

“... truly an exceptional speaker ...

# RIVETING ... AN AURAL FEAST

... will take your breath away.”

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*“Can they rock? Can they go loud and blow my hair back while keeping all that delicacy and finesse? ... they did so in legendary force ... breathtaking power ... the amount of energy was tremendous ... all the details remained ... crystal clear ... easily distinguished ... and as loud as you could take it.”*

by Yoshi Carroll

## INTRODUCTION

Earlier this year, Paradigm released an update of one of their most successful and longest-lasting speaker lines, the Monitor Series. Paradigm is famous for following the simple business proposition of building a good product for less than the other guy. What I've always appreciated about Paradigm is that they don't skimp on the details, no matter how low the retail price. The sound quality is there, but so are the build quality, finish and nice little touches like their new magnetized grilles. Value here doesn't mean you're getting something cheap, it means you're getting something truly valuable, for less than you might expect to pay.

The subject of this review and my new object of affection, the Monitor 9 floor-standing speaker is about all the speaker one could hope for, unless of course you want to really terrorize the neighbors, in which case you can step up to the larger Monitor 11. Still, the Monitor 9 isn't small by any stretch, measuring 40-and-a-quarter inches tall by seven-and-a-half inches wide and 13-and-a-quarter inches deep, tipping the scales at 88 pounds per pair. The Monitor 9 isn't going to be mistaken for anything but a loudspeaker; however, the three available finishes go a long way in dressing it up a bit. My review samples came finished in a beautiful Cherry Wood finish, with Rosenut and Black Ash also available if Cherry isn't to your liking. I have to say, I've been impressed with Paradigm's cabinets and

finishing techniques in the past, but with this new version, I feel they've really raised the bar. These speakers are gorgeous, even more so when you consider their price.

The Monitor 9 is a four-driver, two-and-a-half-way speaker, with a rear-firing bass reflex port. It uses a one-inch H-PTD dome tweeter mated to a condom like (I'm not kidding) six-and-a-half-inch M-ICP bass/midrange driver, with two six-and-a-half-inch polypropylene bass drivers. The Monitor 9 has a stated sensitivity of 96 dB into a fairly benign eight ohm load, which makes it freakishly efficient, in turn making your power requirements and possibly your budget shrink considerably, which is a good thing for those of you just getting your feet wet in home theater. The Monitor 9's are also bi-wireable or bi-ampable via their gold-plated, five-way binding posts. This allows for several configuration options not often found at this price point. The most extreme case is having separate amplifiers for treble and bass, perhaps a rich and warm-sounding tube amplifier on top, and a more powerful, bass-tight, solid state amp



Monitor 9

for the bottom. Another option, if you have a seven-channel-capable amplifier or receiver but only five channels' worth of speakers, is to use the extra two channels for bi-amping. Not all processors have this option, but for ones that do, this configuration might allow for an extra boost in sound quality without purchasing new equipment.

*"... realistic and textured ... highs were smooth and rounded ... strumming guitars and strings were also smooth and well-separated ... Instruments and tones seemed to occupy their own individual sonic spaces, easily distinguished from nearby frequencies and volumes, without sounding forced or analytical."*

#### SET-UP

Out of the box, there was the small matter of attaching the black outrigger feet to the bottom of the speakers with a single screw. The provided spikes plug into these feet for added stability and crisper sound.

Since I'm not equipped for bi-amping, I decided to bi-wire the Monitor 9's for the duration of my review, getting a little tricky with it by using different brands of speaker cable. For the top end, I used Mapleshade's Golden Helix cables, which are clear, natural-sounding and suitable for small satellite speakers, though they lack the bass to satisfy a full-range speaker. For the low end, I used Monster Cable's M series, which are full and bassy, but also a little bright for my taste. Combined in this way, I was able to get the most out of my existing components, without having to upgrade.

I played all CDs using my Denon DVD-2910 as a digital transport driving my Modwright Signature Mod Perpetual Technologies P-3A DAC. For amplification, I used Sonic Impact's excellent class T digital amplifier, the Super T-Amp, which at \$160 sets its own records for a value component. The Super T-Amp only puts out 15 watts per channel, but the Monitor 9's are so efficient, and the amp is so clear, this proved more than enough power to put a rock show in the room.

