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STUNNING PERFORMANCE ...

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by Wes Marshall

THE SEARCH FOR VALUE IN SURROUND SOUND

My friend Pieter, who lives in real-estate-challenged New York City, recently asked me what the best choice of surround-sound speaker system was to accompany his new 26" Sharp Aquos widescreen LCD TV. Most of his available money had already gone to the TV, but, like all of us, he wanted good sound for as little as possible.

Nearly every speaker company now makes neat, shiny models for exactly this purpose, and picking one out of the multitude would be tough. But I knew one thing: If anyone was able to make a good product for the price, it was Paradigm. For a couple of decades they've been among the audio industry's top overachievers in terms of quality per dollar.

I've long been a fan of Paradigm's budget speakers. I used their Titans for my office setup for several years, then retired them to play the eternal rock'n'roll hoochie-coo in my brother's living room. They still sound great.



So I was prepared for a positive experience with the Paradigm Cinema 110 Compact Theater, a complete 5.1-channel system for under \$1,000 (USD).

SOME HARD-EARNED SETUP WISDOM

The system arrived well packed in a single box and weighed 71 pounds, not counting the extra-cost stands, which came in separate boxes. The main speakers are light and came out easy. The 10", 150W-rated subwoofer, all sharp edges and accounting for most of the weight, was a bear to unpack without damaging it, the box, or me. As I had to preserve the box to return the system, I lost. Be prepared to sacrifice the box and hope you don't have to return anything for service.

My set was gray, though it also comes in black. The finish work was clean and utilitarian without drawing a lot of attention. The three-driver, two-way 110 L/R main and 110 C center speakers are identical except for the orientation of the Paradigm logo. Size-wise, well, imagine a bottle of wine, but a little longer. The surround speakers are a bit smaller but pack a nice surprise. In a moment of corporate largess, Paradigm designed them for true surround performance, in what they call their Adapted Dipole (ADP) system. That means the surrounds radiate sound to front and rear but send a null to the listening area, lending the spaciousness called for by the original THX standard. This costs Paradigm more to produce, but delivers a spacious sound that's especially useful in smaller rooms.

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All of these speakers can be mounted on walls or stands. Wall mounting is best left to a professional — getting the speaker tight against a wall is difficult (more on this in a moment), as is snaking the wire through the walls. This is not to say you couldn't do it yourself, but you probably won't like the looks. As Paradigm says in their minute owner's manual, “If you are not comfortable performing the following mounting procedures, have a professional perform the installation.”

The Premier LS stands are sturdy enough for the task though not particularly heavy-duty. Assembling the stands is simple, other than snaking the wires through the mounting poles. Despite the fact that the speakers are set up for use with banana plugs, the binding posts are not of the standard spacing. Another oddity occurs on the 110 L/R and 110 C speakers. They allow large-diameter wires, yet if you use that type of wire, it's difficult

to screw the lugs down tight enough to be able to use the stand mounts. Therefore, setting up the Cinema 110 system requires using bare wire of small to medium gauge, and carefully dressing it to keep it out of the way of the mounting bracket.

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That mounting bracket is a piece of molded plastic fitted between the mounting pole and the speaker, the whole apparatus held together by two substantial wood screws. Those screws are tightened using a supplied Allen wrench, and you must be careful. I was torquing one of the front speakers with a wimpy amount of pressure when suddenly the wrench stripped the screw, or so I thought. After cursing my bad performance as an audio reviewer, I carefully went to work on the rest of the speakers. Of the eight holes, this happened on four, and I was being careful! I got out my own wrench set, tried various sizes, and found that 5/32" fit perfectly with no more slipping. I have no way of measuring, but I could swear that Paradigm supplied a 1/8" wrench. In any case, if you don't have a wrench set, be prepared to buy one and just throw away the supplied wrench.

The ADP surrounds offer much easier access for the wires. The center-channel speaker has an ingenious sliding third foot that screws on the back and allows you to set the speaker on a shelf or TV top and angle the speaker toward the listening area. However, it covers the wire holders and, once more, only smaller-gauge wire can be used.

Again, if you hire a professional installer to run wires and mount the speakers on the wall, you can forget about all the hassles I've just discussed. But even if you do it yourself, you only have to set up the system once.

SOUND IN 2 AND 5.1 CHANNELS

To break in the Cinema 110 system, I fed it a series of well-recorded two-channel CDs, each with a different number of players,

from jazz combo to symphony orchestra, but with one thing in common: difficult bass. “So What,” from Miles Davis' *Kind of Blue* [CD, Columbia/Legacy CK64935], features Paul Chambers' bass mixed too far back, in the style of the late 1950s, when this disc was recorded. You need good resolving power to hear the arpeggio he plays at the 30-second mark. The Paradigms caught not only the notes but the woody texture of the microphone (not a pickup) that had recorded his instrument.

