

“ ... **FLAWLESS** ... utterly pure ...
completely transparent ... beautifully articulated ...
... **MAGNIFICENT** ... ”

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“ ... *state-of-the-art bookshelf classic ... the benchmark by which other such speakers should be judged.* ”



by Doug Schneider

Paradigm loudspeakers and the words “high value” seem to go hand in hand—likely the result of the company carving out an enviable niche in the audio world by designing, manufacturing, and selling relatively inexpensive speakers that offer quite an extraordinary level of performance. I know—I’ve reviewed a good number of Paradigm speakers—from the entry-level Atom, to the mid-level Monitor 5, to the cutting-edge Reference Active/40, and most recently the Reference Studio 20, which is amazingly good-sounding.

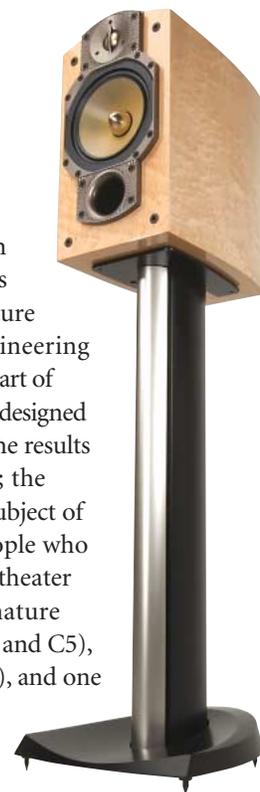
But while everyone wants value, not everyone wants a budget-priced loudspeaker. As a result, there has been, for as long as I’ve been reviewing speakers, a segment of the audio market clamoring for something more from Paradigm—as in *more ambitious* and *more expensive*. Enter Paradigm’s newest line, Signature, the company’s response to those audiophiles who have been waiting for Paradigm to pull out the stops.

SIGNATURE SPEAKERS

According to Scott Bagby, Paradigm’s head of research and development as well as company co-owner, Signature represents an “all-out engineering effort” for Paradigm. Every part of every Signature speaker was designed specifically for the series. The results are the top-of-the-line S8; the middle-range S4; and the subject of this review, the S2. For people who want to complete a home-theater system, there are two Signature center-channel models (C3 and C5), one surround model (ADP), and one hefty new subwoofer (the Signature Servo), which has a 1200W amp that is said to put out 4500W (!) peaks.

SIGNATURE STYLE

I praised the Studio 20 for having a “flashier, more dramatic look” than previous Paradigm speakers. In fact, until the S2 arrived, the



new Studio 20 was the spiffiest-looking Paradigm speaker I'd seen—a long haul from the more basic boxes the company had been producing since the '80s. The S2, though, isn't just good looking *for a Paradigm speaker*; it's good-looking, *period*.

“Perfect center fill ... wonderfully balanced ... when a component does so little wrong, as the S2 does, you end up fixating only on the music — exactly what you want in a piece of audio gear ... as flawless as any two-way speakers I've heard ... Clean, clear, and completely uncongested, the S2s draw absolutely no attention to themselves.”

Still, the new Signature appearance doesn't represent a radical departure from the look of Paradigm's other speakers. With its tweeter/woofer “keyhole” design, the S2 has Paradigm written all over it, and its drivers look quite similar to those of the Studio-series speakers. But Signature has rounded side *and* top panels, which I don't think any Paradigm speaker has had, along with an absolutely gorgeous real-wood veneer. You can get the S2 in cherry, which looks good but *isn't* as attractive as the Signature high-gloss finishes. For what I think is money well-spent, you can get what the review pair came in: heavily lacquered bird's-eye maple. Such a sight—and for such a price! I praised the two high-end speakers I reviewed recently for their stunning woodwork, and I can say that Paradigm Signature's high-gloss finish is their equal. High-gloss rosewood and piano black are said to be coming soon.

Paradigm designs its speakers to be used with the *grilles on* (which is how I listened), but I suspect most will take them off at least a few times to see what's underneath. According to Paradigm, Signature is far more than Studio in fancy cabinets.

Take the tweeter, for example: the aluminum dome has been gold-anodized for Signature, something Paradigm says increases the

driver's rigidity without adding mass. The bass-midrange unit uses the same Mica-Loaded Polymer cone technology used in Studio, but Paradigm has worked on all aspects of the driver—from the cone, to the basket, to the magnet structure—to take it to the highest level possible. There are many other refinements—too numerous to mention briefly in this review—so I suggest that to learn about them all you visit Paradigm's website or obtain a brochure, which describes the Signature line quite well.

