"... glorious ... stunning ... A STANDOUT SPEAKER."

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SoundStage!

"... the kind of detail and presence that makes audiophiles swoon ... ease and clarity without grain or edge ... a clean, smooth performer ... it preserves all that the very best speakers do."

by Doug Schneider

Studio 20

Paradigm's new Signature series has grabbed much attention, mostly because it represents Paradigm's first attempt at making all-out loudspeakers. Prior to Signature, though, Paradigm topped out with the Studio line – moderately priced, high-performing speakers that the company debuted in the '90s under the Reference banner. The Studio line was an enormous success, and it's mostly because of Studio that there's so much anticipation for Signature.

But luckily, even though there has been buzz about Signature, Paradigm has not forgotten or neglected its Studio speakers. In fact, Paradigm surprised everyone last fall when, prior to releasing Signature, they unveiled a new generation of Studio speakers. There are four main speakers in today's Studio series: the 100, 60, 40, and the smallest of the bunch, the 20. Rounding out the series are the CC-470 and CC-570 center-channel speakers, plus the ADP-470 surround speakers, which allow you to grow your stereo Studios into a full-blown home-theater system.

While the new Studio series represents a substantial reworking of the models, all of the new speakers still look like Paradigm designs. There's still the distinctive woofer-tweeter "keyhole" look we've known for years and can't be mistaken for any other company's design. But while recognizable, the designs have also been cosmetically improved – not an extreme makeover, but certainly a sizeable one. The result is a flashier, more dramatic look.

The 15″ H x 8 1/4″ W x 12 3/4″ D Studio 20 has a really sharp-looking vinyl finish that's good enough to pass for real wood. The review set came in sycamore, which contrasts nicely with the dark baffle and rounded top pieces. Other finishes include cherry, rosenut, and black ash.

As I've gleaned from talking to the company's owners and designers, Paradigm's goal has always been to produce nearly identical sound within a particular line, the biggest difference between each model being

attainable bass depth and output capability. For example, the top-of-the-line Studio 100 is a full-blown three-way design with three woofers, a midrange driver, and a tweeter. It provides the deepest bass and can play the loudest. The Studio 20, on the other hand, is a two-way design that uses the same Paradigm-designed and -manufactured 1″ aluminum-dome tweeter as the Studio 100 above the same 7″ mica-polymer cone midrange/woofer that you'll find in the 100. The Studio 40 and Studio 60 are both two-and-a-half-way designs that use three drivers in total, although the 40 is a stand-mounted speaker and the 60 is a floorstander. Technically, they've all been designed to achieve similar sonic goals: wide and even dispersion, flat frequency response, and low distortion.

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Paradigm says the Studio 20's tweeter and woofer hand off to each other at 2 kHz via a "second-order electro-acoustic" crossover. Anechoic sensitivity is rated as 87dB, while impedance is said to be "compatible with 8 ohms" – an alternate way of stating the equally vague "8 ohms nominal," I guess. Translation: This speaker shouldn't give any reasonably powerful amplifier made to handle an 8-ohm load (they all are) any difficulty. In fact, I used the Studio 20 with Zanden's Model 600 30Wpc tube integrated amp, and it didn't give the amp the slightest bit of grief. Around back are high-quality binding posts suitable for biwiring or biamping. The Studio 20 comes with a removable grille, although Paradigm designs its speakers to be used with the grilles on.

SYSTEM

Along with the Zanden integrated amp, I used the Studio 20s with Zanden's amazing Model 5000 Mk IV DAC driven by a Theta Data Basic transport and dejittered by an Assemblage D2D-1 digital interface. Toward the end of the review period, I used April Music's affordably priced Stello DA220 D/A converter, which is also in for review. All electronics were plugged into an Exact Power EP15A. I used Nordost Valkyrja speaker cables and interconnects, and an i2Digital X-60 coaxial digital cable. The Studio 20s were placed atop 24″-high stands.

SOUND

In the context of being a small-box, stand-mounted design with a single 7″ woofer (i.e., this is not a full-range speaker, nor should anyone expect it to be), the Studio 20 should impress most listeners with its robust presentation, which sounds quite fleshed out in the low end without sounding artificially bumped up or boomy. The Studio 20 is reasonably full but not overblown.

