

hi-fi news

THE HOME OF REAL HI-FI

& Record Review

TANGERINE DREAM

Wilson's amazing Alexia



'Ridiculous, in a very good way'
Classic Venues – CBGB, New York

£2k Tube Amps

Bathe in the glow of our Group Test

Nagra Jazz & MSA

Valve pre & solid-state power amp

Audio Research REF10

The flagship touchscreen preamp



Marvel-ous

TuneAudio's Horns

'New Classical downloads'

Investigation, p18



- PLUS 18 pages of music reviews and features • VINTAGE REVIEW ADC's Accutrac 4000 turntable
- OPINION 10 pages of letters and comment • VINYL RE-RELEASE Killing Joke's Revelations 180g LP
- AUDIO MILESTONE Meridian's iconic 200 Series • READERS' CLASSIFIEDS Your hi-fi bargains

UK £4.00 US \$9.99 Aus \$9.95



Wilson Audio Alexia

Like a half-scale model of the mighty Alexandria XLF, the Alexia may be Wilson Audio's best all-rounder. Ever.

Review: **Ken Kessler** Lab: **Keith Howard**

Unless people acquire the 'best' models in a product range, they will always be aware of 'something better' in the catalogue. It will gnaw at them. Porsche Cayman owners cower in the presence of 911 drivers, and one would not want to wear off-the-peg Ralph Lauren Polo next to a dandy in made-to-measure Ralph Lauren Purple. So what befalls those who cannot afford the Wilson Alexandria XLF?

Dave Wilson does not allow such doubts to occur, because every speaker he makes fills a specific need based on size versus performance, while pricing has always separated adjacent models widely enough to preclude an interneccine clash. Awkwardly, though, the WATT/Puppy, upon metamorphosing into the Sasha W/P, found itself some distance in size and price from the next model, the MAXX Series 3.

This chasm did not concern Wilson, because the speakers are so different. He likens the Sasha to a highly-tuned Italian GT, while the MAXX is 'more like a muscle car', *ie*, they will fill larger rooms and they possess qualities better suited to high-end home cinemas.

A CLEVER RECIPE

And yet ... there was enough demand from both customers and retailers to justify a new model for those who wanted something closer in performance to the current flagship – the universally-acclaimed Alexandria XLF [*HFN*, Nov '12] – but one that swallows no more real estate than a Sasha. Faced with this grass roots demand, the company came up with a clever recipe that would appeal to Sasha owners lusting for more, but who couldn't accommodate the beefier MAXX.

Its design concept recalls the kind of gear audiophiles might fantasise about in the same manner as 12-year-olds picturing their dream car: 'What would happen if we merged the time-domain accuracy of the

Alexandria XLF with a form factor similar to the Sasha?' It tells you immediately that the speaker must not be a room-filling behemoth with the presence of a Stonehenge pillar.

Instead, with a footprint close to the Sasha's, it hosts only a slight increase in height: 10in, to be precise, due mainly to the necessarily larger woofer enclosure. And while the Sasha/MAXX gap is adamantly *not* being filled due to price [see adjacent boxout], its cost falls almost mid-way between theirs.

FIRMLY ADJUSTABLE

To provide a goodly portion of the XLF's adaptability, precision and coherence, the smaller Alexia had to offer adjustability of the midrange and tweeter positioning with to-the-millimetre accuracy, according

to room specifics and the location of the owner's 'hot seat'. That meant a 'head' section with two movable segments – but it had to fit in a volume akin to that of the original WATT.

As a smaller speaker would lack the overkill of an XLF enclosure's mass and dimensions, Dave, son Daryl and acoustic and electrical engineer Vern Credille focused initially on avoiding the introduction of resonances and upper assembly instability – crucial because the integrity of the upper structure would determine whether or not the new speaker could, in Wilson's words, 'substantially expand on the dynamic performance, resolution and bandwidth of our existing compact loudspeakers.'

What you see here, then, is a genuinely manageable floorstander with the complex time-domain adjustment

RIGHT: Housing a 1in dome tweeter, 7in mid and 8in and 10in woofers in three chassis allows the two upper sections to be positioned with greater precision than on the two-box Sasha, which only allows upper-section to tilt

'It's a manageable floorstander with full time-domain adjustment'





MIND THE GAP

Dave Wilson's first remark via a transatlantic phone call was to state emphatically that 'price has never been a motivating factor' for creating a new model. Although the gap between the Sasha (£27,450) and the MAXX 3 (£68,000) is considerable and it suggests a 'hole' in the catalogue even by high-end pricing standards, Dave says, 'The Alexia was not designed to suit a "price point" between the Sasha and the MAXX 3. It was, in fact, designed to a "size point" that would allow it to be enjoyed in a room space where a MAXX 3 would be totally out of place. The MAXX is designed to provide wide dynamic range in larger rooms, including home theatres.' As far as Wilson is concerned, the Alexia is like Goldilocks' porridge, 'just right' for us baby bears.

of the much larger XLF. Trial-and-error research lasting more than a year was undertaken to transform the two-module architecture of the Sasha into something equally svelte, yet with full adjustability of the tweeter and midrange in their own 'mini' cabinets, and boasting the rigidity demanded of a speaker fine-tuned with torturous exactitude.

