

“... a quiet

OVERACHIEVER.”

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sound

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by John Potis

Paradigm, along with a handful of other Canadian loudspeaker manufacturers, has virtually revolutionized budget loudspeaker design for more than a decade. Building upon the definitive 1980's research and development work of Dr. Floyd Toole and Canada's National Research Council, the company has brought sound engineering principles and innovative manufacturing techniques into the previously bleak world of affordable loudspeakers to an unprecedented extent. And yet, being Canadian, it has done so in such an unprepossessing way as to make it seem like no big deal.

OUT OF THE BOX

So you'll forgive me if I reveal that, as I unpacked Paradigm's Monitor 9/CC-370/ADP-370/PW-2200 speaker system (Paradigm refers to this packaging of speakers as the System Seven.2), I found myself looking askance at the speakers. While the Monitor 9s and the

PW-2200 were cosmetically matched in a vinyl rosewood veneer, the CC-370 center-channel speaker and the ADP-370 surrounds were clad with so much double-knit grille cloth that I wasn't sure just where it was safe to touch them without the risk of damaging a driver beneath. And while the Monitor 9s initially seemed a tad lightweight, both the CC-370 and ADP-370 appeared to be quite well built.

When I later found out what the system cost, I decided it was a wise move on Paradigm's part to put their money into the drivers and technology. Besides, from a few feet away, the speakers looked quite nice.

The system is designed to work well with moderately powered receivers, which is evidenced by the higher-than-average sensitivity (Paradigm claims up to 94dB for the Monitor 9s!).

Monitor 9



"... I actually had the PW-2200 pegged for a much more expensive subwoofer. ... based on sound quality and quantity. When he informed me of the price, I was surprised — and filled with admiration."

OUT OF THE GATES

I began by auditioning the PW-2200 subwoofer. I used it in several different music systems and came away very impressed. Perhaps it was fortuitous that Paradigm's Marketing Manager, Mark Aling, was *unhurried* in getting me the MSRPs of the speakers under review because I actually had the PW-2200 pegged for a much more expensive subwoofer. I was figuring a price that was a fair bit more than it actually is based on sound quality and quantity. When he informed me of the price, I was surprised — and filled with admiration.

Ditto for all the speakers in the system. I had guessed at the cost of the Monitor 9s (and still thought they were good performers for the money), and when I found out the price of the CC-370, I had a new and improved view of the entire system. Vinyl finish or not, I had no idea I was *this* deep into budget territory. No, I'm not saying that this setup is *cheap*. But after playing with the system for weeks and experiencing the fine overall quality of the speakers and the deep and powerful bass, well, this is a lot of system for the money.



CC-370

I did a lot of initial listening for enjoyment, but when it came time to get serious, I turned to three reference DVDs. The first was James Taylor *Live At Beacon Theater*. Like the Paradigms themselves, this DVD is a quiet overachiever. Wonderfully natural, eminently musical and tastefully engineered, it's not only one of my reference DVDs, it's also one of my most frequently enjoyed. "Another Day" begins with the line "Wake up, Susie," and the two sibilants showed the system to be a little bright on top. Fortunately, the Paradigms required only the slightest attenuation at the treble control on my receiver and I was happily back in business. Chimes now sounded surprisingly delicate, smooth and clean. Also noteworthy was the cello with its clean, rounded tone.

"Daddy's All Gone" provided a healthy and clean bass line, and illustrated the fine soundstaging abilities of the Paradigm system: The electric guitar came from the far right side of the stage and the percussion was midway between the center and right speakers, while Taylor was properly positioned dead center, flanked on his right by his backup singers and a more nebulous-sounding keyboard. As expected, audience applause at the end of the song filled the room, and I had absolutely no hint of the location of the quasi-dipolar ADP-370.

Quasi? Well, yes. You see the tweeters in the ADP-370 are wired out of phase (in true dipolar fashion), but because the bass waves would wrap around the speaker and cancel each other out if wired out of phase, the woofers are wired in phase, more in line with a bipolar speaker. The ADP-370 has the high-frequency dispersion and on-axis null of a dipolar surround, along with the increased bass response required for Dolby Digital and DTS soundtracks.

Sure, some may scream "foul!" at the thought of using a dipolar surround with Dolby Digital and DTS soundtracks, preferring the more focused image of a direct-radiating speaker. In theory I think they are right, but in reality, things are never that black and white. In a perfect room with the ability to precisely place

the surround speakers for best effect, yes, monopole surrounds can be spectacular. But even in that perfect room, for those who are forced out of the sweet spot (and remember, cinema is not supposed to be the individual sport that two-channel music is!), rear ambiance portrayal as well as effects imaging will suffer.

"... given the less-than-perfect rooms that we are forced to utilize as family rooms, an ever-forgiving dipole surround, such as the ADP-370, might be precisely the ticket."

However, given the less-than-perfect rooms that we are forced to utilize as family rooms, an ever-forgiving dipole surround, such as the ADP-370, might be precisely the ticket. The closer you sit to it, the deeper into the null you are and the less you hear of its direct radiation. You can sit right on top of one, or at least to the side of one, and be unaware that it is playing because most of what you are hearing is what has been reflected off adjacent walls. Listeners who can't place surround speakers to the rear of the room need to investigate dipole surrounds, because they do a much better job of immersing the listener in ambience.

