

## Monitor Audio Radius HD Series 5.1 Speaker System Review



### Brad Copeland

Living in a condo in downtown Toronto, I am reminded every day of the many things we pass up in the name of convenience and location. A lawn, a deck, a BBQ, a backyard to throw the football in. All things that millions of others around the world like myself, have given up in order to live "in the heart of it all". The one thing I am not willing to compromise on though, is my entertainment system. This poses a unique challenge, rather unlike the rest of those posed by living in the close confines of modern urban dwellings. If you have a small living room, you can get a smaller couch, and it doesn't necessarily mean the couch will be any less comfortable. Unfortunately though, with a lot of AV gear, smaller usually equals "less awesome". Whether it's the level of immersion granted by a 100 inch screen filling your field of vision, or the floor shaking bass of an 18 inch subwoofer, there is often no substitute for going big. Renowned British speaker manufacturer Monitor Audio has attempted to address this unfortunate truth with their Radius HD series of speakers, a compact and contemporary line of freestanding towers, bookshelves, in-wall and in-ceiling speakers. Designed to faithfully reproduce today's high resolution audio sources while taking up as little space as possible, the Radius HD series promise to blend seamlessly with the decor in just about any room.

The 5.1-channel R270HD10 system which was sent to me for review comprised of two R270HD floorstanding towers (\$1299/pair), a pair of R90HD bookshelves (\$299 each), an R225HD centre channel (\$499) and an R370HD subwoofer (\$999). The total for this system added up to \$3395. The R370HD is the larger and more powerful model of the two subwoofers in the Radius HD series, offering a 10 inch Ceramic-Coated Aluminum Magnesium (C-CAM) driver and a 250 watt amplifier. Like the more expensive Silver RXW 12 subwoofer, it features a top-mounted panel with a dedicated volume knob and a switch to toggle between two EQ settings, one for films and another for music. The R270HD floorstanders feature dual 4 inch drivers, a 1 inch C-CAM tweeter and are a bass-reflex design, with one front and one rear-firing port. The R225HD, here positioned horizontally to act as a centre channel, features two of the same 4 inch drivers and a 1 inch C-CAM tweeter. These oblong speakers can also be mounted vertically beside a flat panel, using the included custom wall mount, to act as left and right channels. Monitor Audio also makes a larger version called the R250HD which features an extra port, extends a little lower and is designed to complement 50 inch or larger flat screens. The same C-CAM tweeter and driver are used in the R90HD bookshelves, but this time in a single driver configuration. The R90HD bookshelves come with a custom wall bracket, and a custom stand is available as well for those not able or not wishing to mount the brackets on walls.

My review system was sent in a finish Monitor Audio calls Rosemah, a rich, tasteful mixture of natural rosewood and mahogany. These cabinets are also available in piano black, glossy white, a silver lacquer and a natural walnut veneer. The finish and detailing on all six speakers was impeccable, with beautifully joined corners giving the appearance that the enclosures were sculpted from one solid block of wood. The design of the cabinets themselves was quite elegant, with soft, rounded corners and tasteful, low-profile grilles with just a hint of the gold coloured C-CAM tweeters visible beneath. Monitor Audio was kind enough to send a pair of the optional floor stands for the R90HD bookshelves. The stands feature a set of speaker wire binding posts at the base, with speaker wire run internally through the spine of the stand. One only has to loosen two screws on the speaker itself, slide the speaker onto the waiting pins on the top of the stand and then re-attach the retaining screws to the back of the speaker. Mounted on the stands, the bookshelves' tweeters resided just a few inches above the tweeters of the R270HD front stage, giving the whole system a very cohesive, balanced esthetic. Another nice touch I appreciated was the pivoting Monitor Audio logo on the R225HD centre channel, which can be rotated so that it is "right side up" regardless of whether the installation calls for the speaker to be positioned horizontally or vertically. After 20 minutes or so spent scrambling around disconnecting my reference Klipsch 7.1 system I slotted the Radius HD cabinets into place and stood back to admire what almost seemed to be someone else's living room! The degree to which the slender R270HD towers and compact sub opened up my room was astonishing. I saw portions of my walls I haven't seen in two years, and my 60 inch Pioneer plasma looked absolutely monstrous!

