"... BRILLIANT ... big and refined sound ... A REAL FEAT ..."

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"... an immersive soundfield ... equally balanced ... fully enveloping ... plenty of articulation and punch ... imaging was spot on ... crisp and brilliant ... recreated the ambient space beautifully ..."

WHAT WE THINK

These trim speakers provide surprisingly big and refined sound at a good price.

Ken C. Pohlmann

Truth be told, huge speakers are a pain, especially when you've got six or more crammed into your living space. In today's world, where aesthetics often trump sound quality, boasting about your big speakers has become passé. We like our speakers small, if not invisible. That's all fine, of course, but pesky laws of physics dictate that small speakers often don't perform as well as big ones. And this has driven a dramatic transformation in speakers, as designers find new ways to get big sound from small boxes.

Emblematic of the new breed is Paradigm's Cinema 330 satellites, Cinema ADP surrounds, and UltraCube subwoofer. The largest in a line of siblings that also includes the Cinema 110 and 220, the 330 satellites follow a design trend that thins cabinet depth to accommodate wall-mounting with plasma and LCD TVs. At about 4 inches deep, the speakers are flatter than most flatscreens. Thoughtfully, Paradigm supplies beveled mounting brackets to create an angle toward the listening position. If not wall-mounting, the contour of the rigid plastic cabinets makes it impossible to position the 330 vertically without speaker stands, though an included bracket lets you use it horizontally for the center channel. Cleverly, the Paradigm badge is attached to each of the grilles with fridge magnets, so they can be made readable with either orientation. (Or you can skip all that and use them in the kitchen to post your grocery list.)

Cinema™ ADP

UltraCube™ 10

Cinema™ 330 LCR

The ADP surrounds are dipoles, with a pair of drivers firing from each side and none in front. Much ink, and some blood, has been shed debating direct radiator vs. dipole speakers. The former provide more precise imaging, while the latter provide the more ambient sound preferred by some for watching movies. The lightweight ADPs are easily wall-mounted using their keyhole slots.

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The UltraCube subwoofer showcases another design trend, that of the Incredible Shrinking Mini Sub. Understandably, huge bass output and a small cabinet are hard to reconcile, but the UltraCube tackles the problem: three of its six sides have radiators. There's a 10-inch active driver firing downward (powered by a 650-watt RMS digital amplifier) as well as two passive 9-inch radiators on opposite sides.

SETUP

For this short visit, I skipped wall-mounting and attached two of the 330s to LS-25 steel-and-glass speaker stands supplied by Paradigm. Once assembled, this pair handsomely flanked my Samsung DLP display. For center-channel duty, I placed a third 330 horizontally under my TV. A pair of ADPs went along the side walls and a third ADP along the back wall. Since these are dipoles, I aimed the side-wall ADPs with their drivers pointing to the front and back, and the rear-wall ADP with its drivers aiming toward the side walls.

To complete the decimal point in my 6.1 system, I dropped the UltraCube at a proven spot along my front wall. Bass response is significantly affected by subwoofer placement, so if you're a newbie, take some time to find the best spot. For example, you'll generally get more bass in a corner but tighter bass when you move the sub out and into the room. After a little bit of tuning with test music to get the sub to blend nicely with the three front speakers, I was ready for some serious listening.

MUSIC PERFORMANCE

Seal's self-titled 1994 album had a string of hits, but the stereo mix of its intricate accompaniments always felt confined. The six-channel mix on the CD+DVD version (which also supports DVD-Audio) frees the album from that constraint. The baroque vocal arrangements and lush orchestration of "Kiss from a Rose" create a fully enveloping experience. Imaging was spot on, with a smooth transition across the soundstage. The rear dipoles created a nice wash of sound, with nothing extremely localized – a problem that can haunt smaller speakers. In this mix, lead vocals are spread across the front, with the center channel reproducing solo vocals in the final refrains, joined by a single harmony on the very last note. This detail pointed up a flaw: the timbral response of the horizontally oriented 330 sounded different when heard off-axis than when heard from the prime position. This happens all too often in center-channel speakers, and in this song resulted in a slightly unnatural vocal quality.

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The "Don't Cry" video features another luxurious mix, starting with background vocals that sweep seamlessly from the front to the rear – revealing a closely-matched midrange timbral balance between the 330s and ADPs. The acoustic guitars in the first chorus really showcased the surrounds, which sounded crisp and brilliant. While dipoles aren't always preferred for surround music, they were great with this type of complex mix, where an expansive sound field is more desirable than pinpoint imaging.

The bass line in the original stereo mix of "Bring It On" was merely adequate, but it's featured prominently in the surround mix. The UltraCube sub provided a nice separation between the bass line and the also prominent kick drum; I could follow both easily. The bass remained musical at all times and had sufficient output for moderate listening levels. The second half of this song expands out to the surrounds, placing the alternate melody and vocals from the reprise solely in the tiny ADPs. They handled it beautifully.

"… the rattling of chain links in the center channel … vigorous orchestral music in all the satellites … the occasional musket ball whizzing through the surrounds — an effect that will make you duck … the ringing clash of blades, pointedly punctuating the music … The Paradigms really brought these scenes to life …"

Musical subtleties abound on Seal's album, and this Paradigm system was mainly transparent, delivering them to my ears unsullied and without calling attention to itself. Also, with so many instruments mixed discretely to each channel, the system needed to be equally balanced, with no individual speaker weaker than another. The Paradigms met that challenge, too.

MOVIE PERFORMANCE

Despite Johnny Depp's exuberant use of mascara, *Pirates of the Caribbean* is actually a thoroughly watchable movie. Moreover, its soundtrack is as swash buckling as its plot. In Chapter 3, Depp's first escape is accompanied by frantic exclamations and the rattling of chain links in the center channel, vigorous orchestral music in all the satellites, and the occasional musket ball whizzing through the surrounds – an effect that will

make you duck. Later, in the blacksmith shop, the swordfight is full of the ringing clash of blades, pointedly punctuating music, and of course, witty repartee. The Paradigms really brought these scenes to life, providing an immersive sound field and plenty of articulation and punch.

In Chapter 4, the ghostly Black Pearl pirate ship comes a-callin', and the score darkens considerably with low bass rumbling menacingly through the room. Broadsides from the Pearl, return cannon fire from the British fort, and fiery explosions everywhere really made the sub jump. As usual, when switching from music to movies, I turned up the subwoofer, and it performed well – though I couldn't help but yearn for a little more bottom end on this demanding scene and others like it. Subsequently, as ruffians storm the Governor's mansion, you can hear cannon balls rip through walls, chandeliers crash to the floor, grenades explode, and all manner of lethal cutlery fly through the smoke and mist. Once again, the Paradigms recreated the ambient space beautifully, and dialogue remained intelligible throughout the mayhem.

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BOTTOM LINE

Ideally, speakers today should be the opposite of children: heard but not seen. This Paradigm system fills that bill very nicely: it is both child-sized and well behaved. The 330s provide first-rate sound, a real feat given their slim profile and low price, while the dipole ADPs performed very well for movies. (For music, you might consider putting 330s in back as an upgrade.) The UltraCube was also quite good for its size, and even though it can't buck the laws of physics, it will satisfactorily pound smaller rooms. Put it all together, and it won't take much listening to this system to know that the new breed of trim speakers is offering terrific sonic choices.

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