"... EXCELLENT ... perfectly natural ..."

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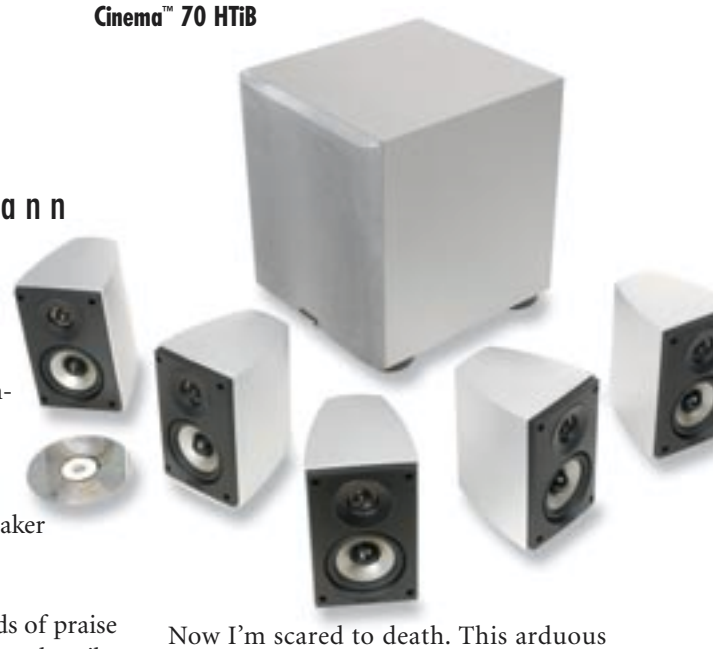
HOME Theater

"... voices performing a cappella sounded perfectly natural and well separated. An acoustic guitar chimed. Violins and cellos resonated woodily ... voice and acoustic steel guitar-imaged three-dimensionally ..."

by Mark Fleischmann

Cinema™ 70 HTiB



A SWIG OF PARADIGM

Cinema 70 includes five matching satellites and a minuscule sub but not a dedicated center channel. If you prefer, you can add the Cinema CC center speaker (optional extra).

Audio critics reaching for words of praise often use a beverage metaphor to describe budget products. We've done this so often that we've even corrupted the publicists (if that's possible). The telling phrase is right there in the press release for the Paradigm Cinema speaker system — "champagne sound on a beer budget."

IS THE GLASS HALF FULL OR HALF EMPTY?

This is cannier than it looks. First of all, by using the cliché themselves, the PR people have effectively prevented hacks like me from using it. Now I'll actually have to think of a new metaphor to earn my reviewer's fee. To make this possible, I'll have to cancel an appointment with my massage therapist and may even have to work as late as 5 p.m, Well, 4:59.

Now I'm scared to death. This arduous thought process dredges up questions I'd rather not answer What, for instance, is "champagne performance?" Is it like good French champagne, the kind that I can drink for hours and not feel too awful the next morning? Or is it more like the cheap stuff that gives me a splitting headache, the kind of headache I get from nosing out new, novel metaphors like a journalistic truffle pig?

The beer side of the metaphor is a briar patch even more likely to bloody my legs, I happen to love and respect beer. I even like Bud: It's freshness-dated, the rice content gives it a unique lightness, and nothing goes better with Chinese food. What sends me on a pilgrimage to an exotic beer store far from my apartment is the Belgian stuff,

like Saison Dupont Farmhouse Ale, a golden unfiltered ale heavily impregnated with yeast, a beer as fine in its own way as any bottle of fancy French champagne.

"Off-axis performance, traditionally a strength of Paradigm speakers, was excellent, as usual. As I moved around the room, the satellites maintained much of their tonal character and image focus."

So, even if I adopt the assumption, however questionable, that champagne is automatically good, I utterly reject the assumption that beer is automatically bad. I do have some scruples left even at this stage of my career. The whole alcohol metaphor has got to go.

What about water? Yeah, that's it. I'll explore new terrain in beverage metaphors. OK. Great performance is bottled water. San Pellegrino or Evian? Carbonated or non? Well, I'll decide that later. And bad performance? That's easy, tap water. Bad tap water. You check into a hotel, you have a shower, your body smells like chlorine, you pour a glass of the stuff and taste it, you make a face in the mirror, then you put your pants and socks back on and prowl the halls in a foul mood looking for the Coke machine. Like an angry truffle pig.

Now all I have to do is decide whether Paradigm's Cinema 70 HTiB is deluxe bottled water or underperforming tap water. For a full 5.1 channel system, it's definitely selling for a tap-water price, yet there's no hint of chlorine in the Cinema 70 drivers, which are made by Paradigm and include a 3-1/2-inch MPC woofer and 5/8-inch CPC tweeter in a sealed, mineral-filled polymer enclosure. According to the press release (which saves me from having to dial a telephone, so maybe I'll actually finish the day at 4:58), MPC is a mineral-filled copolymer polypropylene, while CPC is a coated polymer composite. Basically, we're talking about complex plastics here. You can wall-mount the 3.3-pound sats with the MB-20 flush-mount kit or the MB-40 wall brackets.

The 5.1-channel version of the Cinema 70 HTiB uses identical satellites all around. For a 6.1-channel upgrade, add the horizontal Cinema CC, with two woofers flanking the tweeter, all of the drivers match the ones in the satellites in size. Both systems come with the Cinema Sub which has an 8-inch carbon-fiber-reinforced composite cone woofer in a 13-inch-tall, 20-pound enclosure driven by an amp rated at 90 watts RMS or 270 watts peak.

