

“ ... BROAD, OPEN SOUND
... CULTURED AND
UNCOLORED ... ”

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by Filip Kulpa

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

Speakers made by the Canadian firm Paradigm have long enjoyed recognition in North America. They are known as exemplary products offering excellent value for the price. This year Paradigm speakers made an appearance in our country, and the smallest model in the Paradigm® Reference Studio Series – the Studio/20 – made its way to our office for a listening test.

CONSTRUCTION

The Studio/20 belongs to a group of average-size monitors, some designed to be set on bookshelves or stands, others are floorstanding models. The Studio/20 is a 2-way bass-reflex bookshelf speaker that vents in the rear. It was designed and manufactured in-house by Paradigm, a relatively rare occurrence among speaker manufacturers.

The bass/midrange driver on the Studio/20 is a 165-mm semi-transparent MLP™ (mica-loaded polymer) cone suspended on an inward-turned butyl rubber sur-

round. The speaker basket is made of high-pressure die-cast aluminum. I'd describe the magnet as average-sized. The crossover, a third-order electro-acoustic falls quite low, around 1.5 kHz and is positioned on two separate printed circuit boards fastened to the terminal cup. The high-frequency drive unit is a 25-mm PAL™ (pure aluminum) dome. A phase plug on the tweeter faceplate not only assists in dispersing sound, but also protects the tweeter, positioned behind the plug, from accidental damage.

The black finish gave the speaker a somewhat modest appearance, although the gold-color diaphragm adds a visually attractive element. Enclosure construction gets high marks! Thick MDF composition (more than 20 mm thick) is used for the cabinet and a substantial number of interlocking internal braces join side, top and bottom walls. The interior of the cabinet is well damped with sound-absorbent polyfiber.



SOUND

We tested the speakers in two separate listening rooms. The one was a large hall with an area of almost 50 m², the other—a room we typically use for review testing at *Satellite Audio Video*—was a 19 m² room with an irregularly shaped niche.

Despite its relatively small size, the Studio/20's bass was impressive. Extension and detail were decidedly above average, particularly when you consider the price of these speakers. In this regard the Studio/20 is bold competition for any floorstanding speaker. In our smaller test room, the Studio/20 descended easily to 40 Hz. When we moved the speaker to the larger listening room, the high quality of sound surprised us, since in theory, the room was too large for the size of the speakers.

Positioning the Studio/20's 2 to 3 metres away from the listener during pieces such as Pat Metheny's *Imaginary Day* generated an impressive avalanche of controlled sound. When we matched the Studio/20 with a Krell KAV-300I amplifier (8 times more expensive than the speakers), speed and dynamic effects were absolutely spectacular.

The Studio/20's bass is not the fastest and we noted a slightly slower response in the lower registers. In small rooms we suggest you place the Studio 20's a fair distance away from the wall (although having done this ourselves, we found the bass was still a bit too much). Of course, much will depend upon the amplifier used. Despite our comments, however, reproduction at the lowest registers is still audiophile quality. I personally prefer the Studio/20's type of bass. It is more authentic and easier to listen to than the curtailed bass presentation found in some speakers.

The Studio/20's trademark is big, broad, open sound – not only in the bass range, but also in relation to its spacious imaging. The speakers built a stable and proportional soundstage with no apparent effort. Sound flowed smoothly through the enclosures. Separation of sounds and

depth perception were flawless. Imaging was natural and well placed. Music was never strained. At this point we'll focus on the midrange, a place where the competition simply took a back seat to the Studio/20's exceptional talent.

Large amounts of warm, honest acoustical detail is how we'd describe the midrange. Paradigm's engineers achieved minimal coloration and as a result, sound is smooth, cohesive and authentic. Was the midrange lacking a little warmth? It was difficult to decide since we might have been influenced by the pervasive warmth of the strong bass. The tenor sax, piano, electric guitar, vocals—male as well as female—left us with considerable appreciation for this speaker's talents. A sweet, limpid midrange, plentiful bass and smooth transitions made listening to *Unmarked Road* by Doug MacLeod (Audioquest Records) very enjoyable.

The Studio/20's easily demonstrated the differences among amplifiers ... Pass Labs Aleph 3, Conrad-Johnson Premier 11A, Krell KAV-300I and Musical Fidelity A1001. I should add that all of these amplifiers are from six to ten times more expensive than the Studio/20's, proof of the speaker's unusual analytical abilities.

Listening to the Studio/20's elicits a strong emotional engagement. Although they cannot be classed among the "fastest" group of speakers, when required, they can kick up a brisk rhythm with strong dynamic expression.

The high frequencies performed well (although perhaps not as much to my liking as the midrange) demonstrating good balance. I noticed a slight curtailment of overall color and silkiness when string instruments entered the picture, but on the whole, this was not detrimental to the sound. The sharp shrillness common in tweeters in this price range was not evident in the Studio/20.

On a more general note, our test results suggest the Paradigms favor jazz and blues.

SUMMARY

Our conclusion—a level of audiophile-quality sound usually found in speakers that cost at least twice as much. Despite their size the Studio/20's are bold enough to perform effectively in larger rooms. The strength of this speaker lies in the universal appeal of its construction and an absence of the limitations usually found in speakers at this price. Cultured and uncolored sound with highly satisfying dynamic possibilities (on a mega scale) and a solid well-made design—truly a rare combination in this price range. It seems we've imported some serious competition.

Two final words about the Studio/20's — absolutely recommended!