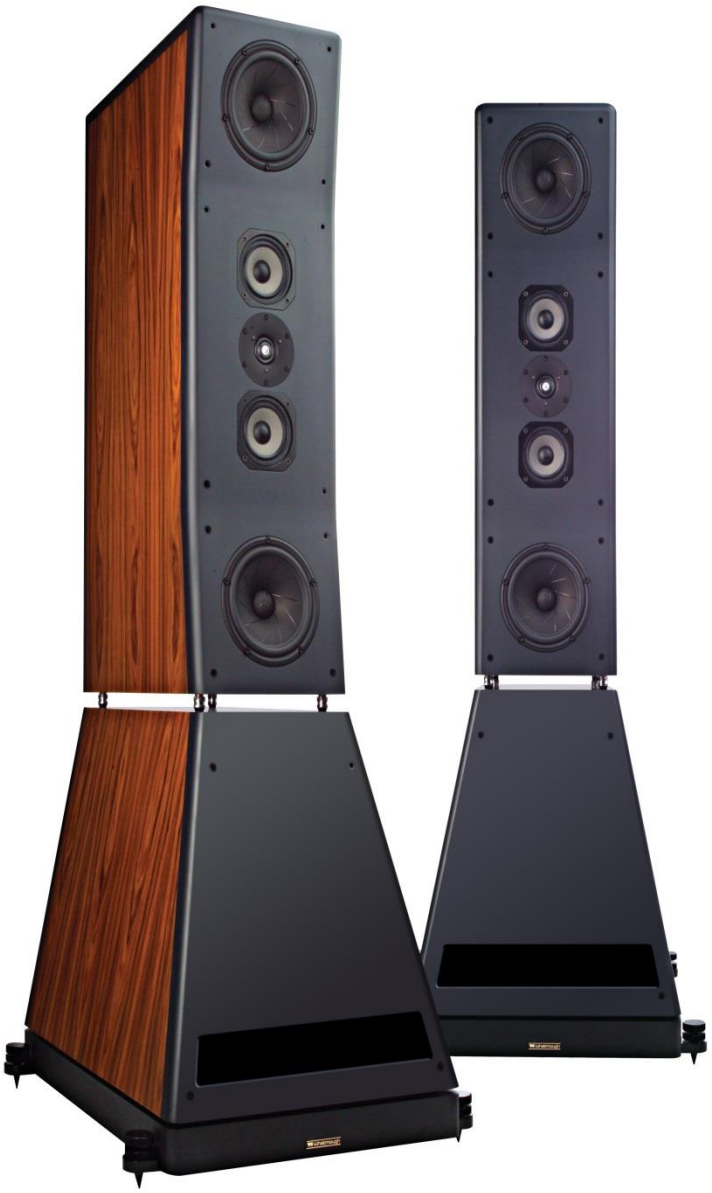
WHATMOUGH

PARAGON LOUDSPEAKERS



Colin Whatmough is no doubt hoping his Paragon loudspeakers will emulate the enviable success and longevity of their famous namesake, the Paragon loudspeaker system developed by Richard Ranger in 1957 for the Lansing Company (later to become JBL.)

At the time the world's most expensive loudspeaker, JBL'S Paragon remained in continuous production right up to 1983, when it was discontinued in favour of the Everest. Notice that I am using the singular to describe the speaker. JBL'S Paragon was a single, very large cabinet nearly three metres wide, so it didn't look dissimilar to a drinks cabinet, except that it was curved, and contained multiple loudspeakers.

The Equipment

Whatmough's Paragon stand 1.57 metres tall, are 630mm wide and 720mm deep. Each cabinet weights 125kgs. Sensibly, given the size and weight, the Paragon speakers come in four parts: two active, sealed enclosure sub-bass driver and a 240 watt power amplifier, and two passive enclosures, each containing a pair of

175mm diameter sliced-paper bass drivers, a pair of 100mm diameter poly-glass coned midrange drivers and a 35mm diameter (yep, you read the right, thirty-five millimetre diameter) dual-concentric diaphragm tweeter.

