

Paradigm Cinema 100 CT 5.1 Speaker Package Review

What's an inch or two between friends?

Introduction

In a world positively awash with compact sub/sat packages, there is little to raise the eyebrow when another comes to the market place. However, when the brand in question is Paradigm and the price tag is a whisker under £1000, it should cause at least a twitch of the supra ocular facial fluff. This is not their natural hunting ground, multi driver array floor standers and megawatt subwoofers, being the staples on which their reputation is built.

More than a few high end manufacturers have introduced models to prop up the bottom of their range and ended up with models that are, in performance terms, little more than somewhere to mount their badge. Paradigm have already dipped their toe in the micro sub/sat market with the Millenia package, reviewed here a few months back and did so with qualified aplomb. But that package weighed in at a total of £3000 pounds, the satellites alone accounting for £300 each. The Cinema 100 CT system, under review here, slashes the entry level into the Paradigm stable by 66% and yet incorporates larger speakers, so it should be interesting.

Summary

There are an increasing number of very competent, well finished compact sub/sat systems on the

Paradigm Cinema 100 CT



Reviewed 15th June, 2012 by Russell Williams

market, each having to eke out it's own niche, if it's not to submerge beneath a sea of the 'also very good'. On the face of it, the Paradigm Cinema 100 CT looks par for the course, with all the increasingly usual features. Glossy finish, multiple mounting options, etc., are all present and correct. It doesn't even have the headline grabbing monster subwoofer power that Paradigm - above all - are renowned for and clearly, other people have managed to do smaller for the price, or less.

That would be to entirely miss the opportunity that Paradigm have provided here. If you can get away with slightly larger satellites, if you can get away with a subwoofer that doesn't need to slide behind your sofa, then here is a package that actually delivers a sound that feels like the floorstanding loudspeakers that you've already decided you can't shoe horn into your room. The scale of sound this package delivers is epic, relative to the real estate it asks you to give up to accommodate it. It's not going to give you a spotlight on musical nuance, or studio recording techniques like £1k of studio monitor, but neither will any other 5.1 package for the money, any more than that pair of monitors will deliver sub 30Hz performance across five main channels.

No, the Cinema 100 CT will work happily with any decent AV receiver, it will make the most of the power on offer, it will move the room when asked and will do it all in a seamless blend between all of the speakers. Crucially, it will feel bigger and more exciting with movies, whilst sounding more complete with music than it peers, whose form may be bound by their function.

The Cinema 100 CT successfully trades a slight compromise in size, for a lot less of a compromise in performance and so should you. Forget the paper figures and go audition it if you're in this market, or spend the rest of your life wondering what if?

Scores	N/A	Very Poor	Poor	Average	Good	Excellent	Reference
Build quality	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Connectivity	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Ease of use	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Audio - movies	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Audio - music	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Power handling	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Value for money	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Overall	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

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Key Features

- ▶ Compact 5.1 system
- ▶ Flexible mounting options
- ▶ Full Paradigm sound

Pros

- ▶ Superb, full scale, room filling sound
- ▶ Multiple satellite mounting options
- ▶ Well made

Cons

- ▶ Not the smallest
- ▶ Only in black



The rather tall box that contains the Paradigm Cinema 100 CT package, is a layered affair. Clam shells of thick polystyrene hold the Cinema Subwoofer at the base, the five Cinema Satellite speakers in the middle, with the top deck housing the sundries, such as nuts, bolts and mounting feet. Having maintained my customary level of ignorance prior to the products arrival, I was surprised that not only were shelf mounting feet supplied, but also adjustable wall mounting brackets for four of the satellites. I chose the injection moulded, shelf mounting feet, to expedite setup and having screwed them on with a single cap head allen bolt, immediately had to take them off again. This is because they cover the sprung, chrome steel, cable terminals, a small hole in the upright of the foot being provided for cable access. This hole, plus the size of the terminals themselves, won't accept much more than a typical figure of eight 79 strand cable. That said, at this price point, there really is no need for boutique wire, so that's just fine. The centre speaker departs from it's otherwise identical siblings by having a non-attached, curved plate upon which to rest and this proved very versatile. The centre speaker could be laid flat, stood upright and pointed up or down, just by turning the foot around or shifting the speaker within the curved radius of the foot's upper surface.



