

TAS Cover Story



# NHT Classic Three Loudspeaker

More honest than finicky

by Chris Martens • photography by Adam Voorhes



Ask any veteran audiophile to suggest good speakers in the \$800 price range and odds are that he or she will name one of the many fine two-way bookshelf models now available. This is a hotly contested market segment, so there are plenty of attractive and sensibly priced options to choose from. But if you wanted my opinion, the speaker I'd propose wouldn't be a two-way model at all. Instead, I would direct your attention to NHT's brilliant new Classic Three—a three-way, stand-mount monitor that reproduces music with refinement, resolution, and imaging specificity that few affordable two-way speakers can match.

## Reveals subtleties with effortless grace

Many of us instinctively think of the audio spectrum as having three main constituent frequency bands—bass, midrange, and treble—and a clear-cut advantage of the Classic Three is that it provides three anodized aluminum drive units specifically optimized to cover each band (the anodizing process is said to eliminate the hard, “pingy” quality some listeners associate with aluminum-diaphragm-equipped drivers.) By comparison, many affordable two-way speakers can sound somewhat compromised, as if their woofers are being forced to go higher and tweeters to go lower than would normally be optimal. The Classic Threes, however, neatly sidestep this problem by covering the middle range of the music with dedicated 2" dome midrange drivers that offer excellent transient speed, the ability to resolve details well, and a healthy measure of dynamic punch.

NHT's switch to the three-way format pays sonic dividends at the top end of the audio spectrum, too, allowing use of an incredibly light and responsive small-diameter (.75") dome tweeter. This driver offers terrific dispersion and captures high-frequency details with disarming ease and a near-complete





freedom from treble histrionics. Just be sure to take time to install the NHT-provided, X-shaped, foam-rubber dampers that go between the Threes' midrange drivers and tweeters. Once the damper is in place, the tweeter rarely sounds like a separate driver at all; instead, it sounds like a natural integral extension of the voice of the midrange driver, which is as things should be.

The one criticism I would offer of the midrange driver/tweeter array may actually be a backhanded compliment: These drivers are truth tellers that will faithfully report shortcomings, if any, in associated components or program material, sometimes exhibiting traces of edginess or momentary hardness on abrupt transients. But the good news is that, in spirit, the Classic Threes are more honest than finicky, meaning good affordable amplifiers and A/V receivers can drive them effectively. At the same time, however, the speakers offer more than sufficient resolution to show why higher-performance ancillary components might be a worthwhile investment.

Finally, completing the picture is a 6.5" woofer housed in a sealed enclosure. This driver doesn't offer as much low-frequency reach as I've heard from the best competing bass-reflex two-way systems (e.g., the Paradigm Studio 20s), but it compensates through extremely good pitch definition and control. This design choice makes perfect sense given that the last thing you would want to match up with the Classic Three's responsive midrange/tweeter would be a sluggish, lugubrious-sounding woofer. Bass extends down to about 45Hz, but enthusiasts who crave deeper bass response should perhaps consider NHT's Classic Four floorstanders (\$1800). The Fours are based on the Threes, but add an excellent, built-in, passive subwoofer that pushes bass response down to the mid-20Hz range.

Put these elements together and you've got a bookshelf speaker that reveals subtleties in music with the effortless grace typically associated with more expensive designs. I put on "I Believe I'll Go Back Home" from master blues harpist Little Hatch's *Rock With Me Baby* [Analogue Productions, LP], and marveled at the way the Classic Threes showed Hatch's amplified harmonica dancing along



the fine line between a saturated but clean sound and a deliberately raw and overdriven one. In fact, the Threes made it obvious that Hatch not only plays the harmonica, but his microphone and amplifier as well, picking and choosing moments where he deftly pushes the amplifier into momentary distortion. Many affordable speakers would have homogenized Hatch's harmonica sound, but the Threes instead caught all the little details that show Hatch's true mastery of the instrument.

Even more impressive was the way the Threes handled the sound of Count Basie's ensemble on "One-Nighter" from *Basie Jam* [Pablo, LP]. First, the Threes nailed the cool, reedy voice of Basie's electric organ, and gently highlighted the economical yet soulful accents and fills Basie contributes throughout the song. The Threes also showed how the bandleader uses the spaces between notes to create unexpected pools of silence that showcase distinctive phrases about to be played by other band members. Best of all, the Threes created rock-solid images of the ensemble on stage so that, as solos are traded back and forth, the listener comes to appreciate the song as a roundtable conversation between performers who not only play but also listen with great intensity.

The point, really, is that the Classic Threes show the myriad small ways in which master musicians make choices and adjustments as they perform, partly to perfect their tone and partly to respond to fellow players. When speakers get this good, listeners feel they are being let in on precious musical secrets—as if granted the privilege of hearing the music from the inside out, just as musicians often hear their own performances. I've enjoyed this experience with fine mid-priced and expensive speakers before, but rarely with ones that cost as little as the Classic Threes do.

As I see it, whether listeners are spending \$800 or \$80,000 on a new pair of loudspeakers, they want the same thing—namely, to get as close as possible to the heart and soul of the music. No other affordable bookshelf speaker I've heard does a better job of that than NHT's Classic Threes. **TAS**

## Specs & Pricing

### NHT

6400 Goodyear Road  
Benicia, California 94510  
(800) 648-9993  
nhthifi.com

**Type:** Three-way monitor loudspeaker

**Driver complement:** .75" dome tweeter, 2" dome midrange driver, 6.5" woofer

**Frequency response:** 45Hz–20kHz

**Sensitivity:** 86dB

**Impedance:** 8 ohms

**Recommended amplifier power:** 150 watts maximum

**Dimensions:** 7.5" x 13.75" x 10.375"

**Price:** \$800

### ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

Linn Sondek LP-12 turntable and Ittok LVII tonearm; Benz Micro ACE L phono cartridge; Sutherland Ph3D phonostage; Musical Fidelity kW SACD player; Nuforce P8 preamplifier and Reference 9 Special Edition monoblocks; Kharma MP150 monoblocks; Furutech Alpha Reference interconnect and speaker cables; Sanus Steel Foundation stands; RPG and Auralex room acoustic treatments