



# Paradigm Prestige 15B Speaker System Review

By Mark Fleischmann • Posted: May 14, 2015



**PRICE** \$6,145

## AT A GLANCE

### Plus

- Advanced driver designs
- Fine-grained, transparent, dynamic playback
- Compact but powerful subwoofer

### Minus

- Boxy, non-curved enclosures

## THE VERDICT

Paradigm's Prestige series speakers and Seismic 110 sub employ unusual driver design to achieve remarkable transparency and punch.

★★★★★ 	
<b>Prestige 15B Speaker System</b>	
Performance	★★★★★
Build Quality	★★★★★
Value	★★★★★
★★★★★ 	
<b>Seismic 110 Subwoofer</b>	
Performance	★★★★★
Features	★★★★★
Build Quality	★★★★★
Value	★★★★☆

As I sat down to write this review of the Paradigm Prestige speaker system, I couldn't get a seemingly unrelated subject—the Pono hate—out of my head. No joke, folks: I sat at the keyboard

for hours mulling it over. What chance did I have to convince readers that a \$6,145 speaker system is worth hearing when a \$400 music player is greeted with language like “don’t buy” and “snake oil”?

OK, I know I’m preaching to the converted. You probably wouldn’t be reading Sound & Vision if you weren’t open to the idea that a well-designed speaker system has the power to bring you closer to music. That’s what the Paradigms did for me when I informally played a few recent additions to my high-resolution music library (more on them later). I felt as if a curtain had been lifted and music was in the room with me—not just recorded music, but music.

### **Between Signature and Studio**

The Prestige series is brand new. It lodges between Paradigm’s top-of-the-line Signature speakers and midpriced Studio series, with the slim-and-trim Millenia and value-oriented Monitor further down. (If you don’t want to pay \$400 for a music player, you may be a Monitor kind of guy, and that might even be a shrewd decision on your part.)

The Prestige lineup includes three towers, the 95F (\$2,499 each), 85F (\$1,999 each), and 75F (\$1,499 each); a single monitor, the 15B (\$799 each); the 45C center (\$1,299) and larger 55C (\$1,699); and a dedicated surround speaker, the 25S (\$999 each). Finish options include midnight cherry, walnut, and black walnut veneers, and piano black.

Prestige is closer in price to Studio than to Signature. The 15B monitor, reviewed here with the 45C center, costs only 100 bucks more per pair than the chunkier Studio 20 v.5 (I use the v.4 in my reference system). While the 15B’s boxy 0.75-inch fiberboard enclosure lacks the sweet curved sides employed in the latest Studio line, the edges use a lock-joint construction for greater structural rigidity than is customary from the usual 45-degree-angle box cut. And when you remove the magnetically attached grilles, you may notice that the 1-inch-thick baffle has a visual economy lacking in the overbuilt-looking Studio as well as a new tweeter lens and other driver-related refinements. I like the massive robotic look of the Studio just as much, but that may be a matter of taste. Perhaps it’s a guy thing.

Paradigm loves acronymic tech-speak, so your head may spin when I tell you that the 15B and 45C have 1-inch X-PAL fluid-cooled tweeters with PPA tweeter lenses and FEA-optimized pole-piece assemblies. Meanwhile, the 5.5-inch woofers in both speakers (dual woofers in the center) have 5.5-inch X-PAL drivers, ART surrounds, Shock-Mount isolation mounting systems (shared by the center’s 3.5-inch X-PAL midrange driver), and high-temp voice coils.

As to the parts that aren’t self-explanatory: The PAL in the X-PAL drivers refers to pure aluminum, which combines light weight and stiffness with highly pistonic (that is to say, piston-like) movement. The PPA (Perforated Phase-Aligning) tweeter lens, which covers the tweeter, has concentric rings of holes that diminish and then disappear as they approach the center. Besides having a protective function, the lens (a variation on the more common phase plug) blocks out-of-phase frequencies to provide what the literature calls “smoother, extended high frequencies with incredible detail and higher output.” The FEA (Finite Element Analysis) pole-piece directly behind the tweeter dome has a

contoured cavity that scatters reflections and expands the tweeter's low-frequency extension from 1,800 hertz (with a conventional pole-piece) down to 1,200 Hz. This allows a lower crossover point to the woofer, resulting in potentially smoother off-axis response.

