

“JUST AN EXCELLENT SPEAKER”

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“The Atoms worked well with all types of music ... these speakers have a wide sound-stage that easily extends past the edges of the speakers ... great imaging ...”

by Sandy Bird

We spend a lot of time and money on our home entertainment systems. It only makes sense that we should have a decent audio setup at the office. In some occupations, an office system is not practical, but in many situations an office system can brighten up your day and increase productivity. The problem in my office setting is space. The speakers sit less than two feet in front of the listening position. While a small sub-satellite system would maximize that space, I have never been overly impressed with computer oriented sub-satellite systems.

A small monitor speaker that could function without the aid of a separate subwoofer seemed like a sensible alternative, although due to the increase in size, I would be compressing the space between the listening position and the speakers. To test if this was a good solution, I got a pair of Paradigm Atoms, which are a logical choice when looking at size and affordability. The question was could they perform the task

without a sub and the perpetual upgrade path starting only a few months down the road?

THE PARADIGM ATOM

The Atoms are part of Paradigm's Performance line, which was designed for the budget minded individual whose focus would be on audio quality and not fancy cabinet making or large gold plated binding posts. The Atom is the smallest in the Performance line and sports a 5-1/2" woofer and a 3/4" tweeter. The grilles are permanently fixed to the enclosure, so there is no chance of showing off the drivers to the public.

Paradigm clearly passes the manufacturing savings from this on to the buyer. While speaker drivers can look very impressive, you are not going to find Kevlar coated drivers and gold phase plugs in a sub-\$200 speaker, but with the fixed grille, you will never know the difference. The back of the

Atom



cabinet is made from dense molded plastic which houses the binding posts, port, and holes for mounting hardware. This is another cost saving measure, and while I would prefer a solid MDF cabinet you cannot have everything at this price point. The Atoms use a 2nd-order electro-acoustic crossover at 3 kHz which are a perfect match for the CC-70 center channel and ADP-70 rear channels. The specifications state the entire performance lineup is "compatible with 8 ohms", meaning they are an easy load for low wattage receivers.

"My computer speaker had always hidden the difference between high bit-rate streaming media and the fidelity of CDs ... using the Atoms I quickly reverted back to CDs only."

To further compliment the easy to drive load, the Atoms have an in-room sensitivity of 89 dB. The five-way binding posts are more than I would expect from a sub-\$200 speaker, nothing special, but better than the spring clips that come on most mini-systems. The speakers are finished in a rich dark mahogany vinyl wrap. Do not let the word vinyl fool you, the finish looks very good and matches the laminate of my desk to a tee. The finish is of a caliber I would be proud to use in my main system.

SETUP

I connected the Atoms to an older Sony Pro Logic receiver I had sitting in the back of a closet. Not the best receiver, but it functions adequately for an office system. If you are looking for a cheap solution you might want to check local Hi-Fi shops that carry a used inventory from trade-ins. Look for a Pro Logic or an integrated amp, as the demand for these has declined, effectively pushing the prices of them into weekly spending allowances.

For sources I used a Pioneer carousel DVD player (which I had retired from duty quite some time ago) and my computer. My desk is an L shape where I sit in the middle of the L. This allows for the speakers to be placed about 1.5 feet in front of the listen-

ing position on 250 angles from center. I pointed the speakers directly at me, but the tweeters were on an angle about 20° below my ears. This created an issue with upper frequency roll-off. Using a couple of spare office objects (books and CD cases), I was able to raise the speakers up to a level where the high-end was just right. The procedure became a physical tone control. This setup worked well since the Sony receiver was too bright to begin with, so the slight roll-off tamed the high-end to just the right level.

When setting up a system to be used at low volume in close proximity to the listening position, tone controls can be a big help. There are two phenomena that occur at low volume. First, our hearing is less sensitive to both ends of the frequency spectrum. A loudness or contour circuit (such as the one in the Anthem TLP 1) may aid in correcting this. However, depending on what sensitivity of speakers the manufacturer calibrated the filter with, it may hinder the results. The second issue is getting the mid-bass drivers to move. At low wattage the woofer may not be in its linear operating range, so adding a little extra bass can flatten the frequency response back out. In this scenario having tone controls is highly recommended

THE SOUND

The Atoms required a small break-in period before use. The period was short, but absolutely necessary. During the first 2–5 hours the speakers seemed exceptionally edgy but soon smoothed out. I would not want to use the Atoms without the aid of a subwoofer in a large room, but in my close proximity setup with a little bottom end added from the bass control the little Atoms could reach down plenty low enough for the office environment.

I did not have any dedicated test material for the Atoms, I just simply enjoyed listening to them. I filled my days with a compliment of CDs ranging from R&B to Classical and everything in between. Lately I have become especially fond of Hip-Hop that my wife is still trying to accept. The Atoms worked well with all types of music and are a versatile speaker. I would like to make a point that all good speakers should work well with

all types of music. I hate reviewers that say these speakers worked well with music type X but should not be used for music type Y. If you think about it that statement is absurd, since a speaker's job is to reproduce a recording, regardless of the music genre. There are speakers that will sound bad in some areas of the frequency spectrum, but that is a fault in the speaker. This is not to say organ music will sound as good with the Atoms as it does with a pair of Paradigm Studio 100s, but that is simply a frequency response issue.

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Overall the Atoms are just an excellent speaker for someone on a budget. That statement extends from the office to your home, as these speakers would work well as monitors in a small room, or with the aid of a sub as a main speaker in a small home theater.

This being an office system and my having access to a computer, I also spent some time listening to streaming audio. My computer speaker had always hidden the difference between high bit-rate streaming media and the fidelity of CDs, but using the Atoms I quickly reverted back to CDs only.

Overall I cannot say my office setup is the best listening environment. While the Atoms have brought great imaging to the office soundstage, there is very little depth or width beyond the speakers themselves. This is not the fault of the Atoms as these speaker have a wide soundstage that easily extends past the edges of the speakers when giving the appropriate space to breathe in a room.

CONCLUSIONS

There are not any real drawbacks to the Paradigm Atom speakers, and they have a high performance/cost ratio. I find it interesting how good a sub-\$200 speaker at this price can sound when a company like Paradigm takes the time to build them right. In a large room the Atoms might

not be up to the desired SPL levels you would want for Home Theater but in a smaller room, office setup or a beginner system, the Atoms just make a lot of sense. In a home system they can be even further complemented with the addition of a small subwoofer.

"In my office environment I now have a system that takes my listening to the next level ... in a smaller room, office setup or a beginner system, the Atoms just make a lot of sense ... "

Overall the Paradigm Atoms were more than I could have hoped for. In my office environment I now have a system that takes my listening to the next level. Most of the day they serve as high quality background music, but there is nothing better than sitting back with some lunch and listening to tunes for a half hour to clear your mind. If you are considering a reasonable investment in computer speakers, your money might be better spent on a pair of Atoms and a used receiver or integrated amp. In total, the cost will probably be a little higher, but I think you will be more than impressed with the results.