"SONIC BLISS"

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"Is it still possible to achieve sonic bliss from a sub $1,500 speaker system? … Thanks to this budget-pleasing system from Paradigm, yes it is!"

by Jared Rachwalski

FOCUS

INTRODUCTION

Recently, my wife and I bought our first home together. If I had my way, the audio system would have taken priority over the rest of the furnishings when it came to setting up the living room. Soon, I painfully found out that I am not the one who gets to make those decisions.

Let me start by saying I, like so many, do not have a dedicated theater room. I have a real room with budget equipment. While I was more than eager to have taken out the mortgage solely for my audio system, the bank, and more importantly my wife, had other ideas.

Is it still possible to achieve sonic bliss from a sub $1,500 speaker system and an entry level a/v receiver? Thanks to this budget pleasing system from Paradigm, yes it is!

THE STUFF

Paradigm has long been making some of the best sounding low priced speakers. They continually produce quality products without cutting corners. Having an enormous R&D facility, including a 33,000 cu ft anechoic chamber, certainly helps. Not only is all R&D done on site, but also all of the components are created in house (they even wind their own voice-coils). This allows for impeccable quality control, and unmatched value, which is not lost on the final product.

Paradigm offers multiple finishes for most of their speakers. I received the Focus mains and the PDR subwoofer in Rosenut, while the Center and Surrounds came in neutral Black Graphite. The speaker cabinets are very solid, especially the ADP Surrounds. I was rather surprised by their weight. Thoughtfully, Paradigm

provides hefty mounting brackets and hardware for wall mounting.

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The fronts, center, and subwoofer all have flared rear ports (two for the sub). As well, the Focus, CC-170, and the ADP-170s all have five-way binding posts.

The CC-170 Center speaker has two grille cloth-covered end caps and an angled front baffle. The angle is such that if you place it either above or below a typical screen, you will ultimately be off axis vertically by the same amount, and as such the speaker is designed to be its best at that angle.

The PDR-12 subwoofer uses a standard front firing, rear-ported design. The plate-amp located on the back of the unit has controls for volume, and a variable low-pass filter. There is a mono low-level input, and left/right high-level inputs. However, there are no speaker-out connections.

The Focus fronts are mid sized bookshelf speakers that do not call attention to themselves. The tweeters are recessed into a dimpled baffle, which appears to be common with Paradigm's entire performance line.

The ADP-170s are a slightly different take on the normal dipole design. The custom designed crossover network allows the speaker to operate as a cross between bipole and dipole performance. Dipole is preferred for surround speakers, thanks to the diffuse sound created by having drivers firing in opposite direction out of phase. The problem is, when you have two different drivers playing low frequencies out of phase, you get cancellation. The ADP surrounds act like bipoles below 150 Hz. This means that the bass information is in phase, allowing for substantially more low frequency extension. They are rated down to 90 Hz.

CC-170

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Removing the grilles from each speaker (the PDR-12 has a non-removable grille) reveals the same CMC (Ceramic Metal Composite) tweeters, and MPC (Metallescent Polymer Cones) mid/bass drivers for each speaker (two per ADP surround).

THE SET-UP

After determining the best location for the surround speakers, I proceeded to drill my mounting holes, attached the mounting brackets, and suspended the speakers from the walls. I stepped back to admire my craftsmanship. Surprisingly, they held. I was shocked because I was mounting 12 lb+ speakers directly to drywall, and I do not share the same tool-wielding skills as the rest of my family. Three months later, they are still holding, and my wife wants to use them as plant stands. (I don't think so!)

The Focus fronts took little effort to set up. Some slight toe-in, and we were set. They were located on either side of my TV with five feet between them. The tweeters sat at about 3 feet off the floor, putting them just about ear height when I was seated on my couch.

I was a little worried about the rear-ported design. One speaker has a wall two feet from the rear, and the other is open to another room. I was expecting noticeable differences in sound quality between the two. Fortunately this difference, although slightly noticeable, was not detrimental to the sound quality.

The center was mounted above my RPTV. My TV stands over five feet tall, and this put the center speaker two feet above the Focus fronts. This can pose problems with a seamless transition across the front stage, but happily I was unable to notice any such problem. This is due mostly I feel to the large soundstage that the speakers present.

The PDR-12 subwoofer gave me some difficulties. Well, not really the subwoofer per se. Subwoofer location is key to good bass response and, as I found out, apparently subwoofers are detrimental to room aesthetics (according to my wife). So after a lot of moving (all 41 pounds of it), I was able to find a pleasing location to the right of the TV.

Once everything was set up, I spent some time loosening up the speakers before I began taking notes. Some people believe this has no effect on the speakers, yet I feel that some speakers do benefit from this exercise. I did not use any special disc, or music. Basically, I just let them play for a few weeks before I critically listened to the speakers.

THE MUSIC

Armed with a variety of different CDs, I set out to listen to what a pair of bookshelf speakers under $300 sound like these days. I was pleasantly surprised to find none of the expected boomy midrange and stressed tweeter sound that you'd expect from a low-priced bookshelf. Everything I threw at the speaker came out sounding clear, detailed, and focused. As well, the speakers provided some of the mid-bass I was lacking with my older system.

"The ADP-170 surround speakers never drew unnecessary attention, and they always provided balanced rear effects. I was constantly impressed by the sound these speakers delivered. [Editor - CANADA Note: These speakers are so good at what they do that I have recently chosen a pair of ADP-170 speakers as the reference surrounds in my personal theater.]"

