"AUDIOPHILE QUALITY OUTDOORS, WHO KNEW?"

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by Piero Gabucci

INTRODUCTION

Ah, summertime! Around my house it means gardening, BBQ, a pool if we had one, and high fidelity—well at least it does for me. And I'm assuming if you're reading this review, high fidelity plays a pretty important part of your life too … indoor and outdoor.

Speaking of music, why should we compromise sound quality just because we're outdoors? Outdoor speakers aren't new and neither are the rock-simulated units more and more manufacturers are designing and building. Paradigm, yep, even Paradigm is no exception. Returning from a week's vacation this summer, I was surprised by a pair of boxes (alright, I knew they were coming) on my porch from the good people up north. As it was early in the afternoon on a sunny Sunday, I had those boulders unpacked and placed where I thought I could take best advantage of them for my whole yard; more on that later.

Needless to say, I did forgo unpacking my suitcase to play with the Monitor 60-SM's from Paradigm. Obviously setting up speakers on your back deck or patio requires running hidden wires from some source component in the house, snaking their way through crawlspaces or in eaves, and ultimately outdoors underground, through shrubs, under lawns, well you get the picture.

Not me. I was anxious so I simply brought out my receiver and CD player and hoped the extension cord was long enough. Minutes later I was listening to

glorious music outdoors! No research, no homework on Paradigm's rocks, just right to the meat—music! But before I give you the juicy details, let's get some of the business about these speakers out of the way.

ROCKS!

Alright, I admit it—speakers that look like big rocks wouldn't necessarily turn me on. I do realize as more and more people really jazz up their yards with landscaping, I could understand a need to hide or blend in appliances, and speakers are no exception.

The Rock Monitor SM comes in a few color options; mine are called "Northeastern Dark Granite." Other colors available are

"Western Sandstone" and "Fieldstone." The Rock is a completely sealed unit; Paradigm refers to it as a PolyGlass Enclosure. Other than the stainless steel grille slightly exposing the drivers beneath, the SM comes with a security spike to discourage theft and prevents others from moving it to different locations. The unit stands a bit over 12″ high and about an 11″ square footprint. It also weighs about 12 pounds. All told, it gives you 8 litres or 0.3 cubic feet of internal volume in round numbers. It's also designed to self-drain. Paradigm recommends a maximum of 70 watts of power if you're running the SM in mono and 35 watts per channel in stereo—which means a 50-watts-per-channel receiver is sufficient to drive the unit, also considering the specified sensitivity of 89 dB outdoors. Expect a frequency response from 66 Hz – 20 kHz if you're on axis and a bit less off the top end if you're off-axis.

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Uniquely, each rock speaker can output in stereo or mono. Cleverly, Paradigm realizes that yards can get quite asymmetrical large, and although multiple locations are possible and encouraged, getting good imaging isn't always possible. Stereo from each unit then is an excellent alternative. Ideally, however, the SM can be wired around a patio for example, with a stereo pair, which I did.

THE DRIVERS

As a sealed unit it's quite difficult to have a good look at the unique driver array in the SM. Since the review took longer than anticipated, I was able to see the driver "out of the box" as it were, while attending CEDIA in Denver. Essentially, there are three drivers—a single 6-1/2″ mid/bass polypropylene cone driver on a die-cast chassis, and then, attached to the chassis is a pair of 1″ PTD pure-titanium dome tweeters. Because of Paradigm's concern for outdoor placement and therefore dispersion, the tweeters are offset at a 30-degree angle. The mid/bass driver has dual voice coils, one for each channel.

LISTENING

We concentrate outdoor living around our patio, which measures about 12 ft by 20 ft. I placed a unit on either side of the patio about 16 ft apart and wired the units for stereo. What's nice about this placement is that I can spin the unit if I wanted to direct the sound towards the rear yard (we have a yard about 80 feet deep). I suppose a second pair back there might work better, perhaps even in a second zone. I also didn't want to place the units anywhere near the house, fearing an echo-effect or perhaps a bass boost. Whether my theory holds true or not I cannot verify, I simply didn't try. An interesting side note: I realized that placing the speaker on the patio created a different sound than placing the unit on soil: Bass was tighter, highs were generally cleaner. The speaker has a front side where the driver has a direct radiation, and obviously, hearing the speaker from the driver side is much better. But the speaker has a wonderful ambient quality. What impressed me was the musicality of the speakers, something I'd expect from a good pair of monitors on stands inside. I sat myself about 20 ft back between the speakers towards the open yard. The soundstage (odd to say that outside) was again surprisingly wide and controlled. Using a dedicated 55 watts-per-channel receiver, the Paradigm rocks handled low volume levels, revealing detail and fullness. At higher levels, to the dismay of many neighbors to the left and right of me, the SM units bellowed without complaint, and my neighbors enjoyed "live" music with clarity —one even suggested a different track on the CD I was playing, and he was two doors down. Audiophile quality outdoors—who knew?

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CONCLUSIONS

I write this conclusion shortly after using the Paradigm Rock 60-SM speakers for our annual outdoor Halloween party, and I answered more inquiry about the speakers than the booze, and that says a lot. They were a big hit, for the entire neighborhood. I knew what to expect from Paradigm—a solid performing unit, yet I was skeptical at the beginning to some extent. I can honestly say it didn't take long for me to accept the 60-SM as having rich quality sound. I very much liked the dual wiring option, and since the unit is so solidly built, I'd have no problem leaving the unit outdoors all year round. I look forward to next summer when I can place them properly amongst the shrubs with buried wires on their own zone.

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