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Paradigm Atom Monitor Bookshelf Speaker Reviewed

By: Andrew Robinson, *June 10, 2013*

HTR Product Rating

Performance	★★★★★
Value	★★★★★
Overall	★★★★★

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In my earlier review of the Aperion Audio Intimus 5B bookshelf speakers, I laid the groundwork for what was a rather interesting home theater challenge, one that would see a variety of low-cost bookshelf speakers put to the ultimate test. This test was designed to ascertain whether a "lowly" affordable two-way bookshelf speaker could convincingly recreate a true cinema experience in one's home if properly configured. The benchmark has been set by an actual set of commercial cinema loudspeakers in the form of [JBL Pro's Cinema 3000 series](#). The players thus far include Aperion, RBH and Paradigm. Paradigm, along with its newly revamped Atom Monitor from the company's Monitor Series 7 line, is the subject of this review.



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Retailing for \$199 each or \$398 per pair, the Paradigm Atom Monitor (Atom) is among Paradigm's most affordable loudspeaker offerings aimed at a more traditional user. The Atom itself has been with Paradigm seemingly since the beginning, though it is now in its seventh iteration. The Atom is a smaller bookshelf speaker, measuring a mere 11 inches tall by nearly seven inches wide and nine inches deep. It tips the scales at ten-and-a-half pounds and is available in either Black Ash or

Heritage Cherry finish. Behind the Atom's magnetic grille (nice touch) rests a single one-inch S-PAL dome tweeter mated (second order crossover at 2kHz) to a five-and-a-half-inch S-PAL bass/midrange driver. Both drivers sit flush mounted inside a baffle made of a soft-touch rubber-like material that is very high-end in its look and feel. Around back, there is a bass reflex port, along with a single pair of five-way binding posts.

The Atom's driver complement is good for a reported frequency response of 86Hz to 22kHz, though low-frequency extension is said to be 50Hz. The Atom boasts a sensitivity of 90dB with an impedance of eight ohms, meaning it is suitable for amplifiers and/or receivers ranging in power from around 15 watts on up. Its maximum sustained input power is said to be 50 watts.

The Hookup

As with all the speakers taking part in this challenge, I requested that the Atom be finished in black and that I receive five identical speakers - no matching centers or surrounds. In a five-speaker configuration, the Atoms will run you \$995 retail. Not bad. I set the Atoms up in my new reference room, **which was built from the ground up by yours truly**, featuring a **120-inch acoustically transparent screen from Elite Screens**, as well as a SIM2 Nero single-chip DLP. The front three Atoms were placed (decoupled) atop my three JBL Cinema 3677 commercial loudspeakers and connected to Emotiva's UPA-700 multi-channel amplifier via 12-gauge bulk cable from Binary, a Snap AV company. The rear two Atoms were mounted to my ceiling using an articulated mount from Monoprice. These were connected to the same Emotiva amp, utilizing the same type of speaker cable. This setup was identical to that of my earlier Aperion test, as it will be for my RBH test, which is pending.



The Emotiva UPA-700 amp was then connected to my reference **Integra DHC 80.2 AV pre amp** via analog interconnects from Monoprice. Source components included Oppo's new universal disc player, **the BDP-103**, as well as **Dune's HD-Max media streamer**. For bass, I utilized the wonderful **SVS SB13-Ultra subwoofer**, which I EQ'ed using Room EQ Wizard, with filters applied to the signal via my trusty Behringer Feedback Destroyer Pro. Connections for the SVS sub to and from the Behringer and then later to my Integra were handled via balanced interconnects from Monoprice.

For comparison's sake, the system remained largely the same for my commercial setup, with only the amplifiers having to change. For amplification to my JBL 3677s, I utilized two Parasound Halo amps, the A31 (three-channel) and the A21 (two-channel). The amps were connected to my Integra via balanced interconnects from Monoprice, with everything else remaining the same.

No automatic equalization in the form of Audyssey or the like was applied at any time, nor was it needed, as my room is treated using **GIK Acoustic products**. I don't put a lot of stock in break-in, though I did let the Atoms play for a spell in order to make sure they were all level-matched and crossed over properly before beginning any critical evaluations.

