

“... superb ... astounding ...

nothing but

**EXCELLENT.**”

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*“... packs so much value and performance at such a low cost. ... you will be shocked at just how close a small system can sound like much bigger and more expensive gear.”*



by Doug Schneider

**A**udiophiles always love to fixate on the *really* expensive stuff, no matter how impractical it is. Reviewers are particularly bad in this regard. Big, clunky, and (for many people) totally unaffordable—most likely these are the real lures among the reviewing crowd.

Paradigm's System Two is the perfect answer for people who don't have an infinite budget, or perhaps *could* have the budget but simply don't want to allot a large amount of money to home theater. It's also the perfect system for a reviewer who loves to find great-sounding gems in the low-priced crowd.

The System Two consists of the Atom loudspeakers used for mains, the CC-170 center channel, ADP-170 surrounds, and the PDR-10 subwoofer. All speakers are of fairly high efficiency, so most average-powered receivers will have no trouble cranking it all up to reasonable volumes.



Paradigm System Two

As an added bonus, all the loudspeakers are pretty small and, therefore, quite easy to place in your living/listening room.

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#### SETUP

I set up the entire system in my 14' x 16' room. In this space, which I consider moderately sized, I found the speakers to have sufficient output for listening at slightly louder than reasonable levels. Because the speakers are small, they accented more than detracted from the aesthetic of the room. Overall fit, finish, and appearance are good for all pieces. In fact, many people (particularly women) found this system to be more attractive than some much bigger and more poshly finished goods. The PDR-10 and the Atom speakers are available in Light Cherry, Black Ash and Rosenut vinyl, wood-like veneers. (The Atoms are also available in White.) I think Rosenut looks best. On the other hand, the ADP-170 is available in Black Graphite and White, while the CC-170 is only available in Black Graphite. While I first thought this to be odd, Black *is* probably

ADP-170



the only color you'll really want for them because the CC-170 sits atop the TV (and blends in quite nicely) and the ADP-170s sit off to the side, probably back a bit (and can even be mounted on the wall with small brackets that are included).

The biggest speaker in the bunch is the PDR-10 subwoofer (if you want something a wee-bit smaller, there is also a PDR-8). Still, it's only of average size for a subwoofer and reasonably lightweight, so it is easy to pick up and move around in order to find an inconspicuous, good-sounding space. I ended up adjusting its crossover to about 80 Hz and placing it off to the right side of my room.

*"I played every type of movie on this little Paradigm system . . . it never failed to impress me. . . . tight, integrated, well matched, and balanced. Not surprising given the fine level of performance of the Atoms, it plays music well too. . . . good clarity, spot-on tonality, and room-filling ambiance."*

All speakers are pretty standard in terms of their general operation. The Atoms are two-way bookshelf monitors that earned our Reviewers' Choice rating for a combination of outstanding value and sound. The CC-170 is a traditional-looking center-channel speaker with two woofers, each aside the central tweeter. The PDR-10 is a self-powered subwoofer with a 10" driver blowing low notes out the front. It's designed to give reasonably deep bass for its price point—Paradigm rates it down to 27 Hz. Finally, the innovative ADP-170s are a combination dipole/bipole design. What happens is that above their non-switchable crossover point (150 to 200 Hz) they operate as a dipole—the drivers on opposite sides of the cabinet work out of phase. The company believes this gives a more spacious sound, which is generally

what one wants for rear-channel speakers. Below that threshold the drivers all operate in phase. In this bipole mode the speaker gives better bass extension. Of course, despite all the technical details this operation is all transparent to the user. Set 'em up and don't worry about a thing.

#### SOUND AND PERFORMANCE

I played every type of movie on this little Paradigm system. There was the standard demo material—*Titanic*, *The Matrix*, *Contact*—and there were countless others. As a system, it never failed to impress me. Certainly it has output limits—bass only goes *so* deep and ultimate volume levels are only *so* loud—but as a whole, meaning as a complete system, it is tight, integrated, well matched, and balanced. Not surprising given the fine level of performance of the Atoms, it plays music well too. *Sessions on West 54th* is rendered with good clarity, spot-on tonality, and room-filling ambiance.

