

# PARADIGM SOUNDTRACK REVIEW

By Ryan Waniata — July 14, 2013

Product Review



**Paradigm Soundtrack Review**

**Highs**

- ✓ Tactile detail
- ✓ Clear, dynamic midrange
- ✓ Potent, lyrical bass
- ✓ Elegant design
- ✓ Wide stereo image

**Lows**

- ✗ Occasional raw edge to upper mids
- ✗ No Bluetooth connection
- ✗ Limited inputs

**Our Score** ★★★★★

Outside of laying down bigger bucks for a full blown hi-fi surround system, we can't think of a better addition to your home theater.

We've all heard the saying: If something is worth doing, you might as well do it right. Paradigm seems to agree. The family-owned company is meticulous in its speaker design, using high-end materials and committing long hours to R&D before it lets its speakers see the light of day. So when we heard Paradigm had recently turned its focus to the highly-competitive game of sound bars, we

took notice.

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Paradigm's new entry is the 2.1 Soundtrack (available at \$800). The sound bar is loaded with mouth-watering components like mineral-filled polypropylene cones and satin-anodized aluminum tweeters. And it's paired with an aluminum 8-inch subwoofer with class D amplification for 300 watts of peak power. Boom. After cruising the test track at Paradigm's manufacturing facilities (which include a 36,000 cubic-foot anechoic chamber), this tandem team has finally been deemed ready for duty. But tech aside, just how well does a sound bar have to perform to make it worth eight of your hard earned Benjamins? We took the system on a rollercoaster ride of audio auditions (and emotions) to find out.

## Out of the box

After lugging the Soundtrack's massive cardboard package into our test facility, we peeled back its flaps to reveal a smooth, all-black finish, encased in a white canvas shroud. The bar immediately exudes quality, striking a succinct design interrupted only by a few small beads of silver along the top for onboard control and Paradigm's badge at the center of its rounded speaker screen.



Beneath the sound bar was a second enclosure, harboring another, much broader canvas bag. We opened the bag to reveal a smoothed rectangular platform, carved into curvy lines of hard plastic along the front, with a fully-exposed 8-inch driver at the back. Our first impression of the sub was that of a rectangular shell, as if it were designed for a large robotic tortoise. Both components came with an included set of footers and we also found a small padded docking station for the sub. Other accessories in the box included an owner's manual, an optical audio cable, a stereo RCA cable, two DC power cables, and a tiny remote control.

## Features and design

The 36-inch long sound bar can be mounted or set on a pair of small feet which easily pop into place on the backside. We tested the sound bar while set up on our TV stand. But for a sound bar, this thing is freaking tall. Its height of over 5 inches blocked our TV's IR sensor, so users will want to either mount the device on the wall, or raise the height of their TV to avoid the issue. Such a tall sound bar could use an IR repeater, like that found in the Yamaha YAS-101.



Enclosed in a small chamber at the back of the bar are an a stereo RCA input, a 3.5mm input, and a digital optical input. We were a bit surprised to find no HDMI connections in a sound bar at this price point, but as we began to dig deeper, we realized the Soundtrack makes no apologies for what it lacks. It's here to perform, and that should be enough.

Nowhere was that silent confidence more apparent than on the Soundtrack's miniature remote control, which is so small and succinct it borders on hubris. Only five buttons grace the remote, including ones for power, mute, volume control, and input. To be clear, the system is designed to be paired to your TV or universal remote, and is easily set up to do so. Still, this minimalist approach underscores the philosophy of the system itself. Unlike many other sound bars we've tested that are stocked with reams of presets, EQ controls, and DSP, the Soundtrack is a simple powered speaker setup, designed to be perfectly tuned for all of your audio endeavors, as is.

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Beneath the surface of the sound bar's grill sit the main speaker components, spread widely to the sides. Each of the two channels are comprised of three drivers: a 4-inch polypropylene cone which handles upper bass and midrange, a 4-inch copycat driver which is a passive radiator, and a 1-inch "S-PAL" aluminum dome tweeter for the high end, all set in an ABS injection molded enclosure for minimal resonance. Each channel is driven with 50 watts of peak power, and the unit gets down to a respectable 105 Hz on the low end, and 20 KHz up top.

The subwoofer is a thing of beauty in itself, and we loved the exposed driver at the back, which is constructed from

laminated composite and armed with a 1 ½-inch aluminum-wire voice coil. The crossover point is fixed at 130 Hz, presumably because Paradigm feels it knows best. Onboard controls include a switch to choose wired or wireless connection to the sound bar (via Bluetooth) and a level dial. To minimize annoyance for the floors beneath us, we used the sub upright in its small dock, which hugs the speaker snugly in place. However, if you want the rumble right under your seat (or just want to keep the sub out of sight), users can mount the speaker horizontally by attaching four included pegs. The only real disadvantage to this method is that it's hard to get at the level control.

## Setup

Setup is simple, but there is a method that must be followed. Eager as we were to get things going, we plugged both speakers into the wall, and powered them on simultaneously, which began Bluetooth pairing. However, the sub kept dropping the wireless signal. After reluctantly consulting the small startup guide (who reads manuals, right?), we discovered that the sound bar must begin pairing before powering up the sub. Following this method, it quickly paired to the system without further incident. We then adjusted the sub level, which had more than enough juice for our purposes when set below the 12 o'clock mark.