Without careful setup, the system (the Monitor 9s in particular) can sound a little soft in the bass, with a tendency toward bloom and boom. I can't say that in my theater room I was completely successful at ameliorating this tendency (though in large part I was), but once the James Taylor DVD started, I was only aware of this characteristic for a very short time. This system does much more right than it does wrong, and within moments it took no effort at all on my part to ignore what the system *didn't* do in favor of what it did do. And it *did* a lot!

Bobby Mann's guitars sounded spectacular, no matter which one he was playing, as did JT's. They always had that *ring* of

truth about them. Cymbals were unerringly musical with just the right amount of metallic shimmer. They were crisp and fast with excellent decay and no white-noise splash that some other inexpensive speakers can give you.

Peter Frampton's *Live in Detroit* was no less satisfying and enjoyable. This DVD does not make use of the center channel; thus the front right and left speakers had better be able to maintain a credible center image — as the Monitor 9s did. I've got tons of listening notes that I don't have space to transcribe here, so suffice it to say that bass was as deep as I have become accustomed to with my far more expensive reference system, and every positive observation made about the James Taylor DVD could be made, over and over again, for this DVD.

The Perfect Storm turned out to be the perfect demo disc for this system, and the dipolar envelopment added an almost unbelievable amount of realism to the movie. For almost an hour and a half I experienced something that I've never experienced before — the real sensation of motion. Huge wave after huge wave pummeled me, first from one side of the room and then the other. When I closed my eyes and concentrated on the sound, the sensation ceased, but when immersed in the action of the film I was on that boat being rocked from side to side! When the scene changed to one on the mainland, I was made equally aware that the sensation of motion had ceased. Hey, I've watched a lot of movies on a lot of systems, but this was something new and cool! And the terrific surround presentation wasn't restricted to the sea either.



ADP-370

"... dipolar envelopment added an almost unbelievable amount of realism ... I experienced something that I've never experienced before — the real sensation of motion. Huge wave after huge wave pummeled me ... I was on that boat being rocked from side to side! ... Hey, I've watched a lot of movies on a lot of systems, but this was something new and cool!"

In the scene that follows Clooney's collection of his paycheck, he's walking up the dock to the bar. I was surrounded by so much gurgling water it was startling! Once inside the bar I was again surrounded, this time by Bruce Springsteen as heard over the house sound system. And then there was the ever-present James Horner soundtrack — as haunting, stirring and enveloping as the ocean. And lest I give the impression that this system can't place a surround effect, the creaks and rattles from within the various fishing boats' cabins were actually very well placed and specific.

In a demonstration that combines specific effect location, as well as total envelopment, the DVD *The Negotiator* features an elevated train moving left to right across the screen. The sound of that train moves in a wave across the room, both front and back simultaneously. The dipolar surrounds worked in perfect concert with the direct-radiating Monitor 9s to reproduce this scene. Nicely done!

COMPARISONS

The Paradigm system reminded me of the Reviewers' Choice-designated system. At \$4000 the system is considerably more expensive than the Paradigms. The Paradigms didn't quite have the level of sophistication that the Reviewers' Choice system did, and weren't quite as clean and transparent through the midband or quite as smooth and refined on the top end. But the build quality of the Paradigms was almost as good as those of the more expensive system. With both systems, the fun factor was there in spades, too. In the end, the two systems shared some basic sonic threads that led to an enjoyable home-theater experience. Call 'em two birds of a feather.

"... terrific surround presentation ... The dipolar surrounds worked in perfect concert with the direct-radiating Monitor 9s ..."

PW-2200



In terms of price, perhaps another system I'm thinking of makes a more logical comparison, as the units cost about the same as the Paradigms. Physically, there is no comparison — the other is a much larger and a more room-dominating system. In the area of resolution the scales tip toward the Paradigms, but in

terms of dynamics and overall bass fortitude, the larger system will reign supreme. But perhaps the greatest differentiating factor between the two systems is the high frequency performance of the Paradigms, which exhibit an exciting, forward presentation the other system can't quite match.

"... my initial delight over the price of the PW-2200 subwoofer never faded; it's one heck of a performer."

CONCLUSION

This Paradigm system was a lot of fun, as well as remarkably musically accomplished. The only potentially troublesome area about the system was the brightness of the treble, which was rendered a non-issue through a tiny adjustment of the tone control. As always, your room, your tastes and your mileage may vary. On balance you get a surprising level of performance with good dynamics and as clean a midband as you are likely to experience from a system utilizing full-range speakers in this class. I've not talked too much about bass, but my initial delight over the price of the PW-2200 subwoofer never faded; it's one heck of a performer. Obviously, I was happy to have the opportunity to experience the dipolar ADP-370s in my imperfect room — unless your room is perfect, you should check them out, too. If you are lucky enough to have a perfect room, then I suppose you can do with a pair of Paradigm's small monitors and bring the cost of this system in even lower.

Consider yourself lucky if you have both options. Both deserve an audition!