While I tend to shy away from movies for purely video and sound-effect reasons (the lousy *Lost in Space*, for example), there is a place for this type of stuff in a reviewer's collection. Whenever people want to discover what the system can *do* (meaning, if it plays LOUD), I pull out *Desperado* and cue up the "Bar fight massacre" chapter. *Desperado* is not *quite* reference level compared to the very best DVDs, but it's close and fabulous for testing a system's resolution, tonal balance, and, of course, output capability. Granted, it's not easy viewing for those who don't like violence in movies, but for those who like this genre, give it a try (or simply listen and don't watch the screen).

There is plenty of detail in *Desperado*. Listen closely to Banderas' voice—does it sound real and fleshed out? Listen to the subtle cues, room ambiance, clink of the guns, and all the other wonderful things thrown into the mix. These things should all be easily audible, cleanly rendered and room-filling. Director Richard Rodriguez includes music alongside almost all the action scenes. Listen closely to see how

well your system handles not just the sounds, but the songs too. Does it play music? This system does. Finally, listen to the bass. It's a warm, reverberant, full-bodied mix. There are also plenty of bodies being thrown around that land in the front *and* the back. They hit with such a thud that it will test your system's overall output capability, all around.

*"Tonal balance is outstanding, an area where I notice that Paradigm speakers always excel — they have a slightly warm, full-sounding, and vibrant character that's very natural. Vocals — have good clarity, and most importantly, the warmth and weight that make them sound real."*

This disc told me a lot about the capabilities of the Paradigm system, as did the many others I played over the months the System Two was set up. Overall resolution and clarity are good. The System Two does not display the subtle nuances and level of detail that, say, a competitor's \$4,000 system is capable of. But at a fraction of the price, the System Two can be



CC-170

considered nothing but excellent. Highs are well extended and never bright. This is a place that lower-priced speakers can really fall apart—bright, edgy and hard to listen to are commonplace problems in the lower-priced-speaker arena. If anything, the System Two sounds just a tad subdued in this area—not necessarily a bad thing given the overly bright mixes that plague some movies.

Tonal balance is outstanding, an area where I notice that Paradigm speakers always excel—they have a slightly warm, full-sounding, and vibrant character that's very natural. Vocals, in particular, have good clarity, and most importantly, the warmth and weight that make them sound real. It is here that the System Two, used within its performance limits, sounds like a much more expensive system. Paradigm gets the sound of their speakers right, with only minimal compromises. Finally, bass performance is deep and very fleshed out. I would say that the PDR-10 leans a little more to the warmer than tighter side of things. Some will definitely like the PDR-10 because it makes the bass sound more fleshed out, while others may want just a tad more wallop instead of the bloom. It's a matter of choice.

*"Paradigm's ability to make superb-sounding inexpensive speakers is astounding, and these qualities extend to their System Two loudspeaker system ... well-built, tonally matched ... a superb combination of performance and value ..."*

Finally, overall output is surprisingly good and, like I mentioned, suitable for small to medium-sized rooms. I played the System Two loud just to show my friends what it could do, and also to find out myself how loud it could go. Although the system didn't holler in pain at any time, I did feel a few times that I was hitting close to its limits (for the Atoms

and the PDR-10), which brings me to my only warning about this system. A budget-priced system like this can achieve extremely high performance levels, but smaller speakers like these can only play so loud. Don't try to place the System Two in too big a room if you want to play at high volume levels. Played within the speakers' limits, though, you will be shocked at just how close a small system can sound like much bigger and more expensive gear.

## CONCLUSION

Paradigm's ability to make superb-sounding inexpensive speakers is astounding, and these qualities extend to their System Two loudspeaker system. For just a smidgen over a kilobuck, you get a well-built, tonally matched loudspeaker system that is ideal for small to medium-sized rooms.

For people on a budget, the System Two more or less becomes a no-brainer purchase because it packs so much value and performance at such a low cost. And for people who don't yet have a home-theater system and want to test what it's all about, the System Two is a way to dip your feet in the water for less money than you may think and get a flavor for movies at home. And for people with big budgets and really large rooms, I have no doubt that you can achieve better and louder sound for more money (right in Paradigm's own line, in fact). However, you'll still be more than impressed with what the System Two offers here. Any way you look at it, for a multichannel home-theater speaker system, Paradigm's System Two is a superb combination of performance and value in a reasonably small package.