

“**RED HOT PERFORMANCE
AT SANE PRICES**”

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“... downright amazing ... a refined, well-rounded system with few weaknesses and all the essential sonic ‘goodies’: high levels of resolution and detail, razor sharp transient response, neutral tonal balance, good dynamics, and powerful, richly textured bass.”

RATINGS:

(relative to sub-\$6.5K surround speaker systems)

TRANSPARENCY AND FOCUS	10
IMAGING AND SOUNDSTAGING	9
TONAL BALANCE	10
DYNAMICS	9
BASS EXTENSION	10
BASS PITCH DEFINITION	10
BASS DYNAMICS	9

by Chris Martens

It’s been said that almost anyone could build a great loudspeaker system, if given an unlimited budget. A much tougher task, however, is figuring out how to build speaker systems that combine genuinely high performance, classy aesthetics, and high value, and that are backed with the kind of widespread distribution and quality dealer support necessary in order to make the systems accessible to a broad audience. This admittedly tall order defines in a nutshell the exact specialty of the Canadian speaker maker Paradigm; in fact, you could say those guys have turned manufacturing of high-end/high value speakers into an art form. Want proof? Look no further than the firm’s new Studio Series speakers.

What makes the Studio models special? One answer is that they occupy the number two slot in Paradigm’s product pecking order, just below the ambitious, expensive and critically acclaimed Signature range. The significance of this positioning is that Studio models often inherit recently developed technologies and construction techniques originally created for the Signature line, but that become more affordable once they trickle down to the Studio level. Can you say “sweet speaker technologies at bargain prices?” Sure you can.

For this review, we chose a surround system based on the very recently released Studio 60 floorstanders, a Studio CC-490 center channel, two Studio ADP-590 surround speakers, and one of the firm’s just-announced SUB 12 subwoofers. We then used Paradigm’s new PBK (Perfect Bass

Kit) subwoofer/room EQ system to fine-tune the performance of the SUB 12. Our mission? To find out if the new Studio range carries on in the grand tradition of providing near-Signature levels of performance at accessible prices.

OVERVIEW

Consider this surround speaker system if: you seek the sound of a fine \$10K+ surround rig at a mid-\$6K price. This is a refined, well-rounded system with few weaknesses and all the essential sonic “goodies:” high levels of resolution and detail, razor sharp transient response, neutral tonal balance, good dynamics, and powerful, richly textured bass.

Look elsewhere if: you like your surround sound softly focused and diffuse (in contrast, the Studio system



Shown: Piano Black

has an open, explicit, and tightly focused sound). Also look further if you crave over-the-top dynamics; you can find systems that play louder at this price—if you're willing to trade off a lot of refinement for greater punch and clout.

"If I had to describe the Studio 60 system in just two words, the two I would choose are 'balanced' and 'focused.'"

SONIC CHARACTER

If I had to describe the Studio 60 system in just two words, the two I would choose are "balanced" and "focused." Balance: The voicing of the Studio 60 system is extremely neutral, straight out of the box—so much so that, even if you choose to use a room/speaker EQ system such as the Audyssey MultEQ system or Paradigm/Anthem's ARC system, you may find that you don't hear much of a "before" vs. "after" difference at all. That's a remarkable testimony to how smooth and evenly balanced the system's frequency response is in the first place.

Focus: This system does a great job of resolving fine, small textural and transient sonic details, yet does so without making soundtracks or music recordings sound "glassy," "hot" or overly bright. In particular, the system has a commanding way of handling sudden transient sounds thanks to its great combination of transient speed and dynamic snap. Surround sound imaging is tightly and precisely focused, too, so that sounds/voices often present themselves within the sound field with startlingly vivid realism (more than once during my tests I unconsciously swiveled my head to look toward the apparent source of a sound, only to realize the sound was "only in the soundtrack"—not real).

"... does a great job of resolving fine, small textural and transient sonic details — without making soundtracks or music recordings sound 'glassy,' 'hot' or overly 'bright.'"

