"... MARVELOUS ... JAW DROPPING ... the dominion of the highest end."

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"... a great loudspeaker system ... wonderfully detailed and transparent ... always sounded right, natural and non-fatiguing ... alluring and delicious ... removing any indication that I was listening to loudspeakers."

by Christopher Zell, Ph.D

Paradigm, as well as their sister electronics arm Anthem, has long been known for producing components that provide high-end sound at relatively affordable prices. Until fairly recently, Paradigm has offered value-oriented products, such as the excellent Atoms up through the Paradigm Reference Studio 100 floorstanding loudspeakers that favorably impressed me during an earlier review of mine. In the tradition of Anthem and their new Statement Electronics, Paradigm has taken on the risky and bold challenge of entering the ultra-high end loudspeaker arena. I was very enthusiastic when, a few months ago, I received a large pallet at my doorstep containing a full Paradigm Signature 5.1 home theater loudspeaker. This included the top-of-the-line Signature S8 main loudspeakers, a Signature C5 center channel, two Signature ADP surrounds and, finally, a Signature Servo subwoofer.

DESCRIPTION

The drivers utilized across the Signature series are very similar to each other in design and material composition, helping to achieve a synergistic sound from loudspeaker to loudspeaker, and therefore across the 360 degree soundstage. Though I will briefly describe Paradigm's proprietary Signature transducers, those interested in more detail may reference Paradigm's informative Signature website for additional specifications (**www.paradigm.com**). All tweeters are one-inch, Ferro-fluid-cooled

S8

G-PAL™ gold-anodized pure-aluminum domes. The midrange drivers are MLP™ mica-loaded polymer cones of various diameters, with gold-anodized solid-aluminum phase plugs. Each bass transducer features a mineral-filled polypropylene cone and a large one-and-a-half inch voice coil. The S8, C5 and even the ADP surrounds can be bi-amped or bi-wired by removing the included shorting straps connecting the dual pairs of five-way binding posts. Each loudspeaker in the Signature line is available in four high-quality cabinet finishes: Cherry, Natural Birdseye Maple, Rosewood and High-Gloss Piano Black. All of the loudspeakers within this series are designed to perform with the grilles on. These curved, black cloth-covered assemblies are said to eliminate edge diffraction sound reflections that can interfere with a driver's primary output.

"… integration among the various loudspeakers was impeccable … the C5 was extremely synergistic — indistinct as a separate source, even when playing loudly … the ADPs, as well as the entire Signature system, were excellent at reproducing the ambience …"

The complete Signature home theater system arrived with absolutely gorgeous high-gloss Piano Black cabinets. Each time I viewed the system, it reminded me of the flawless finish you would experience from a luxury automobile. The Paradigm pedigree is obvious with the S8 main loudspeakers, especially glancing at the Paradigm Reference Studio 100s situated next to them in my reference room. The 48.5-inch-high by eight-and-a-half-inch wide by 20.5-inch deep, 100-pound S8s are, however, a step up in weight, size and most noticeably cosmetics and fit and finish quality. The flawless cabinet rounds and tapers back toward the rear face, leaving a graceful and soft façade from the listener's perspective. The black finish, slim front face, outrigger feet and appealing aspect ratio also creates the illusion of disappearance rather than an imposing scale that a loudspeaker of this size often can. They are understated but command a powerful presence, eliciting universal oohs and aahs from visitors. The S8 is a six-driver, three-way ported design, with a driver complement from top to bottom, including a one-inch tweeter, a seven-inch midrange and four seven-inch woofers above the relatively small three-inch diameter front port. The frequency response is rated down to 28 Hertz in-room, with the usual uniform +/- 3 degree off-axis horizontal frequency response you expect based on Paradigm's loudspeaker design philosophy.

The arresting C5 is the largest center channel in the Signature series. It was most often the first thing that caught people's eye as it floated on the optional floor stand below my front projection screen. The 81-pound C5 is the most significantly-sized center channel loudspeaker I have ever had in my home theater, measuring 9-and-a-half inches high by 37.5 inches wide by 17.5 inch deep. This six-driver, three-and-a-half-way design contains a vertically aligned one-inch tweeter and four-inch midrange, flanked by a pair of seven-inch midrange/woofers and another pair of seven-inch woofers. The rear features two high-velocity, low-noise, die-cast aluminum ports to minimize potential distortion from turbulence. The C5 is magnetically shielded via Paradigm's trademark MagneShield™ technology. Despite its size, once again, the overall feel was graceful because of the gentle tapering from front to rear, the fine gloss black finish and the manner that the optional center channel stand levitated the unit between the projection screen and floor.

