"... OUTSTANDING ... exceptionally well balanced ... keen sense of space and presence."

Reprinted with permission from

THE PERFECT VISION

Issue 62

"... without a doubt, the SA-35 utilizes the most robust mounting system of any in-wall speaker that I've ever reviewed ... build quality is among the best ... excellent sound characteristics ... a great value."

by Gary Altunian

The growth in the popularity and availability of in-wall loud speakers has been explosive. Virtually every major speaker manufacturer now offers a line of in-walls in almost every price range some several thousand dollars per pair. The quality of in-wall speakers has also steadily improved in the past few years leading to much wider acceptance among audio enthusiasts.

To some, the downside of in-wall speakers has always been that they are not "tuned" or designed specifically for the volume of the wall cavity in which they are placed, as a floorstanding speaker is tuned for its enclosure. This leads to a variety of results when they are installed in a typical residential wall, and because of this variability some audiophiles question their accuracy. Many manufacturers use sophisticated technology to overcome these issues, and some offer enclosures or back-boxes for their in-walls to control the speaker's response characteristics when wall-mounted. Regardless, in-walls are popular and gaining acceptance because they take no

floor space and almost disappear, especially when the grilles are painted to match the room.

"… exceptionally well-balanced sound … midbass was outstanding … low bass was very acceptable without a subwoofer … lower ranges of the piano sounded full and resonant … a three dimensional soundstage with a keen sense of space and presence."

The Paradigm SA-35 in-wall/in-ceiling speakers are another offering from Canada. Paradigm manufactures a wide range of floorstanding and in-wall loudspeakers, electronics, and control products; the SA-35 is the high end of their Reference Series in-wall components. Without doubt, the SA-35 utilizes the most robust mounting system of any in-wall speaker that I've ever reviewed—at least of those models that don't use a back-box or in-wall enclosure. My first clue came when I picked up the shipping carton, which was much heavier than usual for a pair of in-wall speakers. The SA-35s have a two-piece mounting system with a heavy die-cast aluminum speaker baffle and mounting bracket, which is the same size as the perimeter of the baffle. The bracket is inserted into the wall cutout then secured to the wall with eight screws. In effect, it sandwiches the wall between the speaker baffle and the aluminum bracket, stiffening the wall and thus reducing unwanted wall resonances. Paradigm calls this the Ultra-Rigid mounting system. The Ultra-Rigid system makes a lot of sense; just be sure you don't have any loose patches of drywall or they'll quickly be revealed. I discovered a few rattles in the walls when breaking in the speakers prior to critical listening.

The SA-35 in-wall speakers are described as a 2.5-way system with an eight-inch bass driver, an eight-inch bass/midrange driver, and a one-inch high-frequency ferro-fluid-cooled dome tweeter.

The Paradigm SA-35s have an exceptionally well-balanced sound quality. Midbass was outstanding, and low bass was very acceptable without a subwoofer, although a sub filled in the lowest frequencies, below 50Hz. The lower ranges of the piano sounded full and resonant even without the sub in "Crazy World" from Ultimate Mancini [Concord]. Rebecca Pidgeon's "Spanish Harlem" [Chesky] had a three-dimensional soundstage with a keen sense of space and presence.

Tapping your feet to the music is a good sign that a speaker has a pleasing sound quality. That's exactly what happened when I was listening to Steely Dan's "Glamour Profession" from the Gaucho disc [MCA]. The SA-35s brought out the best in this busy recording.

"Five or seven SA-35s would make an excellent choice for a multichannel home theater system."

Five or seven Paradigm SA-35s would make an excellent choice for a multichannel home-theater system. You still might need a subwoofer, but would listen to them first without a sub to evaluate. If you find a subwoofer is necessary, consider one of the Paradigm Seismic Series subs, available with a 10″ or 12″ woofer.

At the higher end of the price ranges covered in this review, the Paradigm SA-35 in-walls are deserving of consideration. Their build-quality is among the best I've reviewed and is complemented by excellent sound characteristics.

They're also a great value.