

Downhill all the way? Or Evolution VS. Creation!

By: Blaine Peck

I have owned a pair of Vandersteen 2Ce's since last summer and been extremely happy with them. They are transparent, well balanced, and virtually disappear. Though I have made many satisfying acquisitions in the past year, a year of many upgrades, I can't think of an audio purchase with which I have been happier. That's why when Jon approached me with news regarding a new "level" (2Ce Signatures) in the Vandersteen line of speakers I was surprised. I thought Richard Vandersteen had already found the near-perfect steps of audio value in a speaker market that is rich, if not buried, in choices and price ranges that make my home expenses look like a real buy. I was additionally surprised when Jon asked, "How would you like your pair of 2Ce's to be the guinea pigs for a Signature upgrade path that Vandersteen will be offering 2Ce owners who purchased after January 1 '97?" Of course I immediately said yes and then asked what the improvements were. This is my "shoot first, aim later" response to questions ruled by my emotions. I found out that Richard had decided to make several changes he has always wanted to make to 2Ce's but had delayed due to the inevitable cost increases. Price points and value have always been keys to the Vandersteen line. The changes include replacing the standard tweeter with the one used in the model 3A's, adding a terminal block on the back of the speaker for a more sonically transparent spade lug connection and revamping the crossover. This last would correct a few minor discrepancies that have nagged him over the years and optimize the speaker. Then there is the final modification that does not affect the sound but certainly says volumes about the evolution of this fine product. The back panel not only included the tweeter and midrange control and the new terminal block but something a Vandersteen speaker, no matter what level, has never seen: Richard Vandersteen's signature. I guess he finally felt that the 2's had fully arrived and it was time to embrace them with his own moniker. Very nice touch!

Having committed to the update, I began to think about the ramifications. What would happen to the sound of these great speakers? With a degree in instrumental music and having been a professional vocalist and serious amateur recording engineer for years, I am pretty particular about sound. Voices are something that not many speakers do to my liking. Somehow, many drivers and crossovers seem to get in the way of my perception of what voices sound like. Previous purchases I had made, like Magnepan II B's and a pair of Rogers LS315A's (which I will never part with), did a very nice job in that area but lacked the low-end response and balance of the 2Ce's. I was worried that when my 2Ce's changed I wouldn't like them as much. Well, trusting Richard Vandersteen with his decision to make the speaker what he always wanted it to be was something I felt strongly about so I decided not to look back.

My first experience with the "Sigs" was not to be with my own set. One day visiting Ultra Fidelis, I walked into their listening room to be grabbed by what appeared to be 2Ce's. I noticed the transients were really fast. The percussive nature of the plucked guitar and the quick, natural feel of the cymbals and tom toms really pulled me from my normal "Hey," to Jon and Dave. Sure enough, the first pair of off the line Sig's had arrived and they were putting them through the normal break-in paces. I didn't have time to stay long so I left with a lot of questions but not too many answers about the effect of the upgrade.

So now let's get to the meat of this article. Several weeks passed while my 2Ce's traveled to California and back but it wasn't too painfully long before I was sitting in front of my newly modified 2Ce Signatures. I was excited, but also actually a bit frightened. I loved the pre-modified versions so much I could have sold them to the hearing impaired.

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What was this experience going to be like? Being the anal retentive person I am, I had properly marked the floor before removing them because I wanted to be able to recall their "proper" location upon their return. I set them up, hooked them up to my ARC front end (LS7, PH3 and VT60) and sat down to listen. Again the first thing that struck me was the speed of the transients. Guitar (particularly acoustic) and percussion were so much more "there" in time that the music moved in a more fluid manner. Everything was synched or locked-in more solidly. It was a revelation with many of the CD's and albums that I listen to frequently. I had no idea what I had been missing previously. Remember, if I haven't made this perfectly clear yet, I LOVED THESE SPEAKERS BEFORE! I listened to various types of music to get a real handle on what was changed. First I listened to some jazz instrumental music that I knew I'd love on the Signatures because I had a sense of their capabilities with instruments.

I put on several pieces such as Sonny Rollins "Way Out West" (the Analogue Productions 24 karat gold limited edition) CD. As I suspected, everything from tenor sax and drum kit to string bass was full and round and again there was that rock solid feeling that moved as if in lock step. During several other jazz selections that included some Miles Davis and solo piano from the Concord Maybeck Series, I heard instruments through the 2's as I had never heard them before. It was as if someone had adjusted the system with the 15 band EQ, circa 1975, only without all the downside. In a sense that is what was done in the tweaking of the crossover. I finally decided to go for the daunting vocal part of my evaluation.