“... pristine and airy ... an utterly pure and completely transparent top end ... the S2's tweeter was one of the best I'd ever heard ... phenomenal ... magnificent for its clarity, sweetness, and extension ... completely effortless ... fantastic ... amazing.”

Spec-wise, the S2's sensitivity in an anechoic chamber is rated as 88 dB, impedance is said to be “compatible with 8 ohms,” and recommended power handling ranges from 15 – 225 watts. The S2 uses a “3rd-order electro-acoustic” crossover, and the designers have managed to inch the S2's crossover point down to 1.8 kHz versus the Studio 20's 2 kHz. Each S2 weighs 28 pounds, and on the backside are attractive and durable binding posts suitable for biwiring and biamping.

But the spec sheet says only so much. Other than the high power handling (225 watts is very high for a two-way monitor), there's not much there that would differentiate the S2 from Paradigm's other less costly speakers, or some other companies' speakers for that matter. But there's *much* more to Signature than specifications.

SIGNATURE SETUP

The S2s took the same position atop 24"-high stands in the same system in which the Studio 20s were reviewed: Zanden Model 600 integrated amplifier, Stello DA220 DAC (as well as the Zanden Model 5000 Mk IV DAC for a time), Theta Data Basic transport de-jittered by an Assemblage D2D-1, Nordost Valkyrja speaker cables

and interconnects, and i2Digital and DH Labs digital cables.

“The S2's tweeter doesn't just rival more expensive tweeters; its performance is so clean and clear that it's now the one others have to rival.”

Setup was simple: I left a few feet to each side wall, a clear five feet behind, and toed the S2s in about 10 degrees. Presto! Perfect center fill and wonderfully balanced sound throughout my room.

SIGNATURE SOUND

After a terrific start, the rest of the review didn't get going as easily as it could have. At first, I had trouble writing about the S2's sound—or lack of sound, really. The easiest components to write about are the ones with the most colorations. For example, if a speaker has a prominent midrange, that's a snap to describe. Perhaps the bass is boomy or the treble bright, or maybe the speaker does something else out of the norm. Again, that stuff is easy to put on paper. What's more, those aspects are oftentimes what give certain components their “character,” and if a reviewer isn't careful, that character—more accurately, coloration—can be construed as being a good thing when it's really not, at least if your goal is to reproduce music with high fidelity. But when a component does so little wrong, as the S2 does, you end up fixating only on the music and not the product—exactly what you want in a piece of audio gear. But this makes for difficult writing.

“Then there's the way the S2 handles the mids ... sound so transparent it's like there's not even a driver there ... voices project almost magically.”

And that's exactly what the S2s wrought in my room. Save for the extreme low bass (below 40 Hz or so), which no smallish speaker reproduces, the S2s sound as flawless as any two-way speakers I've heard. Clean,

clear, and completely uncongested, the S2s draw absolutely no attention to themselves. In fact, I found myself enjoying far too much music with them and taking far too few notes.

Take a day late last month, for example, when I was helping our editors format articles for publication. I was wiped out from staring at my computer screen all day, so I retreated to listen to the 2003 remaster of Willie Nelson's 1982 release, *Always on My Mind* [Columbia/Legacy CK 89257]. With pen and paper in hand I put the disc into my transport and let it play. When the 12 tracks finished, I was astonished: I had listened to the album straight through and there was not a single word on the page. Two things about that surprised me: (1) I always have listening notes, and (2) I rarely these days find myself listening to albums all the way through in one sitting. But then again, I usually review products that have a far more identifiable character, and that gives me lots to write about—and sometimes reasons to shut off my system before an album plays through.

“... the S2s can rock ... and play Gyproc-cracking loud if you want them to — perfect tonal balance, complete freedom from sibilance ... pristine purity ... ultra-sharp precision, texture and presence that resembled life, not hi-fi.”

The only concrete thing I could dig up at the end of that listening session was the one that leapt out at me: how pristine and airy the cymbals sounded on “A Whiter Shade of Pale.” This wasn't a coloration, though, but rather a sign of an utterly pure and completely transparent top end. At the time I recalled thinking that the S2's tweeter was one of the best I'd ever heard, mostly because it didn't sound like any tweeter at all. (I guess that would make it the best-sounding tweeter that I *didn't* hear.) The rest, though, was a blur.