I wasn't overly surprised to find this tweeter on the Paragon – it's appearing on high-end designs right around the world and is immediately recognisable thanks to its wave-guide centre plug. As a stand-alone component, it's equally recognisable because of its unusually large neodymium magnet. (During listening sessions, it's also instantly recognisable because of its super-extended frequency response, which runs out to beyond 40 kHz.)

The passive drivers are contained in the smaller enclosures, which sit above the sub-bass enclosure. Each of these enclosures is divided internally into discrete volumes to avoid destructive interference caused by the radiation from the rear of the cones. Also inside these enclosures are two of the crossovers that are essential to the performance of the Paragons. These are, as with all Whatmough's high-end loudspeakers, not only handcrafted, but also hard-wired. Whatmough uses different types of capacitors in different series loudspeakers. Inside the Paragons it's strictly and exclusively Hovland territory, using that company's top-line film/foil capacitors. All internal wiring is the purest' 'six-nines' copper, which exits the cabinet via Cardas binding posts whose copper base is plated first with silver and then with rhodium.

What about the other two crossovers? They're external, using the revolutionary 'Neville Theile Method' or 'NTM' crossover circuitry invented and patented by none other than the legendary Australian speaker designer Neville Thiele, the electronics engineer who, along with Dr. Richard Small, gave his name to the famous Theile/Small equations that are used by all loudspeakers manufacturers when designing their loudspeakers. The NTM crossovers handle the critical transition point between the powered 305mm diameter sub-bass driver and the two passive 175mm diameter bass drivers.

When the Paragons were first developed, Whatmough was paying license fees for the NTM crossovers, but following the incredible popularity of the design (we're talking serious back-order territory!) came the news that Whatmough had merged with Whise Acoustics, which was responsible for the NTM licensing. The merger not only gives Whatmough unfettered access to Neville Theile's NTM circuitry, but also to the incredible Parametric Acoustic Modelling (PAM) technology developed by Whise's Graeme Fettling and Graham Huon. This technology has been used to great success in Whise's award-winning range of hi-fi, home theatre and professional cinema subwoofers, and gained the enthusiastic endorsement of sound professionals around the world, including none other than Tomlinson Holman (The 'TH' in THX).

Australian HI-FI's review pair of Paragons had an impressive Santos Palisander timber finish that seemed all the more spectacular because of the imposing size of the Paragon. (A high-gloss version of this veneer is also available.) However, despite their size, the unusual shape of the Paragons means they don't appear to the eye as bulky as their dimensions might indicate. The top cabinets, for example, are relatively narrow, at just 285mm wide and 545mm deep. It's the overall width and depth of the base of the sub-bass enclosure that skew the figures to the high side. Needless to say, the sub-bass enclosure, with its two solid steel support struts, is a major contributor to the overall weigh of each loudspeaker.

Listening Sessions

Positioning the Paragon is no job for the faint of heart (or the weak at knee), but it's also not particularly difficult, thanks to the fact that both cabinets are infinite baffle enclosures, which means no pesky bass reflex ports(s) to complicate the procedure. As with any large floor-standing loudspeakers, the Paragons perform at their best when operated well out into the room space, at least a meter away from both side and rear walls. It will also help if you have high ceilings so you don't get any early first-reflections from the tweeters. When I was moving one of the Paragons, it managed to draw blood (literally) when I inadvertently cut my finger on a sharp edge on the Whatmough logo, which is carved into a sheet of Perspex that was inset into the rear panel. Normally I'd suggest that you, too, should be careful not to cut yourself except that when I mentioned this minor incident to Colin Whatmough, he assured me he'd take care of it on all future models.

Blood wasn't the only bodily fluid the Paragon managed to extract from your long-suffering reviewer. The music that issued from them also managed to bring tears to my eyes. Yes! This is how music should sound. The quality was so exceptionally good that I was immediately painfully aware that mere words would not be able to do justice to the Paragons and I'd go about explaining the sound quality. Could I simply say that the Paragons sound magnificent, and leave it at that? Tempting, very tempting, but the easy way out, so consider the following a poor attempt at translating my listening experiences into print.