Endowed with five drivers, the three-way, triangulated Signature ADP surround loudspeakers are similar in design concept to the Reference series ADPs, and are intended for wall or stand mounting. The side-facing eight-inch woofer is crossed over at 250 Hertz, while the angled front and rear faces each contain a vertically aligned one-inch tweeter and four-inch midrange. They are configured as dipoles, which could be a concern for some multi-channel music sources that are intended to be used with direct radiators to localize musical instruments. The ADPs performed admirably with multi-channel music, which does minimize this concern to a great extent.

Finally, the substantial but graceful 107-pound sealed enclosure Signature Servo subwoofer may be imposing physically (18-and one-quarter inches wide by 19-and-a-quarter inches high by 20-and seven-eighths inches deep), but it is surprisingly unobtrusive to the eye, largely due to the tasteful curve from the cabinet front to the smaller rear. Realize that this subwoofer is not small and will make a physical statement in your home theater room, albeit a positive one in my opinion because of its stunning cosmetics (my chosen placement was behind the C5). The Paradigm subwoofer insignia glows a soft blue when the unit is powered, but this was not visible or distracting from my listening position because of the side-ways orientation I selected. The back panel is comprehensive, with a variety of useful controls, including excellent graphics illustrating the function of most knobs and switches. Both balanced XLR and unbalanced RCA line level inputs are provided. The low-pass cutoff frequency is continuously variable from 35 to 150 Hertz, and subwoofer-satellite phase alignment from 0 to 180 degrees. The usual subwoofer level dial is included, along with a three-position on/off/auto power switch. The Servo subwoofer is rated down to 11 Hertz DIN.

C5

SET-UP

The first order of business when setting up a home theater loudspeaker system is experimentation with the placement of the main left and right loudspeakers. Leveraging my previous experience in locating the Paradigm Reference 100s greatly simplified this process for the Signature S8s. Although I did extensive experimentation with their location, they ended up almost exactly where the 100s performed best, about three-and-a-half feet from the back wall, just over three feet from the side walls, and 11.5 feet from the center listening position. This positioning was chosen as a compromise between low end extension and openness from the upper bass on up, keeping in mind that I had the Signature subwoofer to augment the lower frequency registers. The curved sidewall tapering on the S8s did make it more difficult to eyeball toe-in, so I resorted to exact measurements from side and rear walls to various cabinet corners, something I always end up doing eventually anyway after initial experimentation. The C5 center channel was mounted on the supplied stand and placed below the projection screen along an arc traced through the S8s from my reference location. The Signature Servo subwoofer was situated behind the center channel, as far out from the front wall as possible in a sideways orientation, allowing for convenient control manipulation while optimizing the system. The ADP surrounds were wall-mounted approximately one foot above ear level, and 15 degrees behind the main listening couch. I did not bi-amp any of the loudspeakers, since the robust Anthem Statement P5 power amplifier proved to be more than enough for all of the efficient Signatures.

LISTENING

As previously mentioned, I considered the Signature line a somewhat risky undertaking for Paradigm. To make the comparison of differences even more relevant, I directly auditioned the Signature home theater loudspeakers vs. the Paradigm Reference Studio system I reviewed last year. Since the S8's driver complement and cosmetics are so similar to the Studio 100s, I was curious to what degree of significance the overall performance variation would be. I also assessed whether the considerable increase in cost over the 100s would be justifiable. At these prices, you are entering into the law of diminishing returns to some extent.

> *"… the addition of the Servo subwoofer created an unrestrained, subterranean feel … bottomless … like you have hardly tapped the power and low frequency extension capabilities."*

As Paradigm states, the Signatures are designed to be used with the grilles on and indeed they sounded noticeably worse and rawer naked. In stereo mode, the S8s are wonderfully detailed and transparent, clearly more so to my ears than the more affordable Studio 100s. On "Philo," from bassist Victor Krauss' *Far From Enough* (Nonesuch), guitarist Bill Frisell's trademark, almost slightly flat guitar eerily played against Krauss' bass and sister Alison's background vocals, removing any indication that I was listening to loudspeakers. This disappearing act was something the Signatures consistently achieved with a variety of sources throughout the evaluation period. Although the S8s sounded great sans subwoofer on Krauss' interesting, dirge-like cover of Robert Plant's "Big Log," the addition of the Servo subwoofer created an unrestrained, subterranean feel that the S8s by themselves could not quite duplicate, enhancing the layered effect of Alison's restrained vocals and Victor's unadulterated bass line.

I will refrain from waxing poetic ad nauseam with specific details about the entire Signature system's performance and simply offer my global impressions, which never wavered, regardless of music or film source genre. This approach is actually quite consistent with my lasting sentiments about the Signatures. Throughout an impressive plethora of cymbal crashes, explosions, guitar riffs, etc., the Signatures always sounded right, natural and non-fatiguing, regardless of how spectacular or mundane the source material was. Rather than spending my evaluation time documenting specific things I liked or disliked, I simply enjoyed whatever music or movie experience I was immersed in. The integration among the various loudspeakers was impeccable, a common thread throughout all of Paradigm's loudspeaker line. The C5 center channel was extremely synergistic and indistinct as a separate source, even when playing loudly. In fact, I often found myself checking to make certain it was on. This was especially evident during DVD playback, even with older, non-notable soundtracks such as that of "Solaris" (20th Century Fox). At the close of this film, the music was so alluring and delicious through the Signatures that I sat through the entire final credits, something I seldom feel compelled to do.

