

Paradigm Shift A2

Problem Solver

Neil Gader



The dilemma: My wife and I recently added a small room to our house in order to create a much-needed workspace for her. She stores her music and other audio materials on an iPod and on her Mac, but the idea of cluttering a freshly finished room with electronics was at best unappealing. The solution called for good sound at entertaining levels while maintaining the smallest possible footprint. This was about the time that Paradigm announced its latest loudspeaker series, the irresistibly named Shift.

The appearance of the \$559-per-pair model A2 represents something more than just another speaker. It heralds a seismic shift in the way many of us are accessing and experiencing our music today. Already new-fangled music sources are everywhere—smart phones, MP3 players, wireless computer-generated audio, even that little headphone jack on the side of a flat panel can no longer be ignored.

Tasked with keeping up with new-gen music delivery, Shift is based on Paradigm's resident mighty-mite two-way, the Atom. However, the Shift A2 scuttles the rear-firing port, sealing the enclosure and packing it with fifty cool-running watts of bi-amplification linked up with a digital crossover and DSP (all incoming signals are converted to digital with a 48kHz sampling rate). Did someone say powered loudspeakers? In some segments of the tweakier high end that's still a big yuck—like eating broccoli. But if ever a newly born segment of the speaker marketplace cried out for internal power (and open minds), this one is it.

Standing a mere eleven inches tall, the MDF cabinet of the A2 is finished in a brilliant polar-white gloss that screams Apple (five finishes are available). The plastic back panel is fitted with an on/off rocker (it automatically cycles into standby mode after a few minutes *sans* signal); independent volume controls and an AC outlet stand ready for wireless streaming audio devices like an AirPort Express. The 3.5mm mini-jack and set of analog inputs mean that any model in the Shift line can be driven straight out of the Mac headphone mini-jack or from a preamp. All the appropriate wiring is provided. Additionally a single A2

can be purchased on its own (\$279). A handy slider-switch on the A2s back panel is selectable for mono or left/right or multiple speakers. In sum, no preamp or amp is necessary—just locate a couple of AC outlets and you're good to go. An alternative to an AirPort is Paradigm's optional Bluetooth BD 1 dongle. About the size of Zippo lighter, it operates within a range of approximately thirty feet, and is battery-powered and rechargeable. A charge lasts about 12 hours and over 200 hours in standby. It comes with an AC recharger which conveniently plugs into the back of an A2. It synched with my MacBook without issue.

The satin-anodized aluminum drivers are derived from Paradigm's Reference line. The mid/bass diaphragm features a high stiffness-to-mass ratio and foam-rubber elastomer surround. Although it appears an exact match to the Atom driver, it has a larger magnet and a longer voice coil for increased excursion—crucial in a less efficient sealed enclosure. The wire-mesh-protected dome tweeter uses a powerful ceramic magnet and ferro-fluid cooling for increased power handling, as well as waveguide technology for smoother response and dispersion. Keep in mind, the Shift is not a pro-monitor, so if you were expecting balanced inputs, a digital input, or IEC fittings for audiophile-grade power cords, forget it. On the other hand, at under \$300 each the Paradigm Shift A2s deserve some slack. One item that could use an easy fix is the volume control wheel on the rear panel. Why not include a center notch so that users can adjust by feel where the volume is at any one moment?

I evaluated the A2 in a variety of settings, determined

EQUIPMENT REVIEW - Paradigm Shift A2 Powered Loudspeaker

to give it a workout. I listened to everything from Debussy to *The Daily Show*, wirelessly from a Macbook, from the preamp outs of a NAD C 390, and through the headphone jack of a flat-panel television. Sonically the Shift takes a midrange-centered Everyman approach, consistent with its wide-ranging crossover mission. There's general warmth to its personality—a fuller, darker, almost voluptuous sound that makes this little speaker particularly satisfying even without the augmentation of a subwoofer. It communicates surprising weight with orchestral material—a factor that is all the more significant given that many of us might consider the A2 as an occasional movie speaker system in lieu of a dedicated home theater. Dialogue and effects are critical to that experience, and the tonal values that the A2 espouses are consistent with good voice articulation and the slam and immersion of special effects-driven soundtracks.

Even the in-room response I measured validated my impression that the A2 is remarkably balanced throughout the midrange. There are no significant tonal spikes or suckouts—especially in the highly sensitive 1kHz–3kHz presence range. The character of the sound is a bit forward, even in the upper midrange and presence region. Although the lower/mid treble region has hints of added sibilance, there's an overall coolness and dryness to the tweeter—a reluctance in the top octaves to open up fully, which accounts for the earlier reference about the speaker's darker sound. But even though the upstage castanets were reproduced with a slight metallic bite during the Saint-Saëns *Samson and Delilah* *Bacchanale* [Reference Recordings], the personality of the treble turned out to be more complex than that. During the same track the cymbals and other instruments were reproduced with a bevy of fine-grained and specific detail. The Shift A2's imaging and soundstaging abilities are by and large average for this range, but it has enough dynamic gradation and low-level resolution to reproduce significant front-to-back depth. However, its ability to retain ambience and lifelike image size in the vertical plane is distinctly earthbound.