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To test the depths to which the Studio 20 could go, I played the opening track from Greg Keelor's *Gone* [Warner Canada 17513], "When I See You" – a great song, and also a nice showpiece to demonstrate low-end capability. There was tight, controlled bass down to 50Hz or so – maybe a touch lower – after which it mostly vanished. It vanished, though, quite smoothly and slowly, without the fall-off-the-cliff quality some speakers display. The rumble-the-floor bass was truncated in comparison to bigger, more bass-capable designs, but not overly so. The sound of the Studio 20 is weighty enough that I don't think anyone who's familiar with mini monitor sound could possibly find it light.

The top end is stunning. It's clear and wonderfully extended, with ease and purity that I normally associate with higher-priced speakers - much higher-priced. This is one of the highlights of the Studio 20s performance. I played Johnny's A's "Sing Singin" (*Get Inside* [Favored Nations 2290]). This gutsy, guitar-dominated track (on a gutsy, guitar-dominated CD) is nicely captured, with guitar up front and well-recorded cymbals in the back. The Studio 20s had all the snap and growl that was needed. Its effortless treble will better that of like-priced competitors, not to mention the treble of some very expensive speakers.

Sometimes with speakers in the Studio 20's price range there is an amount of edge, tizz or roll-off, or some other kind of distortion, aberration, or coloration that mars the sound. In fact, a good number of speakers priced far higher have such issues. A pair which I reviewed a while ago ($2000 per pair at the time), for example, sounded wonderful overall, but I was bothered by a somewhat dry- and clinical-sounding top end that could make some music fatiguing to listen to. And at the Montreal *Son & Image* show, some companies were playing speakers costing thousands of dollars that didn't sound as clean and effortless as the Studio 20 in its upper reaches. To get topnotch high-frequency performance like the Studio 20 gives you for hundreds of dollars, not thousands, is something to rave about.

"… glorious … tantalizing purity and cleanliness that the most discriminating listeners would have a tough time quibbling about."

Impressed by Studio 20's well-behaved treble, I had no issue using the speakers for a time with the shockingly expensive Zanden Model 5000 Mk IV DAC ($9800, if you have to ask). Part of what I listen for when critiquing high-end digital components is the treble. A good number of DACs and CD players, like speakers, spoil it with a nasty, edgy sound. The 5000 Mk IV played through the Studio 20s was glorious. There were tantalizing purity and cleanliness that the most discriminating listeners would have a tough time quibbling about.

Equally impressive is the Studio 20's midrange, which is clean, clear, detailed, and devoid of colorations such as chestiness and wooliness. Male voice was rich, full-bodied, and quite present (present as in there), while female voice was silky smooth. Throughout *Gone,* Keelor's voice is close-miked and has the kind of detail and presence that makes audiophiles swoon. Sarah McLachlan also appears on this album, and her angelic backing vocals have ease and clarity without grain or edge. The Studio 20 is a clean, smooth performer, and it preserves all that the very best speakers do.

But there is something about the midrange worth pointing out. The Studio 20 sounds as though it's voiced to be ever so slightly laid-back. It's not overly so, but a touch, making it more friendly than forceful – polite and not pushy. People who like a more up-front speaker, one that projects the mids quite a bit, might have an issue with the Studio 20. This will mostly be a matter of taste – I enjoyed what I heard.

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Soundstaging and imaging are both good, but as with the bass, not weaknesses by any stretch or standouts. The Studio 20s present a spacious stage with strong image placement and a good sense of depth, but compared to the very best speakers in this regard, they don't present images with razor-sharp precision. Things are just a bit diffuse.

I also liked how evenly the Studio 20s dispersed sound into the room (far from the sweet spot, standing up or sitting down, their tonal balance had no drastic shifts) and how unstrained they sounded even at quite high volume levels. They can party if you want that, and no doubt they'll do well for home theater, too.

All that said, while the Studio 20 is certainly a standout speaker, I can kick a couple of small dents in its armor when I pull out the stops and forget about price. The biggest quibble I can dig up is that you can hear a little of the box, particularly with music that emphasizes the upper bass. It's an ever-so-slight "wooden" quality – some may call it a resonance or boxiness – and it holds the Studio 20s back from completely disappearing into the soundstage. The other nit is that the speakers lack a dynamic, incisive personality. The Studio 20s can play impressively loud and handle large-scale dynamics well, but where they fall short is in the immediacy of the presentation – "speed" is a subjective term used to describe this.

Do I hold either of these things against the Studio 20? Nope. At the price, the Studio 20s are a formidable package that has far fewer issues than many speakers costing quite a bit more.

