# "... these are some

# FABULOUS SPEAKERS,

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by Steven Kim

Paradigm has a long history of offering speakers that provide a big slice of audiophile-approved sound at reasonable prices. Its speakers aren't the cheapest and they can't be found at any big-box retailer, but chances are that if you seek out a Paradigm dealer, you'll be rewarded with some great-sounding gear at a fair price. Follow us past the break to see how much of the high-end Paradigm delivers with its latest entry-level offering, the Cinema Gaming speaker system.

Paradigm is one of the most successful brands straddling the high-end and real world, so it's not surprising that the company has carefully monitored the changing role of loudspeakers in home entertainment. Many audiophile speaker companies have not navigated that transition from 2-channel to 5.1-channel (and counting) audio nearly as well as Paradigm, so you know that Paradigm has a keen interest in keeping pace with the times. It comes as no surprise, then, that Paradigm has put together its Cinema Gaming speaker systems to complement the growing number of dual-purpose HT/gaming living rooms.

Up for review here is the 5.1-channel Phantom member of the Cinema Gaming family, which consists of one pair of Cinema Phantom floorstanding speakers, a single Cinema 220 LCR as center channel, one pair of Cinema ADP surrounds and a PDR-10 subwoofer.

The Cinema Gaming systems are also offered with Micro bookshelf speakers in

place of the floorstanding Phantoms (see the engadget review), and in 2.1-channel arrangements that do without the surrounds. It's worth noting that these speakers aren't something special Paradigm cooked up just for this system—the Cinema Gaming lineup is made up of already-existing Paradigm speakers. We like this approach, because it keeps your options open for mixing and matching other Paradigm speakers as you need, without locking you into a "specially concocted" entry-level lineup. At the same time, we think newcomers to Paradigm that might otherwise opt for an HTIB system will welcome the single-order convenience of a bundled set of speakers. Selling audio quality can be tough

in today's HT and gaming market that pushes visuals over everything else, so we're all for easing new consumers into the benefits of high-quality speakers.

## **INITIAL IMPRESSIONS**

Even though UPS didn't show the Paradigm boxes any white glove treatment, the speakers arrived in perfect shape. The tall and narrow



Phantom mains are prone to topple, so the first task for new owners will be to install the outrigger feet (and the included spikes if the floor is carpeted). Being speaker geeks, we immediately noticed the good quality and wide spacing of the binding posts on the speakers. Finally, if the spikes and binding posts didn't give you the impression you're dealing with gear a notch or two up from typical massmarket dreck, the manual that spills more ink over proper speaker setup than legal warranty limitations will.

"... our listening sessions went on for hours at a time and we always looked forward to more music — definitely a good sign."

This is a longish review, but there's no need to draw out the drama—these are some fabulous speakers, especially for the price. We've owned Paradigm speakers in the past, so we were pretty familiar with the "house sound." But we weren't fully prepared for how much of the family values would translate down to the entry-level Cinema speakers. Right out of the box and even before we broke them in, the clear top end and first-rate imaging were obvious.

"'Phantom' is a fitting name for these speakers, as they threw up a solid and stable stereo image that seemed to detach itself from the speaker cabinets."

# A LITTLE SETUP

We flanked our 42-inch plasma with the Phantom mains, keeping them away from side walls with the rearward-facing port about 2 feet from the back wall. The imaging seemed really good, so we left well enough alone. Our usual surround channels are standard, front-firing mono-polar speakers and are located in the back corners of our room. To make sure the dipolar Cinema ADP surrounds got a fair shake, we put them on our side walls and in line with the "audition couch" like the manual calls for. Finally, the PDR-10 sub was put off towards a corner of the room, about 4 feet away from the closest Phantom speaker. A note on subwoofer setup-do yourself a favor and spend some time with an SPL meter and some test tones to get your sub adjusted for your room; it doesn't take much time or money, and it can really make a big difference in the performance.

Even if your receiver has an auto-calibration routine, you might be surprised at how effective (or not) it is for subwoofer integration. The PDR-10 has controls for output level, low pass frequency and a 0/180-degree phase switch—use the phase to maximize the bass volume and then trim the frequency and level controls to smooth out the transition from the PDR-10 to the Phantoms.

