PRODUCT review

STUDIO/80 • STUDIO/CC
STUDIO/ADP • PS-1200

PARADIGM REFERENCE

"...a trip to fantasy land every time you turn it on. ...EXTRAORDINARY."

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AUDIO VIDEO INTERIORS

"The fully tricked out system gave new meaning to 'bringing cinema home.' Somewhere in the middle of 'Twister,' I found myself glancing about to make sure I still had a home."

by Lawrence B. Johnson

The New STUDIO/80
(Improved over version reviewed for even better sound.)

In the design and marketing of loudspeaker systems for Home Theater, the byword – one might say the new reference standard – is "Impact." Very often the objective of speaker design these days seems less to seduce the ear than to subdue it. Yet if the once-hallowed goal of recreating musical realism has been largely abandoned, this basic philosophical shift has occurred for a reason. Movie soundtracks are not essentially about either music or reality. The sound world of film is purely artificial, a fabrication custom-tailored for the world (that is, the movie) of the moment.

While that simple truth inescapably alters the aesthetics of speaker design, it also creates a dilemma for the person who wants, in one package, a musically satisfying sound system that also can deliver the hyper-presence – the boom and sizzle – of film soundtracks. Paradigm Electronics has struck such an elusive balance with a surround array based on richly musical tower speakers called Studio/80s. The full Paradigm system, including a well-conceived center model and heavy-duty reverberant surrounds, proved quite musically engaging and when two powered subwoofers were added, the array stood wholly equal to the challenge of some classic "impact" movies.

The model Studio/80 itself is a 41-inch column with three drivers that form what Paradigm calls a 2-1/2 way system. That is, the two 8-inch drivers overlap in their frequency response in the bass, but only one extends into the midrange. Bass performance is supported by a forward-firing vent, and a 1-inch aluminum dome tweeter tracks high-frequency response out to a very high (and quite smooth) 22 kHz.

"… richly musical … Their well-tempered sound, solid in the bass register and clear-voiced in the midrange, brought a natural presence to symphonic music and a stunning immediacy to intimate jazz sessions. And the speakers displayed ample speed and dynamism to capture the energy of even sci-fi sound-tracks like 'Terminator 2.'"

Several structural features help to focus and stabilize the sound of the Studio/80. Multiple reinforcements within the cabinet ensure virtual sonic inertness: The box doesn't resonate with the drivers. To minimize random diffraction, the grille fits flush with the drive units. And gold-plated feet with adjustable spikes allow for solid placement of the speaker, even on irregular surfaces. My review samples, finished in Black Ash laminate, showed careful attention to the alignment of side panels and top plates.

Though good looking, the speakers – on a smallish footprint just 10 inches wide by 15-1/2 inches deep – really did not call attention to themselves. However, if you'd prefer more visual display, the Studio/80 is also available (at the same price) in cherry laminate as well as wood finishes of light cherry, rosenut and black ash for an additional cost.

The New STUDIO/ADP
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I can easily imagine an initial investment in the Studio/80 towers alone for enjoying music and movies alike. Their well-tempered sound, solid in the bass register and clear-voiced in the midrange, brought a natural presence to symphonic music and a stunning immediacy to intimate jazz sessions. And the speakers displayed ample speed and dynamism to capture the energy of even sci-fi soundtracks like *Terminator 2*. While you ultimately might want to add at least one subwoofer, the Studio/80 provides enough bass to make the emotional connection with film sound.

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Paradigm's center channel, the CC-450, affords an excellent timbral match with the Studio/80. It's also a rugged, effective, appealing loudspeaker in its own right. The driver array, twin 6-1/2-inch mid/bass cones framing the same 1-inch tweeter used in the towers, produces a frequency sweep from 22 kHz down to 70 Hz — which covers the center-channel specs of Dolby Pro-Logic. For listening in Dolby Digital, which brings full-range sound to all five channels, you'd need to supplement this (or almost any other) center-channel speaker with a subwoofer.

The CC-450 is relatively power sensitive at 90 dB, nearly matching the sensitivity of the Studio/80, and while the center speaker doesn't offer all of the tower's power-handling (130 watts maximum versus 180), this bookshelf-size unit is a robust performer. And a mellow one. It can produce a pleasantly conversational sound for talking heads on the 6 o'clock news or unleash the high-calibre fireworks of *Eraser*. With the lights out in the room, Paradigm's front array dropped out of sight and mind. All that remained was the sonic experience. Well, not quite all. The surround factor in Paradigm's array may be the most potent I've encountered in any speaker of its modest size. The ADP-450 uses a multiple radiating pattern scheme: In each enclosure, a 6-1/2-inch mid/bass driver and 1-inch dome are paired on opposite faces and wired to create a maximum sense of sound diffusion.

Although the ADP-450s were designed to be mounted on side walls, and to fire in both directions along the walls with no sound radiating directly into the listening area, I set them up on high pedestals across the back corners of my room – forming a triangle with the converging walls. The sonic embrace that resulted as the speakers fired at angles into the side and rear walls, was extraordinary.

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I suspect many listeners, especially apartment dwellers, could live long and happily with just those basic elements of the Paradigm Studio/80 surround system and, for performance at this level, the cumulative price is an excellent value, but the addition of a subwoofer, or better two, transforms an enjoyable system into a trip to fantasyland every time you turn it on.

The New STUDIO/CC
(Improved over version reviewed for even better sound.)

The PS-1200 is the top model in Paradigm's PS series of subwoofers. It combines a single 12-inch driver with a 130-watt amplifier to generate huge quantities of remarkably articulate bass down to 23 Hz. To obtain maximum efficiency, the PS-1200 uses three tube vents. A control panel lets you balance the sub's output to match the rest of your system and to set the unit's upper frequency cutoff at any frequency from 50 to 150 Hz. The sub can be linked directly to your preamp/processor or connected via speaker wires from your system's main amplifier.

"The surround factor in Paradigm's array may be the most potent I've encountered in any speaker of its modest size. … The sonic embrace – was extraordinary."

I didn't have to listen long to be convinced by the PS-1200. One rip-roaring blow through *Twister* was all it took. I strongly prefer two subwoofers to one, which in this case adds to the basic system price – still a very good investment. The Paradigm subs transfigured the experience of watching *Twister* into something uncannily like living it. The fully tricked out system gave new meaning to "bringing cinema home." Somewhere in the middle of *Twister*, I found myself glancing about to make sure I still had a home.

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