Along with the Monitor 9's, I also had on hand Paradigm's CC-290 center channel, also a member of the Monitor Series of speakers. The CC-290 is a four-driver, three-way speaker, built to blend seamlessly with the rest of the Monitor series. Also on hand was Paradigm's 10-inch UltraCube, a compact, single-cone subwoofer capable of 1500 watts peak power and 650 watts sustained. The UltraCube only comes in black, but it's handsome and well-finished.

#### MUSIC AND MOVIES

As soon as the music started playing, I knew that my favorite word to describe the Monitor 9's would be "fun." Whatever other characteristics the Monitor 9's have, my overriding conclusion is that these speakers are very enjoyable to play music through. There's a dynamic richness to the presentation that makes me want to put in CD after CD and just sit back and listen, tapping my foot and bopping my head. And for a while, I did just that, but unfortunately that makes for pretty dry reading, so it was time to start paying attention.

*"... smooth, light and effortless ... [the singer's] voice appeared in the room like it belonged there ... the speakers disappeared ... no shout to the midrange ... no congestion ... nothing distracting ... extremely stimulating."*

The first test CD I used was Mike Oldfield's *Tubular Bells III* (Warner). This is an old favorite test CD that I've listened to on every imaginable type of gear at every imaginable price point. There's little bit of everything here, from voices to guitars to various drums to many, many bells. It's these I noticed first, sounding quite realistic and textured. It was easy to recognize the initial hit on the bell, and the subsequent texture and tone of the instrument. The highs were smooth and rounded, and though a little glassiness was evident, it wasn't enough to distract. Strumming guitars and strings were also smooth and well-separated. Well-separated is actually a good description of how the Monitor 9's sounded overall. Instruments and tones seemed to occupy their own individual sonic spaces, easily distinguished

from nearby frequencies and volumes, without sounding forced or analytical. This was evident in the shimmering of bells, with the sound oscillating as it faded, as opposed to slower speakers that can't resolve those minute variations of volume. This was also evident when playing voices. Track 6, "The Inner Child," featuring a female soloist singing scales. The tiny quivering of her voice imparted a sweet, emotional resonance to her song.

*"Voices through the center channel were smooth and clear ... same extension and high level of tonal separation found in the Monitor 9's ... dispersed sound widely ... disappeared well enough that I never noticed it in play ... did everything a center channel needs to do—without calling any attention to itself."*

That same track starts out with the distant, faded voices of children on a playground, somewhere on the right side of the soundstage. The soloist came on front and center, and she was very much in the room with me, her voice coming out of the quiet darkness like a lamp fading in and illuminating the stage. And once she was there, that's where she stayed. The Monitor 9's imaging was excellent, well-defined and stable, with voices, instruments, and sound effects well-integrated and, again, separate. When a backup singer came on, she took her own place farther back on the left. The big drums were farther back still, but their impact was strong and they comfortably filled out the soundstage. And they sounded like big drums, not just loud and deep, but with their own mass and three-dimensional volume through the Monitor 9's. Like the strings and bells in the high frequencies, the drums exhibited the same realistic impact and inner detail, well down to floor-shaking levels. Paradigm claims the Monitor 9 is a full-range speaker, and I certainly don't feel like I'm missing anything on the low end. The fact that I'm getting solid, satisfying (and loud) bass from a 15-watt amp is testament to Paradigm's SuperDrive technology. Whatever high tech wizardry is in the crossover networks and the low mass drivers, it is certainly working.

