

“STELLAR VALUE”

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“... so engaging that, if you were blindfolded, you’d swear the speakers were far larger. ... You wouldn’t be crazy to compare them to speakers costing as much as \$1,000 per pair.”

by Brian Kahn

Paradigm is known for building great-sounding speakers that entry-level music and home theater enthusiasts can actually afford and can definitely enjoy. Unlike most loudspeaker manufacturers, Paradigm actually makes, designs and tests their speakers without significant help from outside agencies. They have the largest anechoic chamber in North America at their testing facilities, along with enough engineers to start a “Star Trek” convention. Paradigm designs and makes their own drivers, cabinets, hardware and more. With this level of control over the design and manufacturing process, they are able to hold a top position in the highly competitive world of under \$2,000 loudspeakers.

The Focus is the latest addition to Paradigm’s Performance Series. The newest Focus is a two-way, bookshelf or stand-mounted speaker, featuring a rear-firing port. The Focus has a 6.5-inch cone mid-woofer and a one-inch dome tweeter driver complement. The Focus’

mid-woofer utilizes an all-new metallescent, polymer cone material. The cone is mounted to Paradigm’s proprietary Ultra-Rigid GRIP chassis, which achieves lightweight stiffness with glass-reinforced injection molded polymer. All of this is a lot of technology for a loudspeaker at this low price.

My review samples are finished in a laminate called Rosenut. There are other finishes including light cherry and black ash. These speakers have a traditional look and can be placed out in a room for audiophile-esque positioning or integrated into a more interior designer-friendly environment with ease. The Focus is a physically slender 14 inches high, 7-3/4 inches wide and 10-1/4 inches deep, weighing 14 pounds. The back panel features oversize binding posts and a port that assists the relatively small Focus speakers in achieving a reported bottom end response of 44 Hz.

FOCUS



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I rounded out my Paradigm 5.1 system with the CC-270 center channel, and a pair of Paradigm ADP-170 speakers used for surround speakers. I previously reviewed the ADP-170s with the Paradigm Phantoms and CC-170. The CC-270 is the big brother of the CC-170 and features two six-inch mid-woofers flanking a one-inch dome tweeter. The ADP-170s continue to utilize a dipole/bipole configuration designed to maximize sonic spaciousness without sacrificing lower frequency strength. The ADP-170s come with wall-mounting brackets. The backs of the cabinets are thoughtfully grooved for speaker cables, allowing the ADP-170s to mount flush on the wall.

SETUP AND POSITIONING

The best performance I could elicit from the Focuses was achieved by positioning them almost six feet apart and exactly two feet from my front wall, with the CC-270 aligned perfectly in the middle. I placed the ADP-170s to the sides of my listening position and utilized Vantage Point stands to place the speakers at the desired height. The ADP-170s can also be flush-mounted to your side walls with hardware that is included with each pair.



CC-270

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MUSIC AND MOVIES

While I primarily used the Focus speakers as part of a 5.1 theater system, I did a bit of two-channel listening as well. All my two-channel listening was done with the Focus speakers running full range and my M&K 350 MK II subwoofer turned off. The matching Paradigm subwoofer has yet to be released. After letting the speakers break in nonstop at low levels for a few days I listened to Sheryl Crow's new album *C'mon, C'mon* (A&M Records). The sound was on the warm side, smooth with slightly rolled-off highs. The high end had more energy than some of the past Paradigms did, but slightly less than another speaker I recently reviewed. The soundstage between the speakers was seamless, as you'd expect from a well-positioned \$2,000 per pair, high-end electrostatic transducer. The depth of the stage extended all the way to the back wall of my theater room. The imaging did improve with the grilles removed, which is a phenomenon that I rarely find but proved to be the case with these Paradigms.

On the track "Soak Up The Sun," Crow's voice had a good sense of weight and sonic impact. Unlike nearly every speaker I have heard in this price range, the Paradigms didn't try to tear your head off with flashy high-frequency performance. The soundstage was what you would want from a speaker of this price range, but the dynamics were far more exciting than I had expected.