Performance

I typically begin my evaluations of any product with some two-channel music, but since the goal of this review was to see how the Atoms fared in a multi-channel setup, I dove right in and began my tests by watching some movies. Beginning with a favorite of mine, National Treasure (Disney), I noticed straight away that the Atom's high-frequency performance was one of surprising vigor. This isn't to suggest that it was in any way harsh, but rather that it was far more defined and articulate than I was expecting. There was an incredible amount of detail present in the Atom's high-frequency performance that simply caught me off-guard. While I've encountered "airier" tweeters, what the Atom possessed for less than \$200 per speaker was remarkable.

When pushed (make that punished), the tweeter was not unflappable, and could become brittle and flat at the extreme (think mid 90s in terms of dB), but within its comfort zone, it was surprising. The added top-end detail acted more or less like punctuation on large dynamic swings, such as explosions and/or gunfire. It also aided the Atom's spatial definition and delineation, two other elements that were also exceptional. Dialog was clear and intelligible, not to mention appropriately weighted and solid in its scale. The Atom's natural tone served the individual actors well and, despite not being a full-range speaker, its overall texture was one of mass, providing a full-bodied sound all the way to the customary THX crossover point of 80Hz. I couldn't detect any port noise or cabinet resonances with the Atoms, which is rather impressive, given their modest price - a testament for sure to Paradigm's manufacturing prowess. The resulting five-speaker soundstage was one of seamless beauty and excellence with regard to accuracy and ambient detail. When played back at near-cinema levels, the resulting five-speaker performance was wholly enjoyable and very convincing.

Moving on, I cued up Ridley Scott's retelling of Robin Hood (Universal), starring Russell Crowe. I chaptered ahead to the film's climatic battle on the beach. Once again, it was the Atom's high-frequency performance that struck me first, as the sequence's swordplay rang true. Via the Atom's tweeter, metal on metal contact sounded like metal and was violent to boot, as it should be. There was a touch of sibilance at the extremes and a faint ringing when pushed too hard but, all in all, when kept within limits, the Atom's high-frequency performance was impressive. Speaking of limits, I found the Atoms to be comfortable all the way up to 90dB and a few clicks over. Much beyond that and things began to come apart, but not dramatically so. And if you're at all worried that 90dB or, say, 95dB peaks aren't enough, I assure you they are, for at that volume, you're definitely stirring more than just your soul, if you catch my drift. Even at these higher volumes, the Atom remained very composed and comfortable, making longtime listening sessions a delight rather than a chore. Dynamically, I found the Atoms to be startling, as I simply wasn't expecting them to be as bombastic as they were. To say that the Atoms are capable of big sound is an understatement. Moreover, the effect of having five identical speakers cannot be undersold, as the seamless portrayal of space in a 360-degree circle is a thing of utter beauty, something the Atoms not only get right but do so at a price point I feel many can justify. For such diminutive speakers, the Atoms again proved to be quite adept at recreating a convincing cinema experience.

Satisfied with the Atoms' recreation of big-budget action films, I opted for something a bit more delicate in the form of the Clint Eastwood drama Trouble With the Curve (Warner Bros.). Focusing my attention on the film's dialog track, the first thing I noted was the Atoms' dispersion. A single Atom, I felt, did a better job in covering lateral space than most center channels do with their (largely) horizontal configuration. This dispersion meant that dialog tracked true with the actors on screen as they moved left to right, rather than merely residing somewhere in a sort of vague middle area. Having three identical speakers up front (the way commercial cinemas do) meant that the sound was seamless speaker to speaker, which is a big deal, as there are often subtle scale and tone changes when employing a dedicated center. Some are more susceptible to these changes than others, but nevertheless, they're present. Dialog on the whole felt true to the actors' natural tones and timbres, and it even matched their visual scale on screen, which can be difficult when your visuals span 10 feet, yet your speakers are smaller than a shoebox. Still, the Atom was exemplary in this regard, besting even a costlier competitor that I had on hand but that wasn't a part of this experiment. I also noted that the Atoms' handling of the film's score was nicely nuanced and well-balanced in its portrayal. While I've experienced the Atoms doing their best bigscreen rendition of the real cinema experience, it's nice to see they possess a delicacy, too, one that is exciting, albeit on a far more intimate scale.