Finally, the SUB 12 is a truly potent subwoofer—one that impresses as much with its textural refinement as with its 1700-watt

clout. As I listened to low frequency sounds or musical notes, I found that the SUB 12 revealed subtle variations in timbre and pitch that other subs tend to quash or to render as more of a monotone. Paradigm's PBK kit definitely makes a good thing better, cleaning up peaks and valleys in the subwoofer's in-room response curve and addressing the bass irregularities of "problem rooms." In general, the kit helps the sub achieve a tighter, smoother, and better-defined sound—making the sub a more perfect match for the rest of the Studio system. One hint: do pay attention to Paradigm's advice about giving the Studio speakers a few hours of playing time before doing critical listening. Our set smoothed out and opened up nicely (almost like some fine wines do) after initial break-in.

MOVIE PERFORMANCE

The Studio 60 system is a real treat on movie soundtracks, in part because it so effortlessly and gracefully shifts from playing "large" to playing "small." Let me provide an illustration to explain what I mean. In the "Depth-Charged" chapter of *U-571*, a German destroyer has pinpointed the location of one of its own captured U-boats and is raining deadly depth charges down on the sub from above. The system is called upon to reproduce the sound of multiple, violent underwater explosions, and then to capture the sounds of chaos from inside the U-boat. We hear the hull quake with each detonation, pipes bursting, instruments shattering, electrical fires breaking out, and the sounds of loose objects and crewmen being flung in every direction. That's what I call playing "big," because the system is forced to reproduce multiple cacophonous sounds at once, even as its dynamic limits are being probed. It's a test the Studio 60 system passes with flying colors. But later in the film, in the "200 Meters" chapter, extreme sonic subtlety is the order of the day. We watch and listen as the Allied crew pushes its captured U-boat far beyond its design limits—to the terrifying depth of 200 meters—in an effort to dive under the depth charge barrage. Desperate not to reveal their position to the German attackers overhead, the crew communicates only in whispers, while the sub's hull pops and creaks under the enormous water pressure outside. You can hear palpable relief and grudging admiration in the Chief's voice when, at the 200 meter mark, he whispers, "Mary, Mother of God, those Krauts sure know to build a boat." What's impressive is

that the Paradigm system handles low-level details so effectively that it conveys even more emotion through these whispered words and the hull's soft but ominous groaning than through all the sturm und drang of the earlier "Depth Charged" chapter. When a system plays "small" as well as this one does, the impact can be huge.

"... a commanding way of handling sudden transient sounds ... great combination of transient speed and dynamic snap."

MUSIC PERFORMANCE

During my music tests, I put on an old surround sound favorite—the "Timeless" track from Larry Coryell, Badi Assad, and John Abercrombie's *3 Guitars* [Chesky, Multichannel SACD], and invited a young office colleague in to listen. My colleague had heard the track many times before, both on high-end stereo systems and on other surround rigs, but he sat absolutely transfixed as he listened to the Studio 60 system. Part of what's so special about this recording is that it captures the three distinctive guitarists performing on stage in an intimate setting and from an up-close perspective; Coryell is playing on the left and Abercrombie on the right, with Assad in the very center of the stage. As the track came to a close, my colleague looked up and said, "Is it my imagination, or does this system do a way better job of placing those guitarists in exact positions on the stage—as if (he stopped to gesture) they're right there in front of you?" The answer is that the Studio system's qualities of precision imaging and focus are palpable and real. One of the most intense illusions created by this track is that of Badi Assad playing masterfully from the center of the stage. But here's the kicker; Chesky's multichannel recordings deliberately forego any center channel information (they are essentially four-channel recordings). This means the Studio 60 left and right main speakers were doing all the work necessary to create that hyper-vivid sonic image of Assad at center stage, which is downright amazing.

"Surround sound imaging is tightly and precisely focused ... startlingly vivid realism ..."

“SUB 12 is a truly potent subwoofer ... one that impresses as much with its textural refinement as with its 1,200 watt clout ... revealed subtle variations in timbre and pitch that other subs tend to quash or to render as more of a monotone.”

BOTTOM LINE

Paradigm's practice is to continually improve its various speaker product families, but I think the firm has really struck gold with its fifth-generation Studio models. The new Studios not only look better than their predecessors, but also sound a lot better—with a presentation reminiscent of the sound of earlier-generation Signature models. True, it takes serious commitment to spend a mid-\$6k sum on a fine surround speaker system in these troubled times, but for those who can afford the entry price, the Studio 60 system offers sumptuous sonic rewards. Highly recommended.

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