"... GREAT SOUND, LITTLE FUSS ..."

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by Mike McGann

PERFORMANCE YOU DON'T HAVE TO WORK FOR

What, exactly, makes a good speaker? I suppose for a lot of people, the answer is in the eye (or ear) of the beholder. Get a bunch of audiophiles in a room and they'll debate crossover design (the circuit that routes sound of different frequencies to woofers and tweeters), porting, cabinet design and so on.

Throw in room acoustics and it might seem like an unfathomable jumble to normal people who just want to buy a good sounding speaker. As a sometime-audio snob myself, I've been known to bore people senseless explaining endless technical details to people who just want their Beatles albums and movies to sound great.

While some of us haven't been listening to the needs of normal people, it's obvious that Paradigm has. The Canadian manufacturer of speakers certainly earned its praise from critics and consumers alike, including me on these pages. In truth, I lumped them into a pile of high-end audio companies that provide excellent products, which is no insult. But after spending time with the Focus and Paradigm's less expensive products, I finally get the point.

Most speakers sound lousy out of the box, needing break-in time and usually a bit of pointing to sound their best. These Focus monitors sounded pretty good right out of the box and without more than just pointing them in my general direction. With a bit of time, they did get slightly warmer, but it wasn't a massive difference. With a wide dispersion pattern, I was able to get fairly consistent sound, no matter how much I tinkered with the position of the Focus units.

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Matched up with the Focus were the more venerable CC-270 center, which uses the same woofers and tweeters as the Focus fronts, two-way ADP-170 dipole/bipole surrounds and a smallish-looking, but powerful PDR-10 subwoofer.

As is the norm for me, I started out with stereo material. In a bit of a departure, I used my old CD copy of Queen's *A Night At The Opera*, and then used my fresh-off-the-presses copy of the DVD-Audio version of the album, which has three separate mixes: a stereo 24/96, a DTS 5.1 and a traditional DVD-Audio 24/96 5.1 track.

Truthfully, I thought the Focuses made my old CD sound great, with a deep soundstage and excellent detail. When I switched to the much more revealing 24/96 DTS stereo mix (which is louder, as almost all DTS mixes seem to be, and had a bit too much bass), the music became that much more detailed and seemed to fill the room. I did mix and match speakers around a bit to see what the average difference was between the higher resolution mix and the old CD, and I found that the Paradigms showcased the differences in the mixes as well or better than some much more expensive speakers.

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My excitement dimmed some when I switched to the 5.1 channel mixes. The rear channels, played through the bipole/dipole ADP-170s, just didn't sound right to me, whether I was listening to the new Queen album, or the just-as-new Dishwalla DVD-Audio disc, *Opaline*. Pans around the room weren't smooth and seamless as I've heard with other speakers. The problem isn't really a lack of quality in the ADP-170, but rather more like being disappointed that a motorcycle isn't a car. As I discovered later, the ADP-170s work well as surrounds for movie soundtracks, but aren't the perfect match for 5.1 audio. I suspect that four Focuses, with a pair of ADP-170s in a 7.1 setup, would be the best solution, allowing users the ability to have five basically matching speakers for DVD-Audio while keeping the benefits (and there are some, without doubt) of having bipole/dipoles for rear surrounds on movie soundtracks.

Moving on to movies, I was pleased. Aside from liking the ADP-170s as film surrounds, I was impressed at the clarity of the CC-270, which belted out sharp, clear dialogue, even on soundtracks that tend to get a tad muddy with some speakers. Designed to be wall-mounted, they come with templates and everything you need to install them on your wall, a nice touch without question.

The PDR-10 sub had no trouble keeping up with anything I threw at it, nicely combining speed and punch in a fairly small package. I'd like to see a phase control on the unit (something commonly deleted from inexpensive subs) which is helpful in some circumstances, especially when you can't get an ideal placement for your sub. Other than that small gripe, it's an excellent unit for the price.

As a group, I think the system integrates well and works well together. The front three speakers are a perfect match, and they in turn, work well with the surrounds in a movie environment. The sub, not required to carry a massive load, thanks to the bass capabilities of the mains, is able to be speedy and tight.

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In terms of sheer, gross performance, this Paradigm system is among the best in its price range, without question. But maybe a better measure is how much of that sheer performance is available to the non-techie with a minimum of fuss. Without tweaking, pointing and gnashing teeth, this system sounds better out of the box than a lot of speaker systems that cost a whole lot more.

Undoubtedly, audiophiles could pick on minor issues, and it's true there are speakers (more expensive ones) that sound better when properly set up and pointed. But unless you're an audio expert, or willing to adjust and listen until they sound right, you may never know the difference. Paradigm has a product that your grandmother could set up and have sound good. So in the final analysis, the question is whether you want to listen to music and movies, or spend time playing with your gear to get it to sound good. If you're

more interested in tweaking, this might not be the system for you. If you want great sound, little fuss, and want to avoid those big-store, four-letter brands, Paradigm's got the answer. Last one to Canada is deaf.

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