"...downright elegant. ... ASTOUNDINGLY MUSICAL and accurate."

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THE INNER EAR REPORT

"... really great sound. ... full-bodied, with well-resolved bass, mids and highs. ... a soundstage which must be described as stunning. ... almost too good to be true ..."

by Ernie Fisher

The New Studio/20
(Improved over version reviewed for even better sound.)

Paradigm needs little introduction, since it is almost a household name here in Canada as well as in many other countries. In the audio business since 1982, Paradigm is a success story of significance. Specializing in loudspeaker development in the lower price ranges, the company had their designs built under contract back in those old days. Presently, Paradigm has one of Canada's – indeed North America's – most elaborate research and development facilities. The model under review is the smallest of the newly developed Reference Studio series consisting of four models.

APPEARANCE:

Most small loudspeakers look the same. There is a box-like structure, there are eight corners, two drivers on the baffle, grilles and terminals to connect them to the amplifier/receiver. The Studio/20s differ in a few areas, not immediately apparent at first glance. They measure 14-1/2 x 8-1/4 x 11-3/8 inches and weigh 56 pounds/pair. Our samples came finished in a rosenut shade walnut veneer (other finishes available are black ash veneer, light cherry veneer and laminate). The company's reasoning is that the readily available walnut veneer can be finished to appear like rosewood while preserving our precious forests. Although an ordinary looking, small bookshelf-type of enclosure like so many others, the Studio/20s look nice and unobtrusive on their own, but when placed on optional stands, they look downright elegant. These loudspeakers have been designed to interact with the grilles attached.

The company's optional speaker stands must be mentioned here. Our samples were 24 inches high, with posts connecting the bottom plate to the top plate. In order to make the stands function properly, they must be filled with lead shot, sand, or both. This can be done by removing one of the plates. Optional gold-coloured plates for the bottom of the stands allow a bit of dressing up of their appearance – and it looks great.

"… the loudspeakers practically disappeared (sonically) and managed an image so realistic that our panelists almost never even glanced at the enclosures that created the sound. That's high praise and indicates the speakers' capability to sound realistic and musically correct."

TECHNOLOGY:

The design is a ported two-way system which features a one-inch (25-mm) tweeter and a 6-1/2″ (165-mm) bass/midrange driver. Paradigm manufactures all speakers which allows them to customize. The tweeter boasts a pure-aluminum dome (PAL™) with treated-textile suspension, operating with a high-temperature voice coil, a ventilated aluminum former, ferro-fluid cooled and damped to assure power handling over a long period of time. The assembly is made of high-pressure die-cast aluminum which boasts a heatsink. Dual magnets provide increased energy in the magnetic gap—a further step to improve power handling. The tweeter assembly is coupled to a faceplate to improve its dispersion and provide a large listening window, as the company calls it.

The woofer consists of a mica-loaded (MLP™) polymer cone operating in an aluminum die-cast basket. The cone is suspended with progressively damped synthetic butyl surround, to eliminate resonances. Heatsink fins and airflow ventilation, a large magnet assembly and a high-temperature, multi-layer voice coil with a ventilated former make up this well-made midrange/woofer. The system is crossed at 1500 Hz with a third-order electro-acoustic design, kept simple to eliminate distortion. The tuning port is rounded at the edge and placed behind the tweeter. The system efficiency is quoted as 89 dB (room), 86 dB (anechoic), making it possible to drive with amplifiers rated from 15 to 150 watts. Although the design doesn't vary greatly from other such designs, the components – raw materials – are excellent. Now let's get to what's important.

"… all amplifier/Studio/20 combinations allowed the loudspeakers to perform beautifully."

THE SOUND:

The Studio/20's sonic calibre depends very much on the quality of the component with which they are connected. In practical terms, that's the way it should be, since the loudspeakers are supposed to reproduce, rather than produce. Our initial setup during the breaking-in period, was with the high-resolution Topaz amplifier (a mean single-ended design) and we noticed a steady improvement over the first thirty hours or so. This configuration made the Paradigms sound almost too good to be true, although the system combination is unrealistic since it is unlikely for a $1,000 pair of speakers to be connected with an over $13K amplifier. However, the Studio/20s revealed the amplifier's fine sonic attributes with competence, thereby revealing their own resolving quality.

A more realistic setup with a Bryston 3B-ST, however, still sounded full-bodied, with well-resolved bass, mids and highs. With both amplifiers, the Studio/20s conjured up a soundstage which must be described as stunning. Fact is, the loudspeakers practically disappeared (sonically) and managed an image so realistic that our panelists almost never even glanced at the enclosures that created the sound. That's high praise and indicates the speakers' capability to sound realistic and musically correct. Another listening session with the ARCAM amplifier resulted in a cost-efficient system configuration with exemplary sonic merits.

All our amplifiers when connected with the Paradigms, can be considered synergistic matches; and all amplifier/Studio/20 combinations allowed the loudspeakers to perform beautifully.

"… highs are nice and smooth … The upper midrange cones came across immaculately, revealing and resolving inner detail … enchanting and sweet-sounding."

The highs are nice and smooth with a hint of occasional hardness in the extreme treble regions, noticeable only with large orchestral material and at high volume levels. The upper midrange cones came across immaculately, revealing and resolving inner detail comparable with some of the more expensive brands. The lower midrange isn't quite as well resolved as the upper part and some of our panelists thought that it came across a bit laid back. Others however, found this enchanting and sweet-sounding. The bass is surprisingly robust, full-bodied and resolute down to the specified 54 Hz. Below this, there is still fairly good energy to about 38 Hz, minus however, the utmost resolving quality. All in all the Studio/20s offer very good sound under almost any circumstances.

"The bass is surprisingly robust, full-bodied and resolute down to the specified 54 Hz."

SYNOPSIS AND COMMENTARY:

A good speaker design will always depend on the system configuration chosen for a musical setup. We used the above-documented electronics to find out about the synergy; and all our components sounded very good with the Studio/20s. Although we do not know this from our own experiments, we believe that these loudspeakers aren't fussy and there must be a lot of receivers and amplifiers which complement these Paradigms. Still, when you listen to a pair at your dealer's, get him/her to set them up with some upscale electronics, so that you can hear what we have heard; namely, the Studio/20's ability to come up with really great sound. The degree of musical accuracy, resolution and soundstaging (imaging) depends on the calibre of the components.

We find the Studio/20s to be an inexpensive alternative to high-priced loudspeakers because they can sound like the high-priced high-resolution designs for which you might pay more than double. We urge you to get good stands and fill them with both lead-shot and sand. When the stands are at least twice the weight of the enclosures, you can expect the Studio/20s to perform astoundingly musical and accurate. The best reasonably-priced system that we came across is with the Bryston 3B-ST. Try the new Bryston integrated amplifier, the 60-B for an even more cost-efficient setup. This said, it's up to you, the consumer, to come up with amplification which will make you happy. Certainly, the Studio/20s offer the possibility to come up with great sound for a reasonable price.

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