"... wide soundstage ... tremendous efficiency ... NO PROBLEM PLAYING LOUD and I do mean LOUD!"

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"The Paradigm Monitor 7's offer so very much for such a reasonable price that it amazes me that more speaker companies don't try to model their budget floorstanders to resemble their sonic signature."

by Dan Nielsen

Many years ago, I owned a pair of Paradigm Export Monitors that I bought from a college student. He had done a bit too much partying and discovered that you can't pay rent with deposit money from beer cans. I remember being very pleased with my purchase and I enjoyed them right up to the day they went into storage. I never saw them again, as my locker, along with a few others, was broken into while I was on a six-month job site out of state. Wanting to start fresh, I went with another brand of speakers and equipment when I got the insurance money. Since then, much has happened with both Paradigm and myself.

Fast-forward to today: Paradigm has grown tremendously, gaining all sorts of awards as well as consistent recognition from the audio press. I was offered the opportunity to review the Paradigm Monitor 7's, after mentioning to the publisher about my previous experience with the Exports. I knew the 7's were floorstanders and I was expecting the traditional wide front of that line from yesteryear. Instead, I was greeted by a very fresh 21st century slim tower. Long gone is the 10-12 inch wide front, and in its place is a very svelte, seven inch facing. I knew at that point that I needed to think very differently about the 7's. As I remembered back to the Exports, they had more of an east coast sound, similar to Boston Acoustics. That impression was soon to change.

DESIGN

The Monitor 7 cabinet is constructed of ¾-inch MDF with a vinyl finish imitation wood in four choices. The review pair came in a Black Ash finish. The vinyl has a satin sheen to it, which keeps the eye from locking in on the fact that it isn't real. The fact that the Monitor line is Paradigm's budget speaker grouping deflects criticism from those that demand veneer. The grill employs my favorite style of attachment: the hidden magnet. No broken tabs with these speakers. The top of the grill and the baffle behind it have a slight arch like all Paradigm speakers. This gives a look of the top of the letter "P". The baffle is the anchor for all the drivers. Manufacturers who use the raised baffle all make the same point—that by doing this, wider dispersion is created. Paradigm calls it an "Advanced Wave Guide Chassis".

Paradigm manufactures all of its drivers in-house. The Monitor 7 tweeters use a titanium dome, and the bass drivers chassis use die-cast aluminum and polymer with glass injected for reinforcement of the cone. Advanced materials is an area Paradigm has been known to be a leader in research for many years now. The bass driver cones use a carbon infused process. All of this technology put together is one reason why Paradigm speakers operate at such high efficiency levels; the Monitor 7's are rated at 92 db.

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The tweeter and three drivers work in a 2-1/2-way design. The ivory-colored driver acts as an upper mid playing down to 700 Hz, there, dual mid-bass drivers kick in, taking the speaker down to 50 Hz. The forward, full nature of the 7's creates a fine illusion of a speaker that plays down to the upper 30 Hz level.

On the backside, there are two fairly large ports; one located behind the tweeter and the second just above the speaker terminals. Even with two ports this size, I found placement from the rear wall to be a quick process, although slightly dangerous, due to the extremely sharp floor spikes that attach to the missile-shaped outrigger feet. Without thinking during the placement process, I managed to impale the webbing of my hand on one of the points. Therefore, be conscious when moving the 7's, the spikes are quite nasty.

LISTENING

My listening space consists of a great room for lack of a better term. It is 21 feet in length and 14 feet wide. It is divided into a sitting and office area. The ceiling is a surprising 10 feet, which creates much more volume for any speaker to fill. There are three windows all of which have fabric draperies to soften the sound waves. The floor is carpeted. Final placement was 36 inches from the back wall. Distance between the speakers was eight feet, which allowed for a balanced placement distance between the side and rear walls. I did find that I preferred them firing straight-ahead; the result was a more balanced and wider soundstage.