All right, so now I have to listen to some vocals. I could no longer put it off. I grabbed a CD by Marc Cohn, "The Rainy Season," which was never my favorite offering of his, but remember, I am still holding back a bit. I pressed "play" and sat down. My first impression was that I was able to hear detail in the voice that I had never heard before. There were times I could actually hear some of the noise that seeps into the mic just before the beginning of a take. Not a musical issue per se, but certainly one of detail. Again the instruments were wonderfully fluid, percussive and true to form. I was very happy in that category. Ah, but what about the voices? Well, as I had suspected they certainly were not the same. The detail was almost too bright and I vacillated back and forth between enjoying the detail I had never heard and wanting back the wonderfully natural vocal sound of my pre-modified speakers. I went into the wee hours of the morning listening to some of my favorite vocal selections. Bonnie Raitt's "Luck of the Draw", Livingston Taylor's delightful "Good Friends" (I highly recommend his recordings with Chesky Records) and a couple contemporary Christian favorites: Bob Bennett's - "Songs from Bright Ave." and Susan Ashton's untitled CD from 1993. Each listening brought a new understanding and experience of this music with which I was so familiar. After hours of intense yet enjoyable listening I decided to call it an evening so I put the CD player on repeat, turned the volume down, and went to bed. After all, I had a new tweeter and crossover electronics and they needed to be "broken in". I might as well accelerate the process.

I let the music repeat the entire following day and prepared to listen the next evening when I got home from work. I pulled out one of my "test" CD's and sat down to listen. Overnight the speakers had mellowed a bit. Probably the parts in the crossover, but who knows? I'm not a designer or EE, just an avid listener. Still with the vocals bothering me a bit, I decided to move the speakers' positions in the room. Just a bit about my room: it is 10.5 feet wide by 17 feet deep and it's my old recording studio control room so its pretty absorptive and very linear in spectral balance. It is built on a floating concrete floor, has built-in bass traps, and no parallel walls. A wonderfully intimate place to listen to music and also brutally revealing. Previously, I had positioned the unmodified speakers approximately 1 foot from the side walls and about 3 feet out from the wall behind them. This would not be ideal in a normal room but, because my room has so little effect on the speakers, I can get away with it. Also, the side walls in that area flare out so the room opens up to the listener. I tried moving the speakers closer to the listening position by 1.5 feet and another 6 inches

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closer together. After spending several hours listening to music in that position I realized that this was not the answer as the center image had gotten just ever so slightly compressed. Next I moved the speakers back toward the side wall but actually pulled them forward just a few inches more. That was it. I found a full, uncompressed center image and the vocals were warmer than they had been. I had not lost any of the detail, just a touch of edge. OK, I found the right location but how was the listening pleasure now? Well I have to say it was up an order of magnitude. I was able to hear detail that I had not experienced before this modification but my precious vocals were getting more round, full, and accurate. Every day brings a more congealed sound as the "new" of the speaker gets more mature and mates with the "old." Due to the increased intimacy, the listening experience is astounding. The vocals are more open, much like the experience of moving previously from a model 2Ce to a current model 3A. The speakers, as always, have a wonderful sound stage both in panorama and depth. Instrumental and vocal locations are easily and clearly located and a real delight.

There are a couple things that I experienced that I was not aware I would get with this modification. The low end of these newly modified speakers is more robust. It's as if, since the mids to highs were more finely honed, that Richard could now complement that with a bigger bottom. I also have found that by holding more true to the old rule of my listening position being equal to the distance between the speakers I get the most out of this system. Of course this may vary with listening environments.

Suffice it to say, it has only been days since the arrival of my Sig's and with some tweaking and break in period I am extremely pleased with the investment of \$350 plus shipping, or for you who haven't bought your Vandersteen 2Ce's yet, a premium of only \$200 for Signatures. I have a more balanced speaker from top to bottom that reveals so much more music in my existing collection than I thought possible. My thanks to Richard Vandersteen for not only endeavoring to give the world an incredible value in his entire loudspeaker line, but for not resting on his many laurels. True, it's the model 2's and their successors that have certainly been instrumental in putting Vandersteen on the map, but he has now brought this wonderful speaker system to a value level that I feel is unequalled in the industry.