"… robust presentation … quite fleshed out in the low end without sounding artificially bumped up or boomy … tight, controlled bass …"

COMPARISON

As impressed from the start as I was with the Studio 20s, I was even more impressed with them when I finished reviewing a pair of far more expensive floorstanders and put the Studio 20s back in my system. The floorstanders were a two-way loudspeaker with super-high-quality European drivers and a scrumptious real-wood veneer. All this doesn't come for free, though – they cost $5100 per pair.

While some may consider it unfair to compare a sub-$1000 speaker to one that costs six times the price, I don't agree. Both are two-way designs that use 7″ woofers and 1″ tweeters. And although the floorstanders have much larger cabinets, they're similarly configured to the Studio 20 and share striking sonic similarities.

In the bass the floorstanders do go a touch lower, and they sound a little more detailed, articulate and "quick." They also don't have that bit of upper-bass "hearing the box" sound that the Studio 20s do. I suspect that the bass depth has entirely to do with the significantly greater cabinet volume – a better comparison in this regard would likely be the Studio 60 or 100 – and the tightness and control down low. The floorstanders do, though, have a bit of upper-bass boost that adds to the subjective impression of weight and warmth, whereas the Studio 20s seem to toe the line of neutrality a bit better, even if they don't go quite as low.

What surprised me most, though, was how the Studio 20s held up in the midrange and highs – strengths for the floorstanders and obviously for the Paradigms, too. While the Studio 20s didn't quite have the velvety texture of the others when reproducing male vocals, they most certainly had similar clarity along with ideal tonal balance and freedom from chestiness or other such nastiness. The speakers sound far more similar than different. And the highs? The Studio 20s really surprised me given what they were up against. Frankly, few speakers, no matter the price, compare with what I hear from the tweeter that's used in this floorstanding speaker. There's sweetness and purity to its sound that is uncanny. No, the Studio 20's tweeter doesn't quite equal the other's, but it's certainly in the same ballpark. Purity, sweetness, and air – the Studio 20s have all of these, just not to the umpteenth degree of the floorstanders. But at a fraction of the price, the Studio 20's top end is as much a revelation as the floorstander's tweeter.

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There were two areas where I found the floorstander clearly ahead. One has to do

with the cabinet, which includes a beautifully executed real-wood veneer. But this shouldn't surprise anyone – the speakers cost just over $5k and the Studio 20 less than $1k. A better comparison for the floorstanders would be to Paradigm's Signature speakers, with their real-wood, high-gloss finishes. The other area was soundstage acuity and image specificity. The Studio 20s can display solid images and give a credible sense of depth, but the floorstander, on the other hand, is a sound-staging champ with eye-opening image specificity and a highly defined impression of depth.

Dissecting the sound of these two speakers tells you how the speakers differ here and there, but there's more to it than that when you take a bigger view. Place the floorstanders and Studio 20 side by side in a room, turn on the music, and just listen – not knowing how much the speakers cost or what they look like – and they'll sound more like direct competitors than two speakers separated by thousands of dollars. Sonically, they share strong similarities and possess surprisingly small differences. This isn't meant as a knock at all against the floorstander – I believe it to be an extremely good-sounding speaker that's built with luxury-good attention to detail – but rather something that's inherent in high-end audio that I first wrote about in my Simaudio Moon Nova CD player review. The Rule of Fives states that "You pay about five times the price for far less than one-fifth of the improvement in sound quality." While these figures aren't absolute, the point is that Paradigm's Studio 20 can't necessarily better the sonic performance of far more expensive products in every way, but it can bring you much closer than its price tag would indicate.

" … bass that is generous and controlled, highs that are extended and pure, and mids that are detailed and clear … the kind of inexpensive loudspeaker by which you can judge pricier competition."

CONCLUSION

Paradigm has created and maintained an enviable reputation for making great-sounding speakers. However, in recent years, mostly as a result of the Reference products, the company is gaining an equally warranted reputation for great-sounding speakers regardless of price – even if they still don't cost all that much compared to other speakers on the market.

Summed up, the Studio 20 offers bass that is generous and controlled, highs that are extended and pure, and mids that are detailed and clear. There's a touch of a laid-back quality that gives the speaker a more polite demeanor, but this will please some listeners much more than a more up-front sound.

Great sound, little money – the Studio 20 is the kind of inexpensive loudspeaker by which you can judge pricier competition.