"... OUTSTANDING ...

... a smooth panorama of sound ..."

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audio ideas guide

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by Aaron Marshall

When Anthem sent me their AVM 20 and PVA 7 home theatre separates for review awhile back, Paradigm, Anthem's parent company, followed up by sending a set of home theatre speakers to go with them. And what did they send to complement over $6,000 worth of home theatre front end? Paradigm's entry level Cinema system, as it turned out; the five speakers and sub costing a small fraction of the gear driving them. Although another example of the unusual equipment pairings reviewers are often faced with, this ended up working out nicely since I had already received a very good taste of what the Anthem gear was capable of and I could be sure that I'd be getting the best the Cinema system had to offer with such a high-zoot front end.

With one exception Paradigm's Cinema 90 is about the smallest speaker you're likely to come across. Truly palm-sized, the 90 is only 7″ high, 4-5/8″ wide, 5″ deep, and weighs just over four pounds, making it

one of just a handful of speakers you could conceivably juggle (no, I didn't try this). Its little brother, the Cinema 70 is even smaller, although not by very much (about 10%). Mounted in the Cinema 90's enclosure is one 4″ polypropylene cone and one 5/8″ metal dome tweeter. The box itself looks and feels like high quality plastic but, Paradigm calls it "mineralfilled polymer", which sounds like a fancy name for plastic to me. Whatever you call it, the silver finish is very stylish, matching the current trend of silver televisions and electronics, and the box is surprisingly solid and nonresonant for a speaker at this price point. Indeed, one of the benefits of being so small is that cabinet resonances can be kept to a minimum without going to the kind of expensive extremes called for with large speakers (the same is true for diffraction: no baffle, no diffraction; ed).

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An acoustic suspension design, the Cinema 90 has no port, its narrow, tapered rear panel featuring only a pair of high quality, gold plated five-way binding posts and two threaded holes to facilitate stand or wall mounting with optional hardware. I used the supplied Premier stands (another Paradigm company) to support the speakers. These stands are essentially heavy iron bases supporting curved metal rods to which the speakers bolt directly. The miniature speakers, especially with their svelte silver cloth grilles attached, combined with the unobtrusive stands, make for a subtle and design friendly look, scoring points with members of your household more concerned with aesthetics than, say, pinpoint imaging spectral decay characteristics.

After becoming familiar with the Cinema 90 the Cinema CC centre channel doesn't pose any significant design surprises. Here we find what basically looks like two Cinema 90's stuck together and turned on their side. Arranged in a D'Appolito array are two 3″ cones and the same 5/8″ tweeter found in the satellites. In-room sensitivity for both the 90 and the Cinema CC is 89 dB with low frequency extension rated at 75 Hz for the Cinema 90 and 85 Hz for the Cinema CC. Suffice it to say, with speakers this tiny, a subwoofer is not optional.

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Naturally I wasn't without one, Paradigm supplying the sensibly matched PDR-8 for use with the Cinema 90 satellites and centre. Simple but value packed, the PDR-8 is a single driver, bass reflex sub with a 100 watt amp built in. The PDR-8's model number refers to the 8″ carbon fiber reinforced composite cone firing out from the side of a 13″ x 9″ x 15″ box which is ported at the rear. All the major features you'd expect to find are supplied, including variable cutoff (50-150 Hz), auto on/off and standby, and both line level and speaker level inputs. Low frequency extension is quoted at 27 Hz.

After giving all the speakers a good break-in with several weeks of casual listening in the home theatre system I took the front pair and dropped them into my two-channel system for the first bout of critical listening. For such a tiny speaker which makes such significant compromises to cost and "lifestyle" friendliness, the Cinema 90s sounded remarkably uncompromised sonically, giving a first impression of being well balanced and musical. After a little fussing to get the sub position and cutoff settings as favorable as possible, the system jelled very nicely indeed and sounded impressively large and full bodied, even in my largeish 20′ x 13′ living room. The deepest bass was noticeably absent (one 8″ subwoofer cone can only do so much), but the integration with the satellites was very smooth, especially considering a handoff point hovering above 100 Hz. Bass heads in search of more grunt can also easily add another PDR-8, a PDR-10, or step up to the PDR-12, a sub AM was very impressed with. *(Review available on the Paradigm website.)*

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Anyone who's heard their flagship Servo-15 can attest that Paradigm knows a thing or two about subwoofers, and, despite lacking the extension and macrodynamic capabilities that come from bigger cones and larger enclosures, the PDR-8 continues a family tradition of tight, tuneful bass. Acoustic bass was particularly well rendered on the PDR-8, sounding realistically big and full bodied with good transient "pluck". When called for the system could sound convincingly large and muscular, assuming you didn't twist the volume knob too far. Despite its small size the PDR-8 did an admirable job of driving a room much larger than it was designed for.

Good acoustic guitar music (ie; Don Ross, Michael Hedges, Ray Montford) really brought out the best in the Cinema 90's. What they concede in bass extension with those tiny but sturdy cabinets is made up in openness and imaging, both major strong points of these speakers. Very quick and lively, the Cinema 90s' tiny baffle area helped them disappear seamlessly, leaving behind a smooth panorama of sound with very specifically placed images (especially at centre) and a nice sense of air when appropriate. Aside from some occasional chestiness on vocals and a slight sense of veiling, midrange transparency was also good. Mind you, this is compared to my three-way, floorstanding reference speaker costing over ten times as much.

Considering the miniscule size and cost of the Cinema 90s, I was expecting many more sonic shortcomings than I found.

As I usually do with speakers, I began my listening with the grille covers off. Generally, they stay off in the interests of wringing every last bit of detail out of a speaker. The Cinema 90s bucked this trend, sounding quite a bit better with the grilles on, seemingly designed to be used this way. Without them they were noticeably bright and a little bit thin sounding. Popping the grilles on brought the balance much closer to neutral, and made for a much more musical and immersive listening experience. They also look better in this configuration.

"The little satellites' excellent imaging, surprising transparency, and flair for disappearing made them very effective in a surround application … Clean and smooth, with excellent separation and delineation on sequences dense with sound effects."

The Cinema system's musicality and ability to draw in the listener were also borne out when I put the Paradigm speakers back into the home theatre room. The little satellites' excellent imaging, surprising transparency, and flair for disappearing made them very effective in a surround application (in this case four Cinema 90's and the Cinema CC up front). Clean and smooth, with excellent separation and delineation on sequences dense with sound effects, the Cinema system sounded great on DVDs. Orchestral strings and brass were particularly impressive. Although I still occasionally missed the very deepest bass and whiz-bang dynamics of bigger speakers, perhaps even more so on soundtracks than with music, the Paradigms sounded better balanced and more transparent driven by the Anthem front end in my smaller home theater room. In this system, with the grilles on, my concerns with brightness were forgotten, and I wasn't surprised to discover that the Cinema CC center channel was adept at delivering clean, clear and neutral sounding dialog.

As an entry level home theatre system the Cinema is hard to fault and easy to recommend, offering outstanding sound for the dollar in a package that could suit even the tiniest rooms, not to mention pass the aesthetic muster of all but the most demanding spouse. Those with big rooms and bigger ambitions may want to look somewhat further up-market, but the Cinema 90, especially if paired with one of Paradigm's bigger subs, packs a lot more punch than the price would suggest.