Paradigm

tone ★★★★⯪

Atom Monitor
Standmount Speakers $499

Trends

tone ★★★★☆

TA-10 Class T Amplifier $329
UD-10 Digital-To-Analogue Converter $299

The Atom was a marvellous character from the golden age of comics, a little guy who gained superhuman strength when he was exposed to radiation. The Paradigm Atom Monitors and their oriental sidekicks, on the other hand, have been imbued with a superpower that allows them to sound bigger and more vital than anyone would believe possible from such small, inexpensive packages.

Paradigm's Atom Monitors arrived at *Tone*'s offices along with the unfeasibly tiny Class T amplifier and USB DAC from Hong Kong-based Trends Audio. The intention was to review them as a complete stereo system, but we also wanted to see if they could transcend the lowly sound of computer audio and deliver hi-fi quality to the desktop.

The Atoms were swiftly set up and their finish immediately impressed, with a neat dark vinyl wrap that contrasts nicely with the familiar yellow Monitor series drivers. Not everyone will appreciate the way they look sans grilles, but pop the grilles on and hey presto, an understated appearance that will offend few.

Next out of the box were the amp and DAC. Tiny DACs are nothing new; after all, every MP3 player has a DAC chip somewhere inside. But Trends Audio must have some cunning designers on staff to cram an amplifier into a box little bigger than a chubby cigarette packet. The TA-10 is related to the giant-killing Sonic Impact T amp, much beloved of budget audiophiles everywhere, being based on a similar Tripath chip, which operates in ultra-efficient class D mode (class T designation notwithstanding).

Unlike the plastic Sonic Impact amp, the Trends units are built into basic but reasonably attractive aluminium housings, with good quality sockets and sturdy multi-way binding posts. Ten watts isn't much grunt at all but partnered with efficient speakers the TA-10 does the business, with a refined yet dynamic sound that makes little sense given its cost and size. Admittedly, there are excellent, feature-rich conventional amps available from industry leaders like Cambridge Audio and NAD for not much more moolah, but they're different beasts, being visually more impressive but way too big to use on a desk, and many would argue that the class T amps sound as good if not better.

There's a degree of audio tweaking available at a computer level for real geeks, but if that's not your scene, setting up the DAC is as difficult as plugging in a USB cable and feeding it with a selection of good quality MP3 and AAC files from a laptop. This gives a composed sound that will see off many an entry-level CD player. Despite disappearing behind a copy of *Tone*, the Atoms' diminutive cabinets carry a 5.5-inch bass/midrange driver, a size more often found on much bigger speakers, and it helps with low frequency extension, which is an obvious concern with speakers this small.

Even Paradigm's miniature atomic marvels can't rewrite the laws of physics, so they won't generate stomach-churning lows or fill up big rooms. But placed close to a wall, any bass anxiety I had quickly evaporated as track after track reminded me that tight bass is better than the warbling, unshapely kind any day. Their clear midrange and brisk, slightly metallic but not overly sharp treble combined with the warmth and detail of the TA-10 to create an exciting and involving synergy that was anything but boring, doing great things with music as varied as the rough but fantastic long lost rock tracks on Warren Zevon's *Preludes: Rare and Unreleased Recordings* to the beautifully recorded clarity of Nils Lofgren on *Acoustic Live*. This combination won't go loud enough for parties, but volume levels were more than adequate in a four by three metre room.

The Trends amp and DAC are a fine fit with the Atom Monitors and they work together to create a budget system that can transform desktop audio or stand alone as one of the nicest computer-based hi-fi systems I've yet encountered. These components aren't top-class hi-fi, but they are a generous serving of the high end for very little cash. ■ **BRETT GIDEON**

GET ON MY DESK BABY

Getting good hi-fi, car audio and portable audio is a doddle because modern components are so good, even at the entry level, so the final hideout of bad audio remains the desktop.

Many of us spend a disproportionate amount of time at our desks listening to computer-based music but we tend to be burdened with cheap computer speakers, run from computer sound cards, which have components that can best be described as inexpensive but are often afterthoughts.

There's an obvious issue with annoying fellow workers, but in a SOHO situation or the individual offices some of us serfs are lucky enough to have, there's no excuse for listening to awful audio, especially if you're there all the live long day. The following steps can help to raise your desktop music game:
• Use less compression – 320kbit/s is better than 128kbit/s and lossless is better still.
• Bypass nasty computer components with a good aftermarket sound card or an external USB DAC.
• Biff el cheapo speakers and use high-quality brand name amplified speakers. Even better, take the plunge and go with real hi-fi components.
• Micro and mini hi-fi systems with USB inputs can make for a cheap and cheerful option that may sound better than computer speakers, but hi-fi separates are likely to sound better still.

The kit in this test sounds fabulous as a budget hi-fi system in a reasonably sized room, but it absolutely comes into its own as a desktop system. Small as they are, the speakers dominate any desk they're placed on but their sound is so far removed from the lo-fi of most desktop audio setups that their presence is entirely justified.

The DAC is clearer and sounds less digitized than my laptop's sound card, and the smooth amp and punchy speakers in a nearfield setting are dynamite. There's real bass, plenty of rich detail, a wide soundstage and a sense of dynamics, musicality and scale that no computer speaker – not even the good ones – can capture. I use the excellent Bose aluminium Computer Desktop Monitor speakers on my desk and as good as they are, the Trends/Paradigm kit is in a different league.