The woofer surrounds—the flexible piece that attaches the circumference of the cone to the basket—feature ART (Active Ridge Technology), with ridges overmolded onto the cone, for greater excursion and what is claimed to be a 3-decibel gain in distortion-free output compared with that of conventional surrounds. The Shock-Mount isolation mounting system on all the woofers and the center's midrange uses rubber inserts and gaskets to decouple the drivers from the enclosure, controlling interaction between them along with sound-polluting resonance and vibration. Brushed-aluminum finishes and matching concave dust caps give the woofers and midrange a sleek appearance that complements the snazzy-looking tweeter lens. Incidentally, Paradigm designs and builds its drivers in-house.

If you opt for a tower model, you'll get a polished steel and aluminum base with reversible feet. Don't want spikes to damage your hardwood floors or carpet? Unscrew the spikes and reverse them, and you've got blunt nubs instead.

### **Oh, and the Sub**

The Seismic 110 subwoofer (\$1,650) we mated with the Prestige has been part of my reference system since it came out four years ago, and for which a formal review here is long overdue. Paradigm spent a lot of time and money refining this unique sub, and the results are both visible and audible.



The 37-pound sub's die-cast aluminum chassis may look massive in photographs but is actually just 13.5 inches tall. Its 10-inch front-firing copolymer polypropylene cone is built in two parts, with the flat outer cone locked onto the voice coil by an unseen inner cone with I-beam cross-section support arms. An inverted surround made of overmolded Santoprene—a material that combines the characteristics of vulcanized rubber and thermoplastic—has corrugations to allow “extreme excursion” while remaining stable and centered. You’ve got to see the driver moving, as well as hear it, to believe it. I’m surprised the 850-watt RMS Class D amp doesn’t make the darned thing fly off the sub and hit the wall.

The sub supports both XLR and RCA connections and meshes with Paradigm’s Perfect Bass Kit for computer assisted room correction. It is just the awesomest compact sub ever, and I say that after years of using it.



Associated equipment included the whole menagerie: a Pioneer Elite VSX-53 A/V receiver, Oppo BDP-83SE universal disc player (for movies and music), Panasonic DMP-BD87 Blu-ray player (for music and streaming), Lenovo Windows 7 laptop, AudioQuest DragonFly v1.2 USB DAC, Meridian Director USB DAC, Micro Seiki BL-21 turntable, Shure V15MxVR/N97XE cartridge, and the phono stage of a Denon PRA-S10 preamp. All movie demos (and the first music demo) were on Blu-ray Disc.

## Live Long and Image

Refinement and transparency are Prestige's prime directives. The 15B monitor and 45C center offer finer-grained mid and high frequencies than the Studio 20 I have enjoyed for so many years, especially with harmonically rich instruments like violins and cymbals. They also offer a clearer window into hi-res content and are a little more candid about the flaws of both associated gear and content. The Prestiges aren't forgiving speakers; mating them with a midpriced or better receiver would be worth the investment. (I should note in passing that the Studio 20, with its 7-inch woofer, has the advantage in bass. But the Prestige 15B's 5.5-inch woofer may be more appropriately compared with that of the smaller Studio 10.)

The *Hobbit: The Desolation of Smaug* had cavorted with my Seismic 110 sub before, and so the roaring, thundering emergencies of Smaug and Sauron came as no surprise. I actually dialed the sub back from the initial settings used for most of the music demos (below). The 45C delivered precisely enunciated voices that had no chestiness or honking coloration, with especially impressive low-level resolution in the sotto voce conference between Gandalf and Thorin at Bree. When setting up the speakers with test tones, I noticed that the center had a slightly brighter tonal balance than that of the monitors, and I worried that the less-than-perfect timbral match would affect lateral panning. In practice, however, it wasn't a problem. The 15B summoned a roomy sound for the orchestral score and rolled Smaug's liquid rumble like a melodious tidal wave from front to back. (Smaug sounded most like its voice actor, Benedict Cumberbatch, in moments of stress.) Most impressive of all, I was able to watch the entire movie with a single volume setting and no dynamic range control—a first for the *Hobbit* movies. When the soundtrack stepped up its various all-channel assaults, listening comfort remained high, and I was able to lose myself in the movie.

*Get On Up* is the James Brown biopic coproduced by Mick Jagger. The sub was delightfully forceful in the scene where Brown's plane is caught by anti-aircraft fire in Vietnam. But of course, the musical segments are the meat of the movie. The monitors were dispassionate enough to reveal the artifice in the raucous gospel scene; the reverb seemed faked. But the subsequent gigs were stunningly believable, with the funky beat punching through thick club and theater ambience and Brown's vocals defiantly riding, emoting, and punctuating over the top. It was as if the satellites and sub were having a torrid love affair.