"I found the transitions between the Focuses and the CC-270 to be virtually seamless. Krall's voice — was wonderfully warm and robust in ways that you just don't hear with most CDs. ... At higher volumes the Focuses held up like champions, never losing their coherence on the surround material."

I listened to Eric Clapton's *Unplugged* (Reprise Records). The Focus fared even better with this sparkling recording. Clapton's voice on "Hey Hey" was reproduced without any chestiness that I noticed in the older Paradigm Phantoms. Clapton's guitar handiwork on "Tears in Heaven" and "Before You Accuse Me" was recreated convincingly and it was only in the lower registers that the Focus' size constraints were evident. As the frequencies dropped down low, the Focus lost some of the solidity it had in the upper registers. This is where successfully matching and crossing over a subwoofer to your system makes a big difference. There are simply physical limits as to how low a small speaker can go and when you allow it to do the highs and mids that a speaker like the Focus can do best, you get the best results.

For low bass, you either need a huge physical speaker with big drivers or you need a subwoofer. I recommend the use of the sub.

Moving to 5.1 surround material, I auditioned Diana Krall's *Love Scenes* (DTS / GRP Records) and immediately noticed that the Focus was more at ease with the low end being handled by a subwoofer. The crossover of my Krell 7.1 processor was set at 80 Hz. The CC-270 was a sonic match for the Focuses and may have actually been a bit more detailed. I found the transitions between the Focuses and the CC-270 to be virtually seamless. Krall's voice, from the opening of the first track "All Or Nothing At All," was

wonderfully warm and robust in ways that you just don't hear with most CDs. At higher volumes, the Focuses held up like champions, never losing their coherence on the surround material.

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Moving over to feature film soundtracks, I demoed with a scene I used in my Paradigm Phantom review—the opening battle scene from *Saving Private Ryan* (Dreamworks/DTS). As the scene opened, with the waves crashing about, I noted that these Paradigms were true to their family tradition of coherence. They were able to provide an enveloping soundstage so engaging that, if you were blindfolded, you'd swear the speakers were far larger. As the battle raged on, I noted an element of sonic congestion with the Focus speakers, which could, at these extremely high levels, represent the limit of the speakers' output.

"The ADP-170s also continued to perform well, and nearly had me ducking the arrows flying from the battling archers."



ADP-170

Keeping with the grand battle theme, I next watched the epic film *Gladiator* (Dreamworks/ DTS). The CC-270 continued to perform well, portraying voices articulately. The cocking of the catapults, panned cleanly from right to left, demonstrated the continuity between the Focus and CC-270 speakers to form a convincing front soundstage. The ADP-170s also continued to perform well, and nearly had me ducking the arrows flying from the battling archers. On *Gladiator*, the system remained more composed at extreme volume levels, compared to the all-out opening sequence in *Saving Private Ryan*.

"... great bang for the buck performance ... At their price the Paradigm Focus speakers are a must-hear in any speaker buying decision under \$500 per pair."

DOWNSIDE

While the Paradigm Focus speakers are sonically polite, their laid-back Canadian flavor doesn't reach out and grab you as do certain other comparably-priced speakers. The Paradigms do sound better on a wider range of music and movies, but the other speakers have more "wow" factor. If your main goal is to impress your neighbors with a quick demo, the Paradigm Focus speakers might be too subtle. If you are more interested in subtlety and surprising excellence during a long musical listening session or a two-hour feature film, then you will be interested in investing in Paradigms.

CONCLUSION

Paradigm, with their new Focus, continues to provide great bang for the buck performance and stellar value. You wouldn't be crazy to compare them to speakers costing as much as \$1,000 per pair. Their sonic qualities make them well suited for extended listening sessions or movie marathons.

"... a lot of technology for a loudspeaker at this low price."

For true low-end performance, you will want a subwoofer to go along with the Focus speakers, which will free up the Focuses to do what they do best. At their remarkably low price, the Paradigm Focus speakers are a must-hear in any speaker buying decision under \$500 per pair.