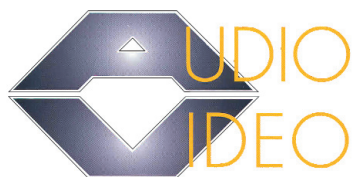


“ ... ENGAGING, REVEALING

AND ULTIMATELY

COMPELLING ... ”

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“... so transparent ... completely invisible as point sources ... the kind of sound picture many a larger floorstander could only dream of achieving: expansive and three-dimensional; accurately scaled and thoroughly convincing.”

by Deon Schoeman

CLASS ACT

Loudspeakers are supposed to be function-focused, utilitarian devices designed to perform, rather than to charm the visual eye. They're also the most difficult part of a system to position, and can become a real nightmare to incorporate into a carefully laid out interior design.

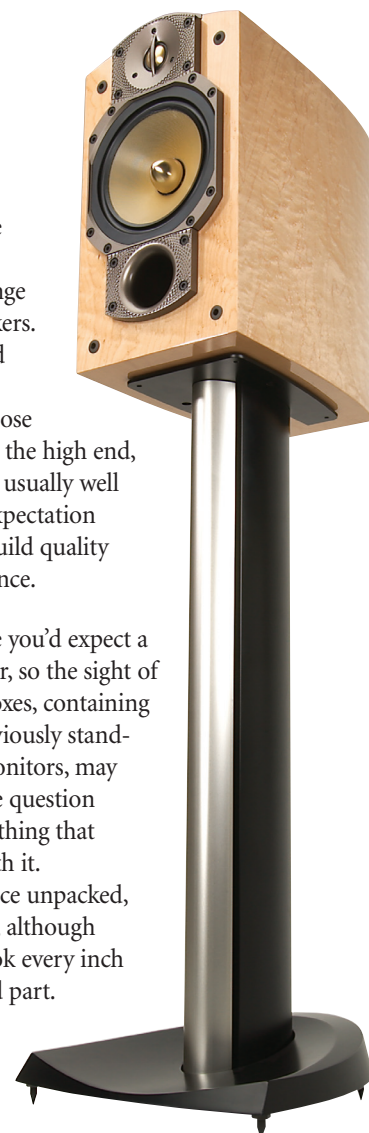
However, I don't believe that owners of Paradigm's latest Signature S2 loudspeaker will have to listen to many complaints as far as aesthetics are concerned. In fact, one could even argue that they can only augment a room's existing accoutrements.

The S2 is a high-end audio monitor, designed to be stand-mounted on a nice, sturdy platform, ideally solidly weighted to ensure good coupling. I say 'high-end' not because of the price, which admittedly isn't in the peanuts category, but because of a performance which easily outweighs expectations.

But let's start at the beginning. Paradigm is a Canadian firm committed to excellence in

design and performance from their extensive range of loudspeakers. These extend from budget models to those approaching the high end, but at prices usually well below any expectation created by build quality or performance.

For the price you'd expect a lot of speaker, so the sight of two small boxes, containing what are obviously stand-mounted monitors, may well pose the question whether anything that small is worth it. However, once unpacked, the speakers, although compact, look every inch the high-end part.



The enclosures are tapered towards the very deep rear, providing slightly rounded side walls which will no doubt have a positive impact on the reduction of standing waves, while the top panel is also slightly rounded, possibly for the same reason.

“... just the right shimmer and emotion ... distinctively presented ... smooth, rich in detail, but not smothered by too many lavish trimmings ... allows direct, visceral access to the music.”

Finish is quite superlative, thanks to beautiful real-wood bird's eye maple veneer, applied with obvious care and lacquered to a very high gloss standard. I'm not so sure, however, about the contrasting grey of the driver surrounds, which looks almost industrial in shape and colour by comparison. It means that the drive units (manufactured in-house by Paradigm) are proud of the main baffle in an arrangement that lacks the visual finesse of the rest of the design. Use of the plain cloth grille is recommended to address edge diffraction. The grey surround plate incorporates a high-velocity, low-turbulence aluminium bass port.

Looking after the high frequencies is a 25-mm gold-anodised aluminium dome tweeter equipped with dual neodymium ring magnets, ferro-fluid cooling and a die-cast heat sink chassis. The tweeter is equipped with a wave guide, and is mounted in a smooth recess extending slightly above the top edge of the enclosure.

The tweeter is accompanied by a 178-mm mid/bass driver featuring a mica-loaded polymer cone with gold-anodised centre phase plug. The driver employs a 38-mm voice coil.

The rear of the enclosure is home to two pairs of gold-plated binding posts, allowing bi-wiring or bi-amping. The internal crossover is mounted directly to the binding posts, and features a second-order arrangement for the tweeter, and

a third-order low-pass design for the mid/bass driver.

The review units had clearly been run before, so I limited run-in to a warm-up period of a day or so before turning my full attention to them. Ancillary equipment employed included Musical Fidelity's X-Series components, a Vincent SA-93 pre-amp partnered by Electrocompaniet's AW120 stereo power amp, my trusty Rotel RCD-991 CD player, and a high-end Classé CDP-100 digital source. The S2's were mounted on sturdy, spiked stands and located well away from the rear wall, but quite close to the side walls.

I enjoyed the Paradigms from the very moment I sat down to listen to them properly. They have a certain gregarious quality that makes the music they're performing — from classics to rock, intimate ensembles to symphony orchestras — accessible and enjoyable, while they also sound more generous than one would expect from a compact monitor.

However, that doesn't mean to say that the S2's deliver their sonic fare with no regard for accuracy, nor that they will tolerate recording flaws or problems in the preceding signal path. In reference terms, these are speakers that reveal such issues with unwavering candour.

“... bass response has power and momentum ... unmistakably present ... nicely balanced with the rest of the tonal package ...”

The treble, while not bright or attacking, could be considered a little bold for some tastes, meaning that recordings already biased in the treble department will suffer as a result. Similarly, edgy cables or brash components will not stand up to the scrutiny of these speakers.

On the upside, the treble performance really does full justice to good recordings when the rest of the system is nicely set up. Female vocals by masters of that art such as Carol Kidd and Sarah K have just the right

shimmer and emotion, while woodwinds and strings are distinctively presented without becoming aggressive.

Of course, it also means that vital staging clues contained in fine slivers of detail so often obscured by poorer speaker designs are fully revealed here, with a direct bearing on the quite superior staging and imaging the S2's are capable of.

“... a class act ... just the right levels of critical precision and revelation ... a core musicality and approachability ... should please even the most critical listener.”

As only the best monitors can, these Canadians are so transparent that they are completely invisible as point sources on the soundstage, while delivering the kind of sound picture many a larger floorstander could only dream of achieving: expansive and three-dimensional, but accurately scaled and thoroughly convincing.

If the treble is somewhat critical, then the midrange is this speaker's strongest suit. Smooth, rich in detail, but not smothered by too many lavish trimmings, it is at the very core of the S2's considerable appeal. It allows direct, visceral access to the music.

Bass response? Pretty good for a speaker of this size. The bass response has power and momentum, but it won't resonate in your chest cavity, nor rattle the cupboards. Yes, the low frequencies are unmistakably present, and nicely balanced with the rest of the tonal package, but don't expect earthquakes.

The S2 is a class act. It links just the right levels of critical precision and revelation to a core musicality and approachability to steer clear of clinical analysis.

Instead, this is an engaging, revealing and ultimately compelling loudspeaker that deserves ancillaries of equal excellence, and should please even the most critical listener.