



Spectral Shift

Adam Smith comes over all young and trendy with the help of the Paradigm Shift A2 loudspeakers.

As I was discussing with a professional loudspeaker manufacturer at the Munich High End Show recently, there is a definite disparity between the popularity of active loudspeakers from a technical point of view, and their uptake within the domestic market. At the top end, they are seen as acceptable because of those very links with the professional studio setup, and one or two manufacturers such as Bang & Olufsen and Meridian have doggedly stuck with the technology and made some true loudspeaker masterpieces as a result. Elsewhere, however, active speakers have tended to remain a somewhat left-field option.

Until now, that is, and it seems fitting that the resurgence in one

area of the market is yet another walk of life in which we are re-living the newly-trendy 1980s once more! Back then, the arrival of the portable CD player suddenly opened up a whole new world of music on the move that didn't actually have to sound rather unpleasant, unlike a good many of the cassette portables at the time.

Personal CD players prompted loudspeaker manufacturers of the time to pop amplifiers into their proven bookshelf models so that you could take them with you, plug them in and strike up Duran Duran and Modern Romance wherever you saw fit.

The leaders at that time were Goodmans with their Maxamp models and Wharfedale with their Active Diamonds, the latter even

coming in shades of red and white and in their own carrying bags.

Fast-forwarding to the present, the MP3 player has turned into the main musical source for many, and the resurgence of the budget active loudspeaker is in full swing. Sadly Goodmans are no more, in a loudspeaker sense at least, and Wharfedale don't seem in any hurry to 'activate' the current Diamond 10, but there is no shortage of other contenders.

Newest on the scene hail from Canada and are part of loudspeaker manufacturer Paradigm's new trendy sub-brand Paradigm Shift, introducing a range of personal audio, PC and gaming products to the UK. At present the range consists of three pairs of in-ear headphones and the A2 powered loudspeakers under

consideration here.

Reassuringly, the A2s feel like proper high quality loudspeakers rather than just a vain and half-hearted attempt to appeal to the trendy youth, and fit some fine technology into their neat cabinets. Said cabinets themselves cost £279 each in Black Ash or £329 each in Gloss Red, Grey, and White, or Satin Black.

The business end is taken care of by a 1" anodised aluminium dome tweeter and a 5.5 inch aluminium coned bass/midrange driver with inverted dust cap. Each unit is driven by a 50W amplifier with "DSP for an Intense Bass Experience" and at the rear you will find both 3.5mm stereo jack and phono socket inputs, plus corresponding outputs which allow the second loudspeaker to be daisy-chained from the first. As a result there is also a three position switch on the back of each unit to tell it to reproduce the left, right or both channels from the jack plug or phono sockets (yes, you can start off with a mono setup and buy the second speaker later if you like!)

The rear of the loudspeaker is completed by a mains input socket, on/off switch and a volume control, with the manual giving recommended settings for the latter depending on what the units are connected to. Grilles are supplied which not only look smart but take the edge off the eye-woundingly bright front panel power LED, and there is the option of smart desk stands and a Bluetooth receiver unit for £60 that allows direct music streaming from a suitably equipped source.

On their painfully trendy website, Paradigm Shift say that you can also make use of an Airport Express, however telephone calls to a couple of local taxi firms specialising in trips to Heathrow and Gatwick left me none the wiser, so I elected to listen to the A2s using good old fashioned connecting wires...

SOUND QUALITY

Heeding the wise words of Paradigm Shift's PR man to "Give 'em large; they were made to party!" I duly slotted a DJ cartridge into my Vestax turntable's headshell and cued up some Underworld. He had a good point. I always like my review surprises to be of the pleasant variety and the A2s may be little on the outside but they have a mighty big heart on the inside. They really do love to punch out a rollicking tune and can come up with a bass line that belies their diminutive dimensions. Even more encouragingly that bass line wasn't of the overblown,

overstrained 'She's gonna blow, captain...' type, but had an impressive sense of control behind it. Equally the top end was crisp and spry but without being harsh or spitty. All in all, a great first impression, but now was time to don the serious hat for a more in-depth analysis...

