

**“BIG, BOLD AND  
BEAUTIFUL ... among the best  
that I’ve heard anywhere near this price.”**

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... Complementing that  
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control, and warmth like  
I’ve rarely heard ...”*

by Chris Lewis

#### **BIG, BOLD AND BEAUTIFUL**

Odd as it may seem for a speaker review, I must begin with my first visual impression of Paradigm’s new Reference Signature speakers. Granted, I usually stress that a speaker’s physical appearance means little — after all, we don’t buy speakers to look at them. If the current trend is any indication, though, many people don’t agree, as evidenced by the proliferation of smaller, prettier, and more aesthetically sensitive speakers.

This is why Paradigm’s new flagship system quickly caught my eye. With an imposing, six-driver tower, a center channel bigger than some TVs, and a hearty-looking subwoofer, I immediately saluted Paradigm for bucking the trend and delivering a statement system that looks like it would pick you up and toss you around rather than sit politely next to your TV, looking pretty — and sounding the same.

This isn’t to say that the Reference Signature S8 tower, C5 center channel, ADP surround, and Servo subwoofer aren’t aesthetically pleasing — they most certainly are. However, as you’d expect from a Paradigm flagship system, they’ve paid more attention to how these speakers sound than how they look. Paradigm hasn’t spent countless dollars developing some of the most impressive manufacturing, design, and listening facilities you’ll find to simply pump out cute, plasma-flanking speakers with someone else’s parts. The Signature Series represents Paradigm’s state-of-the-art in terms of driver, cabinet, and crossover design, with a host of proprietary technologies (see <http://signature.paradigm.com>) and some modern improvements on fundamental speaker philosophies.

S8



*"I hit the Signatures with power players from across the musical spectrum — from Mozart to Metallica. Forget making them flinch, I barely made them sweat, even at ear-popping volumes."*

I set up the Signature system with an array of international cohorts, including Simaudio's Aurora amplifier from their homeland of Canada, Meridian's G98 disc player and G68 pre/pro from just across the pond, and Lexicon's MC-8 pre/pro from the good ol' U. S. of A. I toed-in the S8s slightly and placed them 4 feet from the side and front walls, while the C5 rested comfortably, despite its impressive girth, atop our Princeton Graphics direct-view monitor. I placed the ADPs about 110 to 120 degrees behind the listening position and a foot above ear level, and I put the Servo sub around the midpoint on the side wall.

*"Bass is one of the first things you'll notice about the S8s ... there's a lot of it, even by large tower standards ... the really impressive part was how the S8s created such powerful, punchy bass without sounding boomy or muddy."*

#### REALITY CHECK

With setup complete, it was Post time, where physical appearance, flagship titles, and proprietary status fade away as sound performance takes its rightful spot atop the heap of speaker qualifications. As pleased as I was by my first visual impression of the S8s, it paled in comparison to my first sonic impression. These speakers are every bit as powerful and dynamic as they look, but they're hardly all brawn and no brains. Complementing that raw power is agility, control, and warmth like I've rarely heard from speakers this dominating,

with this many elements operating at once. Needing commensurate source material, I hit the Signatures with power players from across the musical spectrum — from Mozart to Metallica. Forget making them flinch, I barely made them sweat, even at ear-popping volumes.

*"They dug into the depths of high-resolution mixes as much as any tweeter I've heard ... never abrasive or overly aggressive ... Even while reproducing ripping harmonica tracks or piercingly high trumpet assaults, the S8's tweeter also revealed underlying detail and depth that I've rarely heard from any tweeter."*

Bass is one of the first things you'll notice about the S8s — as in, there's a lot of it, even by large tower standards. I'd expect no less from a speaker that has four drivers dedicated to lower frequencies alone, but the really impressive part was how the S8s created such powerful, punchy bass without sounding boomy or muddy. I listened intently for the phase coherence anomalies and cancellations that can result from having so many fingers in the same pie, but Paradigm has done an excellent job of using the crossovers to control this abundance of bass drivers and keep them from stepping on each others' toes — or those of the other drivers.