*A Most Wanted Man* (DTS-HD Master Audio) brings to life the Hamburg of John le Carré's novel. The gritty surround ambience generated by four 15B monitors was so real, it competed with both the narrative and the acting prowess of Philip Seymour Hoffman and Willem Dafoe—and that's saying a lot. I felt as if I were on the streets with the characters. And although I've sat through loads of nightclub scenes in movies, the one summoned by the Prestiges was unusually claustrophobic; my fight-or-flight instinct was in high gear. The center and sub were a perfect marriage for voices of both genders, never localizing in the sub. In fact, the 80-Hz sub crossover worked beautifully for everything.

I hadn't intended to use season 3 of *House of Cards* as demo material, but having heard the ominous, airy opening theme dozens of times, I couldn't help feeling that this was the best iteration yet. My binge-viewing buddy said: "This sounds amazing."

### Reference Orchestral

The Blu-ray Pure Audio release of Mahler's Symphonies Nos. 3 and 5, with Zubin Mehta leading the Bavarian State Orchestra in the Vienna Musikverein, got a treatment from the Paradigms that was nothing short of mesmerizing. With these speakers, the 96/24 DTS-HD Master Audio 5.0-channel soundtrack set a new standard in my listening life: I've never heard an orchestra as vividly and realistically imaged as this outside a concert hall. It was a perfect storm of hi-res content, surround soundtrack, tweeter lenses, and rubber gaskets. The strings had more tone color than I've ever heard in recorded music—yet despite the almost obsessively focused imaging, there was no edge, just a fully fleshed-out account of dozens of people playing stringed instruments in one of the world's greatest concert halls.

I auditioned Led Zeppelin's Physical Graffiti (96/24 FLAC from HDtracks) with the two aforementioned USB DACs, the Meridian Director and the AudioQuest DragonFly v1.2. The Paradigms surprised me by preferring the less expensive DragonFly's warmer midrange and more relaxed presentation. While the Seismic 110 sub pounded out John Bonham's mighty kick drum, the speakers panned Jimmy Page's guitars for gold and came up with grunge—but a cleverly recorded, multifaceted, and endlessly engaging grunge.



Te Amo, Argentina (from Yarlung Records) has cellist Antonio Lysy performing solo and other works by Ginastera, Piazzolla, Bragato, Golijov, and Schifrin (yes, the same Lalo Schifrin who wrote the Mission: Impossible theme). It was recorded with vacuum tube equipment onto analog tape and delivered to my system via LP, and as heard through the 15B monitors, it provided a laid-back but solidly imaged account of the cello. If I hadn't known better by that point, I'd have thought the golden mellowness was a property of the speakers, but the shape-shifting Prestiges were just adapting to the content, as great loudspeakers often do. Occasional accompaniment on this album includes a piano, and the system called attention to the gentle wooden-hammered attack.

The final and unanswered question: Will Paradigm add either a Dolby Atmos-enabled model or an Atmos module to the Prestige line? Rumors are flying, but for now, all I can say is: I hope so.

The Paradigm Prestige series combines state-of-the-art design, ingenious engineering, and superb build quality with voicing that I found cinematically and musically unerring. Speakers that allow me one-setting enjoyment of action movies, with no dynamic range control intervention, are rare. Speakers that beat my reference system on orchestral material are rarer. But speakers that do both are practically unheard of. I learned a lot—and had a lot of fun—with the Prestige in my listening room. And living with the Seismic 110 sub continues to be a joy.

### **Specs**

15B: 5.5 in aluminum-cone woofer, 1 in aluminum-dome tweeter; 7 x 12.13 x 9.38 in (WxHxD); 16 lb

45C: 5.5 in aluminum-cone woofer (2), 3.5 in aluminum-cone midrange, 1 in aluminum-dome tweeter; 18.38 x 7.5 x 10.5 in (WxHxD); 32 lb

Seismic 110: 10 in polypropylene-cone woofer; 850 watts RMS, 1,700 watts peak; sealed enclosure; line-level stereo and LFE in, mono XLR in, USB for PBK EQ, 12-volt trigger; 13.75 x 13.5 x 12.56 in (WxHxD); 37 lb

Price: \$6,145 (15B, \$799 ea; 45C, \$1,299; Seismic 110, \$1,650)