We used the digital optical output from our TV with the included fiber optic cable since we figure most folks will do the same. Although a direct connection to a Blu-ray player usually yields superior sonics, going that route would have required the use of analog audio outputs from our TV for TV audio, which is a compromise we weren't interested in making. One annoyance worth mentioning is the system's lack of a digital display, offering no input indicator aside from a blue LED which blinks when changing sources or volume.

## Performance

*Movies and media* – From the moment we began using the Soundtrack as our TV's primary sound system, we were treated to rich, clear audio, bursting with detail and riddled with the subtle nuances that draw the user in and enrich the experience. The owner's manual recommends a break-in period, and we did notice some extra sibilance in the first 10 hours or so of listening. But once things settled in, the system created a gorgeous balance between its strong command of the delicate intricacies of speech and sound effects, and a potent, musical force in the heavier moments of action that made everything we played more vibrant and realistic.

Our first real test involved a casual screening of a few episodes of *Mad Men*. Instantly, we began to realize that the show is special for more than just its clever dialogue and period scene staging. The sound is brilliantly produced, and we sat enrapt as the fluid touches of the dialogue spun from the bar, almost too focused on the detail to follow the plot points. Thick wooden doors, cigarette lighters, and soft loafers on linoleum floors seemed to burst to life.

One particularly revealing moment came when Don's team watched a screening of the "Kennedy Ad". As the mono tape of the grainy film was replaced by the characters conversing in the boardroom, the difference between sources outlined by the Soundtracks sensitive upper midrange made the scene seem starkly realistic.

**The Soundtrack also doubles as a serious machine for engulfing yourself in your favorite tunes.**

Looking for something with a little more dynamic punch, we put on Joss Whedon's *Avengers*. The film was an absolute blast, and not just because of the epic imagery and Downey Jr.'s quick wit. The sound bar created a fanfare of midrange power, pushing the stereo boundaries of its cabinet to fill our entire room. Jet and helicopter fly-bys cast poignant sweeps through the stereo image, and we even enjoyed some pleasant moments of sound jumping clear of the front wall, catching the sides of the room. Meanwhile, the subwoofer showed a brilliant command of the low end, blending

seamlessly into the lower mids with barrels of warmth and offering some titanic blasts from explosions as well.

We loved the crack of lightning bolts, Ironman's searing arc turbines, and the plethora of gunshot pitches. But again, some of the best moments were in the smaller details. The chain in the scene from *Black Widow*'s Russian interrogation was almost musical, jingling along the factory floor with the harmonic definition of handchimes. And the air pressure that swished from the closing of automatic doors was tactile and smooth, blending into the background with dynamic presence.

*Music* – The Soundtrack also doubles as a serious machine for engulfing yourself in your favorite tunes. We tested the Soundtrack over several genres from our [music](#) library and its penchant for detail, dynamic response, power, and clarity made it one of the best compact speaker systems we've come across.

We started with some electronica and hip-hop, which quaked with thick waves of sound, while the upper register struck with pinpoint accuracy. Pushing the system to ear-crushing levels, we heard no distortion. The subwoofer was a little heavy occasionally, so we dialed it down to about 1/4 power. There it was held mostly in check, providing a velvety glow from below to match the whipped transients and keen instrumental delineation up above.



Auditioning some of our favorite acoustic tracks from Mumford and Sons and Elliott Smith, guitars were offered with fine, pointed attacks that carved out glinted edges to the melodies. Vocals had a dry and present response, with the same breathy definition we'd heard in dialogue from movies and TV. Moving on to classic rock, we were treated to ornate percussion, with ride and crash cymbals ringing tangibly close, washed in a draught of tape saturation. Paul Simon's "Late in the Evening" offered plucky pops from woodblocks that jumped right out at us like a 3D effect, while the horns were sweet, stinging, and vibrant.

A few minor nags arose in our testing, such as an occasional tendency for snare and hi-hat to get a little sharp and boxy. The upper midrange seemed to be especially sculpted for dialogue (for obvious reasons), and its near relentless clarity laid some sibilance to the attack that wasn't always ideal. We also wished there was an easier way to play back tracks from our smartphone. The lack of a Bluetooth input is puzzling. Still, these issues aside, the system makes for an excellent way to bring all of your media to a new level, miles above what you'll get from an average flat screen TV or sound bar.

## Conclusion

The Paradigm Soundtrack's fine detail, warm and powerful low end, and dynamic stereo image combine for a suite of sonic brilliance that far exceeds its sound bar status. Aside from pony-ing up for a full blown hi-fi surround system, we can't think of a better addition to your home theater. And the system's elegant and convenient design should be a welcome in any room, regardless of the size. If you're looking for a real taste of hi-fi sound in a pint-sized package and you've got the cash, Paradigm's Soundtrack is a no-brainer.

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Ryan Waniata is an audio engineer, musician, composer, and all-around lover of all things tech and audio. Hailing originally from Montana, Ryan received his bachelor degree from the University of Montana in composition and technology. He later studied audio engineering at the Conservatory of Recording Arts and Sciences in Tempe, AZ, then packed up for Nashville, where he spent a couple of years playing and recording music in various studios and local venues. Ryan now makes his home in Portland, OR. Feel free to contact him on google + and twitter, or check in with him at Digital Trends to get the scoop on all the latest gear.

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