

“... you **CAN'T GO WRONG**
 with Paradigm's Monitor series.”

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by Bryan Dailey

Many people make their first step into the world of budget home theater via pre-packaged “theater in a box” systems, which usually consist of a low-end receiver, a CD/DVD player, woefully inadequate speakers and a weak subwoofer. Electronics aside, if you are the owner of one of these lower-end systems and are looking to move up to a higher performance audio/home theater speaker system that isn't going to require you to take out a second mortgage, Paradigm has created the Monitor series of speakers. Priced under Paradigm's top-end Reference series, the Monitor Series (not to be confused with Monitor Audio speakers from the U.K.) features a full line of floor-standing towers and bookshelf speakers available in several wood finishes, as well as a center channel and two-way surrounds, both available in only black. Paradigm manufactures a number of subwoofers, but there is no subwoofer in the Monitor line.

Consisting of the Monitor 9 floor-standing speakers, the CC-370 center channel, two

ADP-370 rear/surrounds and the PW-2200 subwoofer, this complete review system is dubbed the System Seven.2 by Paradigm. With its solid build and well-crafted fit and finish, this system looks like it is ready to rock hard, even before connecting a single speaker wire.

Speaking of connecting the speakers, I'll begin first with the floor-standing Monitor 9. By themselves, these speakers look right at home in the two-channel system of an audiophile who has champagne taste but only a Molson budget. The Monitor 9s allow the option of bi-wiring the speakers and have small gold jumper plates bridging the connections. Because I was powering this system from my Kenwood VR-5700

Monitor 9



receiver, bi-wiring was not an option for me, but it's nice to see that Paradigm has made this available for those with more advanced audiophile systems. These towers feature eight-inch, carbon-infused cone bass drivers, eight-inch ICP™ injection-molded co-polymer cones to handle the midrange duties and one-inch PTD™ ferro-fluid-damped, cooled pure titanium dome high-frequency drivers. This fairly tall and stout speaker measures in at 15-3/4 inches deep, 43-1/8 inches tall and 9-and-three-sixteenths inches wide, with optional metal spikes to keep them firmly in place. With a weight of 53 pounds each, the Monitor 9s are capable of reaching down to 45 Hz and go up to 20 kHz ±2 dB.

For the center and surround duties, the CC-370 center channel and ADP-370 surrounds are timber matched to integrate with any of the floor-standing or bookshelf speakers in the Monitor line. Like the Monitor 9, these speakers also feature ICP™ injection-molded co-polymer cones, albeit smaller at six-and-a-half inches, as well as the same one-inch PTD™ high-frequency drivers. This led me to believe that the sonic characteristics of all of the speakers in the system would be quite similar, a real bonus for suspending disbelief while listening to surround sound music and movie soundtracks.

The powered subwoofer in this system, the PW-2200 is a monster, with a built-in 750-watt amplifier, a single 12-inch driver and bass reflex system with a critically tuned resistive port. While by no means the biggest subwoofer on the block, this 69-pound sub was built to go low and loud, perhaps a little too low and loud for my smaller (15' x 20') living room. Fortunately, Paradigm has built in most of the bells and whistles that you'd expect from a quality sub, such as a variable subwoofer cut-off frequency (50 Hz to 150 Hz), as well as soft clipping in case of huge volume spikes.

Other features on the PW-2200 include variable phase alignment, speaker and line level high-pass outputs and Powersaver auto-on/standby, which saves you the hassle of having to turn the sub off when you aren't using it.

Because I use this system in my living room as both a music playback and a home theater system, I made sure that my review sample Monitor 9s were magnetically shielded. This allowed me to place them on the sides of my television without the risk of damaging the picture tube. Space is at a premium in my room and although not the ideal position for the speakers, it was good to know that I would not be wrecking my TV while experimenting with the placement of the Monitor 9s to obtain the best imaging and wouldn't be too close to the fireplace to damage the black finish on them.

For rear/surround speakers in my room, I knew that a pair of Monitor series bookshelf speakers, such as Mini Monitors or Monitor 3s, were going to be a little small when matched up to the larger Monitor 9 mains. Because of this, as well as an awkward room design with a staircase on one side and a tall wall on the other, the ADP-370s were a perfect fit for an imperfect space. With their six-and-a-half-inch drivers and one-inch tweeters on each side that match the center channel, the ADP-370s have optimized radiation patterns to provide a uniform reverberant sound field and accurate full-bandwidth bass according to Paradigm. Translation: When I cued up the DVD *X-Men 1.5* (20th Century Fox Home Entertainment) and the THX audio demo began behind me, I thought my head was going to explode like one of the patrons in the audience on the "Simpsons" when Grandpa Simpson yells "Turn it up!"

