

“... THE MONITOR 11 COMMANDS RESPECT.”

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“... a speaker that will likely be with you for a very, very long time. Incredibly satisfying sound ... able to resolve both the fine details of music, while delivering a visceral audio experience. ... Put them on your list to audition ...”

by Brian Florian

Following, is the final part of a two-part review by “Secrets of Home Theater and High Fidelity.” The first half of this review deals with the Monitor 90P and can be found in the review section of our website at <http://www.paradigm.com>.

In my defense, Colin was committed to reviewing the 90P speakers (see Colin Miller, “Secrets of Home Theater and High Fidelity,” review of Paradigm Monitor 90P) before I patted one on the top plate and casually mumbled, “You should check out a set of these”. That was just the gentle nudge which put him over the edge. I would have been equally happy to harbor a pair of those monolithic wonders in my humble abode, but we're nice kids and we've learned to share.

Besides, with Paradigm, there is plenty of joy to go around. I've heard enough of them and owned enough of them to be left with no hesitation: Anything they turn out is going to be a trip on some level.

If anyone's to blame for hypnosis, it's Mark Aling (Paradigm's Marketing Manager). With Colin's fate sealed ... I mean his review of the 90P locked in, Mark turned to me like a high class pusher: “And for you ...?”

It was the drivers. That's what did it. That and the price. A measly kilobuck for

what is essentially the 90P's unpowered sibling: the Monitor 11. Yes it was the drivers.

If you are reading this, it's a safe bet that you are into all things hi-fi. Like Colin and I you probably have been this way all your life but might have become cognizant of your condition sooner or perhaps later. Some of us get serious about audio at a young age, others buy their first ‘real’ system well into their 20s. Regardless, you probably remember an era gone by when such household names as Pioneer, Sony, and Sansui were making speakers to go with their stereo components. While not bad sounding in their day, one recalls with a somewhat whimsical nature the look of those old pillars to music: stocky, broad boxes with paper cone tweeters, exotic midrange transducers and what was then considered enormous 12” woofers. And the places we used to put them:

Monitor 11



Shoved into corners where they could hold drinks during a party or high up on shelves as if mimicking a great pipe organ. My how the face of hi-fi has changed.

"Bass, as you might expect, is the real treat with these speakers. ... so latent, so accurate, that it ceases to be a 'beat' and turns into an inner body sensation. The Monitor 11s were able to energize the air in a way that only the best (and most expensive) subwoofers can. ... this is REALLY good bass. ... NATURAL bass. ... double bass ... techno bass ... It's ALL good baby!"

The Monitor line has quite a heritage behind it. Introduced way back in 1982, it has been revamped and retooled more times than I can recall, with such designations as "SE", "MKIII", and "V.2" to help position it in history. The last time the "11" designation was used was quite a few years ago, and it shows. The previous model was reminiscent of those stalky models of yesteryear, although much more refined: a 3-way design with a 6-1/2" midrange, two 8" woofers, and a 1" textile tweeter. The new model definitely exhibits the changing trends in loudspeaker design: like the 90Ps, an elegantly slender front profile, favoring multiple small drivers and in this case a simpler 2-1/2 way crossover.

LET'S GET ACQUAINTED

At the top is Paradigm's 1" PTD (Pure Titanium Dome) tweeter on a cloth suspension. The very same may be found not only in the 90P but the entire Monitor line including a dedicated center channel speaker and some radically implemented



dipolar surrounds. Assembling a home theater is pretty effortless, as a tonal match is most definitely assured. As noted by Colin on the 90P (Colin Miller, "Secrets of Home Theater and High Fidelity," review of Paradigm Monitor 90P), the grille frame is really the front baffle and is carved to continue the contours of the mild horn started by the tweeter's chassis. Paradigm calls it "controlled wave-guide". What is relevant is that these are one of the few speakers you are likely to encounter which do in fact sound better with the grilles on. They seemed to me to have less focus when played naked.

It's easy to understand why, unlike so many other speaker manufacturers, Paradigm's brochures feature photos of the components. I, like Colin, just had to pull one of the bass drivers out to show you why. They are of remarkably robust design, given the price point. High strength rubber suspension, rigid cast metal chassis, and more than generous magnets are easily visible even to an inexperienced eye. The cone material for the mid/bass driver is Paradigm's own translucent co-polymer concoction which has an advantage in the midrange. The material for the bass drivers is a more conventional polypropylene, better suited to the low range they are responsible for.

On the back of the Monitor 11s are dual sets of sensible five-way binding posts (bi-wire/bi-amp capable), and a large port. Most other points of the design are the same as the 90Ps: The port is flared at both ends, and the cabinets, oh so well constructed, are stuffed to the gills with

damping material. The finish of my review set was the same as Colin's. It is vinyl, but is of a warm, deep shade of rosenut, so well applied that you will have to look close to be certain it is not an exotic veneer. The requisite black and a light oak, by the way, are also available.