A freshly-conceived structure was required because the design team 'decided early on that the "ladder approach" was incompatible with the desired Sasha-like form factor.' The Alexia's configuration places the tweeter module's support system and adjustment hardware within the assembly of the midrange module.

To provide the necessary freedom of movement for adjustability, the upper sections each employ a captive spike (there are three spike lengths) that rest on a 10-step alignment block, as per the MAXX. The entire two-module assembly moves fore-to-aft, along eight positions, while the tweeter is separately adjustable relative to the midrange and, therefore, to the woofer enclosure.

Wilson devised a milled aluminium cross-member above the tweeter module to form a rigid link between the sides of the midrange module. This ensures that the rigidity of the hosting module is not compromised, while aiding in the precise siting of the tweeter module. Other adjustments allow the modules to be rotated for optimum on-axis performance.


Fitted to the bottom enclosure are drivers designed specifically for the Alexia. They include 8in and 10in pulp/paper cone woofers to suit a layout descended from the offset-

diameter, two-woofer X-1 Grand SLAMM. The goal was to extract comparable bass speed, dynamics and 'authority'. The Alexia is the first Wilson compact speaker to offer this, but it required an enclosure – in X-Material composite – with a volume 18% larger than the Sasha's.

For the midrange, Wilson chose the same cellulose fibre/carbon 7in unit used in the XLF. The mid sits in a baffle made of S-material, first developed for the Sasha, combined with X-material for the rest of the cabinet. Above it is the new 'Convergent Synergy' tweeter, a silk dome unit related to the driver that first appeared in the XLF, modified to suit the Alexia's single-midrange driver layout (as opposed to the XLF's two-midrange complement).

Other details include a rear port for the woofer, rear venting for the mid and a sealed housing for the tweeter. As with all Wilson speakers, the Alexias come with adjustable, proprietary spikes beneath and robust speaker terminals that favour spade connectors. They are available in a range of custom colours. And, yes, everybody loved the 'Lamborghini' orange finish seen here and at their Rocky Mountain Audio Fest debut.

MONO: IN DEPTH

Auditioned over a period in two systems, one Audio Research-based the other powered by darTZeels, both exposed – first and foremost – one overriding aspect of the Alexia's behaviour. It's the sort of loudspeaker that reveals all one could wish to know about every part of the audio chain that precedes it. This is what reviewers pray for, and it will come as no surprise to 



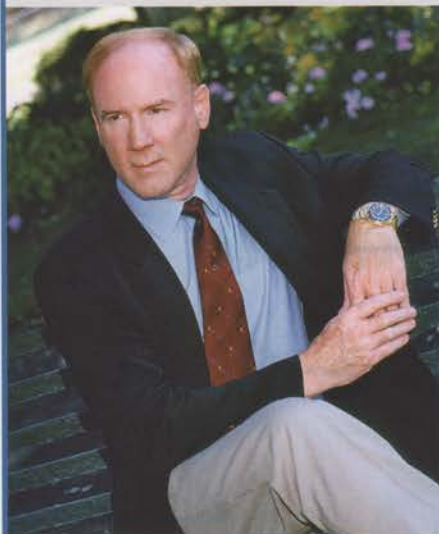
SHRINKING THE XLF

Moveable modules and aesthetic similarities aren't the only trickle-down blessings this Alexia inherited from the Alexandria XLF. Dave Wilson says its Alexia 'is the second speaker we've released, after the XLF, which has benefited from our recently acquired Bruel & Kjaer acceleration and vibration measurement systems.' (The new test gear cost Wilson Audio a cool quarter-of-a-million dollars.)

'Both speakers demonstrate lower cabinet noise floors than we have previously achieved. This has the benefit of extending the dynamic range ever further down into the "silence between the notes", where so much beauty and interpretative finesse are found.

'The Alexia is our smallest loudspeaker which utilises what I call a "full-range Synchronicrometer bandwidth-limited modulus", as first employed in 1983 in the original WAMM. Subsequently, it was used in the X-1 Grand SLAMM and then in the Alexandria. The benefits of this degree of time domain synchronisation include more precise driver blend and coherence across the audible spectrum.'

