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AUDIOPHILE AUDITION

Sept. '99

"...AMAZING SPEAKER BARGAINS..."

"...terrific sonics... reproduction was excellent...almost palpable..."

These little devils were on the cover of the April AUDIO and I just had to see if I heard the same things my colleague Corey was hearing in his rave review of them there. Not only did I hear the same things, but four of these amazing speaker bargains have now replaced my previous home theater speaker system which physically took up more space (and I was constantly bruising myself running into them).

"...richness and depth...the feeling of real bows biting into real strings... every note...is clearly delineated with the Atoms..."

Of course some corners had to be cut to get the price down so low for the Atoms, but the shortcuts don't seem to have degraded the sound these little wonders put out.

Or their at-least-$500-a-pair appearance. They were first introduced by the Canadian speaker company over six years ago and sold well as budget speakers for standard two-channel hi-fi systems. But they also function beautifully in a home theater system as I am auditioning them.

Paradigm offers a special surround version which actually consists of the working parts of two Atoms back to back in one cabinet for the dipole effect required in a Dolby Pro Logic setup. Known at the ADP-170, it sports a total of four drivers. There is also a matching center channel horizontally-configured speaker and a powered subwoofer.

However, all of these are more expensive than the plain Atoms, and I'm solving the current controversy over direct-radiating for 5.1 sound and dipole for Pro Logic surround by simple having the side/rear channel Atoms facing me for 5.1 use and for non-discrete sources I merely turn them on their backs facing the ceiling - getting fine dispersion without additional expense. (Or using the absurd solution one manufacturer is offering of two entirely separate pairs of speakers - one dipole and the other direct-radiating, with a special switch built into the AV receiver for selecting one or the other as befits the format!)

If you do this, be sure that the front channel speakers are the shielded version - the speaker magnets put out a very large

field, and even three feet away with the non-shielded models I was still getting green stripes along both sides of my ProScan monitor's screen. I'm using the Atoms' own 29-inch-high speaker stands (C-70, $80 pr.) under the front speakers, and so far the only tweak I'm doing is mounting one of the C-10 Tekna Sonics vibration absorbers on the top of each speaker - their enhancement of resolution is clearly heard on my Aerolam-encased Celestion mini monitors, so they should certainly have a salutary resonance-bleeding effect on the beaverboard Atoms. [I just completed the on-and-off A/B test - they attach with magnets - and yes, they cleaned up some fuzziness I didn't realize was there until it was gone.] Oh, there is one other option for a cosmetic tweak. I noticed the C-70 stands were hollow and open on the bottom. That was a relief - I didn't have to visit the gun store and construction materials store again to fill up the shafts with lead shot and sand.

"...amazed at the quality of sound...."

However, I missed seeing the hole near the top of the stands and mounted the speaker stands backwards using Blue Tac under the speakers - the hole is now at the front and my speaker cables are too short to run them down inside the shafts. By the way, the stands also come with very sharp spiked screw feet, if you are brave/tweaky enough to use them.

The Atoms are just one of five speakers in Paradigm's Performance Series, the others being the Micro, Titan, Phantom and Legend. The Atoms come in a bunch of different woods and colors. I got black and shielded for the front channels and dark cherry wood - quite lovely - for the surround channels which sit on various shelves with dark wood patterns. I should reveal at this point that the home theater speaker system the Atoms replaced was the Cambridge SoundWorks Ensemble. I had tweaked the front speakers extensively (see my article on this project in the December AUDIOPHILE AUDITION).

They are a small 3-way system with the tweeter and midrange in a very small enclosure. I think the Scandinavian-made ceramic-metal dome tweeter of the Atom, working in a larger enclosure, is the key to its terrific sonics. I matched the Atoms to the Cambridge SoundWorks powered subwoofer, crossed over at 80Hz since the Atoms poop out around 70, and the transition seems smooth enough though I have yet to tweak it. The Atoms were powered with my 100-watt-per-channel Nakamichi AV-10, but (as you can see above) though their efficiency is not designed for 7-watt triode tube amps, they don't require the higher wattage. Speech reproduction was excellent with the Atom. (I don't use a center channel speaker in my home theater system because I only have a 31-inch monitor and no large crowds watching it.) There was perhaps a slight tendency toward a husky quality in the midrange which was not noticed with music sources, but the speakers really aren't yet broken in yet and that may reduce. I started out my A/B tests vs. The Cambridge Soundworks system using my favorite gold test disc from Opus 3. The three guitars on track 2 sounded extremely laid back on the Cambridge, but on the Atoms they retained a good part of the impact and bite they have on the Celestion audio system in my studio. The following trad jazz track on this same CD opens with a piano solo at the left speaker; it sounded pinched and muffled on the Cambridge - on the Atoms it was almost palpable; same thing with a solo banjo that enters later on the right channel.

Joe Jackson's brand new Symphony No. 1 (Sony Classical) opens its Fast Movement (track 2) with a sharp wide-range instrumental exclamation of synthesizer and electric guitar. Though on the Cambridge it had similar deep bass extension, there was much less overall support behind the musical "whap" than with the Atoms. On the Red Seal CD of Berlioz Overtures conducted by Colin Davis, the King Lear Overture had good soundstaging on the Cambridges and sounded very musical. A section where low strings enter and later high violins come in softly over this low string orchestra foundation demonstrated on the Atoms more richness and depth, and the feeling of real bows biting into real strings. As the high violins continue, a very low level pizzicato is heard in the basses and/or cellos. Every note of this subtle pizzicato is clearly delineated with the Atoms, whereas only a few of its notes could be identified with the Cambridges. (And by the way, two of the Tekna Sonics vibration units were still mounted on each of the Cambridge Ensemble speakers during this audition.) In general, the Cambridges sounded thin and overly-laid-back compared to the Atoms. Even those who don't have a dedicated audio-only system but are on a budget for their home theater system would be amazed at the quality of sound from the speakers in the Atom family.

ATOM