The next day I made a conscious effort to take notes—*any notes*—so I had something to write about. This time I played Johnny Cash's *American IV: The Man Comes Around*

[Universal 077083]—a recording I bought and thought I wouldn't like. (Why did I buy it then? Sometimes just to test myself. That's how I ended up with a Jessica Simpson disc in my collection, if you must know.) But I did end up liking the Cash disc—a *lot*—and on the S2s it sounds phenomenal, even if the S2s do ably reveal that the recording has its fair share of flaws. And this time, I had notes.

“... from the highs to the lows, the S2s sound ultra-precise ... exciting and real ... razor-sharp and immediate ... tight and textured ... strong and rich ... an astonishing level of detail ... without sacrificing what many call musicality — the S2s prove that musicality and resolution need not be mutually exclusive.”

At the beginning of the listening session I made a deliberate effort to listen to the treble on all tracks to determine if the Willie Nelson recording was just an anomaly. It wasn't. The S2's tweeter is magnificent for its clarity, sweetness, and extension. It sounds—or doesn't sound, whatever way you look at it—completely effortless. That's part of the reason I got so lost in the Willie Nelson disc. The Studio 20's tweeter sounded fantastic—amazing for the money, even compared to very expensive speakers' tweeters—but the S2's gold-anodized dome is another step up in performance. The S2's tweeter doesn't just rival more expensive tweeters; its performance is so clean and clear that it's now the one *others* have to rival.

Then there's the way the S2 handles the mids, which, as with the highs, sound so transparent it's like there's not even a driver there. As a result, voices project almost magically. One new disc I've grown to like more with each listen is *Beautiful: A Tribute to Gordon Lightfoot* [Borealis Records BCDNBM500], featuring an all-Canadian cast of musicians, each playing a favorite Lightfoot tune. The music seemed so fitting to play on this all-Canadian speaker that I felt like I should put on a hockey jersey, too, and perhaps kick back a Blue. Surprisingly, not one of the musicians was ambitious enough to take a crack at

“The Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald,” but you do have everyone from Cowboy Junkies playing “The Way I Feel” to The Tragically Hip having a go at “Black Day in July.”

The Hip's track proved that the S2s can rock—and play Gyproc-cracking *loud* if you want them to—but I was most taken with Connie Kaldor's “If You Could Read My Mind.” With perfect tonal balance, complete freedom from sibilance, and pristine purity, this song showed that the S2s are as adept at female vocal as they are at male. Kaldor's voice was thrust center stage with ultra-sharp precision, texture and presence that resembled life, not hi-fi.

The bass range was just as surprising as the mids and highs, not necessarily for its depth but for its impact. In fact, the S2 is so quick-sounding in the bass that it makes you think the speaker is reaching far lower than it really is. As a result, the S2s are pint-sized powerhouses that can sound larger than their small size suggests.

“... when it comes to soundstaging and imaging, the S2s can stun ... striking image specificity and a glorious sense of space ... from left to right and back to front, the S2s can lay out a stage with staggering dimensions ... the S2s disappeared into the music — perfectly ...”

Spec-wise, Paradigm rates the in-room response of both the S2 and the Studio 20 about the same—to just under 40 Hz. In my smallish room I'm probably getting just under 50 Hz, solidly, mostly because the room is fairly small and because I tend to pull the speakers far away from the walls, which mostly eliminates the walls' help in reinforcing the bass. Careful listening reveals that both speakers are reaching down to about the same level in my room, but the S2s have much more slam, making them sound quite a bit more authoritative than the Studio 20s. And that bit of upper-bass boxiness I noticed with the Studio 20s is completely gone with the S2. In the end, I

found that the S2s don't deliver more bass than the 20s, as in deeper bass, but they do deliver tighter and more articulate bass.

Overall, from the highs to the lows the S2s sound ultra-precise, which helps music played through them sound exciting and real. On "The Man Comes Around," the S2s' "get up and go" makes the guitar sound razor-sharp and immediate, Cash's voice tight and textured, and the piano strong and rich. The S2s also reveal an astonishing level of detail, but do it without sacrificing what many call *musicality*—defined usually as ease and a lack of fatigue in the presentation. The S2s prove that musicality and resolution need not be musically exclusive.

"... so quick-sounding in the bass ... the S2s are pint-sized powerhouses ..."