"... the Monitor 9s made music that I had forgotten about become fun again, listening to parts that were seemingly simply not there on lower-end speakers."

THE MUSIC

To see how the Monitor 9s and the PW-2200 subwoofer would work as a two-channel audio system I decided to audition some current funk/dance music. Beginning with the modern disco band Jamiroquai, I fired up one of my favorite tracks, "Canned

Heat," from the CD *Synkronized*. The low synth bass throbbed as low as the NASDAQ in late 2002, while singer Jay Kay's Stevie Wonder-inspired vocals anchored them-selves firmly in the middle of the soundstage. To see how just the Monitor 9s would do without the assistance of the sub, I took it out of the loop for several passes through the tune. By themselves, the eight-inch low/mid drivers on the Monitor 9s get a better than passing grade, but to really get into the groove of dance music like Jamiroquai, you're going to want to keep the subwoofer in your rig.

"The even, well-rounded temperament of the Monitors suited both the music and Michael Stipe's vocals quite well."

Next came the jazzy rocker Blood Sweat and Tears Greatest Hits (Columbia), with the horn-filled classic "Spinning Wheel." This silly song has always been a guilty pleasure for me with its blaring, vibrato horns and calliope-esque ending. This is an older recording that is certainly not the most high-resolution track I've ever heard, most notably lacking low end, even with the subwoofer's crossover set fairly high. The thing that impressed me most about the Monitor 9 was how each instrument was easy to distinguish. I once took a class in music school where we were given the assignment to count all of the instruments in particular recordings. Not only could I hear each instrument, I could hear many of the subtle details that each musician was playing. On this track and even many of the other, lesser-known ones on this album, the Monitor 9s made music that I had forgotten about become fun again, listening to parts that were seemingly simply not there on lower-end speakers. The only time when I lost track of the individual musical parts was during the distorted guitar heavy track "Go Down Gambling." This was primarily a function of the dirty, nasty guitar tones on this lowdown dirty tune and a subwoofer that may be a little too much for my oddly shaped room.

The CC-370 and ADP-370s were getting lonely with all this stereo music going on, so it was time to break out some DVD-Audio discs and see how the system handled multi-channel surround music. As good as the 16-bit stereo discs sounded on the system, it was as if cotton were removed from my ears as I spun up DTS' beautifully recorded disc *Brazilian Jazz* (DTS Entertainment). I've often found the all-digital recording of modern fusion jazz (i.e., almost anything from the GRP catalog) to be a little stale and cold. I wouldn't classify this album as fusion jazz per se, but the instrumentation and tones of the instruments recall these types of recording. However, in 24-bit MLP surround, this type of music really comes alive. By its very nature, Brazilian music relies heavily on percussion and it seems as if the ADP-370's rears were made to replicate the sound of shakers, wood blocks, cowbells and any other percussion instrument that you can think of. On the track "Rua Japeri," a shaker moves around the room with creative panning that didn't feel disjointed as it moved from speaker to speaker. Being a drummer myself, I was impressed by the realism of the cymbal tones from high-frequency drivers. Rarely have I ever heard a recorded splash cymbal sound so real, even on the most expensive speakers I've ever heard.

After giving the Monitors a good workout with some jazz, it was time for some alternative college radio rock in REM's *Automatic For the People* (WMG DVD-Audio). Not being a huge REM fan, I wanted to see if these speakers could help me better enjoy a disc that I was fairly



ADP-370

familiar with but not overly excited about. The combination of the higher-than-CD-resolution DVD-Audio format and the solid performance on REM's pop hit *Man On the Moon*. Use of the song as the title track for the Jim Carrey movie about the life of the late comedian Andy Kaufman brought new life to the tune. The even, well-rounded temperament of the Monitors suited both the music and Michael Stipe's vocals quite well. The highs weren't harsh and the mids, despite not being absolutely crystal clear, were still smooth and punchy. The tone of Peter Buck's guitar was distinct and full-bodied like his fourteenth glass of merlot on that flight from Seattle to Heathrow.

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THE MOVIES

One of the cheesiest clichés used when talking about speakers in a home theater system is to say that they "seemed to disappear." Due to the fact that the Monitor 9s and the CC-370 are pretty sizeable black boxes next to my TV, combined with the fact that they aren't hidden behind fabric walls, it's pretty much impossible to forget that they are there. But what they do well in a home theater application is avoid calling attention to themselves by imposing their own sonic coloration on the dialog and sound effects. There is nothing worse than when you are watching a DVD or video and the speakers make the actors sound like they are hiding inside the cabinets. With their very neutral characteristics, none of the speakers in this system ever got in the way of the audio tracks and that is what I appreciated most about them.

