

“NOTHING SHORT OF EXCELLENT.”

Reprinted with permission from



*“... excellent transparency ...
amazing presence and realism
... rich with musical textures
... outstanding dynamics ...
very impressive in every aspect
of their performance.”*

by Yongki Go

The story of success of Paradigm can be attributed to the high performance vs. cost ratio that the company delivers to its products. In fact, Paradigm is the brand that is suggested by people almost constantly in various on-line audio forums when someone asks an opinion about budget speakers to listen to.

To me personally, Paradigm was the brand that started it all, my first introduction into the hi-fi world many many years ago. I began in this hobby like many people do, with a pair of budget speakers and modest electronics, and I was lucky to have the Paradigm Minis as my first hi-fi speakers (of course I had owned several other speakers before that, but none could be considered hi-fi, at least by my current personal standard).

Not only was I a happy owner of those little speakers, but I learned a very valuable lesson, which some people who are into this hobby sometimes forget: you don't need to spend a good fortune to have high quality sound.

My system has evolved significantly since then, and I have not reviewed Paradigm speakers for *Secrets* until now, but every time I hear the Paradigm name mentioned, fond memories of my first hi-fi endeavor always linger.

Paradigm has evolved significantly too, from a company that focused only on budget-minded consumers into a company that offers a wide range of products, to cater not only to the budget-minded but also the consumers for whom cost is no object (or almost no object).

The Reference Signature series marks Paradigm's venture to satisfy the latter group. But even though this series is the highest



level in the Paradigm line, the prices of the products from that series are not as stratospheric as prices of some speakers from some other high-end brands. I guess Paradigm still aims at offering product with a high value, which is what the company has been known for. If I'm right, surely this is good news for the die-hard enthusiasts.

"... overall tonal balance of the S8 was nothing short of excellent ... response was smooth across the whole frequency range ... treble was detailed and airy ... prodigious bass that sounded full and articulate."

PRODUCT FEATURES

The S8 speaker reviewed here is the current top of the line in the Paradigm Reference Signature series. Upon unpacking the two big boxes that were used to ship these 200 pounds-per-pair speakers, I was immediately impressed by the solid construction and the beautiful cherry finish of their cabinets. The distinctive curvy side and top baffles of the cabinet, as well as the titanium-gray elements (die-cast aluminum) on top, front bottom, and footings, add more to the elegance of the speakers.

The S8 tower is a six-driver, three-way ported design. At the top of the driver array is a 1" gold-anodized aluminum dome tweeter with integrated die-cast heat-sink. Underneath the tweeter is a 7" mica-loaded-polymer midrange driver with gold-anodized solid-aluminum phase plug. This driver uses 1-1/2" voice coil, super neodymium ring magnet, and is ferro-fluid damped/cooled in a die-cast heat-sink chassis.

The four bass drivers consist of 7" mineral-filled polypropylene cones with 1-1/2" voice coil and also with die-cast heat-sink chassis. The speaker has front and rear die-cast aluminum ports, which are of different sizes. The use of two ports is to allow more air to escape the cabinet with less turbulence noise than if they only used one.

The two different port sizes are used to further refine the tuning of the port. The array of drivers that Paradigm employed on the S8 (and other members of the Signature series) are of very high quality and look quite impressive.

At a glance, the driver configurations of the speakers in the Signature series look similar to the ones in the Studio series, which are lower in price, but actually there are quite a number of differences. For example, the tweeter in the Signature line uses dual super neodymium magnets for greater power handling instead of ferrite as in the Studio line. The magnet structures are more refined in the drivers of the Signature series to allow for better transient and phase response along with output and linearity. Also, the Signature series use a higher grade of components in their crossovers than the Studios. According to Paradigm, all these improvements help in achieving a higher level of performance in the Signature series.

"... voices, string instruments, piano, and even singers' breaths were all presented with amazing presence and realism ... This very aspect is what often differentiates good and great speakers ... S8 speakers belong to the 'great' category ..."

The S8 speakers as well as other speakers in the Reference Signature series are meant to be played with the grilles on. Paradigm intentionally designs the grilles to have curved outer edges, which are said to eliminate edge diffraction.

There are two pairs of five-way binding posts on the back of each S8 speaker, so it is ready for bi-wiring or bi-amping if desired. As with common practice, the speakers come from the factory with metal jumpers connecting the two pairs of binding posts.

The S8 enclosures are made out of 3/4" MDF and are very well damped. If the knocking test is what you use to assess the damping of a speaker enclosure, definitely the S8's will pass the test with flying colors. The review samples came in an elegant Cherry finish, but three other finishes are available to choose from to best match your room décor or taste: Piano Black, Rosewood, and Bird's Eye maple (these finishes cost more than the Cherry).

"... neutral ... the S8s imaged steadily ... a nice three-dimensional soundstage ... Each instrument had its specific location on the soundstage ... separation between the instruments playing as well as the depth layering was easily identifiable ... again the sign of great speakers."

For the evaluation, I followed Paradigm's recommendation (as given in the user's manual) of separating the speakers at about three-quarters of the distance of each speaker from the listening position (12 ft) and toed them in a little bit. Moving speakers of such weight and size was not an easy endeavor, but fortunately, I found the location where I thought the speakers sounded best after only very few iterations.