With the cartridge changed for something a little more sophisticated and couth I was very pleased to note that the A2s were more than happy with the changes and proceeded to put on a highly impressive show. With a more sympathetic source and some more refined material passing under it, the A2s blossomed into a mature and eminently capable loudspeaker



with a good sense of soundstage scale and fine insight. Popping Neil Young's 'After the Gold Rush' onto the turntable I was most taken by the central image stability of his vocals and the way in which each inflection as he sang was very well captured by the A2s.

As I moved through a wide range of material, the Paradigm Shifts never failed to surprise me with their general enjoyability and sheer competency, proving that you should never judge a book by its cover (or in this case, its website). Possibly the most amusing event of the listening period was when I left the speakers playing Radio 2 for the evening to warm up and happened to wander into the room as that well-known beacon of youthfulness, 'The Organist Entertains' was on. Amusingly, the Wurlitzer being played from somewhere in Ohio sounded superb, with real pace and

impact!

Ultimately, though, I kept being drawn back to material with a beat and this was where the A2s really excelled, with a very impressive sense of punch and timing. Generally I would say the bass DSP works well, the only times it seemed to be caught out were in the likes of Paul Simon's 'Diamonds on the Soles of her Shoes', when the bass guitar had fine depth and weight, but each note was somewhat lacking in detail. It seems a little upper bass insight has been sacrificed for extra punch but, equally, not disastrously so.

CONCLUSION

The Paradigm Shift A2s are a very surprising loudspeaker. Although the website clearly is aiming them towards the funky, trendy young things with their iPods and Playstations, anyone who dismisses them as unruly blasters is doing them a grave disservice. Beneath that glossy exterior is a well developed and hugely enjoyable loudspeaker that would make the perfect partner for a second system and can even make a great case for itself as part of an affordable primary one.

According to my encyclopaedia, a 'paradigm shift' is a change in the basic assumptions, or paradigms, within the ruling theories of science. I'm not quite sure the A2s are quite ready to re-write the active loudspeaker rulebook in this way but I can see them re-writing a good many listeners' assumptions when they hear them.

REFERENCE SYSTEM BOX
 Vestax PDX-D3Mk2 Turntable
 Ortofon Nightclub S and Goldring 2500 cartridges
 Sondex SP1/PS1 preamplifier
 Technics SL-XP140 portable CD player

VERDICT 
 Well developed and hugely enjoyable loudspeakers, the Paradigm Shift A2s should be high on your compact active loudspeaker audition list.

PARADIGM SHIFT A2 £658
 (GLOSS FINISH)
 Anthem AV Solutions
 ☎ +44 (0)1825 750858
 www.anthemavs.co.uk

FOR
 - impressive bass weight
 - ebullient nature
 - sense of control
 - build and finish

AGAINST
 - bass DSP not quite perfect

MEASURED PERFORMANCE

Our frequency response analysis of the Paradigm Shift A2 shows a relatively smooth characteristic with steadily rising treble and no crossover suckout, a balance that will give a bright sound with strong detail. Measuring off axis by around 15 degrees saw treble fall just enough to give a net flat response, so the Shift A2 is a well balanced loudspeaker that certainly won't sound dull, but should not come across as unbearably bright or sharp either, when pointed down a room and not angled in toward listeners. The absence of peaks and dips suggests low coloration and our 200mS decay analysis bore this out: coloration was low for such a small cabinet.

Paradigm claim Digital Signal Processing has been used to enhance bass, a technique that when used heavily handedly gives excessive and

boomy bass. In the Shift A2, however, there appears to be a little upper bass boost around 100Hz but a sharp cut off below 60Hz to limit bass distortion from excessive cone displacement, maintain power handling and keep the Shift sounding 'fast' - a good sign.

The little Shift A2 is well engineered to sound fast and detailed, yet well balanced at the same time. It appears to have low coloration too. NK

FREQUENCY RESPONSE