*"Midrange performance — was top shelf — whether from the S8, the C5, or the ADP ... highly impressive with music ... smooth, natural, and obviously effortless ... performance with movie soundtracks was no less so ..."*

Those other drivers are impressive, too — which high-resolution material indicated most obviously. I sometimes approach metal dome tweeters with hesitation, as

I've heard so many go awry. These tweeters clearly were in the right bands, though, providing the smooth, balanced feel of a soft dome and the natural pop and punch of metal. They dug into the depths of high-resolution mixes as much as any tweeter I've heard but were never abrasive or overly aggressive with any material, high resolution or not. A complete sonic presentation is powerfully affected by the subtle nuances we barely hear, as well as those that we don't hear at all (i.e., elements above 17 kilohertz). Even while reproducing ripping harmonica tracks or piercingly high trumpet assaults, the S8's tweeter also revealed underlying detail and depth that I've rarely heard from any tweeter.

#### HIGHLIGHTS

- Big, warm sound that's strong from the top of the frequency range to the bottom.
- Bold, composed bass performance from both the towers and sub.
- Large, well-defined rear soundfield.

#### BUILD QUALITY

Premium drivers throughout the line. Top-shelf cabinets that are beautiful inside and out.

#### VALUE

Expensive, but it has an excellent performance-to-dollars ratio. Quality like this is never cheap.

#### FEATURES

Plenty of straight-forward sub controls. Quality dipolar surrounds.

#### PERFORMANCE

Among the best I've heard anywhere near this price. Equally comfortable with music and movies.

#### ERGONOMICS

Big towers and centers never make things entirely easy. Easy on-wall mounting for surrounds.

#### OVERALL RATING

Signature ensemble features big, bold, and beautiful speakers that meld modern technology with an old-school attitude — and not a moment too soon.



C5

*"... one of the best center channels I've ever heard ... if sound is your priority, listen to this speaker ... It doesn't flinch when you ask it to simultaneously reproduce dialogue, music, explosions or whatever else is rammed into the center channel ... and it does so with an effortlessness that's rarely matched."*

Midrange performance is the heart of any audio system, and it too was top shelf here, whether from the S8, the C5, or the ADP (which is more adept with music than most of its dipolar brethren). The S8 and C5's mids were highly impressive with music — smooth, natural, and obviously effortless. Their performance with movie soundtracks was no less so, especially the C5's. I've complained before about the overdependence of soundtracks on the center channel, as well as the abundance of centers that have been designed more for convenience than performance and thus can't meet this challenge. I can say without hesitation that this is one of the best center channels I've ever heard. Yes, it's big and heavy, and it may not fit conveniently into some pretty armchairs; however, if sound is your priority, listen to this speaker. It doesn't flinch when you ask it to simultaneously reproduce dialogue, music, explosions, or whatever else gets rammed into the center channel, and it does so with an effortlessness that's rarely matched. Dialogue was crisp and pure — never boxy, never chesty — music and sound effects were delivered with the same body and presence as a quality, full-range tower. For kicks, I even disconnected the S8s at one point and was amazed at how much of the front stage the C5 unveiled on its own.



Signature ADP

*"Dialogue was crisp and pure ... music and sound effects were delivered with the same body and presence as a quality, full range tower ... For kicks, I even disconnected the S8s at one point and was amazed at how much of the front soundstage the C5 unveiled on its own."*