Despite the fact the ADP surrounds are not configured as monopoles, they held up very well, even with multi-channel music sources that have direct sounds emanating from the surround channels. A good example is the spectacular "Blackest Eyes" from the DVD-A version of Porcupine Tree's *In Absentia* (Lava Records), a Surround Sound Music Award winner. Of course, the ADPs, as well as the entire Signature system, were excellent at reproducing the ambience in concert videos, such as David Bowie's *Reality Tour* (Columbia Records). The Paradigms were never fatiguing, always detailed and realistic, so much so that I listened to tons of music and watched scores of DVDs during the last few months.

Signature ADP

The Signature Servo subwoofer sounds bottomless, as a reference subwoofer should. It feels like you have hardly tapped the power and low frequency extension capabilities that are at your disposal, like driving a Ferrari at 80 miles per hour. This was evident on any source with considerable low-frequency content and certainly in action movies. Of late, my home theater has been the location of countless demonstrations of video and music reproduction. One scene that always seems to make the rounds is the opening of *Master and Commander* (Twentieth Century Fox), when a false calm is broken as cannonballs from the bigger, faster and stronger French privateer *Acheron* come blistering across and into the *HMS Surprise's* deck. The sonic contrast between the ferocious battle and the preceding low-level sound effects and dialogue is astounding. The impact is stunning and uncompressed through the Paradigm Signatures, even at very high levels, scaring many an unsuspecting viewer while bringing home the horror and bloodshed and shock of the ship to ship combat.

"The sonic contrast between the ferocious battle and the preceding low-level sound effects and dialogue is astounding … impact is stunning and uncompressed … even at very high levels … bringing home the horror and bloodshed and shock of the ship to ship combat."

DOWNSIDE

I hope it is obvious that I was extremely impressed with the Signature Home Theater loudspeaker system, and it is because of this that I am holding them up to a very high standard. With this in mind, there are a few things that I feel the buyer should be aware of when considering them for a high-end home theater.

The ultra-wide C5 center channel is designed with ultimate performance as a primary concern, but it is difficult to place on top of or below many video monitors. Paradigm does offer the smaller C3 at some reduction in performance and price to accommodate such situations.

"With the release of the Signature line, there has been a paradigm shift at Paradigm Electronics … they have entered the dominion of the highest end."

Despite the fact that the S8s are very large, multi-driver loudspeakers with substantial bass driver displacement, I believe they ultimately need a subwoofer for reproducing ultra-low frequencies appropriate for a system of this level. Though there is quality bass, the bar has been raised in home theater performance in recent years for full-range floorstanding loudspeakers. This ultimately was not a problem for me, since I always advocate a subwoofer in a home theater system.

For those who are using 5.1 music sources that theoretically require direct radiators (monopoles), the ADP surrounds are not configured as monopoles. Despite this, they perform quite well as direct sources, possibly because of the forward-facing woofer crossed over at 250 Hertz, and the excellent horizontal dispersion characteristics of the Paradigm drivers.

The Servo subwoofer does not have a defeat switch, which is unfortunately and curiously very common. In these days of home theater processors and receivers, most end users utilize the processor's bass management and low-pass crossovers, not those in the subwoofer. At this price point and performance level, in my opinion it is inexcusable to not include a bypass switch. Additionally, there is no built-in equalization for room tailoring, which is becoming more and more commonplace in subwoofers.

CONCLUSION

Signature Servo

With the release of the Signature line, there has been a paradigm shift at Paradigm Electronics. Known as a manufacturer of loudspeakers of outstanding value for the money, competing successfully with units many times their price points, now they have entered the dominion of the highest end. I would not describe the Signature Home theater system as merely a good performer for the money, or a great value with respect to the rest of the marketplace. They may be all of those things, but they are first and foremost a great loudspeaker system period, worthy of serious consideration by those seeking a true reference quality sound system. I absolutely believe the S8s are a clear upgrade, and worth the extra investment over the Reference 100s. They cross that tough to describe bridge in performance, where things sound accurate and natural, while making you relax and smile, sometimes enticing you to stay up far too late. As with all loudspeakers, especially those of this quality, to get the very best they must be set up properly (i.e. utilizing measurement tools, experimenting with multiple placements and positions, optimizing bass management, etc.). The Signature S8, C5, ADP and Servo Subwoofer are marvelous loudspeakers, and adding in the jaw-dropping automotive quality finish and graceful lines, you unquestionably have products that are positioned squarely in the high-end realm.