*"... imaging was excellent, well-defined and stable ... voices, instruments and sound effects well integrated—and separate ... filled out the soundstage ... three-dimensional volume ... realistic impact and inner detail, well down to floor-shaking levels."*

Now, tonal resolution and inner detail are wonderful things, but the big questions I have for my speakers are: Can they rock? Can they go loud and blow my hair back while keeping all that delicacy and finesse? To find out, I skipped ahead to the last track, "Far Above the Clouds." The track started out with a low and clear heartbeat, setting the anticipation as the virtual orchestra dropped out and a child's voice announced the onslaught of the titled tubular bells. When they arrived, they did so in legendary force, the first hammer strike coming out of the quiet with breathtaking power in one of the most rousing finales since Beethoven. After the bells came the big drums again, and the chorus, and the wail of the electric guitar. When this song sounds good, it's riveting, it'll take your breath away, and on the Monitor 9's, it did sound that good. Turned up loud, the amount of energy was tremendous; as advertised, all the details remained. Each clang was crystal clear, each bell provided the mass and oscillating decay of a five-foot instrument, even when they were being played quietly behind the drums, and the guitars, and the beautiful vocals. Everything was there and easily distinguished and as loud as you could take it. Until it all suddenly dropped off into silence, to be replaced by little chirping birdies. This part was really interesting, because once the musical storm quieted down, I realized that I hadn't been breathing, and I was pushed back into my chair and was quite possibly levitating. As the bells faded in the distance, I could feel myself physically lighten. It was a wonderful experience and it only works with very dynamic, very emotionally involving speakers, which the Monitor 9's just happen to be.

From there, I switched gears with Anna Nalick's *Wreck of the Day* (Sony). This is

nowhere near the acoustical virtuosity of *Tubular Bells III*, but that's why this CD worked: it's all about Ms. Nalick and her refreshing and beautiful lyrics. A nudge down on the volume control and the Monitor 9's presented an intimate, candle-lit mood without losing any of their liveliness or detail. They were just as emotionally involving when turned down low, which was as much an accomplishment as being able to perform at high levels. As soon as I hit play, I was very pleasantly surprised to find that this album had something special going on. I actually stopped taking notes and just listened all the way through because, well, the Monitor 9's made it easy. The most I can hope for when auditioning equipment is that the critical, nitpicky voice in the back of my head shuts the hell up and I can just enjoy the music. It doesn't happen often, but it's something special when it does, and it was certainly happening here. Whatever else can be said about a speaker's measurements, ultimately what counts is how well the emotion comes through, and in that category, the Monitor 9's delivered. Smooth, light and effortless, Nalick's voice appeared in the room like it belonged there, and the speakers disappeared completely. There was no shout to the midrange, no congestion, nothing distracting to take away from the experience. Whatever Paradigm is doing with their latex-colored drivers, it was extremely stimulating.

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Also impressive, as I switched positions around the room, was that the sweet spot was unusually wide. These aren't the kind of speakers that only sound their best when your head is firmly anchored in a single spot, and this makes them an attractive proposition for anyone without a dedicated audio room. If the best spot on your couch isn't exactly centered between the speakers, or if your ears aren't perfectly aligned with the tweeters, there's nothing to worry about: the music will sound just as good. In my experience, the tradeoff with this kind of wide dispersion design, and there's always some tradeoff, is that imaging suffers a little. While the Monitor 9's ability to place an instrument at a specific location the room

is by no means lacking, if holographic spookiness (technical term) is your particular audio Nirvana, this may not be the speaker for you. Then again, you're not going to find speakers like that anywhere at or near the Monitor 9's price range.

*"... once the musical storm quieted down, I realized that I hadn't been breathing ... I was pushed back into my chair—quite possibly levitating ... I could feel myself physically lighten ... a wonderful experience ... and it only works with very dynamic, very emotionally involving speakers, which the Monitor 9's just happen to be."*

For multi-channel music and movies, I added the Outlaw 1070 AVR receiver into the mix, an appropriate choice considering that Outlaw, like Paradigm, focuses strongly on making performance speakers that sell for less than the competition. I connected the Denon DVD-2910 to the Outlaw via digital coaxial cable, and I set the Outlaw to do all the processing. The 9's I left connected to the Super T-Amp, which I connected to the Outlaw via the preamp outputs, and the center channel I connected directly to the Outlaw. The sub I connected the 1070's LFE out.