Although they held up well on their own, I found they really shined when aided by the PDR-12 subwoofer. That was until I really opened up the system. One of the only complaints I have about these speakers is that they begin to lose midrange detail at very high levels. Keep in mind these are levels that cause spouses to shoot dirty looks from outside of the house, and across the yard, maybe even from down the street.

Thinking my receiver's low power was partially to blame, I then added an older Denon POA 5000 amplifier. I was able to bring the speakers to even louder levels before the same breakup occurred. The bass never lost impact or volume, but the mid to upper frequencies became slightly muddy, losing detail. With heavier music such as "Tool" and "I Mother Earth" the midrange breakup was noticeable. On the other hand, my *Dave Matthews with Tim Reynolds: Live at Luther College* never suffered from those problems. As well,

ADP-170

Jesse Cook's *Free Fall* stayed together at all levels, and both of those discs have some intense moments containing some beautiful guitar work, and the Focus constantly delivered with those discs. This is really a minor problem that only affects complex musical passages at very high levels. If you play music at sane levels, you won't come across the problem.

"The center channel merged seamlessly with the mains, and never added any midrange color to the dialogue."

I ended up going through my regular favorites rather quickly. I began to pull out old discs that I had almost forgotten about. That's when I found *Rain Dogs*, by Tom Waits. I hadn't played this album since my old stereo, in my old home. Dropping it into my DVD player (my digital source), I pressed play and sunk deep into my sweet spot. Instantly Tom's raspy vocals took charge of the speakers. "Walking Spanish" (track 16) has an intoxicating stand-up bass line that permeates the whole stage. With these speakers I could even hear the strings being plucked and strummed, all just behind Tom's voice. As the soundstage suddenly begins to fill up with more instruments, you hear a saxophone float in from the left side. The speakers wonderfully followed the sax from left to right, never losing the stand-up bass position or Tom's vocals. The soundstage presented is much larger than you would think. At times I even double-checked my receiver's surround settings to ensure that 5.1 stereo wasn't on.

Suddenly, in came my wife. Normally after this long, the stereo system has over-played its welcome, and I am usually coerced into turning it down. Quickly stashing the remote, hoping to buy some time, I was caught off guard:

"Wow, this sounds good."

"Uh, ok!" an obvious startled look finding its way onto my face.

"No, I really like the way these sound."

Not only did these speakers meet my approval, but my wife who once asked, "This is the last stereo upgrade right?" actually liked what she heard. I was impressed.

"… the PDR-12 was solid and never intrusive."

THE MOVIES

Luckily for me, I still had these speakers when *The Lord Of The Rings* was released on DVD. I thought this would be the perfect movie to use with these speakers. Great effects, lots of dialogue, cool explosions . . . and I had already seen it. I figured I would sit back, and take notes. Obviously I forgot how engrossing this picture was the first time.

The third viewing of this movie allowed me to listen to the speakers. This was when I noticed the only other flaw I could find with the system. The subwoofer did not seem to extend as deep as I would have liked. Mind you, look at the low price of this subwoofer. The subwoofer provided a lot of impact, but during some scenes it was as if the sub rolled off too soon. It is tough to achieve good solid bass that blends well and goes down deep, especially at this price. With everything else the PDR-12 was solid and never intrusive. I must note that if you can stretch a few hundred dollars more, Paradigm's PW-2200, previously reviewed by *Secrets* as part of a Reference set, is not "too much" sub for the rest of these speakers and reaches down to profound depths with aplomb. So, it is just a bucks thing: this price buys you good bass, but not fantastic bass. It's called a reality check.

Looking for some lighter fair, I popped in *Toy Story 2*. The whole system was very enveloping during the whole movie. However, the trailer for *Monsters Inc.* located on the special features disc provided some rather surprising results. At the end of the trailer, you hear a dog bark in the background. We have two dogs ourselves, and were rather surprised to hear one of them barking behind us. You see they were both in front of us, on the floor, also interested in the new dog. The barking sound we heard actually caused us to

look behind the couch. This doesn't normally happen, and we were all surprised by that one.

> *"The ADP surrounds added great sensations to both movies and television … accurately panned the effects around the sides and back of my room … a wonderfully dispersed soundfield."*

The ADP-170 surround speakers never drew unnecessary attention, and they always provided balanced rear effects. I was constantly impressed by the sound these speakers delivered. *[Editor - CANADA Note: These speakers are so good at what they do that I have recently chosen a pair of ADP 170 speakers as the reference surrounds in my personal theater.]*

CONCLUSIONS

The Paradigm System 3 exceeded my expectations, and I was constantly impressed by their sound quality. The ADP surrounds added great sensations to both movies and television programs. They accurately panned the effects around the sides and back of my room, consistently creating a wonderfully dispersed sound field. The center channel merged seamlessly with the mains, and never added any midrange color to the dialogue. As well, the Focus brought out details in my music, which were lost in my older system. Even though the PDR did not extend low enough for my personal tastes, I was pleased with the bass it did produce. The sub always merged well with the Focus fronts.

This system is able to handle both movies and music equally well. I couldn't find many faults with these speakers, and the ones that I did find were almost inappropriate given their low price. These speakers will be a noticeable upgrade to any entry-level system.

I don't know if I really want to give them back …

PDR-12