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Home Theater

“Who knows better what amplifiers will sound best with their speakers than the people who make the speakers?”



There are really two types of home theater aficionados: Those who like to prominently display their piles of gear and those who like to go for a minimalist, Spartan approach, where as much of their gear as possible is hidden from view. Regular readers of HT would probably guess that my system is most likely comprised of as many, black boxes as I can fit into my home theater room. Well, educated and astute reader – you’re bang-on right. I need lots of black boxes – it confirms my masculinity and helps me to walk proudly through the streets.

But lately we’ve been seeing product designs that try new ways to ease the clutter of gear, most notably speakers with built-in powered woofers. These “powered towers” have a built-in amp inside them, which lessens the need for an external sub and lightens the load in the amp that drives the mids and tweeters. But now Paradigm has taken this approach to the max – they’ve put all the amplification needed inside the speaker cabinets, thus eliminating one or two black boxes from the room. You just plug

“A STUNNING SYSTEM”

your line-level (RCA) connectors from your preamp/processor to these speakers and plug the AC cord into the wall and you’re ready to rock the Casbah. If you think about it, this approach makes a lot of sense: Who knows better what amplifiers will sound best with their speakers than the people who make the speakers? It takes great system matching to get the sound you want, and with Paradigm’s Active speaker lineup, they’ve eliminated the guesswork. But do they sound good enough for me to give up some of my beloved clutter? Read on to find out.

Paradigm sent us a stunning system. Finished in a rich lacquered cherry wood, they look like speakers that cost a lot more than they do, and fit and finish is impressive.

“midrange was clean and pure, as were the high frequencies.”

Right out of the gate, these things are heavy for monitors (around 44 pounds apiece), and if you’re a regular reader of Home Theater, you’re certainly aware that I am a weak, weak man, Still, the effort spent getting these beauties on the speaker stands was worth it.

The Paradigm Active system consists of five speakers, including two Active/450-LRs, one Active/450-C for center-channel duty, and a pair of Active/450-ADP bipole/dipole surround speakers. Also in the shipment was their newly upgraded Servo-15 subwoofer with its external X-30 crossover. The two-

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way Active/450-LRs feature a 1-inch dome tweeter and two 6-1/2-inch cone woofers, as does the matching horizontal Active/450-C center channel, which only differs in the orientation of the heatsink. The really interesting thing about this speaker package is that each speaker is bi-amplified internally. That means that the woofers and the tweeters are powered separately by discrete, bipolar-designed amps. Each driver has its own crossover, and there's an electronic crossover routing the input signal. In the case of the front three speakers, there's a 50-watt amp driving the tweeter and a 110-watt amp driving the woofer.

“expansive soundstage and pinpoint imaging... allowing every subtle nuance to be heard.”

The Active/450-ADP surrounds use identical drivers to the L, C, Rs in a dipole/bipole design; one tweeter and one woofer on each side panel. Here one amp powers the tweeters and one the woofers. On paper, this makes for an extremely well-matched system. Frequency response is spec'd at 50 Hz to 22 for the L, C, Rs, and 44 Hz to 20 kHz for the ADP surrounds.

“the imaging dipole 450-ADP surrounds reigned supreme.”

I connected this speaker system using the supplied AC cords and line-level cables (Audiostream's A400 in five 10-meter lengths). On the speakers' back panel are huge heat-sinks that just scream power. If you have a preamp with balanced outputs (like high-end pre/pros), you can take advantage of Paradigm's generous inclusion of balanced inputs.

“[the] deep bass drum was as thunderous as I remember ever hearing it... vocals were as clear as day.”

For our purposes, I used the line-level inputs. The panels on the back of the speakers are fairly extensive, with controls for auto on/always on, a toggle switch for high-passing the speakers (you'd use this with an external subwoofer, as we did), controls for high- and low-frequency contour, a speaker-level control, and a detachable AC cord (we love to see these). Setting these controls according to the factory specifications produced wonderful sound from the git-go, and after a day of break-in through continuous music and pink noise, I was sufficiently convinced that this system was ready for my delicate ears.

“On dolby Digital movie soundtracks... the presentation was sublime.”

Eager to hear these speakers on music, I pulled out some of my newest testing software, namely Jules Shear's *Between Us*. This is a superbly

recorded album with pin-point imaging of acoustic guitars and voices; it's one of the most realistic recordings I've heard, with very extended dynamic range. There are quick jolts of vocal dynamics that make a good test for both the speakers and the amps. On the duet with Paula Cole called "The Last in Love," I delighted in the fact that the midrange was very clean and pure, as were the high frequencies. Paula's voice can often sound shrill and etched, but with finer speaker systems in general, and the Paradigm 450-LRs in particular, this wasn't the case. Also, the expansive soundstage and pinpoint imaging on this song was well depicted, allowing every subtle nuance to be heard.

“Dialogue was also very articulate and clean”

On Peter Gabriel's "Washing of the Water," from his *Us* record, Manu Katché's deep bass drum was as thunderous as I remember ever hearing it, and the vocals were as clear as day. On harder, more cluttered music, like Ron Sexsmith's "Strawberry Blonde" from his *Other Songs* record, the speakers articulated each guitar pick and drum hit.

“front soundstage was seamless, without raising or lowering in pitch when action shifted from right to center to left or vice versa.”

On Dolby Digital movie soundtracks, like the *Desperado* DVD and *The Hunt for Red October* laserdisc, the presentation was sublime. The bass was deep even without the use of the Servo-15 subwoofer, but obviously much more tight and defined when using the sub and high-passing the main speakers. Dialogue with the Active/450-LR was also very articulate and clean, never distorting or sounding chesty. The front soundstage was seamless, without raising or lowering in pitch when action shifted from right to center to left or vice versa. It seems that the amplifier/ speaker match that Paradigm settled on was a very successful one.

“Paradigm has created a wonderful-sounding, beautiful-looking speaker quintet for your enjoyment”

Listening to the Active/450-ADP rear speakers, the soundfield was a true 360 degrees. While we did try a matching pair of Active/450-LRs in the rear that were superior in terms of pinpoint imaging when listening to DTS music CDs, I favored the dispersion of the dipole ADPs for rear-channel effects. My recommendation is to audition both for use as rears and decide what works for you.

Paradigm has created a wonderful-sounding, beautiful-looking speaker quintet for your enjoyment. The internal amplifiers can even help free up some space on your equipment rack. Now, I've just got to figure out who's gonna carry these things over to my house....