, the large peak in the upper bass is also due to the Vienna Acoustics' intrinsic low-frequency tuning, as seen in fig.3. Wes Phillips was impressed by The Kiss's low frequencies, but I suspect he wasn't responding so much to actual extension—the speaker rolls off below the port tuning frequency of 42Hz, the fundamental frequency of the low E string of the four-string double bass and bass guitar—as to the rich presentation an octave higher. The midrange

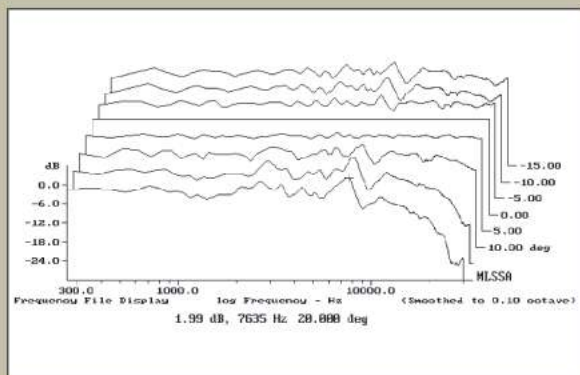


Fig.5 Vienna Acoustics Klimt The Kiss, vertical response family at 50°, normalized to response on tweeter axis, from back to front: differences in response 15–5° above axis, reference response, differences in response 5–20° below axis.

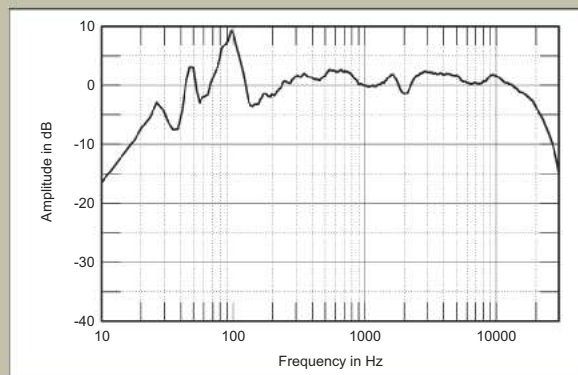


Fig.6 Vienna Acoustics Klimt The Kiss, spatially averaged, 1/6-octave response in WP's listening room.

I Used to Live In.” As a lifelong Zappa freak and audiophile, I know better than to expect sonic integrity from most of his recordings—he loved to edit together snippets from different dates and sessions, wasn’t above using a variable-speed oscillator to convert one key to another, and audio verité just wasn’t his thing.

However, Zappa also leavened all his studio tinkering with substantial sections of essentially unaltered live recordings. “Little House” includes some of the most extended such passages, and, as The Kisses reminded me, is an awfully good example of how excellent the Mothers could sound on the right night in a good hall. But back to those drums: they really knocked me out through the Vienna Acoustics. They were alive and *in* the hall, with loads of air and crunch.

I’m pretty sure, based on the lack of fancy drum flourishes, that it’s Jimmy

Carl Black bashing the skins, and I have to credit The Kisses for their perfect pacing; I frequently forget to credit Black with his phenomenal sense of the naked beat.

After the kiss comes the impulse to throttle

I’ve managed to hang on to the Thiel CS3.7s (\$13,000/pair) since reviewing them in December 2008, and thought

employs a novel coincident midrange-tweeter combination.

The Thiels exhibited a tad more bass slam on Stanko’s “Stone Ridge.” They didn’t so much seem to go deeper as to portray what bass there was with tautness, muscularity, and liteness. Both Stanko’s trumpet and Saluzzi’s bandoneón had the slightest bit more bite. I preferred, ever so slightly, The Kiss’s more relaxed mid-to-high-frequency re-

THOSE DRUMS REALLY KNOCKED ME OUT THROUGH THE VIENNA ACOUSTICS. **THEY WERE ALIVE AND IN THE HALL**, WITH LOADS OF AIR AND CRUNCH.

they might prove an interesting comparison to The Kisses. While the Thiel is a floorstander with a passive-radiator-loaded woofer, it, like The Kiss,

sponse, but many listeners won’t.

