

Surround Sound Speaker Systems

Paradigm Soundtrack (Soundbar and Subwoofer) Speaker System

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Introduction to the Paradigm Soundtrack System

There is no question that soundbars are a "hot item" for home theater enthusiasts. The soundbar category grew a whopping 68% over all of 2012, with a monumental surge in Q4 2012 alone. Unit sales for Q4 versus Q3 were up 158%, even better, the category of soundbars with a companion subwoofer increased 126% in 2012 versus the prior year. This according a new report from Quixel Research. I can't think of any major speaker manufacturer that does not offer at least one soundbar in their line up. They can be pricey or inexpensive depending on the quality and features. The one thing I see from this trend is this: People want better sound from their flat TVs and the speaker companies are giving them options and choices. I know this is a shocker, but most homes in America do NOT have 5.1 speaker systems. So what does Paradigm, a major award winning Canadian speaker company, offer to this fast growing market segment?

PARADIGM SOUNDTRACK SYSTEM SPECIFICATIONS

- Design: Soundbar and Powered Subwoofer
- **Soundbar**
 - Drivers (per Channel): One 1" Aluminum Dome Tweeter, One 4" Polypropylene Woofer, One 4" Polypropylene Passive Radiator
 - Crossover: 3rd-order Electro-acoustic at 2.4 kHz
 - Total System Frequency Response: 40 Hz – 20 kHz
 - Sensitivity – Room / Anechoic: 88 dB / 85 dB
 - Inputs: Toslink Optical Digital, RCA Analog, Auxiliary
 - Dimensions: 5.3" H x 36.4" W x 2.9" D
 - Weight: 7.4 Pounds
 - Finish: Black
 - Wall-mount bracket
- **Wireless Subwoofer** (with Wired Option)

- Design: Ported
- Driver: One 8" Polypropylene
- Subwoofer Cut-Off Frequency: 130 Hz fixed
- Dimensions: 14.2" H x 18.3" W x 6.3" D
- Weight: 1.5 Pounds
- Finish: Black
- MSRP: \$800 USD
- **Paradigm**
- SECRETS Tags: Paradigm, Soundbars, Audio

Design and Setup of the Paradigm Soundtrack System

Paradigm has been making their own speakers for over 30 years and has garnered multiple awards for speaker design and sound quality. When a company with this type of reputation makes a soundbar system, you as a consumer have certain expectations that need to be met. The Soundtrack has 2 isolated, identical channels for Left and Right. Each channel has a 2-driver, 2-way plus single passive radiators enclosed in a molded ABS enclosure with matte finish. The 2 in. tweeters are aluminum domes with a 4 in. midbass driver. This is augmented with a 4 in. passive radiator for both channels, as well. The depth is less than 3 inches, which makes this speaker look good when placed under a wall mounted flat panel. Ideally, its width fits nicely under a 42-50 inch HDTV, but larger screens will work as well. The pictures of my Soundtrack review set up are with a 42 in. plasma and ZVOX 555, for comparison sake.



I used the snap-on feet with the soundbar, but a wall mounting bracket is also furnished with the Soundtrack System. It's all about flexibility, people. The controls are top mounted for easy access and a remote is included for adjusting the volume, powering the unit ON/OFF, muting and selecting the appropriate input.



I used the learning remote feature and was able to control all of these features with my Samsung TV remote. The learning process was very quick and easy and makes life easier for you and the others that access your TV.



The supplied remote is diminutive and can easily be lost between the couch pillows, so programming it to your larger TV remote is advised.



On the back of the soundbar we find an optical digital input, a stereo RCA connection and an aux. (3.5mm) input. Getting to these input after the bar has been wall mounted can be a challenge. This is another reason I like setting the soundbar up with the supplied feet.

The wireless sub contains an 8 in. driver and 2 perpendicularly arranged ports that allow the sub to have a very slim profile. The sub can be placed, with feet (included), under a piece of furniture or placed vertically along a wall with a base stand (also included). The sub can be configured with wires if you so choose, but the wireless option provided the most flexibility for placement. All of this and the amplifier fit inside a nicely shaped ABS molded enclosure that mimics the shape and style of the soundbar.



Wireless connection is achieved by holding down a button on the back of the sub and waiting for a blue light to appear. Once connected, you normally never have to repeat the process again. Now, in spite of the slim profile, I could not get the sub to fit under my couch. It needs about 6.5 inches of clearance and my couch is a low rider. For practical purposes, this was not an issue, as I prefer to have the unit within easy reach for the review period. Rubber feet can be added (supplied) for under the furniture placement and a cradle stand is included for the upright placement along a wall, which was my option. The sub, as a whole, is quite compact and can easily be placed just about anywhere in your room that meets your needs. Unfortunately, my couch was too low slung for me to place the bass module under it, as the module needs about 7-8 inches of clearance.



