

The Audio Beat

Paradigm SHIFT • A2 Loudspeakers

"...the little speakers that not only could but do."

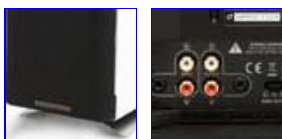
by [Marc Mickelson](#) | July 19, 2013

For the Way You Play": this is the slogan emblazoned across the colorful boxes of the Paradigm A2 speakers. It implies something at odds with the singular function of a hi-fi loudspeaker: *versatility*. Just how *can* a loudspeaker be versatile? After all, it is conceived and built to do a typical job in a typical way: produce sound when connected to an amplifier, with a source in front of that. For the A2, "typical" is just the beginning of its capabilities -- its versatility. While it does a speaker's job, there are multiple ways it can accomplish this, and it does so with true hi-fi cred.



Price: \$559.98 per pair.
Warranty: One year parts and labor.

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The A2 brings its own amplification to the party: 50 watts for its in-house-designed 1" aluminum-dome tweeter and 5 1/2" aluminum-cone woofer. There are inherent advantages to the active approach, owing to the opportunity to match the amplifiers with the crossovers and drivers. Paradigm not only designed the A2 to achieve what its larger passive speakers do, namely smooth frequency response over a broad radiation area, but also overall system efficiency -- in other words, the ability to play loud without strain. To achieve both of these wide-ranging goals, Paradigm employs digital signal processing (DSP) to shape the A2's frequency response, mostly, one can surmise without knowing the particulars, to provide bass output that not only extends the speaker's usable frequency response (to a claimed 30Hz) but also belies its size. The A2 is definitely a small speaker, measuring a mere 11"H x 6 5/8"W x 8 7/8"D, but it doesn't

sound small, possessing an unexpected sense of stature and punch in the bass.

The A2 *had* to be self-powered in order for it to work in the many system contexts Paradigm envisioned. These include use with computers, TVs, music servers and portable music players -- essentially anything with a line-level output and volume control. It's difficult enough to site speakers on a desktop, let alone an amplifier for use with them, so Paradigm put it all inside the box, so to speak. Paradigm also envisioned other uses for the A2, including with musical instruments, game systems and wireless audio sources. The A2 includes an auxiliary power outlet on the rear panel just for integration with Apple Airport Express.

The A2 comes in a variety of colors, including red and white in addition to basic black, and wood-grain vinyl is also an option. Its cabinet is fashioned from a very hard, very dense plastic-like material, and its front baffle feels dead, like it contains something akin to rubber. The grilles attach magnetically, keeping the front baffle free of inserts. Around back are the RCA inputs, the aforementioned AC outlet, and the level control. This allows you to set the maximum output level, tailoring it for whatever the speakers are connected to. The on/off switch engages the A2's auto signal sensing. When the speakers detect a signal, they turn on; after 20 minutes without a signal, they turn off. Around back there is also a switch for specifying which channel each speaker occupies: right, left or center.

The A2s can be used in a multitude of ways, but I used them in just three: with my computer, my TV and my two-channel audio system. And given the emphasis of *The Audio Beat*, you can easily guess in which context the speakers were used most. I actually used the A2s in both my main system, with preamps and sources that cost many times more than the speakers, and my office system, where the A2s were paired with modestly priced equipment that nonetheless revealed much about their sound.

While the small size of the A2s makes desktop use a no-brainer, I couldn't adjust to them when they were used this way, connected to my computer. With the speakers on and no signal present, there is a noticeable amount of hiss, and I found this distracting while sitting at the computer. With a musical signal, the story was different, the A2s filling not just my personal workspace but my entire office with sound. However, because my office doubles as a second listening space, I have an entire system set up there, and it was with this that I initially came to understand the A2s' true capabilities.

Initially I placed the speakers on a pair of lightweight adjustable stands that I've used with other small monitors. While these raised the A2s to an acceptable height, putting the tweeters close to the height of my ears, their wobbliness concerned me. I did some speaker-stand shopping, therefore, and found a very stable alternative from Sanus, the SF30. These attractive, heavy metal stands come unassembled; you can fill their posts with lead shot or sand, as I did, to maximize their mass. They not only provided rock-solid footing for the speakers, they improved the sound noticeably, ramping up focus, firming up the bass and solidifying soundstaging. I used the A2s with them for most of my listening, four blobs of Fun-Tak coupling the speakers to the stands.