*"... my favorite word to describe the Monitor 9's would have to be 'FUN' ... there's a dynamic richness ... makes me want to put in CD after CD and just sit back and listen ... tapping my foot and bopping my head."*

With the P-3A DAC out of the chain, replaced by the Outlaw's internal DACs, I immediately noticed some extra brightness out of the Paradigms, which tended to cause fatigue during extended listening sessions, and the midrange fell back a little deeper into the soundstage. Now, the P-3A is itself



a product that gives a lot of bang for the buck, much more so once it was upgraded by Modwright, and it costs about what the Outlaw and the Monitor 9s cost together, so the difference in sound quality is to be expected. Even so, I'm impressed by the Monitors' ability to resolve so much of what the P-3A was putting out. It shows that they'll be able to keep up when fronted by components well above their price range.

*"... just as emotionally involving when turned down low—as much an accomplishment as being able to perform at high levels."*

However, I still had a brightness problem, but I largely solved it to my satisfaction by toeing the Monitor 9s out a little further, almost straight on, and by lowering the treble controls on the 1070. The toeing out of the speakers also widened the soundstage, often beyond the physical edges of the speakers, and gave more air to instruments playing to the extreme right or left. The cost is the addition of some blur in the center of the soundstage, but this was well compensated for by the addition of Paradigm's center channel.

*"The UltraCube also fit its role very well ... filling in the bottom octaves without making anyone notice it was there ... a smooth frequency blend ... fast and articulate ... helping anchor the soundstage ... immediate, crisp and detailed room-shaking power."*

Once all my tweaks were in place, I found the addition of Paradigm's UltraCube Subwoofer and the CC-290 to perfectly complement and extend the Monitor 9's capabilities without any signs of disconnect. Voices through the center channel were smooth and clear, with the same extension and high level of tonal separation that was found in the Monitor 9's, and it dispersed sound widely enough that everyone in the room got to stay in the conversation. It also

disappeared well enough that I never noticed it in play unless I was very carefully looking for it. In short, it did everything a center channel needs to do, anchoring the center of the soundstage for all sitting positions without calling any attention to itself.

*"... an acoustic environment that wraps completely around the listening room ... location of instruments was spot on and easy to pick out ... echoes and reverberations travelled around, creating a wraparound effect."*

The UltraCube also fit its role very well by filling in the bottom octaves without making anyone notice it was there. The analog crossover knob allowed for anything from 40 Hz up to 120 Hz, and after some experimentation, I found the best position to be around 60 Hz. This gave plenty of overlap with the Monitor 9's to get a smooth frequency blend, while keeping the sub in its comfort zone where it was fast and articulate. In fact, the biggest problem I had in setting it up was that I had it turned up too high for my modest-sized room. Somewhere around only 10 percent on the volume knob is where I found the happy spot.

For example, when I listened to the DVD side of Five for Fighting's *The Battle for Everything* DualDisc (Sony), John Ondrasik's vocals seemed to float directly in front of me, somewhere between the mains, not from center channel on the floor. The midrange blended perfectly between the three speakers, coming off smooth and detailed and very natural. The UltraCube blended in very well, too, extending the kick drum's reach and helping anchor the soundstage. What makes this album a good test, however, is that a poetic, dreamy approach was taken to the multi-channel mix, creating an acoustic environment that wraps completely around the listening room. The location of instruments was spot on and easy to pick out, but echoes and reverberations traveled around, creating a wraparound effect. On the track "Dying," the piano took up the front of the soundstage, extending as wide as the room, but there was also the sense that it was floating over me. The

string ensemble, while easily localized behind the piano, lined up around the soundstage, reaching in and enveloping the listener, almost like a mist. It was a very pleasant effect, and the Paradigms recreated it seamlessly.