Wilson is not the first company to emphasise the importance of the time domain. The history of audio is peppered with speakers featuring sloped baffles, stepped modules for tweeter and mid, and corrections via crossovers. Wilson's approach, though, is more real-world: the installer fine-tunes the Alexia in the room where it will be used.



anyone who understands that a single-word description of David A Wilson would be 'analytical'.

It's not like I fed it disc after disc of audiophile material. Hell, no: I started out with mono doo-wop, the exquisite title track from the Cardinals' *The Door Is Still Open* [Collectables COL-CD-9977]. Why mono? Because it makes the job of reproducing a recording both *twice* and *half* as difficult: the former, because all of the sounds emanate from a single point, with no separation in a physical space to aid the listener, the latter because the system only has to resolve one channel...

With the Alexias, the sense of depth, however artificial, increased over what I knew the Sophias were able to do. I was reminded of my initial session with the XLF, when Dave indulged in my monomania and we heard discernible depth portrayed through the prototype with unmistakable distance in the fore-and-aft plane. However unlikely this may seem, however 'impossible' your logical brain-half wants it to be, the effect was consistent and repeatable, even through a slice of Spectorian mass.

KID IN A CANDY STORE

'Da Doo Ron Ron' by the Crystals was the first recording I ever acquired, now on the bonus disc with the latest reissue of *A Christmas Gift For You From Phil Spector* [Sony Legacy 88765433102]. Buried in the 'Wall of Sound' are assorted percussive instruments, glorious saxes, handclaps and a tinkly piano. Oh, and multi-part harmonies – gorgeous, lush harmonies.

It was a kid-in-a-candy store moment. Do I concentrate on Hal Blaine's seriously weighty drums? Play masochistic ear-games by focusing on the piano? Let myself be pummelled by the raunchiest sax this side of, well, 'Raunchy'? No need: so transparent and detailed was the sound radiating from the Alexias that the tableau in front of me had the clarity, the content and the presentation of a 4K display. I didn't need to work at it.

Within seconds, I was listening to Bob B Soxx and the Blue Jeans' 'Why Do Lovers Break Each Others Hearts?' – from the same CD, only a clearer, brighter recording than its predecessor. Opening with a classic street corner 'dum-mappa-dum' rhythm vocal, then massed female voices – a juxtaposition of classic circa-1963 'girl group' stylings with backing that seemed two decades older – made me sit back and marvel. It was as if someone had a single



ABOVE: With the tweeter sub-section extended fully forward, Wilson's attention to detail is revealed as truly 'SME-like': even the hidden elements are finished to perfection

camera lens optimised for black-and-white, macro, wide angle, zoom and low-light operation. All at once!

What this highlighted was the Alexia's ability to juggle myriad ingredients in their original quantities, neither ameliorating nor exaggerating any apparent anomalies. You heard what was intended, reinforcing what I suspected about the speaker having the power of a priest hearing a

confession. No: make that a hardened cop or a deft lawyer 'the truth will out'.

IT'S KOSHER

To hear pure ambience, I played an Allen Sherman cut, recorded at a party

some 50 years ago. 'Sir Greenbaum's Madrigal' [Now That Sounds Kosher; Shout! Factory DK30336] reeks of atmosphere. You are transported to an intimate club, swept up in the laughter. You picture the cast of *Mad Men*, skinny ties and martinis and too much cigarette smoke. That's just the space around Sherman. His New York *Yiddishe bocher* voice, with a bit of a rasp, enters your room, his plump presence emerging wholly formed with height, depth and width commensurate with the actual person. The speakers implore you to close your eyes, to savour the experience. The word 'uncanny' pops into your head. The Alexia is doing things it, well, shouldn't.

Hard rock, too, was well-served by the speakers. Reissued to mark its 40th

'The Wilson Alexia is doing things it, well, shouldn't'

LOUDSPEAKER

LAB REPORT

WILSON AUDIO ALEXIA



LEFT: Back view shows connections of lower-to-upper sections, rear-firing port, midrange vents and access to crossover elements. Concern for finish extends even to the back panel

SuperPanavision after a 12in TV. Then a standard so inimitable, so faultless, so warm and personal and heart-tuggingly magnificent that it is one of my Desert Island Discs. 'Manhattan' from *Ella Fitzgerald Sings The Rodgers & Hart Song Book* [Verve 537 258-2] features woodwinds and strings as lush, seductive and joyous as any to be found behind Sinatra, Cole or Martin.