Paradigm is careful about little things like specs. Impedance is "compatible with 8 ohms." Sensitivity is rated at 84 decibels for the sats and 86 for the center. While this number may seem low for full-sized speakers, it's fairly nominal for speakers this small. Even so, Paradigm recommends a receiver rated at just 15 to 80 watts and specifies a maximum input power of 40 for the sats and 50 for the center, with clipping 10 percent of the time. Don't worry about it. Many receivers that are rated at 100 watts per channel actually muster less than half that amount with full-range source material and all channels driven. Regardless, I drove the Cinema 70 with my reference receiver, a Rotel RSX-1065. At 100 watts times five, with high-current capability the Rotel is a little more powerful than the 15 to 80 watts that Paradigm recommends, but I didn't hear any unintended popping sounds from the speakers.

Also along for the ride, as usual, were an Integra DPS-8.3 universal disc player, a Rega Planar 25 turntable with a Shure V15 cartridge, an NAD PP-1 phono preamp, BetterCables.com, Silver Serpent audio interconnects. Tributaries SCV C silver video interconnects, and Monster M1.2s speaker cables. The InFocus ScreenPlay 5700 DLP and Sony VPL-IIS20 Cineza LCD projectors were also passing through my apartment at the time, which gave me the chance to coordinate my impressions of the Cinema 70's surround performance with appropriately huge pictures.

There are two schools of thought concerning speaker grilles. Some critics deem grilles an acoustic obstacle and automatically remove them to obtain purer sound uncolored by the grille. Others assume that designers voice their speakers to be used with the grilles on and that to remove them would violate the designers intention, unless the manual says otherwise. I'm a grilles-on kind of guy, but I departed from my usual practice after three days of break-in. Using the speakers as packaged, rolled off the high frequencies and upper midrange to a draconian degree. What remained was lifeless and vague. Pulling the grilles off in the middle of the Dave Brubeck Quartet's *Newport 1958* LP brought the live recording to life. Imaging suddenly popped into focus.

" … for a full 5.1-channel system, it's definitely selling for a tap-water price, but there's no hint of chlorine in these drivers …"

Unshackled from its grilles, the Cinema 70 got off to an excellent start with my primary test CD-R. Six voices performing *a cappella* sounded perfectly natural and well seperated. An acoustic guitar chimed. Violins and cellos resonated woodily. A voice and an acoustic steel guitar (recorded with a single ribbon mike) imaged three-dimensionally, aided by the Dolby Pro Logic II circuit that I invariably use for CDs. And a powerful, carefully phrased female voice singing a folk tune with a delicate filigree of grace notes came through with as much microdynamic detail and as little stridency as I could hope for. Male voices didn't sound chesty.

Overall, the tonal balance was one tiny increment on the brighter side of neutral, but nowhere near enough to warrant reinstalling the grilles. On heavy-metal tracks the speakers absorbed about two thirds of the Rotel's considerable power output, achieving a cruising altitude of 95 dB without noticeably changing character. Off-axis performance, traditionally a strength of Paradigm speakers, was excellent as usual. As I moved around the room, the satellites maintained much of their tonal character and image focus.

A motion picture may fill its LFE channel with two kinds of violent effects. The kind

most likely to challenge a sub is what I call the "continuous menace" mode. There's plenty of that in *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers.* For the Cinema Sub—a sub packaged with a system selling for under $550—the merciless levels of continuous low-frequency information in Peter Jackson's epic battle scenes was like getting beaten by a gang of Orcs.

But then there's the "quick hit" mode, a generally less-challenging series of rapid bass transients, like gunshots and body thumps that dominate the Hong Kong thriller *So Close*. The sub had no trouble with these. It was also adept at filling in the lower midrange, especially with voices —something that immediately became apparent when I briefly switched it off. With the sub placed between the center and right speakers, the 100-Hz crossover wasn't particularly noticeable.

Are you thirsty for a conclusion? OK, how does the Cinema 70 HTiB rate in the liquid scheme of things? Is it clean-tasting bottled water or semi-toxic tap water? Well, Perrier it's not, with or without a slice of lime. That side of the metaphor is reserved for a speaker like, say, the Paradigm Reference Studio 20—which happens to have been my reference (small r) for two and a half years, the benchmark against which I judge all other speakers. Were that not so, the Paradigm people might as well discontinue all of their higher-priced speaker lines.

On the other hand, the Cinema 70's satellites are definitely a cut above a cloudy glass of something hardly fit for gargling. With the grilles off, they deliver very good imaging and detail, with a pleasing and fairly neutral tonal balance, avoiding the worst colorations and other budget-speaker excesses. With the grilles on, I did detect a hint of chlorine, but that may be what it takes to mesh with a particularly nasty budget receiver. Chlorine, after all, is there to protect us again worse things. The sub, H_2O-wise didn't leave a bad taste in my mouth.

If the Paradigm Cinema 70 HTiB were a glass of water, it would be New York City tap water. The city's water comes from a vast system of upstate reservoirs not unlike Paradigm's worldclass engineering resources and design facilities. Although development is encroaching on the reservoirs—similar to the remorse market pressure that drives manufacturers to design incredibly affordable surround speaker sets—our tap water still lives up to a high standard. You see people drinking it in restaurants.

> *" A powerful, carefully phrased female voice singing a folk tune with a delicate filigree of grace notes came through with as much microdynamic detail and as little stridency as I could hope for."*

The city is acquiring land around the reservoirs to protect its water supply, guarding it as prudently as Paradigm guards their reputation for making good (quite often great) speakers. Even now, New York City tap water is good enough to deliver to millions of people without filtering, so is it any coincidence that I prefer these speakers without their grilles?

OK, New York City tap water doesn't come in a fancy bottle, but there was a time within living memory when it used to win drinking-water contests. Judged against same-priced competition, I'm sure the Paradigm Cinema 70 HTiB would do equally well.