

Vienna Acoustics Klimt The Kiss loudspeaker

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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 (\$16,000/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 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 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 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 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.

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 Shenandoah," 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 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 *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 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 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 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 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 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 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 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, 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 litheness. 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 response, 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 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 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 \$16,000/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.

Specifications

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.