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On Patricia Barber's “Too Rich for My Blood,” from *Café Blue* [CD, Premonition 737], the bass solo beginning at 1:39 sounded nearly as good as through my reference speakers, a stunning performance given the price difference of almost \$15,000. One of the best bass tests is Sade's “Cherish the Day,” from *Love Deluxe* [CD, Epic 53178]. For the first 1:34, except for a few early notes, ultracool bass player Paul Denman sits out and lets the kickdrum carry the bass. Then he comes in, sliding down the neck, counterpointing the rhythm of the drum. This brilliant piece of music requires a sound system of exceptional resolution to really hear what Denman is doing. The Paradigms handled it with ease, openly delineating everything.

Still operating in stereo, the midrange and high end sounded great on small-scale works such as *Kind of Blue*, but it developed a thick, spitty sound on such large-scale recordings as Danny Elfman's score for *Mission: Impossible* [CD, Polygram 454525], or Charles Dutoit's recording of Respighi's *The Pines of Rome* [CD, London 410 145]. The side effect of this distortion was a collapse of the

soundstage to the front of the speakers. Turning the volume down to an appropriate level for a small, thin-walled apartment fixed the problem, so I hoped that giving the speakers some more time to break in would give them a little more oomph.

After a good burn-in I began to seriously evaluate the Paradigms with DVDs. The first seven minutes of *Dinosaur* is all orchestral music and sound effects that vary from the most delicate, tinkly sounds to house-shaking bombast. Another tough obstacle, the chase scene in chapter 11 of *The Fifth Element*, caused no sign of breakup or distortion. I was amazed at how good a job the Paradigms did with this at reasonable listening levels. The bottom octave, 20-40Hz, was virtually nonexistent, but everything from there up was perfectly solid. More important, the problems I'd heard in the two-channel listening sessions were gone.

"... sound was suprisingly big ... 'Behold, the Sea Itself,' with full chorus, pounding percussion, and braying horns, was reproduced with a clarity that would have been impossible for under \$1,000 just a few years ago."

Grand opera is a tough art form to reproduce in the home, even with a set of huge speakers. William Christie's DVD performance of Rameau's *Les Boréades* was somewhat brightly recorded, yet sounded luscious when played back using the Dolby Digital 5.1 soundtrack.

Now that things were nicely broken in, I went back to try a few of the recordings that had created problems for the Cinema 110. The improvements were obvious, with less of a tendency for the instruments to migrate out of the soundstage and onto the speakers' front panels. However, the final minute of *The Pines of Rome* was still tough on the speakers.

I usually prefer to listen to things the way they were recorded: stereo in stereo, 5.1 in 5.1. But the Paradigms sounded so good with DVDs that I decided to try the big

orchestral works using Dolby Pro Logic II Music and DTS Neo:6 Music. Voilà! Spreading the signal around and letting all the speakers do the work made a huge improvement. Any sense of strain and stress and that pesky tendency to collapse the soundstage — it all disappeared. Ditto for the *Mission: Impossible* score. In fact, every stereo recording I played sounded better in DPLII or Neo:6. The Cinema 110 is the first system I've come across that preferred surround, no matter what the original recording medium.

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The final torture test was a recording of Vaughan Williams' *A Sea Symphony* [DVD-Audio, Naxos 5.110016]. By now, the speakers were totally broken in. Given the gargantuan orchestral and choral forces and the speakers' diminutive size, the sound was surprisingly big. The opening "Behold, the Sea Itself," with full chorus, pounding percussion, and braying horns, was reproduced with a clarity that would have been impossible for under \$1,000 just a few years ago.

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BOTTOM LINE

The Paradigm Cinema 110 Compact Theater had three problems. First, if I pushed it just a little too hard, it quickly got harsh. I was using serious amplification (Anthem Statement A5 or B&K Video 5), so the problem would probably be even worse with an underpowered receiver. These speakers need high-quality power,

preferably through a setup that has at least Dolby Pro Logic II. Second, the low end worked miracles down to about 40Hz, but don't expect much below that. Finally, there were those mounting problems. Get a 5/32" wrench, pick a smaller-gauge wire, and you should be fine. That's it. Everything else is positive.

So Pieter, I've found your speakers. For under \$1000 USD (not including stands) you'll get superb sound, fine looks, and the knowledge that your speaker system was made by a company with a long history of providing way more quality per dollar than just about anyone else in the business.