I fired up my reference Pioneer Elite SC-27 AV receiver and ran its Advanced MCACC room calibration software. It's worth noting that even though the R270HS fronts and R225HD centre have only 4 inch drivers, the MCACC system recognized them as "large" speakers, which speaks volumes to their low frequency extension. After making a few adjustments to the MCACC parameters, I ran the speakers steadily for several days allowing them to break in using both two and five channel sources. After I felt they had been sufficiently worked in, I ran the MCACC software again, made a few final tweaks and sat down with my stack of reference material. Starting out with the DTS-HD Master Audio track on the Watchmen Blu-ray disc, I was immediately struck by the clarity and crispness of the Radius HD's tweeters. Delicate high frequency sounds like the glass breaking as the Comedian goes through the window in the opening scene and the water rushing off Nite Owl's Owlship were extremely detailed, without being overbearing, sharp or piercing. The R225HD centre channel in particular impressed me, delivering true, natural sounding dialogue, without any of the characters sounding boxed-in or tinny. As I mentioned earlier, all the cabinets in this system share the same 4 inch driver and 1 inch tweeter, and that resulted in a very even, consistent soundfield, with panning sounds being extremely consistent and not changing in tone as they moved around the room. I tested this theory with the underground car chase scene in chapter 20 of Dark Knight on Blu-ray, which features gunshots striking an armored car which rapidly pan around the room as the camera changes angles. I was able to clearly place the bullet impacts around my head with no discernible negative change in tone as they panned around me. The R370HD subwoofer did a commendable job filling in the low end, unfalteringly reproducing the helicopter blades spooling up in the opening scene of Transformers on Blu-ray, a sound which starts out so low in tone it can easily render less capable subwoofers distorted, and in some cases even physically rattling. My mental opinion of the R370HD rose to exemplary when I considered its diminutive size. It measures only 15"x13"x13", as opposed to my reference Klipsch sub, also sporting a 10 inch driver, which measures 17"x14"x 19".

One of the things that I was most looking forward to, when I learned I would be doing this review, was the chance to really put the Radius HD system through its paces listening to multi-channel music. I slid the Anniversary Edition SACD of Pink Floyd's The Dark Side of the Moon into my PS3 with the intention of listening only to my favourite tracks, the way I usually do for reviews. By the time I was midway through the third track, "On the Run", with its swirling surround effects, I was completely captivated, and ended up lapping up the whole album, beginning to end. The level of detail the Radius HDs displayed, especially in the high frequencies, really brought the award-winning mix of music and effects present in this album to life. By the time I hit the saxophone solo in the middle of "Money" I was literally bobbing on my couch. I could hear a crisp bite and detailed vibrato to the sax notes in stark contrast with the mellow filtered guitar licks keeping time in the background, panning off to the sides of the expansive soundfield. When the 4/4 beat and guitar solo launched at 3:08, I was able to

fully appreciate the large dynamic range and presence of these speakers, and when the quiet passage started at around 3:52 and all the other instruments pulled back, the staccato guitar parts seemed to practically burst from the speakers while Nick Mason's lazy toms panned across the room.

Perhaps the greatest endorsement I could give the Radius HD series of speakers is to say that if I had been wearing a blindfold during testing, not once in a million years would I have guessed that these speakers were as small as they actually were. I found their performance to be impressive both with music and film, with a slight edge going to music, but that isn't really the point of speakers like these. Lots of companies make impressive-sounding speakers, but I can't say I have ever encountered a set of speakers that sounds this big while taking up this little space. Anyone whose "theatre room" occasionally has to pull duty as a regular living room (i.e. most of us) owes it to themselves to consider the Radius HD when looking for a set of compact, but only in size, speakers.

**Manufacturer:**

Monitor Audio

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