

Review: Paradigm Shift A2 speakers offer flexible inputs, perky sound



AT A GLANCE ⌵

[Paradigm Shift A2 \(/product/1252679/shift-a2.html\)](/product/1252679/shift-a2.html)

[\\$280.00 \(/product/1252679/shift-a2.html\)](/product/1252679/shift-a2.html) (When Rated)



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The days when people interested in better sound from their computers had to be content with tiny, tinny plastic speakers are over. While you can still purchase such cheap accessories, you can do a whole lot better without draining your bank account. What makes this possible is the number of professional speaker manufacturers who have turned their sights to the desktop. One such manufacturer is Paradigm, a well-regarded designer with a 30-year history of producing great-sounding speakers.

Paradigm's desktop offering is the **Shift A2** (<http://www.paradigm.com/shift/powerd/A2/index.php>).

Each A2 speaker uses a hefty (11.6 pounds) enclosure that measures up at 11 inches tall, 7 inches wide, and 9 inches deep. That enclosure hosts a 5.5-inch aluminum-cone woofer and a 1-inch aluminum-dome tweeter, with the two drivers bi-amped by dual 50-Watt RMS amplifiers that provide an overall power rating of 100 watts. Yes, *each* speaker features two amps: An A2 can be operated alone in mono mode or—using a switch that allows you to designate the speaker as left or right—in pairs, with each unit's amplifier driving its own two drivers.

The A2 is available in a flat black or glossy white, red, black, or gray. The flat-black model sells for \$280 per speaker (thus \$560 per pair), while the glossy versions cost \$330 a piece (\$660 per pair).

Behind the sound

On the back of each speaker you'll find two stereo-audio inputs (a 3.5mm minijack and left/right RCA); two matching sets of outputs; a switch for choosing the aforementioned Left, Right, or Mono speaker setting; a power switch; a power-cord jack (the A2 has an internal power supply, so you don't have to deal with a wall wart); a 120-volt/60Hz, two-prong electrical outlet for powering another device (unlike some other speakers, the A2 doesn't support both American and European power standards); and a volume knob. The front of each unit sports a very bright blue LED that lights up when the speaker is on. Mesh grills are included, while stainless-steel stands (\$40 each) and a Bluetooth-receiver dongle (\$59) can be purchased separately.

I was pleased by the flexibility of these connections. I'm keen on power outlets that make it easy to connect an AirPort Express (thus making the speaker an AirPlay destination), and the cabling between two speakers is a snap—just string the included 6-foot, 3.5mm cable from the output on one speaker to the input on the other.



(<http://images.techhive.com/images/article/2100027653-large.jpg>)

The back of the A2 features inputs as well as a volume control.

I'm not entirely sold on the volume-control situation, however. With separate volume controls, you have to balance the volume of each speaker. This would be easier if the knob had detents so that you could easily replicate the same setting on each. You can eyeball it, of course, but that requires you to turn each speaker around. If you intend to use the speakers only with an iOS device or similar portable source, you can likely avoid knob twiddling by cranking the speakers all the way up and managing the volume with the source's volume control. But with many other kinds of devices, the gain is too high—you'll overdrive the speakers. With these sources, you have to use the speakers' volume knobs. It would be nice if connecting two A2s together allowed you to use one volume control for both speakers.

The sound itself

At \$560 for the pair, the Paradigm Shift A2 speakers are more expensive than Audioengine's \$400 [Audioengine A5+ powered speakers](http://www.audioengine.com/products/A5plus.html)

(http://www.techhive.com/article/1167860/audioengines_a5_is_a_fun_affordable_speaker_system.html),

a personal favorite, but they're similar in size and external design.

(The Audioengine speakers host all their amplification in the left speaker, however.) I happen to have a pair of the A5+ speakers on my desk, so it was a snap to set up an A/B audio switch so I could compare the two.

Before doing so, I attached my iPod touch to the Paradigm speakers and fed a variety of music through them: modern hits with loads of bass, classic symphonic and choral music, techno, metal, acoustic jazz, and acoustic folk. In most cases, I was pleased with what I heard. The speakers are hardly colorless—they tend to be a little bright, but they can produce a reasonable amount of bass from their 5-inch woofers without barking.

Where textures weren't quite so thick, I did notice a couple of things that didn't thrill me. Playing a Bill Evans trio album, I heard a lot of the drummer's brushes from the left speaker—enough to distract me from the rest of the music. And the piano sounded like it was miked from farther away than it should have been. It was there, but you didn't feel any of the resonance from the instrument.

I then flipped back and forth between the Audioengine and Paradigm speakers and heard what I'd been missing—the support from the bottom end. When listening to a bowed bass in a classical recording, I clearly heard the bow's attack with each set of speakers, but only the Audioengine's filled in with the guts of the instrument. It was full where the Paradigm speakers didn't provide the whole picture.

I tested each set of speakers with real-time- and spectrum analysers and they supported what my ears heard. The Paradigm speakers' output drops down a bit just above 80Hz. Flip to the Audioengine speakers, and that band of frequencies is more pronounced.

On the other hand, in comparison to the Paradigm A2 pair, the Audioengine A5+ system sounded more boxed in— the A2’s soundstage was broader when the speakers were placed on the desktop. And, again, the sound was brighter overall. (Listen from farther away and the Audioengine’s soundstage improves.)

But that’s the trouble with A/B listening tests. You hear one thing you like from Speaker A, another quality you care for from Speaker B, and you wish you could compromise between the two. If I had my druthers, I’d add a subwoofer to the Paradigm speakers and turn it up just a hair to provide the foundation I missed.

Having finished that comparison I went back to the Paradigm speakers and used them as I’d normally use a set of good computer speakers. I played some movies through them via iTunes running on my MacBook Pro, streamed music from a couple of music subscription services, played a few local uncompressed tracks, and attached the output of an Edirol audio interface to them and jacked my MIDI keyboard into that interface.

Overall I was happy with the sound with a couple of exceptions. Given that I’m accustomed to the huge sound that can erupt from a 5.1 audio system I did miss a subwoofer when playing movies—the gut-shaking explosions just weren’t there. And when playing piano samples from my Kurzweil keyboard, I found the sound to be uneven. The keyboard, built with larger speakers in mind, requires a fairly flat response from the speaker it’s plugged into, and that’s not what the A2 produced. Rather, piano tones produced an uneven response, with low frequencies emphasized more than higher ones.

Bottom line

The Paradigm A2 is a flexible desktop speaker that, while not a champion on the low end, provides very pleasing sound and a broad soundstage when run in a pair. If you’ve been living with a set of cheap “computer” speakers, it’s well worth your while to audition them.

Paradigm Shift A2

(/product/1252679/shift-a2.html)

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Price when rated: \$280.00

Pros

- Full soundstage
- Flexible input options
- AC-power jack on back of

each speaker

Cons

- Separate volume knobs when used in pairs; no detents on volume knobs
- Bass is present but not big

+ COMPARE