I also used a number of source components and preamps, the A2s needing no outside amplification. While it was easy to hear the difference between the Audio Research Reference 10 and VTL TL-7.5 III, no one would own such expensive preamps and use them long-term with A2s. More their speed in terms of price were a pair of Oppo Digital universal players, the DV-980H and DV-981HD, that I've had for a number of years and a Cambridge Audio Azur 540D CD/DVD player that I recently bought at a thrift store. All of these inexpensive sources have built-in volume control, making them perfect for use with the A2s. And as with the big-gun preamps, the A2s easily differentiated the personalities of the three players -- and the various discs they can play. I settled on one of the Oppos, because it fit underneath a piece of furniture between the speakers, making the A2s the only visible part of the entire system, but any of them

would make for an uncomplicated audiophile system -- just the source, a pair of interconnects and the speakers.

As I've already stated, the A2s simply don't sound like the small speakers they are. They project sound into the listening space like a pair of bigger, more robust speakers, even like a pair of small floorstanders. This alone will impress some listeners -- they present an aural-visual illusion as the music projects out of their small cabinets. However, it's the quality of that sound, not just its stature, that makes the A2s truly special little speakers.

As is so often the case, a few of the discs I played early on were the CD-R samplers I made for audio shows. These allow me to hear a number of telling cuts without having to lug all of the individual CDs around with me. Normally I'm listening to this music on expensive, complicated systems -- the kind of systems assembled in order to impress listeners both visually and sonically -- and many of them have prodigious bass. I'll play these cuts not only to hear what the speakers can do down low, but also to determine if they are causing any problems within the room. These come as no surprise, as hotel rooms were not designed to be great listening dens, but the problems can reveal more about the system, a mental subtraction of the room issues leading to the ultimate assessment of the sound of the system.

With the A2s, however, I had a different goal: to hear how big these little speakers could sound, including down into the bass, which should be a true weakness. It's beyond any minimonitor, even ones with big cabinets, to grip the bass line of "Words of Wonder" from Keith Richards' *Main Offender* [Virgin V2-86499], as so many big floorstanders can't convey its guttural power and impact, but the A2s more than ably captured the low-end grunt of Jakob Dylan's "Evil is Alive and Well" from *Seeing Things* [Columbia 88697 02328 2], which is so vital to the song's brooding character. Yes, the bloomy weight was only hinted at and, yes, the midbass sock was not fully conveyed, but that really wasn't the point (and would have been a bona fide miracle coming from the A2s). The whole of *Seeing Things* is bluesy and instrumentally complex, and the A2s sorted out and placed everything in space, conveying it all very well in my large listening room (connected to megabuck electronics). Ask the A2s to belt out a cut that has real force behind it, and they will certainly try -- and they may

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surprise with what they accomplish. This happened to me more than a few times.

Listening in my office is more about understanding a product's tonality than its ability to impart low-end grunt or project instruments and singers in space, as the room, given its small size and abundance of "stuff," including many LPs, is sub-optimal for critical listening. However, just as out in big listening room, the A2s proved they could not only cast an impressively larger-than-expected soundstage, they were tonally convincing while doing it. They had a measure of fullness in the midrange and sounded more solid than airy into the treble, achieving a sense of balance that is so often the domain of much more expensive speakers. Greg Brown's deep, resonant voice suffers when a speaker leans toward the treble, but the A2s gave his vocals on *Over and Under* [Trailer Records TRUB 33] the sort of weight and density that only floorstanders normally achieve, projecting his voice out into the room more than tying it to the recording's own acoustic. This quality, more emphatic than forward, is a double-edged sword. Some listeners will prefer a sound that coaxes them to lean in while listening, instead of one that lets it all hang out. The fact that the A2s raised the issue, however, was a sign of their sonic sophistication.

With speakers the size of the A2s, even ones with their own amplification, you expect output capabilities to be noticeably limited. As I've already indicated, however, the A2s can play plenty loud, but at a certain point beyond that they begin to compress. They simply refuse to play any louder and a shoutiness creeps into their midrange. At this same point, I also thought I could hear the cabinet resonating, not producing a buzz or some other obvious sign but rather the speakers taking on a forced, unfocused quality. Again, I'm talking here about SPLs that you won't want to experience for long -- if at all. And as much as I've praised the A2s' bass, Paradigm has not rewritten the laws of physics -- there still is only so much low-end depth and weight that can be coaxed from both a small driver in a small enclosure.

But all this said, at normal and even loud levels, the A2s sound amazingly potent and at the same time refined, disappearing like small speakers can yet sounding like more than the small speakers they are.