Haden’s bass had a slight bit more propulsion through the Thiels. I listened repeatedly to *Rambling Boy* through both

and treble are relatively uniform, though there is a trace visible of the peak just below 2kHz, which may have been exaggerated by the fact that the tubed BAT VK-55SE amplifier was used for the this measurement. The rolloff above 9kHz is due to the increasing absorptivity of the room’s furnishings in the high treble. As for The Kiss’s balance lower in frequency, I wouldn’t have described it as “relaxed,” as did WP, particularly in comparison with the Thiel CS3.7, which had less energy apparent in-room in the top two octaves. (See fig.8 at www.stereophile.com/floorloudspeakers/1208thi/index4.html, though this response was taken around 36” farther away from the speakers than was that of The Kiss.) However, it’s possible that WP was subconsciously taking as his reference level the Kiss’s upper-bass region, which is about 5dB hotter than the Thiel’s. And, as he noted, the CS3.7’s bass does go somewhat lower than The Kiss’s.

Turning to the time domain, fig.7 shows The Kiss’s step response on the tweeter axis. Despite the concentric design of the tweeter/midrange unit, the tweeter’s output arrives at

the microphone about 300µs before that of the midrange; both are connected in inverted acoustic polarity. The woofer’s step is the slowly rising trace beginning at 4.5ms; connected in positive acoustic polarity, it smoothly follows on from the return of the midrange’s step to the time axis. In turn, this correlates with the good frequency-domain integration of their outputs seen in fig.3. The speaker’s cumulative spectral-decay plot (fig.8) is disturbed by some high-Q resonances in the mid- and high treble, but of more subjective import is the ridge of delayed energy associated with the on-axis peak at 1.7kHz. The audibility of this resonance will depend to some extent on kind of music being played; however, as I wrote earlier, I could hear the effect of this behavior with pink noise; I do wonder if it contributes to The Kiss’s excellent retrieval of recorded detail by adding a slight spotlighting effect.

There is much to admire in the measured behavior of Vienna Acoustics’ Klimt The Kiss. But as much as WP liked the speaker’s sound, I was somewhat bothered by that peak in the low treble.

—John Atkinson

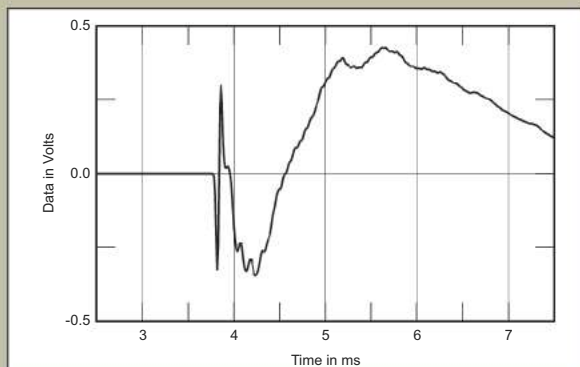


Fig.7 Vienna Acoustics Klimt The Kiss, step response on tweeter axis at 50” (5ms time window, 30kHz bandwidth).

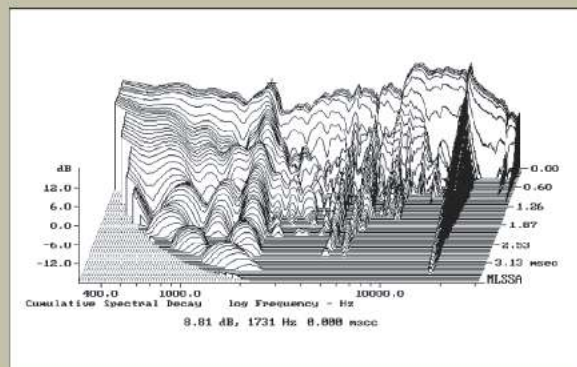


Fig.8 Vienna Acoustics Klimt The Kiss, cumulative spectral-decay plot on tweeter axis at 50” (0.15ms risetime).

Constellation

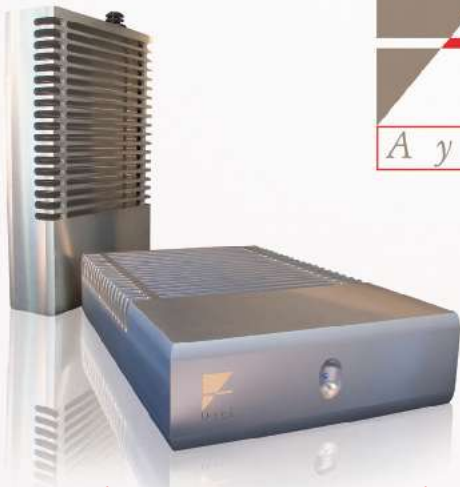
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ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

DIGITAL SOURCES Ayre C-5x^{MP} universal player; Apple 1.33GHz iBook (2GB RAM) with 250GB LaCie external hard drive & 3TB Infrant Technologies NAS drive; Ayre QB-9, Bel Canto e.One DAC3 D/A converters; Bel Canto USB Link 24/96 USB S/PDIF converter.