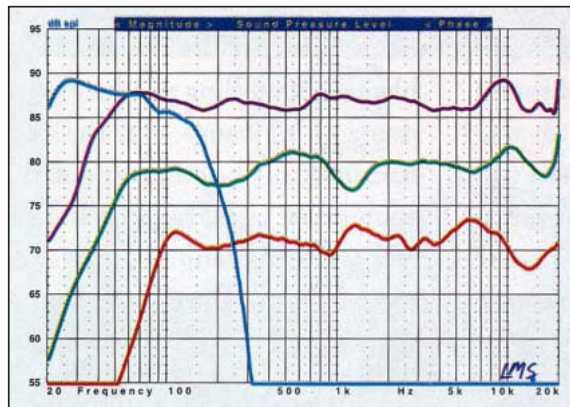
Hardly forgotten in all of this was the Servo subwoofer, which flexes a claimed 200 watts RMS of amplifier muscle to make sure that you know it's there. But the Servo, thanks in part to its servo system, keeps its horsepower under control and relies as much on dexterity as it does on power to get its point across. Its composure with extreme low-frequency events was so impressive that I rethought some of the digs I've taken at certain movies. Take the opening meteor assault in *Armageddon*, which tends to boom about, ultimately degenerating into monotone

#### HT LABS MEASURES: PARADIGM SIGNATURE S8 SPEAKER SYSTEM

Signature S8 L/R Sensitivity: 87.5 dB from 500 Hz to 2 kHz

Signature C5 Center Sensitivity: 87 dB from 500 Hz to 2 kHz

Signature ADP Surround Sensitivity: 85.5 dB from 500 Hz to 2 kHz



This graph shows the quasi-anechoic (employing close-miking of all woofers) frequency response of the Signature S8 L/R (purple trace), Signature Servo subwoofer (blue trace), Signature C5 center channel (green trace), and Signature ADP surround (red trace). All passive loudspeakers were measured at a distance of 1 meter with a 2.83-volt input and scaled for display purposes.

The S8's listening-window response (a five-point average of axial and  $\pm 15$ -degree horizontal and vertical responses) measures +1.92 / -1.44 dB from 200 Hz to 10 kHz. The -3 dB point is at 42 Hz, and the -6 dB point is at 35 Hz. Impedance reaches a minimum of 3.57 ohms at 98 Hz and a phase angle of -33.86 degrees at 57 Hz.

The C5's listening-window response measures +1.76 / -3.02 dB from 200 Hz to 10 kHz. An average of axial and  $\pm 15$ -degree horizontal responses measures +1.88 / -2.73 dB from 200 Hz to 10 kHz. The -3 dB point is at 54 Hz, and the -6 dB point is at 46 Hz. Impedance reaches a minimum of 4.94 ohms at 63 Hz and a phase angle of -61.64 degrees at 49 Hz.

The ADP's three-face averaged response measures +2.05 / -1.86 dB from 200 Hz to 10 kHz. The -3 dB point is at 88 Hz, and the -6 dB point is at 79 Hz. Impedance reaches a minimum of 3.74 ohms at 198 Hz and a phase angle of -28.46 degrees at 96 Hz.

The Servo's close-miked response, normalized to the level at 80 Hz, indicates that the lower -3 dB point is at 19 Hz and the -6 dB point is at 17 Hz. The upper -3 dB point is at 148 Hz with the cut-off frequency control set to maximum. — MJP

mush with many subs. I used to let other subs somewhat off the hook, instead blaming meddling producers who demand big bangs. But the Servo handled this bombardment with such grace and grip that I almost felt guilty blaming the producers, until I remembered that these are the same people who wanted us to pay \$10 to see this movie. The Servo was equally impressive with the mammoth charge in *The Return of the King*, building each footfall into a strong attack and rumbling climax, followed by a natural, well-paced decay.

*"The Servo — relies as much on dexterity as it does on power . . . composure with extreme low-frequency events was so impressive . . . such grace and grip . . . strong attack and rumbling climax, followed by a natural, well-paced decay."*

#### BOTTOM LINE

This Signature system's healthy dimensions and price tag will undoubtedly scare off the timid. However, if sound is what you prize above all else, you must give these speakers a listen, as they're among the best that I've heard anywhere near this price. They are potent and dynamic, yet warm, musical, and composed with source material of any variety. They help prove that big can be beautiful, too. People always warn about first impressions and judging a book by its cover, but, in this case, go right ahead.

*"If sound is what you prize above all else, you must give these speakers a listen . . . potent and dynamic yet warm, musical, and composed with source material of any variety."*



Signature Servo