The Cinema 100 satellites are, I would say, at the top end in terms of size for their breed. They're not that much smaller than the smallest of what qualifies as a 'real' speaker these days, but the soft curves of their cabinets does much to shrink their visual impact further. The cabinet is a two part polymer injection moulding, finished in gloss black the overall shape of which, is easier to see, than it is to describe. Suffice to say, it feels very solid, without being excessively heavy and inert to the non scientific knuckle-rap test.

One big advantage all composite and, for that matter, aluminium cabinets have, is that compared to MDF they're quite thin. This really does maximise the volume contained within and in turn, this has a knock on effect in terms of the speaker's efficiency. More air is easier to squash than a lesser volume and so, for a given driver, less of your amplifier's Watts are lost in doing so. Likewise, the extra volume allows for a bigger mid/bass driver, which in turn shifts more air for a given input and it's here that the Cinema 100 scores over much of its natural competition as it sports a full 102mm (4" for colonials) main driver. The mineral loaded, polypropylene cone is suspended from a pressed steel basket and has a near 100mm diameter ferrite magnet to motivate its 25mm voice coil. The tweeter, is a variant of the 25mm S-PAL dome that we have seen in the MilleniaOne and like that tweeter, it's behind a fine mesh guard, sitting at the throat of a shallow waveguide. The waveguide both aids and controls dispersion of the tweeters output and as it causes the tweeter to be slightly recessed, helps time align it with the mid/bass driver. The waveguide is formed in the single sheet of rubber that covers the entire baffle and therefore, the driver mountings and in turn provides the recesses for the locating pins of the fabric grill. The grill itself is an unremarkable fabric stretched over plastic affair, but was acoustically benign in use, there not being much of it to have any really deleterious effects.



The Cinema Subwoofer is, if not in shape, a convincing match in terms of the finishes applied. The gloss black MDF end cheeks, sandwich a non removable fabric wrap that covers all bar the rear panel of the cabinet. On the rear is a basic set of controls, with the continuously variable gain and crossover controls, plus a 0/180deg switchable phase and a On/Auto/Standby switch for mains power. Inputs are restricted to a pair of stereo RCA phono inputs, the right also being labelled LFE. Beneath all of this is a centrally mounted reversible power chord socket, which in turn is flanked by a pair of flared reflex ports. Amplifier power is quoted as 100W RMS/300W dynamic peak. The lack of heat sinking to dissipate heat, indicates that this is an amplifier of the now de rigueur PWM switching variety, generally incorrectly referred to as digital. This motive force is supplied to, what is described as, a high excursion 210mm co-polymer driver. I'll take Paradigm's word, because you can't see it as the grill is non removable.

To complete the picture, some chunky injection moulded feet are supplied for the bottom of the cabinet, which you can choose to fit or not. Neither option will be particularly kind to you shag pile, but after marker spikes could be procured cheaply enough to fit the provided screw holes for the feet, if you feel so inclined. I should also note that this is the first Paradigm subwoofer I've reviewed that can't make use of the Paradigm Perfect Bass Kit. For the £350 the Cinema Sub would retail at, it's a stretch too far to include the level of DSP such a feature would require. It's also extremely unlikely that anybody spending £350 on a subwoofer, would spend £300 on EQ, so you will have to rely on an external device, or the room correction provided by your AV Receiver.



Setup

As mentioned, I initially went with the bolt on feet for the satellites as I have ample shelving at approximately 600mm off my floor. The stands impart a slight upward tilt and the clever yet simple centre speaker stand allowed me to stand the centre Cinema 100 upright. The rears, placed slightly higher than the fronts, were fired as much forward as in, this creating a more seamless pan of effects up the sides of the room. The subwoofer was placed on the floor, just inside of the left front speaker. Amplification was courtesy of an Anthem MRX 700 and my usual Audiolab/Cinepro processor/power amp pairing.

In the case of the Anthem, all channels were EQ'd using the on board ARC room correction, with Audiolab/Cinepro pair using EQ on the subwoofer channel alone, courtesy of a Behringer FBQ1000 Feedback Destroyer. I did note that in the process of setting up and refining position that the Cinema 100 satellites provided a smooth in room response, with the before/after graphs provided by the ARC programme differing little, subwoofer channel excepted. Of course, your room may vary, but the shallow waveguide of the tweeter, as with all controlled dispersion designs I have tested, seems to go a long way to controlling the input of adjacent room boundaries through the midrange. Equally, the higher crossover forced by small satellites, pushes most of the potential bottom end issues into the passband of the subwoofer, which is an easier, effective EQ proposition. This bodes well for repeating the experience of the package as whole in different rooms. Within reason.