The Monitor 7's are a high-efficiency speaker from Paradigm's "budget" line. I felt that using my Yamaha DR 840 receiver would be a fair match. For a source, I chose my new-to-me Cambridge 540v2 cdp that I snagged off Craigslist while on a recent business trip. For those of you new to Paradigm or any speakers running above 90 dB efficiency, make sure you have the volume turned way down. I thought I had that knob low enough. Well it wasn't! Let me inform all readers right now, the Monitor 7's have no problem playing loud, and I do mean loud! Thankfully, the neighbors with whom I share a common wall, were at work, though their cat, Prissy, was not happy I'm sure. Just as impressive was the overall clarity during the times I cranked the volume way up. What I have noticed over the years is that when speaker volume raises into the mid-nineties decibel level, female vocals especially can become brittle, for lack of a better term. The Monitor 7's never broadcast that problem.

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One characteristic I noticed right away with the Monitor 7's was the obvious forward-sound they presented. This was not the Paradigm sonic signature I remembered from my time with the Export Monitors. Usually when I hear such forwardness, I prepare myself for listener fatigue, as the in-your-face sound has a tendency to wear on me rather quickly. But not with the 7's. It took me a while to figure out why, but I finally think I found my answer: the bass response on the 7's, though pronounced, wasn't sloppy with 95% of the music I played through them.

Recently, I've been listening to quite a bit of female vocals. My favorite CD currently is Norah Jones' tremendous *Come Away With Me*. The sultry-sexiness of her voice and relaxed presentation matched up well to the characteristics of the Monitor 7's. Over the years, Paradigm's tweeters have been known to not shy away from the highest frequencies. The 7's are no different, and they add a bit of fresh crispness to her vocals that more subdued tweeters would miss.

"The song, 'Trampled Rose', highlights not only the purity of her voice, but the range and detail that the Monitor 7's can reproduce. Nuanced within the song are short riffs by various instruments — the 7's give those bits their own place in the soundstage."

When it comes to female vocals in the past six months, I have come to believe that Alison Krauss is as good as it gets. Her duet album with Robert Plant, *Raising Sand*, may just be about as unique as any collaboration in the past 20 years, but it works really, really well. The song, 'Trampled Rose', highlights not only the purity of her voice, but the range and detail that the Monitor 7's can reproduce. Nuanced within the song are short riffs by various instruments that add so much beauty to the song. Thankfully, the 7's give those bits their own place in the soundstage.

BUDGET REALITIES

As our publisher MM and others in the review field try to remind everyone, at this price level nothing is perfect, tradeoffs are made. I must be fair and mention them. I made a trip to a local Paradigm dealer and was able to compare the Monitor 7's to their next higher line, the Reference Studio 60's. The biggest difference is richness and depth that adds so much to vocals, but at a cost difference of over a thousand dollars, which makes what the Monitor 7's do offer, all the more impressive.

A second honest weakness involves heavy reverberation of a few songs involving electric lead and bass guitars. At higher volumes the 7's do begin to stress and become a bit sloppy. Individual notes blur and a hazy quality settles in on the sound. When I first heard this anomaly I thought that I wouldn't want to listen to any Rush albums as they do employ this style in so many of their songs. I was pleasantly wrong, I only found three tracks that presented this issue. Considering the enormity of Rush songs, this is a very small percentage to say the least.

"I was asked by a friend after hearing them and talking about my enthusiasm if I would buy them. I replied, absolutely … they made my current speakers sound rather primitive."

If I have one irritation with Paradigm, it's their use of cardboard rather than styrofoam for their padded packing. Bluntly put, it's a royal pain in the butt. The cardboard is folded several times to create the protective buffers, but they aren't glued into place, leaving the owner a bit confused as to the necessary shape and placement.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Buying speakers is like purchasing a car: you never get everything you want (unless you're Warren Buffet). The Paradigm Monitor 7's offer so very much for such a reasonable price that it amazes me that more speaker companies don't try to model their budget floorstanders to resemble their sonic signature. Their wide soundstage, coupled with tremendous efficiency and near full-range sonic signature make them very hard to beat. The fact that lower-powered amps and receivers would act like a power player matched up with the 7's should intrigue many. I was asked by a friend after hearing them and talking about my enthusiasm if I would buy them. I replied, absolutely, if the review pair was in Rosenut or Cherry. They made my current speakers sound rather primitive. Guess I'm going on a speaker hunt and guess what is going to be my reference point … you guessed it! The Paradigm Monitor 7's.