"They image like the dickens. ... Sure I've heard imaging as good but it cost more and was from tiny mini monitors without bass."

2-1/2-way speakers are getting more implementation recently than I can ever recall. Paradigm first used them in their Reference line of speakers (to great success) and it is now trickling over to a few of the Monitor models. If you are just now catching the buzz, a 2-1/2 way design is nothing more than an ordinary full-range two-way speaker (tweeter and woofer) which is supplemented by one or more additional woofers with their own low-pass. The design makes so much sense: you do away with the inherently complex crossover of a true three-way (tweeter, midrange, woofer) but achieve comparable dynamics and low frequency extension. The workload, if you will, of the lower registers is shared across several drivers. The mid/bass unit, although still getting a full signal, has significantly less to do down deep. While touring the Paradigm factory recently, I asked Scott Bagby, co-founder and lead designer, about their use of the 2-1/2-way design. "All things being equal," he told me, "a three-way will still be superior. But it is a lot harder to produce 10,000 3-way



speakers which are consistent. With the 2-1/2-way design we get awfully close to the three-way in terms of dynamics and bass, but it is much easier to implement on the assembly line."

Paradigm's genius in the area of "value" shining through yet again.

"Midrange is very natural ... neutrality ... is consistent regardless of output level. At what felt like concert level playback, select live recordings ... remained warm and pleasing to the ear."

SET-UP

I should interject here that at heart, I'm a multi-channel audio kind of guy. I'm quick to say that my main interest in high-definition audio is the motion picture soundtrack. I watch a movie almost every night to my wife's dismay ("you're watching that again?!") It's in my veins or something. Sure I've got a decent CD collection, and there is scarcely a silent moment at my house, but I just never thought of myself as quite so absorbed about two-channel audio. The Monitor 11s have changed that. In carrying out the routine of this review, my interest in two-channel music has been refueled.



"On motion picture soundtracks, the Monitor 11s had the gumption to take on the tough guys. ... the speakers had no problem with the signal."

Thanks to the Nordost Z-plug termination of my speaker cables, dancing from amplifier to amplifier is easy (yet the connection is one of the best you are likely to find). I gave the Monitor 11s equal billing on our Yamaha receiver, Rotel THX amp, and the exquisite Smart Theater Systems Valve/MOSFET hybrid. I want to make a point here about the Monitor 11s and amplifiers. These speakers are spec'd by Paradigm as being slightly on the more efficient side of things. 91 dB doesn't compete with the legendary horns of Klipsch, but it's darn good for a more traditional dynamic speaker design. It was therefore my pleasure to confirm that the Monitor 11s are not at all fussy about the power you supply; the difference in their performance as I went from amp to amp was far less than has been with the more typical, less efficient speakers. In other words, you don't need copious amounts of power with the Monitor 11s, but it doesn't hurt. More on their performance with the Smart Theater Systems amp later.

LISTENING: THE WHOLE POINT

The treble is actually quite interesting. I have heard this tweeter before in other Monitor models but could never put my finger on it. Once we both had our respective review subjects for a couple of weeks, Colin and I compared notes and were impressed when we both had much the same to say about the treble. To reiterate, we identify it as having a little "spice" in the top end. Don't misunderstand here. This is not harshness or what I would call brightness, but a bit of spice which is neither right or wrong, just an elusive character. I am normally scared of metal dome tweeters. I've ducked into some "esoteric" rooms at CES only to leave shaking my head, trying to get the

maddening 'ring' and 'splash' of a metal dome out of my head. The gang at Paradigm are no amateurs though, their metal domes are breaking up the negative stereotypes. They proved that to me with the Reference models I reviewed, and fell madly in love with, last year. The detail resolved by the Monitor 11s is very good, the complex layers of cymbals being rendered with palpable fidelity. They image like the dickens. It was a real kicker to plop someone down in the sweet spot and play them some two-channel music such as Holly Cole's *Temptation*. My test subjects swore on their life that I had some exclusive three-channel sound system, as the center speaker seemed to be alive with her voice, the left and right providing the piano and double bass. Sure I've heard imaging as good but it cost more and was from tiny mini monitors without bass. Can I talk about the bass yet? No ... midrange comes next in most people's mind.

Midrange with the Monitor 11s is very natural without any noticeable distractions. Even the relatively harsh recording of Alanis Morissette's *Jagged Little Pill* was pleasing to the ear. Harry Connick Jr.'s crooning was giving me goose bumps, and I'm not easily moved that way. What is worth noting, and trying yourself should you audition these, is that this neutrality of the midrange is consistent regardless of output level. At what felt like concert level playback, select live recordings of Bruce Springsteen, Rush, and Eric Clapton remained warm and pleasing to the ear. If anything (I feel I should say something), the midrange is a little reserved, as if holding back that one extra layer of detail, but again this is not really a sonic negative, just an observation.