Because I know many of you will want to know, I didn't end my evaluation of the Atoms with Trouble With the Curve. Instead, I ended my evaluation with some two-channel music, only I went ahead kept all five Atoms active, opting for Dolby's ProLogic II Music DSP for playback. While this may confound a few purists out there, I'm of the mind that if you have the technology and it works, why not benefit from it? Does the Atom image well? Yes, brilliantly so. Does it have a good soundstage? Again, yes. But neither does a pair of Atoms, nor any other two discrete speakers, hold a candle to what is possible when five are applied. On its own, the Atom definitely has its limitations; it's not altogether that bass-heavy and, as a result, its lower midrange can seem a bit anemic and its treble more pronounced. However, with a sub and when given a format such as ProLogic II to chew on, things change, dramatically so. Adele's track "Set Fire to the Rain" off her album 21 (Columbia) becomes positively epic in its grandeur and scale in PLII, but never at the expense of the Atom's natural abilities. The same was true for the song "Hook" off Blues Traveler's breakout album Four (A&M). The Atoms were lively and snappy and provided for a fun and engaging listening experience, which is really the goal, isn't it? Ending with a bit of teen pop, I cued up Conor Maynard's "Vegas Girl" (Parlophone). I'm sorry, but with the song's driving bass and snappy chorus playing at 90dB in PLII, I really do question some people's need for more. More what? If you look past its diminutive size, modest price and Everyman appeal, and instead focus on just enjoying yourself, the Atom is truly as good as you need it to be. When properly set up (this is a big factor), I think it is capable of shocking even the most devout true believers.

While five matching Atoms were requested for big screen, cinematic viewing - a test they passed with flying colors - the fact that they're equally enjoyable for multi-channel/two-channel music is but icing on the proverbial cake.

The Downside

My reference room is but 11 feet wide by 23 feet deep, with eight-foot ceilings. It resides on the second floor of my home and opens up to a stairwell just behind my primary listening position. In many respects, it is both a large room and a small one. The Atom was "enough speaker" to fill my space convincingly, but those who simply want to achieve true cinematic volume levels will more than likely need to step up to either Paradigm's Mini Monitor or perhaps to their costlier Studio 20 bookshelf speakers.

The Atom comes pre-drilled with two small holes to facilitate wall or ceiling mounts. Stands or mounts will be required in order to extract the best performance from the Atoms in either a two or multi-channel configuration. This of course adds to the speaker's overall price, though not prohibitively so, if you're a smart shopper. Lastly, the Atom's angled binding posts can make it difficult to connect non-banana-terminated speaker cables.

Competition and Comparisons

The obvious competition for the Paradigm Atom has to be the [Aperion Intimus 5B that I've already reviewed](#). The two are more evenly matched than either manufacturer would probably be willing to admit, but that doesn't make them the same. Not by a long shot. Other notable contenders include [Bowers & Wilkins 686](#), [HSU Research HB-1 MK2](#) and [Infinity's Primus 163](#). For more on these and other comparable bookshelf speakers, please visit [Home Theater Review's Bookshelf Speaker page](#).

Conclusion

So, once again, I set out to see if an affordable two-way bookshelf speaker could live up to and recreate a scaled-down version of a true cinema experience in one's own home. This is a test the Paradigm Atom Monitor speaker passed with flying colors. For less than a grand for a five Atom surround sound setup, I found it not only hugely satisfying, but utterly surprising just how much performance the little Atom packed for so little money. While there were aspects of its performance, mainly in the high frequencies and low bass, which could become troublesome if not handled properly and played back at the appropriate volume, these shouldn't discredit or take anything away from the Atom's all-round capabilities. This is why I consider the Atom to be not only a great speaker, but a leader among its peers.