Finally, when it comes to soundstaging and imaging, the S2s can stun. My well-worn copy of the soundtrack to the movie *The Mission* [Virgin Records 86001]—a beautiful choral-based recording that I've been listening to for almost 20 years—had striking image specificity and a glorious sense of space. From front to back and left to right, the S2s can lay out a stage with staggering dimensions. Then there's Ani DiFranco's "Everest" (*Up Up Up Up Up Up* [Righteous Babe RBR013-D])—another one of my staple recordings that I use for imaging tests. DiFranco's voice was placed precisely where it should be—left in the stage and just back of the speaker plane—with absolutely no smear, and her voice was not pulled toward the left speaker, as has been the case with other speakers. In my room the S2s disappeared into the music—perfectly—turning me away from being a critic and toward being a listener again.

SIGNATURE VERSUS STUDIO, AND THE RULE OF FIVES

I've referred to Paradigm's Studio 20 speakers a few times in this review, and you've probably gathered that the S2s have it over them in every way. They do, except for one: price. Keeping price in perspective is important when comparing these two speakers because, obviously, not everyone has unlimited money to spend on audio gear.

Last year I began talking about the Rule of Fives as it applies to audio equipment. The number five isn't exact, but it is a ballpark figure that effectively illustrates an important point when shopping for audio products. The Rule of Fives goes like this: For five times the cost of one good product to another good product, *you don't* get five times the improvement in performance. Instead, you get a fraction of that, oftentimes about one-fifth or less. And even though the Signature S2s retail for two-and-a-half times the price of the Studio 20s, the same rule applies (some may argue that the Rule of Fives should be renamed the Rule of Two-and-a-Half in this case). The S2s sound so good that I can imagine a smaller company without Paradigm's wherewithal trying to design, build, and market them—for twice as much. They'd still be a decent value. There are, after all, companies selling more expensive two-ways at even higher prices that don't look as nice as or offer similar performance to the S2s. Therefore, my Rule of Fives, I'll argue, still holds even in this exceptional circumstance.

"... one of the best-sounding two-way speakers you can buy ... and one of the best looking. With soaring and sweet highs, beautifully articulated mids, and punchy power in the bass ... as flawless a bookshelf-sized speaker as I've heard ... perfect ..."

Side by side, the 20s have many similarities to the S2. There's the familiar Paradigm look—you just have to see them and you'll know what I mean—and the familiar Paradigm sound: dead-on tonal balance, a wide and stable soundstage, and great frequency extension given the speakers' size. Both speakers offer a high level of fidelity. The S2, though, is a significant step up—significant in terms of price, significant in terms of build quality, and most importantly, significant in terms of sound quality. The S2 essentially takes every aspect of the Studio 20's performance and makes them marginally better. The bass is tighter, the highs ever so slightly cleaner and sweeter, the mids clearer, and the imaging more precise. There isn't one aspect of the

Studio 20's performance that hasn't been improved at least a little bit with the S2. And while they're all just a bunch of little differences—tiny improvements really—when you combine them, they add up to a listening experience with the S2 that's so much more complete. The Studio 20s are superb loudspeakers for their price. The Signatures S2s are superb, no caveats needed.

"... with Signature, Paradigm has managed to do what many thought was impossible: mix state-of-the-art design goals and still maintain high-value pricing."

SIGNATURE SIGNOFF

The Signature S2 is one of the best-sounding two-way speakers you can buy, and one of the best-looking as well. With soaring and sweet highs, beautifully articulated mids, and punchy power in the bass, they're overall as flawless a bookshelf-sized speaker as I've heard. Perhaps if you value some other sonic characteristics you'll differ with me—some people like their speakers to *sound* a certain way—but I think the way that Paradigm has served up the S2 is perfect. And there's more: the S2s may provide all-out performance, but they still come in at a very nice price. Paradigm hasn't abandoned the notion of value that's always been the backbone of the company.

As a result, with Signature Paradigm has managed to do what many thought was impossible: mix state-of-the-art design goals and still maintain high-value pricing. As I stated earlier, at double the price, the S2s would still represent a decent value, and I'm sure that if a company without Paradigm's means attempted to create this speaker, it would be twice the price. But that's not to say you're getting the S2s for half-price; rather, the bar's been raised. Paradigm has fashioned a state-of-the-art bookshelf classic that is the benchmark by which other mini monitors should be judged.

If you've dreamed of owning a best-of-its-type loudspeaker but never thought you had the money to do so, times have changed. The Paradigm Signature S2 is for you.