Bass, as you might expect, is the real treat with these speakers. I drove them as hard as I possibly could and never found their limit. Peter Gabriel's album *Security*, and in particular the opening song, *The Rhythm of the Heat*, had such visceral impact as to genuinely reach me on an emotional level. I made similar notes on such material as Dire Straits *On Every Street* and Alana Davis' *Blame it on Me*. Putting sound into words is often considered a vain pursuit, but to attempt it here,

I describe the bass as so latent, so accurate, that it ceases to be a 'beat' and turns into an inner body sensation. The Monitor 11s were able to energize the air in a way that only the best (and most expensive) subwoofers can. No, I'm not saying they go as low as a real good subwoofer or that you will forever be without the need for one, but this is *really* good bass. Interestingly, Paradigm's Monitor 9, a similar speaker with only two 8" mid/bass drivers is actually spec'd as reaching a couple of Hz lower than the Monitor 11s. But after casually listening to the 9s, it was clear to me what the Monitor 11s did differently from even their close sibling: *Natural* bass. Try the double bass of Diana Krall. Try the throbbing techno bass of Destiny's Child. It's *all* good baby!

"Put them on your list to audition and you just might embarrass those multi-thousand dollar exotics you've been considering."

The more analytical are dying to get a number, so to humor them, I can say I was able to get useable output to about 35 Hz in my room, but they seemed to roll off more gradually than other ported designs (there was still plenty of SPL activity, albeit down by over 10 dB, at 20 Hz). There again when comparing notes with Colin, it became clear this was no product of my imagination. The aperiodic design will surprise you.

On motion picture soundtracks, the Monitor 11s had the gumption to take on the tough guys. Though they may not usefully voice those bottom frequencies, the speakers had no problem with the signal. I had the 25 Hz sine wave turned up as loud as the neighborhood would put up with, but it still was not reaching the excursion limits of the combined eight 6-1/2" drivers.

I've already told you that the Monitor 11s aren't fussy as far as amplifiers go, and I'm not backing down on that. I would be remiss though, if I did not relate to you how revealing these speakers are of

the equipment before them and how, as the supporting foundation improves, the Monitor 11s pay you dividends. The Smart Theater Systems 2X150VT I reviewed with great favor recently was fortunately still on hand for this review. An all together sensible amplifier, the 2X150VT includes a tube input buffer and a generously underspec'd output of 150 watts per channel into 8 ohms. What an incredible union between speaker and amplifier, master and slave. The Smart is a control freak, commanding starts and stops with an authority you can actually hear. The Monitor 11s were only too happy to comply, thereby asserting a strata of impact and realism which they just could not grasp under the gaze of the humble Yamaha receiver. And the mellow warmth of the tube mated beautifully with the aforementioned spice of the tweeter. These just might want to be on the shopping list of people with upscale tube gear.

BUT WHAT OF THE REFERENCE?

Barely had I put the review set in place than some folks asked me the inevitable question, a question perhaps some of you have: How do they compare to Paradigm's own Reference Studio/40 speakers (reviewed last year), which are almost exactly the same price once you add the stands? Although I've already praised the Monitor 11's performance, the Studio/40s are in fact even more responsible transducers. This has to be the one opportunity in a reviewer's life when he can get away with saying something is better than the review subject without the manufacturer being upset. The Reference tweeter in particular is such an overbuilt motor, that it seems to effortlessly achieve a textbook correct sound without the mild sizzle which I've noted on the Monitor 11. Midrange is slightly less resolved on the Monitor 11s, while a simple rap with the knuckle will convince even the least knowledgeable observer that the Studio/40's cabinet is as solid as can be conceived. Coloration on the Reference models is non-existent. So what's the point of the Monitor 11s? Doesn't take a genius, but I'll spell it out for the record. While the Studio/40s reach down with confidence and fortitude, bass is where

the Monitor 11 commands respect. Should you be in an intimate space or have the services of an *accurate* subwoofer, the Studio/40 may prove better value, but short of those parameters, the Paradigm Monitor 11s are the obvious choice.

CONCLUSION

Whether a stereo pair, the cornerstone of a music/movie set up, or merely mains in a mixed-media multi-channel environment, the Monitor 11s are a speaker that will likely be with you for a very, very long time. Incredibly satisfying sound for only a kilobuck, they are able to resolve both the fine details of music, while delivering a visceral audio experience. They are recommended for large spaces and tight budgets, but that does not mean wealthy folks should ignore them. Put them on your list to audition and you just might embarrass those multi-thousand dollar exotics you've been considering.