*"The Monitor 9's quick snap and clear response made every noise come alive ... its impact through the speakers was visceral and often gut-wrenching."*

On the high-definition front, I fired up my Dish Network satellite system and brought up *Rabbit Proof Fence* (Miramax), a movie scored by Peter Gabriel that I've been holding on to for some months, waiting for a test system to unleash it on. The story takes place in Australia in 1931, and follows three aboriginal girls who are forcibly separated from their families and taken to a training school where they are to be assimilated into white society at the orders of the government. The girls escape and make their way back home by walking 1,200 miles along a fence that spans the entire continent. The opening scene introduced the sound of the Earth, a deep and low guttural rumble that played out underneath all the dialogue and sound effects. Without the sub, this was only a low rumble, but the sub gave it voice, texture and character. In the third scene, government officers forcibly remove the girls from their families, and the soundtrack portrayed the full emotional violence of the event. Below the cries and screams was a dark and menacing growl. It was a good test of the speakers' snap, impact and speed, and here again, the Paradigms delivered, so much so that the scene got a little hard to watch. When the girls finally get to the camp, the soundtrack of their arrival was downright spooky. Footsteps in the dirt and nearby crickets mixed in with strange whines and ghostly whispers and a low, room-shaking rumble. The sub anchored the scene and Monitor's ability to separate sounds into distinct entities created the feeling of being surrounded. The sounds in this part of the movie were mixed to be loud and strange and immediate, the way they would seem to scared and alienated children, and the Monitor 9's quick snap and clear response

made every noise come alive with frightening realism. The entire movie is an aural feast and its impact through the Monitor 9's was visceral and often gut-wrenching.

*"... it's the Monitor 9's that get credit for bringing [the soundtrack] to life with the energy and detail that, at this price point, is terribly rare, if not unprecedented."*



CC-290

As should be no surprise by this point, the Paradigms' nimble dynamics and tonal separation were ideally suited to conveying high-energy film scores and realistic environments. In *Casino Royale* (Sony), the foot chase at the beginning of the movie, aside from being one of the best chase sequences ever and a work of action film art (yes, there is such a thing), was also a great test for the Monitor 9s. The sequence in which Bond gets in the wheel loader and gleefully crashes through the construction site comes to mind. The crashes and explosions snapped out of nowhere and the subwoofer responded with immediate, crisp and detailed room-shaking power. The orchestral score laid itself out across the soundstage just behind the action, with every instrument as vibrant and differentiated as on a classical music CD, while grunts, hits, jumps, crashes, slides, and all the rest of the sound effects that gave the action realism played firmly in the foreground. Somewhere between, behind and around were the ambient sounds that portrayed the sense of place, including sound effects that aren't usually noticeable, like the sounds of the construction workers' tools, their agitated chatter, the echoes of a welding torch reverberating in an elevator shaft, the vroom of cars in the background and the chirping of birds. The loud stuff caused excitement, but these small detailed sounds made the scene feel natural and engaging. This is, without a doubt, a well-mixed soundtrack, but it's the Monitors that get credit for bringing it to life with the energy and detail that, at this price point, is terribly rare, if not unprecedented.

Much of the movie is a surprisingly talky affair, but the speakers still got plenty to do, mostly offering a great seat from which to enjoy the score, and creating more realistic environments by excellently playing back background sounds. I could watch the movie blindfolded and still have a good idea of each location just from the soundtrack. Naturally, the voices sounded, well, natural, which doesn't surprise me, given how well the Monitor 9's and the rest of the Monitor Series speakers have performed throughout my listening tests.

*"... regardless of price, Monitor 9's hold their ground ... and when taking the price/performance ratio into account, these speakers clearly take the lead."*

#### THE DOWNSIDE

The Monitor 9s are naturally a little bright and, in certain circumstances, this might be a problem. If the downstream components are also bright, this characteristic will be emphasized and, depending on the listener, it might prove to be a fatiguing listening experience. My ears are extremely sensitive to high-frequency distortions, but even so, with careful system configuration and a little bit of tweaking, I was able to rein the Monitors in. It is important to note, though by no means a deal breaker.

#### CONCLUSION

With high efficiency, exceptional dynamics, stable performance at high volume, and an elegant, well-crafted exterior, Paradigm's latest rendition of the Monitor 9 lives up to the company's goal of "Affordable Hi-Fi." This is truly an exceptional speaker that can provide enjoyment of a wide range of music styles and soundtracks, at a price level that's quite easy to swallow. Even when compared to the industry's giants, regardless of price, the Monitor 9's hold their ground and, when taking the price/performance ratio into account, these speakers clearly take the lead.



UltraCube™ 10