"... SPELLBINDING PERFORMANCE

... a class act, through and through...

ABSOLUTELY PHENOMENAL."

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by Martin Bell

SIGNATURE CLASS

"Volvo: Boxy but good" was the slogan created by a wigged-out advertising executive (played by Dudley Moore) in the 1990 film *Crazy People*, but he could just as easily have been referring to a certain Canadian hi-fi manufacturer. For Paradigm is the Volvo of the loudspeaker world. Dependable. Safe. Well engineered. Boring. Of course, things have moved on a bit since those days. While you wouldn't mistake Volvo's latest sedan for a Ferrari, the cuboid designs of yore have been replaced with something altogether more sleek and alluring, and so it is with Paradigm's new Signature series of loudspeakers.

I've listened to several Paradigm models over the past few years. And while models such as the Mini Monitor, Monitor 7 and Studio 60 have consistently impressed with their sound quality and bang-for-buck performance, their aesthetic appeal was dubious at best. So I was pleasantly surprised by the cosmetic overhaul that Paradigm's design team has wrought on the Signature S2. Here is a Paradigm speaker that retains a clear lineage to other Paradigm models, yet adds subtle styling refinements that lift the design into another league altogether. Old-fashioned square edges are replaced by rounded side and top panels (a Paradigm speaker with rounded edges? Whatever next?), while the gorgeous, high-gloss finish on these speakers is as good as any I've seen, short of five-figure models from Italian speaker gods Sonus Faber. Of course, there's a heck of a lot more to a speaker than how it looks, but if you're contemplating laying down the thick end of $4k you'll want something that looks the part, and the S2s most certainly do.

"… it didn't take me long to put a finger on the character of these speakers — they have none … neutrality that renders instruments and voices with all the richness and tonal colour of the real thing."

Remove the snug-fitting grilles and you'll find a gold anodized aluminium dome tweeter sitting atop a mica-loaded polymer cone bass/midrange woofer. A front-firing reflex port sits immediately below the woofer and helps boost the in-room bass response down to a claimed 38Hz (+/- 3dB). The rear panel sports a pair of high-quality binding posts (for bi-wiring or bi-amping) and a brass plate with model and manufacturer details. A class act, through and through.

Paradigm offers the matching J-29 stands for the Signature S2 but I stuck to my heavy-duty twin-pillar Sound Creations stands, as the stands supplied for this test arrived without sand or lead-shot fill and rang like a bell when given the knuckle-rap test.

Paradigm recommends that the grilles be left in place to optimise sound quality. In my system, at least, this was advice best ignored, as the S2s sounded far superior with the grilles removed. While there was a touch more sibilance without them, the midband was more expressive and free-flowing, while the sound gained an extra degree of focus and was less centred on the speakers.

As listening progressed, it didn't take me long to put my finger on the character of these speakers — they have none. By that I mean that the Signature S2s possess neutrality that renders instruments and voices with all the richness and tonal colour of the real thing.

Cueing up my vinyl copy of Roberta Flack's *Killing Me Softly*, the punch of the kick drum and the sheer presence of Flack's vocal on the title track was astonishing. The Signature S2s sound much larger than their physical dimensions would suggest, yet they retain all the nimbleness, focus and precision of a mini-monitor, avoiding the compromises and tonal colourations that can afflict many similarly priced floorstanding speakers.

Detail retrieval is absolutely phenomenal, yet the treble never draws attention to itself. As smooth as Teflon-coated silk, the upper frequencies are extended but never harsh, What's more, not only do they capture the leading edge of notes superbly, but music is fleshed out with a body and substance that makes most bookshelf speakers sound undernourished by comparison.

"Detail retrieval is absolutely phenomenal … treble never draws attention to itself … smooth as Teflon-coated silk … upper frequencies are extended … they capture the leading edge of notes superbly … body and substance that makes most bookshelf speakers sound undernourished by comparison."

With Massive Attack's *Mezzanine*, the S2s proved their dynamic mettle by playing loudly without obvious strain or compression, yet at the same time they retained their coherence at moderate to low listening levels.

Is there anything the Signature S2s can't do? Well, while soundstage width was phenomenal — David Cantor's guitar twang on 'Spasm' from *Sex Without Bodies* coming from a point at least a metre outside the left speaker — I did find soundstage depth was slightly foreshortened And good as the Signature S2s are, they can't bend the immutable laws of physics — 14-litre boxes with a 7-inch main driver are incapable of moving sufficient air to achieve a true full-range bass response. But the bass they do deliver is punchy, super-dynamic and quick, and arrives with a heft that belies its rated in-room response. For a time, I mated the Signature S2 with AudioPro's stupendous Ace-Bass 2 subwoofer which extended the Signature S2's bass another 20Hz or so. The results were breathtaking.

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Overall, the Paradigm Signature S2s are such a well-balanced and finely judged design, that any minor shortcomings (and they were very, very minor) bordered on the irrelevant. Whether partnered with a quality subwoofer or used on their own they are a "must-audition" speaker, without caveats or strings attached. Whenever I played a track that I thought would trip them up or expose a shortcoming, the S2s threw the recording back in my face, with a spellbinding performance that continually confounded my expectations of what was possible from a moderately sized bookshelf speaker.

"… bass — is punchy, super-dynamic and quick … arrives with a heft that belies its rated in-room response … I mated the S2 with a stupendous subwoofer which extended the S2's bass another 20Hz or so … results were breathtaking."

FFWD RECOMMENDED

VERDICT

PROS: A consummate all-rounder with a balance of virtues that is nigh on unbeatable at the price.
CONS: Erm …

SOUND	✶✶✶✶✶
BUILD	✶✶✶✶✶
VALUE	✶✶✶✶✶
OVERALL	✶✶✶✶✶