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Paradigm Shift E2m In-Ear Headphones Review

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It was the season of our discontent...

No, I'm not referring to the NHL who have once again ruined my Fall by locking out the players.

Well, perhaps I am. Just a tad.

Gary Bettman. You suck.

Between the 2012 Presidential Election, the threat of even more carnage in the Middle East, and the cancelling of the *Jersey Shore*, life on earth is pretty miserable right now.

You don't have to be an economics major to figure out that times are still pretty tough for electronics manufacturers; with the exception of the folks in Cupertino and Seoul who are making billions on the sale of tablets and smartphones. Television sales are generally pretty flat and dedicated home theaters are nothing more than wishful thinking for most people. The "man cave" has become extinct overnight having been replaced by the media room/den; the wife and kids want the remote. The horror. The horror.

Two areas of the market, however, are doing just fine.

Soundbars and headphones.

Both categories are doing so well, that traditional loudspeaker manufacturers have jumped into the orgy with both feet; primarily out of a base instinct for financial survival.

Awaiting a recent flight to Spain, I ventured into the new headphone store in Terminal 7 at JFK and was amazed by the selection; all of the popular brands such as Beats by Dr. Dre, Sennheiser, AKG, and Skull Candy were present, but so were B&W, Polk, and PSB. Polk Audio is doing so well with headphones and soundbars that they are opening their own store inside BWIA (that's outside of Baltimore for those who don't fly a lot).



One would think that the market was becoming oversaturated but don't tell the folks at **Paradigm** or MartinLogan that because they are in total attack mode right now. The new **Shift** series from the Canadian manufacturer has been garnering great press; and would you really expect Paradigm to make crappy headphones? Seriously. The \$99 **E2m** In-Ear headphones are here to play.

Wax on. Wax off.

I must confess that in-ear headphones have never been my thing. One bad date as a teenager with a Q-tip and I've pretty much avoided sticking things in my ears ever since. Large dorky over-the-ear cans have always been my preference which probably explains why my headphone of choice at home are the AKG K 702s. In-ear headphones only became necessary when I started running again at 4am. The AKGs require a headphone amplifier so that pretty much rules them out in that role. One can't run with a donut and headphone amplifier at the same time. Where would you put the donut?

Apple may have made earbuds and in-ear headphones all the rage thanks to the iPod and, later, the iPhone (whether or not that was good for your hearing is another issue), but other manufacturers capitalized quickly on the revolution and offered dramatically superior products; Etymotic, Ultimate Ears, and Sennheiser among others.

Skip forward to 2012 and it's almost economic suicide for a manufacturer not to offer headphones. The popularity of online headphone forums such as [Head-Fi](#) and the creation of tradeshow focused exclusively on headphones, headphone amplifiers, and accessories, clearly indicates that the segment has matured. Consumers are spending billions of dollars on headphones; something which the high-end can't say in regard to loudspeakers, amplifiers, and cables.

The smart people in the high-end started offering amplifier products with headphone amplifiers (didn't receivers always do that?) and headphone amps have even begun showing up on external DACs (Digital Analog Converters), with Wadia's superb 121decoding computer as one example.

Paradigm didn't become one of the most successful loudspeaker manufacturers in the world because they are stupid, folks. Not only are their products technically sound (I survived their Anechoic Chamber of Death), but they sound great and offer tremendous value for the money.

But can they build a decent pair of headphones?

No hockey on a Saturday night? What's a Canuck on the Jersey Shore to do...

Ahhh...listen to music. Read a book while listening to music. Read the kids a bedtime story while listening to music (not a good idea - Wife might strangle you with the cord).

The Paradigm E2m utilizes one 8mm super-neodymium driver per side and is relatively easy to drive; the iPod Touch, iPhone 4, Nook, iPad 2, Google Nexus 7, and Samsung Galaxy Note 10.1 had zero issues driving these headphones to adequate sound levels. That's not to say that they all sounded the same, however. The E2m have a relatively high 104 dB sensitivity rating and Paradigm quotes its frequency response at 10 Hz - 19KHz.

The 1.2m cord is tangle-free (mostly) and is wrapped in a really sturdy fabric that inspires confidence. You're not ripping this cord without some real effort and one should expect that for \$99. The E2m also includes a built-in microphone with one-button smart phone control functionality. In other words, you can pause to take a call, pause a song during playback or skip to the next track, whether you're using an iOS or an Android device (functionality may not be available in all models of phone/tablet so YMMV).

Paradigm includes small, medium, and large ear tips with the headphones and a really nice carrying case. The headphones are available in black or white.

Paradigm voiced the E2ms around their award-winning Studio-series loudspeakers and while it's not reasonable to expect the taut bass response of their floorstanding loudspeakers, these headphones deliver a lot of bass; perhaps too much fresh out of the box. The emphasis in the bass was slightly overwhelming the first few days, especially while listening to Green Day, Metallica, and Rush, but as they broke-in over the first ten days, the boominess vanished. What you should hear after 30-40 hours, is a relatively punchy low end but without the bloat that smears bass notes.

Paradigm's loudspeakers (depending on the line) are detail champs and the E2ms don't disappoint with excellent transparency and extension on the top end. Electronic music such as Kraftwerk (*Autobahn*) is a dream match with these headphones; great pace and a real sense of space that many products can't reproduce at this price point. The E2ms are revealing headphones with excellent midrange clarity, but they certainly lean toward the warm side of the spectrum.

If you listen to a lot of Pandora or MOG or use a tablet to watch Netflix, you'll appreciate the tonal balance of the E2ms. These are some of the cleanest and least fatiguing sounding headphones I've listened to in a long time.

Do they sound better with rock and pop versus jazz and classical? Not really, and that should only increase their appeal.

From an isolation perspective, the E2ms do a pretty good job of shutting out the rest of the world at above average listening levels, but those sitting near you in bed or on the train will be able to hear them as well.

The tips also fit quite well and I found them to be extremely comfortable to wear on my 8-hour flight to Barcelona.

For \$99, you're getting a genuine taste of the Paradigm high-end sound and that makes them a steal in my book.

Pros:

- Fantastic build quality
- Uber cheap for the sound quality
- Transparent sounding with a warm tonal balance
- Work well with smartphones
- One of the least fatiguing sounding in-ear headphones I've heard
- Excellent for all types of music and movies

Cons:

- Mid and Upper bass range has too much punch right out of the box
- Longer cord would be helpful
- 30-40 hour break-in required

Final Thoughts

The world of headphones has become incredibly crowded making it increasingly difficult for consumers to find the "correct" pair based on budget and listening preferences. Paradigm has earned dozens of awards for its high-value high-end loudspeakers and has made a strong transition into the headphone category with its Shift-series, earning one more award from us, and it's a BIGGIE. For \$99, I can't think of a better pair of in-ear headphones that will appeal to as many listeners as the E2m. Stick that in your ear, Bose.

For more information:

- [Paradigm Shift E2m In-Ear Headphones](#)

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Need another opinion on the "Paradigm Shift E2m"?

- [Big Picture Big Sound](#) - Oct '12
- [AVguide](#) - Aug '12

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The Scores for Paradigm Shift E2m In-Ear Headphones

OVERALL 

VALUE 

PERFORMANCE 

FEATURES/ERGONOMICS 

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