## THE SOUND

Even though the word "music" didn't find its way into the "Cinema Gaming" product name, we imagine that Paradigm wouldn't object to a "do the music right, and the rest will follow" approach, and this is confirmed by how the speakers fared with audio-only material. Setting the receiver to 2-channel stereo, we put the Phantom mains and PDR-10 sub to work on some lossless-encoded audio tracks.

Those unfamiliar with the brand may not know about the Canadian National Research Council (NRC) anechoic chamber that can be found in a number of speaker companies' DNA (including Paradigm, PSB, Mirage, Energy and Axiom). It's a lot of audio folklore, but the upshot is that after extensive blind testing, some fundamental criteria for good sound were determined, including wide bandwidth, low distortion and even dispersion. That sounds to us like "accurate across a wide area," and it's definitely something you'll hear in the Phantoms.

"These speakers exposed a lot of detail in recordings that can get glossed over — cymbals tapering off on Miles Davis' 'Kind of Blue,' for example ... that detail makes the silent sections of the album feel more like quiet air with humans in the room and less like digital zeros with robots."

Looking over our listening notes, the words "clean," "clear" and "neutral" show up a lot. The Phantoms have a bass spec of 64 Hz, and we got useful in-room bass to about 40 Hz. Adding in the PDR-10 sub smoothed out the region below 50 Hz (our room has a dip around 50 – 60 Hz) and extended bass down to about 30 Hz in the room. There's a good lesson about getting hung up on a magical 20-Hz response figures in these figures—you might not be able to hear it, and those last few Hertz are expensive.

What's more important is that we wouldn't trade off more low-end reach in the Phantoms for a loss of clarity or imaging. Compared to other speakers, the Paradigm neutrality may appear "bright" or "too detailed." If you listen to these speakers in-store, you'll probably notice a lot of new little details jumping out of your favorite recordings. Everyone has their own sensitivities, but we've found that the truest test of whether a speaker has crossed the line from "detailed" to "aggressive" is how long your listening sessions last, and whether you're relieved when they end. If you find yourself listening only in short bursts, or feel relief when you shut off the music, chances are the sound is too bright. We're happy to report that even though the Phantoms with the PDR-10 did convey a lot of detail and we wouldn't call them "sweet," our listening sessions went on for hours at a time and we always looked forward to more music—definitely a good sign.

"... we've owned speakers in the past that did great on orchestral music, but failed to convey the slam and punch of more rockin' music — the Paradigms did great on a wide selection of acoustic, orchestral, small, large, electronic and raucous music alike."

"Phantom" is a fitting name for these speakers, as they threw up a solid and stable stereo image that seemed to detach itself from the speaker cabinets. These speakers exposed a lot of detail in recordings that can get glossed over-cymbals tapering off on Miles Davis' "Kind of Blue," for example. Even if you don't explicitly notice how those cymbals trail off, you probably will notice, at least subconsciously, how that detail makes the silent sections of the album feel more like quiet air with humans in the room and less like digital zeros with robots. We're happy to report that these speakers did a great job on a variety of material we fed them-we've owned speakers in the past that did great on orchestral music, but failed to convey the slam and punch of more rockin' music-the Paradigms did great on a wide selection of acoustic, orchestral, small, large, electronic and raucous music alike.

"... these speakers are accurate enough to show off shortcomings in your upstream equipment."







This system isn't an HTIB, so Paradigm can't cover up deficiencies in the speakers by messing around with the source components—it's up to you to match these speakers with good source components and material. Conversely, these speakers are accurate enough to show off shortcomings in your upstream equipment, so don't think these speakers will cure any ills; "garbage in, garbage out" definitely applies here. But if you feed these speakers a good signal, you'll be rewarded.

"Whether we were running amok in 'Call of Duty 4' or creeping about in 'Metal Gear Solid 4', the Paradigm setup pulled us into the game and made us keep our ears perked for someone coming up behind us."