PREAMPLIFIERS Aesthetix Calypso, Ayre K-1xe.

POWER AMPLIFIERS Aesthetix Atlas, Balanced Audio Technologies VK-55SE, Musical Fidelity Nu-Vista 300.

LOUDSPEAKERS Dynaudio Special Twenty-Five, Klipsch Palladium P-39F, Thiel CS3.7.

CABLES USB: USB: EntreQ Discover. Interconnects: Shunyata Research Aeros IC, Stealth Metacarbon. Speaker: Shunyata Research Aurora, Stealth Dream. AC: Shunyata Research Hydra & King Cobra & Anaconda.

ACCESSORIES Ayre Acoustics Myrtle Blocks, DH Labs ceramic cones, Furutech RDP panels, RealTraps Mini & Mondo traps.

—Wes Phillips

speakers, and found the seamlessly relaxed sound of The Kiss and the precisely articulated extension of the Thiels equally attractive. Too close to call? No, I could hear the differences fairly easily—I just couldn't bring myself to prefer one over the other.

With Russell's Torroba, I was less ambivalent. The Thiels added a slight amount of weight to Russell's guitar—or perhaps it would be more accurate to say more body. The Thiels may have been slightly better at rendering string harmonics and air, but The Kisses were better at putting the instrument itself in my listening room. I preferred the latter, but other listeners might well go the other way.

The CS3.7s just flat knocked me out with Eno and Byrne's "The Jezebel Spirit," however. Yes, the slam and presence of the track through The Kisses continued to impress me, but the Thiels not only upped the "pop" factor in the basses and synths, their slightly brighter balance better matched the song's made-from-found-elements ethos.

That could also be said of the Mothers' "The Little House I Used to Live In," but the Thiels just didn't make Jimmy Carl Black's drums "pop" from the mix as definitively as did the Viennas. The CS3.7s were unswervingly articulate and persuasive, but I really enjoyed that sense of discovery in a 40-year-old favorite that The Kisses granted me.

To put this in perspective, I have to point out that I love, love, love the Thiel CS3.7. I have also fallen under the spell of the Vienna Acoustics Klimt The Kiss. Both speakers are quite special, but I'm not sure they're after the same listeners: If you want punch in the bottom end, the Thiel is probably the way to go. But the smoothness and relaxed seamlessness of The Kiss's midrange to high frequencies

I'D PUT VIENNA
ACOUSTICS' KLIMT
THE KISS UP AGAINST
SOME OF MY FAVORITE
SPEAKERS IN THE
WORLD. **IN FACT, IN
THIS REVIEW, I DID.**

made it awfully persuasive—especially for lovers of vocal music.

'Scuse me while I kiss the sky

I'd put Vienna Acoustics' Klimt The Kiss up against some of my favorite speakers in the world. In fact, in this review, I did. It more than held its own in that company.

The Kiss is a really large speaker masquerading as a stand-mount. In fact, it's both, but visually it "disappears" nicely, and many listeners will jump on it for precisely that reason. The Kiss is also attractive in both its Piano Black lacquer and Sapele finishes, and exquisitely constructed. Furthermore, the innovative rake and toe-in adjustment screws *might* make The Kiss work better than more conventional designs in many acoustic environments. It doesn't matter how good a speaker is if it doesn't sound good in *your* room.

Of course, innovation, precision, and construction come at a price, and in this case the price is \$15,000/pair. Considering what you get, that seems reasonable to me, but ultimately, you have to go by how *your* ears and wallet work things out.

I foresee many such a deal sealed with The Kiss. ■

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— Neil Gader, *The Absolute Sound* October 2009

"I wasn't prepared for such fabulous detail retrieval and astonishing dynamics."
— *HiFi News* Editor's Choice 2009

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www.wireworldcable.com
sales@wireworldcable.com
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