"A FANTASTIC SUBWOOFER ... rich and nuanced, with a perfect voice for music and more than enough power for movies."

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by Dennis Burger

BASS, PERFECTED

It has to be stressful for hardware manufacturers to send their products out for review. They don't know the environment in which their gear will be evaluated. They have no way of knowing if the reviewer will grok the product. It has to feel a bit like sending your kid off to school for the first time.

So when Anthem sends me their D2v audio/video processor for review, it's hard to blame them for wanting to ensure the rest of my system measures up. They ask to send a full complement of Paradigm loudspeakers.

I decline because I know my own reference speakers extremely well, and prefer to evaluate processors and amps using speakers with which I'm intimately familiar.

When they offered to send a pair of SUB 12 subwoofers, though, I take them up on it. My system only had one subwoofer at the time — a veritable anachronism these days — and the D2v is designed to work with multiple subs.

The intent, as I said, was simply to make sure the D2v performed to its fullest potential in my room. But the more I listened to the SUB 12s, the more convinced I became that they deserve attention in their own right. Especially when the first thing the missus says upon seeing them is, "Wow, what pretty subwoofers!"

She's right. As soon as I un-box the SUB 12s, I find myself admiring their slight but

significant deviations from the typical boxy subwoofer aesthetic. Gentle curves along each side and four ovoid feet at the corners give the SUB 12 a rather graceful look that most subs simply lack.

I'm far more interested in how the subs sound, though, and delighted by the fact that it doesn't take me long to find out. Even with the addition of the Paradigm Perfect Bass Kit (PBK) — a sophisticated room correction tool designed just for the company's subs — setting up the SUB 12s is ridiculously easy. To really put the PBK to the test, I skip the usual method of finding the perfect spot for the subs. That is to say, I don't put a SUB 12 in my primary listening position and crawl around on

Perfect Bass Kit

the floor at the front and sides of the room listening for the location with the best bass.

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Instead, I position the SUB 12s where they'll look the best — to the left and right of my main front speakers — and figure if the bass is even slightly lacking, I'll reposition them. In fact, I assume from the get-go that I'll end up repositioning them several times.

Spoiler Warning: The subs are still right where I originally put them.

Paradigm's Perfect Bass Kit works pretty much exactly the way the Anthem Room Correction does. The Kit comes with a microphone, mic stand, and software for Windows XP, Windows 7 or Vista. The biggest difference is that the connection between PC and subwoofer is made via USB, not RS-232, as with the ARC system and the Anthem D2v.

Operation is also nearly identical: place the microphone at the primary listening position in the room, run the software, move the mic to secondary and tertiary positions, run it again, and upload the resulting EQ curve calculated by the software to the hardware. The biggest difference in practice is that the Perfect Bass Kit calculates curves for each subwoofer separately, whereas the ARC software treats them as one unified bass source.

Anthem recommends that I undo the results of the PBK and let the ARC system handle room correction for everything when it comes time to evaluate the D2v. Being the curious George that I am, though, I decide to try it both ways and see which sounds best to these ears.

Honestly, I can't tell a difference, which surprises me a little, because the curves for each SUB 12 measured separately are pretty different. Whether I run the Perfect Bass Kit first and apply ARC to the system as a whole afterward, or reset the subwoofers to their factory original un-EQd state and let ARC do all the heavy lifting, the bass sounds simply sumptuous. It's precise and effortless, with no bloat or boom. It's fluid and even — perhaps not the single most visceral subsonic experience I've ever had in my life, but certainly one of the most satisfying. Low bass is buttery and tactile; upper bass is tight and percussive in a way that all subwoofers should be, but so many sadly aren't.

And much to my wife's delight, no matter how much rump-shaking bass the SUB 12s pump out — and with low frequency extension measuring down to a positively subterranean 16 hertz and power rated at 1700 watts RMS, they pump out a whole hell of a lot — the dishes in the adjacent kitchen never rattle anymore.

The one tiny little sympathetic buzz in the utility closet door next to my media room? The one that nobody but me ever heard? The one that I've never been able to pad or epoxy or EQ out? Gone. The Perfect Bass Kit whacks room resonances with a big stick and ensures that nothing but powerful, soft-walking bass reaches my ears.

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Honestly, it's hard to do anything but gush about the SUB 12. On its own, it's a fantastic subwoofer — rich and nuanced, with a perfect voice for music and more than enough power for movies. Throw in the Perfect Bass Kit (or ARC if you have an Anthem processor), and quite frankly one of the best 12-inch subs I've heard in its class is elevated into another category altogether.