SETUP

During most of the evaluation, the S8 speakers were driven by my trusty Classé CA-100 amplifier. Even though this amplifier only puts out 100 W per channel, it proved to be sufficient for the speakers. Definitely the amplifier could drive the speakers to higher-than-I-can-bear sound-pressure-levels (SPLs). The S8 might be big and imposing, but they were relatively easy to drive. I did not try bi-wiring or bi-amping during this review.

THE SOUND

When I began my critical listening after breaking-in the S8 speakers for many hours, I was immediately taken by how sweet and

natural the midrange presentation was. Singers' voices, string instruments, piano, and even singers' breath were all presented with amazing presence and realism. This very aspect is what often differentiates good and great speakers. And for sure, the S8 speakers belong to the great category in terms of their midrange performance.

"... excellent transparency ... the ability of the S8 to just disappear from the musical soundstage and to just let the music through was one of the strengths of the speakers."

Although the midrange was the first that caught my ears, the overall tonal balance of the S8 was nothing short of excellent. Its response was smooth across the whole frequency range with no obvious over-emphasis on specific area of the response. The S8 treble was detailed and airy. It was certainly not reticent, but not excessive either, giving an impression of just right. The S8 was capable of producing prodigious bass that sounded full and articulate.

"... high degree of realism ... rich with musical textures ... outstanding dynamics ... realistic attacks and decays ... great speakers such as the S8 preserve to a high degree the textures captured in the recordings ... presentation is lively ... you will feel that you're in attendance at the live concert itself."

A little word of caution in regards to placement follows. Paradigm recommends placing the speakers at least 8" from the wall behind them. In my room, following that recommendation with distance of the speakers to the wall behind them closer than about 1.5 ft, I found the bass of the S8 a bit too bloomy for my taste, which blurred the bass definition somewhat. Only after I pulled the speakers into the room at about 2 ft

from the wall that I felt satisfied with their bass response. Your room and taste of course, will determine your end setup, but make sure you spend time with this placement aspect to optimize your results. The bass presentation from the S8 should be enough for most CDs, but the ones containing the lowest octave, such as in pipe organ, might need a subwoofer.

In terms of imaging, the presentation of the S8 speakers was neutral, neither forward nor laid-back. For most recordings, the lead singer's vocal was located at the plane of the speakers. The S8's imaged steadily, and with good recordings, they were capable of depicting a nice three-dimensional soundstage. A good acoustic jazz recording such as "Charles Christopher" by Phil Woods from *Chesky's 10th Anniversary Special Edition Jazz Celebration* really exemplified these characteristics. Each instrument had its specific location on the soundstage, and the separation between the instruments playing as well as the depth layering was easily identifiable. This is again the sign of great speakers.

The S8's also had excellent transparency. The ability of the S8 to just disappear from the musical soundstage and to just let the music through was one of the strengths of the speakers. No wonder that in its Signature series product catalog, Paradigm uses this line: "A higher level of transparency," which I found to be quite appropriate.

Perhaps the greatest attribute of the S8 speakers was their capability to reproduce music with high degree of realism. The sound coming from the S8 speakers was so rich with musical textures that music never sounded flat. The combination of the speakers' outstanding dynamics and capability to produce realistic attacks and decays might be the primary contributors to the texture richness of the speaker presentation. A good analogy for listening to music through the S8 versus a lesser quality speaker is like looking at a painting directly in person versus through a photographed picture of the painting in an art book. When you go to a musical concert, you experience the musical textures unconsciously through the peaks and valleys of sound energy that the various

musical instruments and human voices deliver. Recordings tend to smooth out these peaks and valleys, and during playback, your speakers can further reduce these textures, which at the extreme could cause music to sound flat and lifeless. But great speakers such as the S8 preserve to a high degree the textures captured in the recordings such that the presentation is lively. Listen for example to "Devil May Care" from Diana Krall's *Live in Paris* CD at realistic volume level. This track has so much dynamics and textures that when played through the S8, you will feel that you're in attendance at the live concert itself.

"... S8 speakers seemed to be at home with any kind of music ... They displayed the full energy of rock music with ease and had the finesse to follow nicely the delicate notes as well as the wide range dynamics in classical music."

Some speakers are more at home with certain musical genres and less so with others. But the S8 speakers seemed to be at home with any kind of music. They displayed the full energy of rock music with ease and had the finesse to follow nicely the delicate notes as well as the wide range dynamics in classical music.

"... Signature series marked Paradigm's entrance into the extreme of the high-end world — in sure step and glorious fashion ... Highly recommended."

By now, you should be able to tell that I have truly enjoyed my time with the S8 speakers in my system. Of course, there are speakers out there that cost much more, and some will sound better (\$25,000 a pair does buy you something), but the Paradigm S8's surely can hold their ground very well against competitors in their price range, and in many cases, against higher priced competitors.

CONCLUSIONS

The Signature series marked Paradigm's entrance into the extreme of the high-end world, where cost is often no object. Although this entrance was made only recently, but with many years of experience in designing and manufacturing speakers in its back pocket, Paradigm seems to make this entrance in sure step and glorious fashion. The elegant-looking Signature S8 speakers reviewed here are very impressive in every aspect of their performance. Certainly their price tag for glossy black and Bird's Eye maple finishes cannot be considered cheap, but I can tell you without hesitation that you get your money's worth with these speakers. In fact, when you consider that many speakers in the high-end world carry stratospheric price tags, which can be many times higher than the S8 price, then the word "value" is written all over the S8 speakers. And value seems to be the tradition that attaches to the Paradigm name, and I'm glad to report that this tradition carries even to its top of the line product. Highly recommended!