Bass quality, by which I mean timbre, timing, and pitch, was quite good. At eleven inches tall I'd hardly expected Edgar Meyer's stand-up bass to be reproduced with much soundboard reverberation and sophistication, but the A2 really caught me flat-footed. And the bass

drums during Copland's *Fanfare* were not only presentable but very nearly intimidating. Certainly the heaviest symphonic challenges will illicit a slight rubbery quality from the 5.5" driver, which tends to mask the articulation of individual images. But I can count on the fingers of one hand the number of small inexpensive speakers that produce such a startling amount of energy in the midbass. Indeed, the 55Hz low-end extension that Paradigm specifies was accurate in my smallish room, and there was perceivable response further down the spectrum. Credit Paradigm's extensive experience with subwoofer bass management and DSP for the specific tailoring of the A2's low-frequency performance. Paradigm's acoustical engineering manager Oleg Bogdanov was forthright about the DSP employed in the A2: "At higher volumes, where the woofer reaches its excursion limits, the DSP starts gradually limiting amp output at low frequencies. This effectively works as a dynamic high-pass filter. At 80dB SPL (at 1m distance), the low-frequency extension is about 30Hz, at 100dB it is about 55Hz. Other products on the market typically use wide-band compression to stop the driver from over-excursion and self-destruction. However, this results in an uncomfortable phenomenon, with the volume continuously changing depending on the amount of bass that is present in the material being played." I noted that at

high volumes the A2 did lose a little low-end heft but Paradigm has achieved a very reasonable balance with its clever technology.

The Paradigm Shift A2 represents a very high order of value and performance—incredibly versatile for small-room, family-on-the-go, and impromptu listening anywhere there's an outlet. Frankly only a dog is more companionable than the A2. And as for the dilemma I laid out at the beginning of this article: Take it from the wife and me—problem solved. **tas**



SPECS & PRICING

Drivers: 1" aluminum dome tweeter, 5.5" aluminum midbass

Frequency response: 55Hz–20kHz

Integrated amp power: 50W

Dimensions: 11" x 6.5" x 8.75"

Weight: 11.6 lbs

Price: \$279–\$329 each, depending on finish (BD 1, \$59)

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FURTHER THOUGHTS

A second look at previously reviewed products.



Paradigm Shift A2 (\$279-\$329)

Although I finished the review of the nifty Shift A2 some months ago I've had a chance to revisit it thanks to a relative who bought a pair based in part on my review. This family is heavy into computers and loves wireless—their home is fully networked. The missing variable was a satisfying, go-anywhere, small speaker. Enter the Shift A2—powered, versatile, reasonably priced, and easy to setup. And cool-looking, too. With an Airport Express plugged into each speaker the Shift A2 fills a high ceilinged living room with streaming music. Each time I visit I especially appreciate the solid low-end oomph and rich vocal midrange.

—Neil Gader

2013 the absolute sound Editors' Choice Awards

Welcome to the 2013 edition of *The Absolute Sound's* Editors' Choice Awards, our annual Recommended Products list. On the following pages we present the gear that our editors and writers have selected as most worthy of your consideration. These are the components we ourselves would buy—or recommend to friends and family. Each product category is divided into price ranges, with components listed in order of ascending cost (though a few items, like cables and accessories, are listed alphabetically). Each recommendation is also accompanied by a capsule review, the original reviewer's name or initials, and the issue the review appeared in. Note that in a few cases a product may have been reviewed in one of our sister publications, *Playback* or *AVguide.com*, or the review may be pending publication, or the product may not have been formally reviewed but earns a recommendation based on one or more writer's extensive experience with it.

Given that this is the high end, where components generally have long lifespans, some of our recommendations look back several years. At the same time, in an effort to be as selective and up-to-date as possible, we have dropped some components that appeared on last year's list, usually because they have been discontinued but sometimes because fresh competition has caused us to reconsider the choice.

LOUDSPEAKERS

Desktop Loudspeakers

Paradigm Shift A2

\$279-\$329

paradigm.com

A 2012 Golden Ear recipient, the Shift A2 is more than just a cleverly named loudspeaker. Compact, internally powered, and equipped with DSP bass management and enough back-panel inputs to connect to almost any source, this is what 21st century entry-level high end is all about. A combination of sound and value, it extends the welcome mat to budding high-enders who may have felt they couldn't afford the entrance fee.

Neil Gader, Issue 224

