

Paradigm Studio 80 Loudspeakers



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Introduction

Since their introduction at CES1999, the industry has anxiously awaited the release of Paradigm's Reference line of speakers. The Reference line first started shipments in mid 1999 and has received much recognition since then.

The Studio 80's are the second largest in the Reference line, a line that represents Paradigm's effort to bridge the gap between high performance and high price. Paradigm, a company that is headquartered in Toronto Canada, has been in existence for the better part of 20 years and has long been regarded as a company that manufactures high value Audio/Video products. Paradigm is equipped with a state of the art facility that has one of the larger anechoic chambers in the industry as well as in house transducer design and manufacturing. Since my initial introduction to the Reference Line, I have looked very much forward to the opportunity to audition these speakers and test Paradigm's claims of value.

The Studio 80's are described as a two and a half way three-driver speaker system. They consist of a one-inch Ferro-fluidic aluminum dome tweeter, an eight-and-one-half-inch mica-polymer midrange driver, and an eight and a half inch polypropylene bass driver. All are housed in die cast heat sink chassis'. The Studio 80's measure 40-1/2 inches high, 10-1/4 inches wide, and a shade over 16 inches deep. Paradigm provides you with feet mounting options of either spikes or nylon bottom pucks in case you have flooring that you are trying to protect. The Studio 80's retail for \$1,500 in a laminate finish, and \$1,800 in wood, an option that I consider well worth the price.

My first reaction upon opening the boxes was that these speakers looked very expensive even though they are not. The review models were the wood finished version, which was a beveled slab on either side, giving the speaker a very elegant dressing. I did not have the opportunity to see the laminate version of these speakers, which are slightly less expensive, and probably wouldn't consider them myself. The Studio 80's had the look of the traditional style vertical box, which in itself would never excite me, but the complete package looked great. After break-in, in one of my non-reference systems, I moved them into my audio room to be connected to my main rig. After a somewhat frustrating connection, which I will discuss further in this article, I was ready to roll.



The Music

I positioned the Studio 80's in the exact position that I have determined to be best for my room. This position is approximately seven feet out from the front-wall, and several feet from the side-walls. This position was determined in the past with the use of computer models and optimized with the use of acoustical treatments positioned at the primary and many secondary reflection locations in my room. When first auditioning a new speaker, I like to throw it a large variety of music, for several reasons. One of which is that I like a large variety of music, you knew that one was coming huh, and because a review is about more than enjoying a components strengths, but identifying ones weakness'. The golden rule of auditioning, or in this case, reviewing, is to reserve judgment until you have had adequate time to make a quality educated evaluation, although my first reaction with the Paradigm Studio/80's was quite positive.

I started with Keb Mo's second, named Just Like You, (Sony/Columbia Records). For those that are fans of the blues and don't know about Keb' Mo', I highly recommend this recording. It's excellently recorded and is a refreshing blend of electrical and acoustical blues.

The Studio 80's immediately impressed me with their staging prowess. The stage in this recording was displayed quite solidly. Images were well defined and with quite a natural feel. I admit that although open minded, I did not expect a speaker in this price range to soundstage so openly. Although very good, I found images to be slightly compressed and to lack some of the finite separation between the instruments and the acoustic space, or ambience. I also found the images to be a tad soft around the edge and lack the finite layering in the soundstage depth, features that are found in the highest priced loudspeakers. Overall, I was delightfully surprised with the soundstage nevertheless. I feel it only fair to add that as I describe these anomalies, keep in mind that to this speaker's credit, I am comparing them to my reference loudspeakers and many others that I have had the opportunity to have in my listening room, all costing between twice and up to ten times more. They are also being auditioned with a level of electronics that might not typically be used to drive a speaker in this price range. What this means is that depending on the room you are using and the electronics that you are driving them with, you may or may not experience these discrepancies.

A recording that the Studio 80's seemed to breathe life into was, A Trick of the Tail from Genesis' first recording following the departure of Peter Gabriel, (Atlantic Records). I found the Studio 80's to be very complimentary with acoustical instruments such as in the song "Entangled." The guitars were pleasantly textured and had a percussive impact that was engaging. I did find however that in reference quality recordings, the Studio 80's midrange was a tad polite for my taste. Initially I thought that perhaps there was a high frequency bump, meaning that there might be an over

abundance of upper frequency information. I later found that this was not true, but this was more a product of a midrange that is although very good, possibly on the relaxed side of neutral. In addition I felt that the midrange of the Studio 80's had a hard time articulating the most complex passages. I found the bass to be an impressive attribute for this speaker. It was deep and extended with a pretty natural and agile feel. Bass reproduction is the first place that many moderately priced speaker's fail, and the Studio 80's stepped up to the plate and hit the long ball. These speakers performed remarkably for a speaker in this price class. The more I listened to the Studio 80's the more impressed I became with their performance. The Studio 80's were pretty easy to drive at 92 dB sensitive and handled a lot of volume. Let's do the math, (easy to drive + handled volume well = Rock & Roll!) I say rock and roll figuratively because what I mean is that they will play your favorite music loud, and with considerable dynamic impact.

Because I run a theater system separate from my reference two-channel audio system, I did not have the opportunity to review them in a multi-channel format. I do however feel that they would be great in that application. Because they are easy to drive, they're a great high-end match to most all of the better multi-channel receivers or higher priced separates. If you are looking into the use of these speakers in your multi-channel system, I highly recommend matching at least the center, and best case the rears as well. Paradigm offers a great match in the Studio/CC center at \$450, and the Studio/ADP rear channel speakers at \$900. In subs, Paradigm offers two, the PW-2200, and the Servo at \$750 and \$1,500 respectively.

The Downside

I reviewed the Paradigm Studio/80's as a speaker that can be compared at many levels with the big boys, or at least many bigger boys. Yet several aspects of these speakers reminded me that although they can dance with the stars, they wouldn't be there for the big show. I found frustration with the binding posts. The binding posts are 3/8-inch diameter threaded posts with pin and banana inputs. Pin inputs, are for the little league of cables, and banana plugs although preferred by many, are inferior to the high-end standard terminal lug connection. The problem lies in the fact that the most common diameter spade is 1/4 inch. I have AudioQuest Dragons terminated with 1/4 inch spades, and am using a set of Transparent Reference cables with the similar 1/4 inch spade terminations. This had me profoundly irritated having to screw five-dollar banana adapters into a \$5,000 set of speaker cables. Also, the jumper plates that short the second set of inputs for bi-wire applications looked as if they were stamped out of material that was as thin as a soda can. If you are looking for the maximum performance from this speaker and using high quality speaker cable, you might try a reasonable set of jumper wires.

Conclusion

What we have here is a speaker that is very moderately priced at \$1,800 considering that this is an industry that has no problem throwing a \$70,000 price tag at us for a set of loudspeakers, yet they perform well enough to be considered in the high end class. In this review I was critical about aspects of his speaker that could be considered in some ways as a compliment because they were based on comparisons to higher priced speakers, and speakers that are considered to be without compromise in cost. I found the midrange to be good, but a bit dark and on the relaxed side of neutral. Other than that I found this fine speaker was a breath of fresh air in the effort to bring high performance into the average household.

I can honestly say that if you want performance characteristics such as soundstaging and solid dynamics, and have yet to win the lottery, check these speakers out. They are to be compared to many high priced speakers manufactured by companies that somehow forgot that some of us work hard for our money and care about value.

Manufacturer	Paradigm
Model	Studio 80 Loudspeakers
Reviewer	Bryan Southard

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