### **Company Info**

Paradigm Electronics

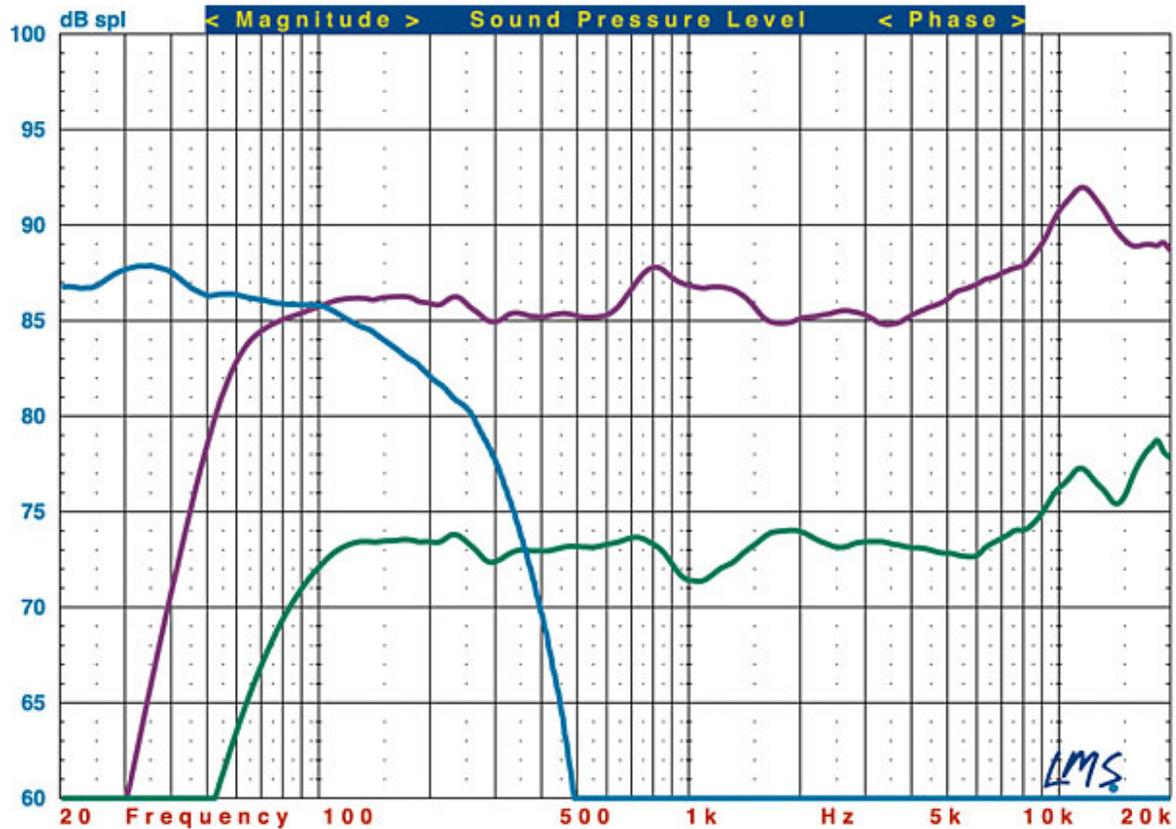
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## Test Bench

Satellite Sensitivity: 86 dB from 500 Hz to 2 kHz

Center Sensitivity: 89.5 dB from 500 Hz to 2 kHz



This graph shows the quasi-anechoic (employing close-miking of all woofers) frequency response of the Prestige 15B satellites (purple trace), Seismic 110 subwoofer (blue trace), and Prestige 45C center channel (green trace). All passive loudspeakers were measured with grilles at a distance of 1 meter with a 2.83-volt input and scaled for display purposes.

The Prestige 15B's listening-window response (a five-point average of axial and  $\pm 15$ -degree horizontal and vertical responses) measures  $+4.64/-1.19$  decibels from 200 hertz to 10 kilohertz. The  $-3$ dB point is at 60 Hz, and the  $-6$ dB point is at 52 Hz. Impedance reaches a minimum of 4.55 ohms at 193 Hz and a phase angle of  $-49.38$  degrees at 5.9 kHz.

The Prestige 45C's listening-window response measures  $+2.68/-2.13$  dB from 200 Hz to 10 kHz. An average of axial and  $\pm 15$ -degree horizontal responses measures  $+2.82/-2.38$  dB from 200 Hz to 10 kHz. The  $-3$ dB point is at 86 Hz, and the  $-6$ dB point is at 72 Hz. Impedance reaches a minimum of 4.17 ohms at 1.1 kHz and a phase angle of  $-56.89$  degrees at 108 Hz.

The Seismic 110's close-miked response, normalized to the level at 80 Hz, indicates that the lower -3dB point is at 18 Hz and the -6dB point is at 16 Hz. The upper -3dB point is at 181 Hz with the Cut-Off Frequency control set to maximum.—MJP

<http://www.soundandvision.com/content/paradigm-prestige-15b-speaker-system-review-test-bench>