Starting with one of the best comic book to big screen adaptations since Christopher Reeve donned tights and a cape, *X-Men* has been given the royal treatment by Fox



CC-370

on *X-Men 1.5*. I thought, what better test for a home theater than to see how the Paradigms do with this film? Beginning with the aforementioned THX intro, and on through countless punches, kicks, slashes and explosions, *X-Men* is a film that will be a real exercise for any home theater system, especially with the DTS audio track available for the first time on this reissue of the film. For the next two hours, I sat watching mutants battling each other to save the world, forgetting about the speakers, only remembering they were there because I was conscious of attending to them for this review.

Next up on the DVD player was *Back to the Future* (Universal Studios HomeVideo). This totally '80s classic comedy/action/adventure film features a cameo and several tunes by Mr. '80s himself, Huey Lewis. When Marty McFly (Michael J. Fox) makes his first leap back into 1955 while Doc Brown (Christopher Lloyd) is being shot at by Libyan terrorists, the soundtrack on the DVD gets pretty heavy, but it was no problem for the Monitors. From the Huey Lewis and the News tunes, to the retro songs from the '50s, to Marty McFly introducing the world to Van Halen-like guitar licks 25 years prematurely, music is a big part of the film. Again, the Monitors didn't flinch. The dialogue in both *Back to the Future* and *X-Men* was clean and well-rounded thanks to the CC-370's even temperament and I didn't need to ride the volume during the quieter portions of the films, which is exactly what I want from a center channel speaker.

TIVO AND LIVE TELEVISION

I like to take a very real-world approach to reviewing equipment, and the most real-world application I could think of

was to see how the Monitor system performed with my TiVo in Dolby Digital recorded from my Dish Network satellite. Like the microwave, I can think of few other inventions that have bettered my life so much as the TiVo, so I felt compelled to see how the Monitors handled my weekend viewing lineup, including the U.S. Open golf tournament, *Crank Yankers* and the FX police drama *The Shield*. By the time I get home from work, it's usually late enough that I have to keep things down at my place. When watching TiVo, this means that it is very important that the center channel be able to reproduce dialogue effectively at low volumes.

In past systems of mine that were underpowered and featured inefficient speakers, I found myself using the TV's stereo output to mix in the right amount of volume. In the end, I found this to be such a hassle that after 10 pm, I would only use the TV's built-in speakers. As they are larger towers, the Monitor 9s didn't come to life at low levels as well as the less power-hungry center channel did, but this was to be expected. Testing both the digital and then the analog outs on my TiVo, I was pleasantly surprised to find that I could easily hear Special Ed's famous "Yeah! I wanna go to Hawaii" crank call, even with the Kenwood barely pushing out any juice to the CC-370. The Latin-influenced, bombastic opening song to my current favorite drama on television, *The Shield*, came through crystal clear at low volumes, and really came to life when I gave the speakers some more gas.

THE DOWNSIDES

As good as this system is at performing all of the things I asked of it, I found it to be at its best with the volume really cranking. This is true of most speaker systems, but when you are in the price ranges that the Monitor series system falls into, chances are these speakers are going to find their way into apartments/condos where opening the volume up full throttle isn't an option. A system featuring smaller speakers might be a necessary option for extremely small rooms, where balls to the wall sound is not a necessity. Paradigm also has smaller systems to fit in smaller spaces.

I also found the subwoofer to be a little slow and boomy for my tastes. I've become quite accustomed to hearing smaller subwoofers, and the Paradigm tended to be fractionally slower in its response time. However, I have yet to audition a sub in my room with its tall ceiling, so it's quite possible that some of my issues with the subwoofer were largely a result of my room's acoustic characteristics and my limited placement options. What I did appreciate about the subwoofer was the fact that there are a multitude of setup options and a very functional crossover that allowed me to finally dial it in to a level that worked for my room.

"They benefit from many of the advances that Paradigm has made in their high-end Reference line, yet are easier on the pocket-book.

When it's time to make your first step from theater in a box to the big leagues, you can't go wrong with Paradigm's Monitor series."

CONCLUSION

It's easy to be jaded when you've listened to some of the most expensive audio/home theater systems in the world, but the Monitor series was in no way a slouch. Thinking back to a few "home theater in a box" systems I have had in the past, stepping up to the world of higher-performance speakers was an exciting prospect, and the Paradigm Monitors fit the bill perfectly. They are versatile speakers with a great selection of tower options and colors.



PW-2200

(Improved over version reviewed for even better sound.)