The speakers I normally use in my office, my reference minimonitors, if you will, are Infinity Primus 150s, (\$300/pair when still available), a pair of traditional (*i.e.*, non-powered) two-way speakers using a 3/4" aluminum-dome tweeter and 5 1/4" aluminum-cone woofer. I bought my pair at a garage sale for \$30, including the original box and manual. Unlike the A2s, the Primus 150s are ported, the output coming from the front of the speaker. The Primus 150's cabinet is milled from MDF, and the front baffle features a plastic insert to which the drivers mount. For what it's worth, a rap on the side of the speaker demonstrates a slightly lower-pitched "thuk" than from the A2. The Primus 150 is also taller, deeper and wider than the A2, leading one to assume that the Primus 150 should offer a bit more bass extension.

We all know what they say about assuming, and it's instances like this that prove the unnamed "they" correct. The A2s sound more forceful and subjectively go deeper in the bass, possessing more of the grunt needed to bring Jakob Dylan's *Seeing Things* to life. In truth, however, neither speaker comes close to "plumbing the depths," let alone achieving the grandeur of a pair of large floorstanders.

Where the Primus 150s excel is in their overall clarity, which imparts the perception of slightly greater transparency to the signal fed to them. Even in the big rig with electronics, both tube and solid-state, that cost much more than they did, the Primus 150s differentiated the equipment in front of them a bit better than the A2s. However, the A2s countered with something I personally find more valuable to the experience of listening to music: body and presence that bordered with some recordings on voluptuousness while never sounding overripe or colored. I don't think this is a byproduct of any frequency range so much as an overall characteristic of the A2s, perhaps owing to their DSP, and it's one that brings music to life, even if the Primus 150s sound a bit truer to upstream equipment and the recordings.

While I like both of these small speakers, I definitely prefer the A2s. The difference in cost is more than made up for by their built-in amplification, and when in the future you decide to upgrade (as we all do), you'll have a speaker that's easy to repurpose. For the heck of it, I did just that for some 2.0 home theater and the improvement over the TV's speakers was -- no surprise -- remarkable. So when you're seemingly done with the A2s in your audio system, they won't be ready for the garage sale, as my Primus 150s were.

It takes no great perceptive abilities to see the economic path that high-end audio has taken -- and will continue to take. Prices have risen for all types of products as a matter of course, but along with this elevation in cost has come a commensurate increase in performance at the lowest end of the price range, which is higher now than ever before. "Is it hi-fi?" has become easier to answer, because the sound of so much equipment qualifies.

This is a point the Paradigm A2 drives home in resounding fashion. For their sub-\$600 price, you get a good-looking, well-designed pair of speakers that requires nothing more than a source with volume control, be that a computer, TV, gaming system, or iPod. But if your goals are more sonically ambitious, the A2s can take their place within an audiophile-approved two-channel system with equal assurance, sounding more robust, more balanced, and more extended down low than their physical size or price would suggest. They respond to better ancillary equipment, cables and speaker stands, becoming the conduit through which it all speaks, just like their pricier competition.

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"For the Way You Play" indeed. The A2s are the little speakers that not only could but *do*. ☺

Associated Equipment

Analog: TW-Acoustic Raven AC turntable; Graham B-44 Phantom Series II Supreme and Tri-Planar Mk VII UII tonearms; Audio-Technica AT33EV, Denon DL-103R, and Dynavector XV-1t and XV-1s Mono cartridges; Nordost Odin and Frey 2 phono cables; Gryphon Audio Designs Legato Legacy, Audio Research Reference Phono 2 SE and Lamm Industries LP2 Deluxe phono stages.

Digital: Ayre Acoustics DX-5 "A/V Engine," Cambridge Audio Azur 540D CD/DVD player, Esoteric K-01 CD/SACD player, Oppo Digital DV-980H and DV-981HD universal players.

Preamplifiers: Acoustic Research SRC, Audio Research Reference 10, VTL TL-7.5 Series III.

Power amplifiers: Hafler DH220, Sonance Sonamp 260.

Speakers: Infinity Primus 150.

Interconnects: AudioQuest William E. Low Signature, DH Labs BL-1 Series II, Nordost Frey 2, Shunyata Research Zi-Tron Anaconda.

Speaker cables: AudioQuest William E. Low Signature, DH Labs T-14, Nordost Frey 2, Shunyata Research Zi-Tron Anaconda.

Power conditioners: Essential Sound Products The Essence Reference-II, Quantum QB4 and QB8, Quantum Qx4, Shunyata Research Hydra Triton and Typhon.

Power cords: Essential Sound Products The Essence Reference-II and MusicCord-Pro ES, Nordost Frey 2 and Heimdall 2, Shunyata Research Zi-Tron Anaconda.

Equipment rack, platforms and speaker stands: Silent Running Audio Craz² 8 equipment rack and Ohio Class XL Plus² platforms (under Lamm M1.2 amps), Harmonic Resolution Systems M3 isolation bases, Sanus SF30 speaker stands.