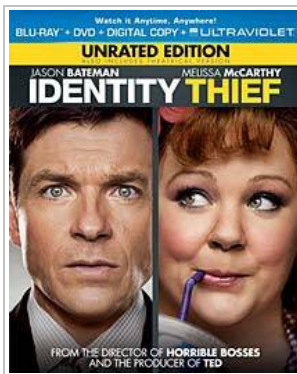
The Paradigm Soundtrack System in Use

My review sample arrived with very high quality packaging and after several minutes of carefully unpacking things, I had it set up in about 15 minutes. The instructions are easy to follow and since there are not a lot of accessories to mess with, I think the average person would have the system up and running without difficulty. Simply run a TosLink from the digital audio output on your TV to the optical input on the soundbar and you are half way home. Plug the bass module into an outlet near the position you plan on using in your listening environment, push and hold the button on the bar that pairs the system and you are done. Though you can hard wire the sub, its special feature is for it to go wirelessly. This allows you to place the sub under your couch or across the room in an unused space or corner. It also permits you to find the spot that provides you with the best bass response from your critical seating area. When I first paired the 2 units, I actually had the sub in my lap while I sat on the couch. This revealed perhaps the only weakness with the system that I noticed during the rest of my testing evaluation. Because the cross over is fixed at 130 kHz, I could clearly hear (deep) voices through the sub module. This could pose more of an issue if you choose to set the module very close to (or under) your seat. Since I eventually placed the sub along the front wall by the TV, I was never bothered by this issue again. In any case, once the 2 units paired, they never failed to re-connect with each other at any time during the several weeks of my review. Upon occasion, my wife noticed that the soundbar did not turn on/off when the remote powered off the TV and she had to re-point the remote directly at the Soundtrack to get it to power on/off. Another "feature" I wish they did not omit was the auto-off. Most soundbars that I have reviewed will power off automatically after several minutes of having no audio signal fed to them. The Paradigm stays on until you power it down with the remote or hit the power button on top of the bar. Not a big deal, but more than once I saw the blue light on when I got up in the morning.

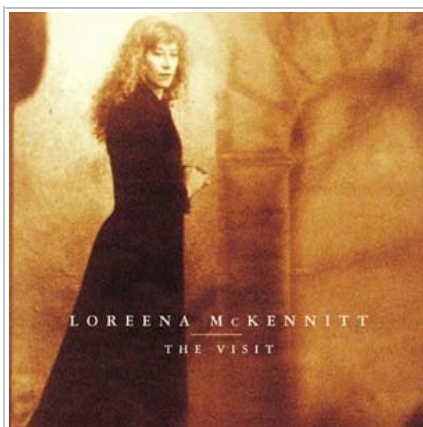


One should not have to go through life hearing, "Honey, you left the soundbar on *again* last night!", if you catch my drift.

Let's move on to the sound quality and performance of the Soundtrack System. Let me say up front that any soundbar system will not duplicate the audio experience of a decent 5.1 surround system. That said, almost every soundbar will blow the fidelity off of the anemic speakers found on your current flat panel HDTV. An ideal soundbar should be able to engross you in the action on the screen by providing good dynamic range (crystal clear highs and thunderous bass) and perhaps more importantly, intelligible dialog. I am happy to say that the Soundtrack System does these two things very well. The only real short coming for me was in the lower midrange level, where I felt the crossover left a bit of a hole. Baritone voices seemed a bit hollow for my taste and moving the bass module around did not help matters at all. Dialog, as a whole, was very clear and detailed. The treble lacked the ultimate sizzle on the high end, but also did not sound overly sibilant like some esoteric tweeters can exhibit. The bass was quite punchy and I never ran the volume on the bass at more than 40%. Placing the module in a corner would probably allow you to dial it down even more. I watched the movie *Identity Thief* and enjoyed the overall clear presentation of the voices and music from the soundtrack.



Perhaps it is because I am very accustomed to my ZVOX that I could easily distinguish the low midrange softness. Perhaps it just a matter of preference on my part, but I missed that extra heft. The voices were clear, but lacked a bit of weight and warmth in that low mid-range. I probably wouldn't even have noticed had I not had the 2 sound systems in place for a comparison. Streaming most of my TV watching from Netflix and Hulu *Plus*, I can say that the overall presentation was very good and having a single digital cable from the TV to the soundbar made for a fool-proof set up process. Moving on to music, with a wire Bluetooth dongle, the Soundtrack can stream music from your iPhone. This makes the Paradigm a good choice (over the ZVOX) for those of you that want to listen, and not watch your favorite entertainment. Music sounded very good, especially acoustic instruments and female singers. I listened to Loreena McKennitt's *The Visit* and the mix of exotic instruments with her voice were beautifully rendered with the Soundtrack. The drums had punch and definition. Strings were smooth and not strident. Loreena's voice, angelic.



The Paradigm sounded great with both classical and rock music. Stereo separation was very reasonable for a bar that only has several inches between the R/L channels. I liked that the Soundtrack does not offer any enhanced "surround" features like most other soundbars. Frankly, it just didn't need them. It was able to cast a wide soundstage all on its own without any manipulating. Volume wise, it could blow you out of the room before any distortion and straining takes place. And speaking of the volume, the Soundtrack does *not* display a numerical value with the volume. Not a big deal, but almost every bar I have reviewed does have a display for that. The Soundtrack will default to the last volume setting the person before you set it to, so hopefully, that was not you teenage son. When you change the volume, the blue light on the front panel blinks to let you know that it is obeying your command. It then stays lit until it powers down.

Conclusions about the Paradigm Soundtrack System

I liked the Soundtrack System. It falls in between what I would call the mid-price range for what

soundbars are currently selling for. It provides better bass than most entry level systems offer while delivering ample volume and clarity for movies and TV viewing. The learning remote option works better than the supplied remote, which is very basic, plastic and small. It has multiple mounting and placement options coupled with a sleek, well finished design that will look good in most room decors. Some areas that I would like to see improved upon would be the soundbar/bass module crossover region. Preferably, a variable crossover would improve the ability to move the bass module into more locations closer to the listener and blend the bar and bass module better. A numeric volume display would be nice, but not a deal breaker for most of us. The Paradigm Soundtrack delivers in those two areas that I find to be most important: clear dialog reproduction and broad dynamic range. If you are looking for simplicity and flexibility in a good sounding soundbar system, the Soundtrack may well be what you are looking for. "Good sound" always sounds good to me.