Listening

As one might expect, the benefits of five identical speakers are as manifest here, as they are in any package so blessed. As long as none of the mounting positions differs significantly in terms of the closest wall, or height, then it's quite easy for the speakers to do an audible disappearing act, sounds panning smoothly around the room, sliding from speaker to speaker without a noticeable point of transition from one to the other. The Cinema 100 package passes this test with ease, but also manages the slightly trickier transition to the subwoofer in a slightly more solid fashion than it's smaller counterparts.

It's not that the smaller packages (that I've tested) suffer from a dip in the frequency response in the crucial crossover region - modern package subs have come on in leaps and bounds in recent years and can reach the frequencies lacking from small satellites with ease these days. No, it's more a case of the mid/bass drivers of the satellites having sufficient radiating area to add dynamic impact in this region and above, which also tends to result in slightly more natural warmth to the sound as volume increases. It's a small addition, but one that elevates a sub/sat package from making a good fist of emulating a larger set of speakers, to actually *feeling* like a larger set of speakers. This is probably more important with music, than it is with movies. The frenzy of a movie soundtrack can often gloss over small gaps in performance, which the extended tonal range of musical instruments will more readily expose.

Spinning the multichannel SACD of Jeff Wayne's 'Musical War of the Worlds' was nothing short of astonishing from the off. Richard Burton's sonorous narration was full and textured, where smaller satellites might emphasize the husky grit of his voice, thus ignoring the benefits wrought by a lifetime of hard living, delivering it's natural richness and warmth. With the seamless contribution of the left and right Cinema 100s blending the acoustic with the rock solid image of the centre, it was a palpable presence in the room.

The Cinema Sub should be lauded here, as it not only failed to to mark itself out with unwelcome waffle, but proceeded to lend ample weight the the opening bars



of the orchestra with a fine texture to the massed strings.

However, the combination of the Cinema Sub and Cinema 100 satellites really showed their combined metal, with the introduction of the rock band overlaying the orchestra. The extra dynamic capabilities the larger mid/bass drivers of the satellites deliver in the upper bass, really delivered the drums with a punch and snap, accelerating the piece from the dramatic, but stately swell of the opening bars.

As we're touching on the Cinema Sub, it's worth noting that it's a unit that plays to its strengths, somehow sidestepping its budget limits. Now, with a mere eight inches of driver and only 100W of continuous rated output, I was fully expecting to have to be polite about it, especially as it would be hard to expunge from memory the heights scaled by the various Paradigms I've had through my room. However, as no compact sub, beyond the mega bucks offerings, is going to even touch the low 20Hz region in an audible, never mind tactile way, the Cinema 100 doesn't bother trying. Further more, by going ported, Paradigm have wrung extra efficiency and significant output into the 30Hz region, output dropping off rapidly below this point. In practice, your room will likely extend the effective roll off a touch, but it's fair to say that it sounds just as deep as more powerful sealed subs, even if it doesn't quite tickle the measurement microphone with what will be inaudible decibels in the real world of a movie soundtrack.

Deep basso drops fade out without any nasty quacks or wobbles, so the inbuilt protection is up to scratch and only the most sustained of loud effects cause it to run out of the peak power that otherwise delivers significant hits to the room. This is not damning with faint praise as no sub £400 subwoofer of this size can deliver more. Anyway, in the context of a sub/sat system, this is all less important than reaching up to and blending with the satellites to deliver the illusion of a much larger system and this has already been established as a job well done.



Tonally, the Cinema 100 satellites tread the familiar Paradigm balance of being pretty much neutral, with just a hint of top end lift to provide a bit of sparkle, whilst remaining impeccably clean. It is very hard to provoke the Cinema 100s into sounding nasty, even if you throw an edgy '80s CD transfer at them. This is in part, a result of the fact that the package as a whole has been designed to work with more modest components than say the MilleniaOne package, which tends to be more ruthlessly revealing of the signal chain. As a result, where the MilleniaOne system (whilst perhaps slightly lacking the warmth on offer here) can really scale the heights of vocal expression, the Cinema 100 CT package treads a slightly less informative middle ground, with ample scale and impact, but not the forensic detail that tells two violins with different strings apart. There's still plenty to keep the interest up though; early on in War of the Worlds, the effect of one of the Martian cylinders unscrewing is grindingly metallic and when the top hits the ground, it does so with an effective, room moving thud. The Cinema 100 CT paints the broad brush strokes in a full and effective manner, with only the minutiae eluding it.

