



the art of audio

LISTEN CAREFULLY: GOOD SOUND IS IN THE EAR OF THE LISTENER

When it comes to audio equipment, especially speakers, our first instinct is to hide them. But for those who appreciate true, nuanced sound, bringing speakers into the open is the only way to go. Thankfully, there are attractive options that will make even those who think sound is unimportant sit up and listen.

In the spirit of this issue's Classic Woman theme, *Traditional Home* asked the audio industry's own classic—and classy—woman, Kathy Gornik, to walk us through the ins and outs of choosing speakers. Gornik is president and co-founder of Lexington, Kentucky-based Thiel Audio, a coveted brand among audiophiles. But first and foremost, Gornik is a music lover and thinks life is quite simply better with brilliant audio.

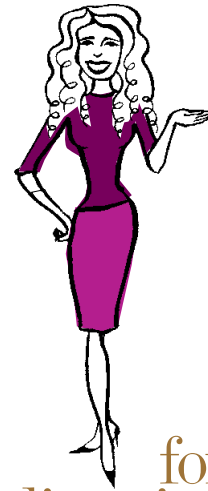
"Sound grows on you over time," says Gornik. "It creeps under your skin, it gets into your heart, your brain, and your body—and there is magic."

The goal of a great sound system is to fool you into thinking you're hearing the real thing, not a recording. True audio-

philes disdain miniature speakers that boast big sound. And while "in-wall," custom-installed speakers will disappear into your decor, so too will the sound when compared to music played through individual pieces.

"Imagine you were having a dinner party in your home and had employed an ensemble to play," offers Gornik as an example. "Because you thought the musicians were not attractive, you put them in the closet but kept the door open. What kind of sound do you think would come out? That's what you get with an in-wall speaker."

Sound needs to roam freely about a room and interact with other surfaces. We may not realize it, but our ears can tell the difference between music that is streamed through a narrow source and music that fills a room. Whether you have dedicated listening time or just have the radio on while folding laundry, you will notice a difference from quality audio. Words are clearly enunciated, volume levels don't need to be raised in order ▶



sound off Floor and stand-mounted speakers produce the best audio. Thiel speakers come in a choice of wood finishes and grille fabric colors (thielaudio.com).



for your listening pleasure

Bring a favorite CD when testing speakers. Familiarity with a recording is the best way to gauge audio quality. A few favorites of Kathy Gornik, president of Thiel Audio, are Beethoven's piano concertos (especially those by pianist Murray Perahia), Pink Floyd's "Meddle," or anything by the Beach Boys, Led Zeppelin, Bob Dylan, or The Who.

to distinguish words or lyrics, and musical nuances will be revealed—even if you aren't listening for them.

When it comes to buying speakers, Gornik says, "Go to a dealer who can do a demo, and, given your budget, choose the speakers that sound the best." High-quality speakers range in price from a few hundred dollars to tens of thousands. A lot goes into each unit—parts, metals, interior muffling, case material, and construction—but it's the engineering that counts the most. "Not all engineering is expensive, some is just smart," says Gornik.

To create full-spectrum audio, speakers need to include multiple drivers: tweeters, mid-range drivers, woofers, and subwoofers. Tweeters produce the highest sounds and subwoofers the lowest bass, with the mid-range drivers handling the acoustic frequencies in between.

When speakers are engineered to be small and unobtrusive, some low-frequency drivers are separated out and stashed inside the subwoofer or eliminated all together. Those tiny golf-ball-sized speakers that would look so nice on a shelf? They aren't much more than a tweeter. "The sound of a grand piano has a hard time getting out of a golf ball," says Gornik.

The best sound comes from large speakers placed on a floor or stand. Shelf-sized speakers can provide surprisingly good audio when on a small stand of their own. A good compromise is a strategically placed wall-mounted speaker. Basically, there should be as little contact between the speaker and the corresponding surface as possible. This minimizes vibrations and interference and lets the sound move freely about the room. ■