Next up were the surround-sound cinema and gaming tests. Remember how we noted that these speakers were able to handle a wide variety of musical genres? Well, the demands of movie and videogame soundtracks is something else again. Keeping dialog and ambiance intact while things blow up onscreen is a kind of challenge that you won't find in most musical scores amid explosions and we can say that the setup as a whole worked great-only when we really cranked things up to 11 did things sound compressed, and sane listening levels (including explosions) were just fine. Videogames and movies both employ the same surround sound codes, and both for the same reason—it helps you get immersed in the experience. Even though videogame graphics get top billing, if you try to play a recent game without audio, you'll immediately understand how essential the audio is to the experience. Whether we were running amok in Call of Duty 4 or creeping about in Metal Gear Solid 4, the Paradigm setup pulled us into the game and made us keep our ears perked for someone coming up behind us. Not surprisingly, movies fared well, too. Taking in standards from The Matrix and The Lord of the Rings trilogy produced that familiar feeling of "why go to a theater?" But these speakers aren't just about action—we really appreciated the clarity while watching The Wire and Diana Krall's Live in Paris DVD, too. We could go into lots of detail from our listening notes, but basically the neutral and dynamic character of the Phantoms in 2-channel mode stuck around and got a serious 3D boost.

"... we really appreciated the clarity ... the neutral and dynamic character of the Phantoms in 2-channel mode stuck around and got a serious 3D boost."

We were really surprised by how much we liked what the Cinema ADP surrounds did for, um, surround. Like we said at the top, our normal surround channels are unipolar speakers, not dipoles—and to our ears, the dipoles made a bigger difference than we ever would have thought. Paradigm's ADP (adaptive dipole) speakers are a clever bit of design that shoehorns four drivers into a really small enclosure by placing the tweeters back-to-back with the midrange. Then, Paradigm works a little crossover magic to make the two speaker face out of phase (dipolar) towards the treble end and in-phase (bipolar) towards the bass—the end result is airy sound up high and some bass reinforcement down low. It's clever, and to our ears, it works a treat.

#### NIT

So where do these speakers fall short? At the price, there have to be tradeoffs, and a (sane) limit on the peak volume this system can deliver is clearly one. Most significantly, however, we did hear a pop when the subwoofer's auto-off feature would engage. It wasn't scary like some speaker/amp pops, but it was annoying.

"... the dipoles made a bigger difference than we ever would have thought ... airy sound up high and some bass reinforcement down low ... it works a treat."

### CONCLUSION

Can you tell we really enjoyed our time with these speakers? Look, we won't say that it's a small price to pay for speakers, but considering what you're getting for the money, these are a "must audition" for anyone serious about good sound. At this price point, Paradigm is getting into internet-only territory (we suspect afforded by Paradigm's economies of scale), so you won't get real wood finishes or cryogenically treated, outboard crossover networks. What you will get is good build quality and solid engineering from a company that will stick around (and offer you those wood finishes, should you want to upgrade). Provided you

have a decent receiver, these speakers will deliver sound quality way beyond any HTIB system we've heard. And yes, they'll be just fine if you move to separates as well. Unless you're a committed audiophile geek, you probably won't ever outgrow these speakers; and if we had to pick a HT gadget least likely to be revolutionized by new tech, it would probably be speakers. Even if you are an audionut, this would form the great "starter system" to build from as finances allow.

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More than any single speaker in this setup, the system as a whole really works well together. Just on a lark, we tried substituting Paradigm's entry-level Cinema CC in for the Cinema 220 LCR at center position. Depending on who you talk to, the center channel is either the most or least important speaker in your setup, and this was a good opportunity to test that. The Cinema CC did ok (probably helped a lot by the stereo imaging of the Phantoms), but the sound as a whole really suffered a lot from the downgrade. It's hard to describe, but there was just not as much of an anchor right to the images onscreen. In short, Paradigm has done a great job of system matching these speakers to hit performance and price points that make good sense to us.

In parting, one element that did not fall under the review is the Paradigm dealer network. We've had personal dealings with some Paradigm dealers, and in our experience, the big box stores simply don't hold a candle to the attention and product knowledge you'll get from these more focused HT dealers. Paradigm is also giving dealers flexibility in swapping speakers in and out of the Cinema Gaming systems, so if you want to use a pair of PDR-8's in place of a single PDR-10, for example, they can arrange that. Programs like in-home auditions and speaker trade-ups are pretty common among dealers, too; just beware of your ears getting bigger than your wallet when you shop! Paradigm has a pretty wide dealer network, so finding one within driving distance shouldn't be too hard. Trust us, it's worth a drive.

"Paradigm has done a great job of system matching these speakers to hit performance and price points that make good sense to us."