The phenomenal attack and precision of the bass turned Dean Peer's performance of Lord's Tundra ('Ucross', Redstone RR91012) into a jaw-dropping contest. Not only is his superb rasguedo technique exhibited to perfection, but also contrasted beautifully against the low detuned D (37.6Hz) played simultaneously. Peer also plays deliberate string harmonics on this piece and I can say that I've never before heard them so clearly, not the harmonics so well-balanced as I did on the Paragons. Play this track in a showroom and the sheer musical excitement that's generated will have everyone within earshot coming over to listen.

Superb delivery of higher harmonics was also in plain evidence when I listened to Dick Hyman's piano on 'Topsy, from 'Age of Swing' (Reference RR59D). On most speakers, the higher harmonics of the top notes of his piano are recessed – almost muted – whereas with the Paragons their volume and clarity was astonishing. This ability to reveal previously unheard subtleties in recordings was again proved beyond doubt when I listened to Sara K's History Repeats Itself (Chesky JD105) – you can hear perfectly how engineer Bob Katz has placed drummer Gary Burke in a completely different acoustic environment, contrasting oddly with Sara K's close-miked voice.

Low bass is enormously difficult to get right, but whatmough's done so with these Paragons. Listen to Bill Stuve's double-bass on Rollin & Tumblin' (Audioquest AQ-CD1027) and you'll find that not only will you be able to hear the pitch of each note the instant it's played, but you'll also hear the rich, warm, 'stringy' tone every time, despite each note's short duration. This is the ultimate in bass 'musicality'. It's exceptional performance.

That the delivery of correct piano sound is glorious right across the frequency range was clearly audible listening to Herbie Hancock playing with Airto Moreira and the Gods of Jazz ('Killer Bees' B&W Music BW041). Again there was the rich musical warmth of the bass, the sonorities of the highest harmonics and across the midrange, the full 'power' of a big grand in full flight.

From there it was on to Lady Blacksmith Mambazo, with the rich resonances of the voice issuing loud and clear, but particularly noticeable was the clarity and realism of the stamping and clapping, which generated the same excitement as their live performances. Human voice Is also uncannily rendered on 'Evidence' (ABC Jazz 981 857 4) a fabulously-recorded CD by the a *capella* group The Idea of North (though) joined on this CD by multi-instrumentalist James Morrison on two tracks). Close your eyes and you will be able to imagine this vocal quartect is right in front of you.

Solo vocals are equally true to life. Listen to Janis Ian's voice on Unreleased 3 (Rude Girls), or Diana Krall on 'All for you' (Justin Time JTR8458). Ian's breathily voiced vocal on Forever Blue is immensely intimate, and the sound of her fingers shifting on the guitar strings is sensationally pure, not to mention completely realistic. And if you don't think low bass matters when reproducing the sound of six-string acoustic guitar, listen to the infrasonics Ian produces whenever she deliberately slap (or inadvertently knocks) the body of her guitar as she plays! The Krall recording is for the most part poorly recorded, in my opinion, but notable nonetheless for the way the Paragons are able to demonstrate the vocal peculiarities Krall exhibits on this CD: listen to the way her tone alters as she twists her mouth when articulating particular words and syllables.

I turned up the volume on *Ravel's Piano* Concerto in G major fresh from having heard the same work performed at the Sydney Opera House a few days earlier. Listening to the performance via Whatmough's Paragons, it really seemed like I was back in row 25, enjoying the full weight of the powerful SSO string section and the thunderous percussion. Yet even at these ff levels, the sound of a single triangle was still able to cut through the sound of the orchestra to spin-tingling effect.

As you've probably gathered, there wasn't a single aspect of performance Paragons do not deliver extraordinarily well, but if I were to asked to identify a single trait that lifts their performance above that of other state-of-the-art designs from other manufacturers, it would be their continuity of tonality across the entire audible range: the sound is just 'there', fully-formed and wonderfully realistic, and it's a hugely desirable characteristic that is not at all subtle: It will leap out at you in the first few seconds of an audition.

Conclusion

Just a few minutes after I'd started listening to the Whatmough Paragons for the first time, I wanted to buy them …. So I am prepared to bet that anyone who hears them will feel exactly the same way

greg borrowman