Via the Alexias, a liquidity and an opulence emanates from the speakers, the music possessing a silkiness that contrasts with Ella's crystalline vocals, recorded with such lucidity that every minuscule, fleeting quaver – this woman is the antidote to Piaf – is detectable with a pay-off in unparalleled authenticity. I've played this song so many times that I sometimes worry if I have the musical equivalent of OCD, yet still the Alexias uncovered evanescent wisps of sound so fragile that the orchestra should have swamped them.

A MISNOMER THEN?

Curiously, in addition to being a name favoured by royals, 'Alexia' is also a brain disorder which affects the victim's ability to read, also known as 'word blindness'. But thank goodness for this amusing misnomer: otherwise, I would have to declare this speaker as 'perfect'. And we all know that perfection simply cannot exist. Right? ☺

Anniversary, *Nuggets* [Elektra/Rhino 8122797112] is one of the greatest compilations ever, even though (or because) it focuses tightly on obscure 1960s garage rock. One of the standouts is 'Open My Eyes', a young Todd Rundgren fronting Nazz, and delivering a riff to challenge 'Sunshine Of Your Love'.

It opens with piano followed by vicious, relentless fuzz-tone and whiny Farfisa organ, a juggernaut of proto-psych-metal. Through the wide-open aperture that is the Alexia, the song acquires majesty even greater than its devotees imagined. It's like seeing David Lean's *Lawrence of Arabia* in

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

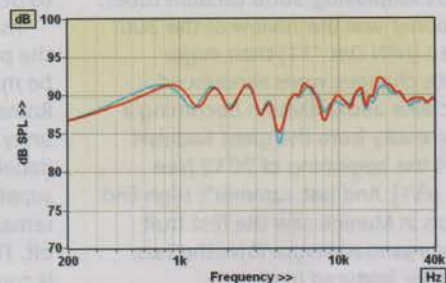
Having spent 25 years listening to 'small' Wilsons, I recognised the Alexia instantly as the compact model Dave was destined to design. Why? Because it is – literally – a scaled-down XLF, the latter embodying the current evolutionary state of his philosophy since the first WAMM. It is to the XLF what Ferrari's 458 is to the F12, what Le Serre Nuove is to Ornellaia: a half-pint miracle. Say 'hello' to my new reference.

Sound Quality: 90%

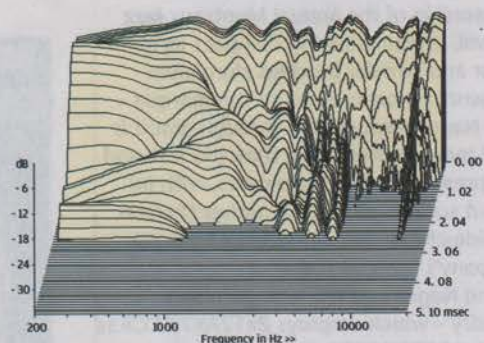


Wilson Audio claims 90dB sensitivity for the Alexia which accords very well with our measured pink noise figure, averaged for the review pair over the range 400Hz to 20kHz, of 89.8dB. Although this sensitivity isn't particularly high for a system of this size, very low impedance is used to help attain it. Wilson Audio claims a nominal impedance of 4ohm with a minimum of 2ohm at 80Hz but our measurement recorded an even lower minimum of 1.8ohm at 85Hz. Impedance phase angles are quite well controlled but even so the EPDR (equivalent peak dissipation resistance) falls to a scary 0.9ohm at 65Hz. This makes the Alexia the toughest Wilson Audio speaker to drive that we've measured in recent years – the Alexandria XLF's minimum EPDR, for instance, was a much more amp-friendly 1.7ohm, and the Sophia 3's 1.6ohm.

Frequency response errors, over the same frequency range, of ± 3.6 dB and ± 3.9 dB respectively are modest for a passive speaker, and the on-axis frequency response trend (measured at the height of the top edge of the midrange enclosure) is essentially flat in trend, with only the mildest of presence band depressions [see Graph 1]. Pair matching was a little less impressive at ± 1.4 dB. Above the audible range the response extends to beyond 40kHz, while our diffraction-corrected near-field bass measurement showed the response to be a creditable 35Hz (-6dB re. 200Hz) – payback for the good sensitivity and that very low impedance. Just as in the Alexandria XLF, the new soft-dome tweeter displays a high-Q resonance at around 15kHz in the cumulative spectral decay waterfall [Graph 2] and some low-level modes are also visible in the low treble. KH



ABOVE: The forward response is extremely extended (bass and treble) and essentially flat in trend



ABOVE: Cabinet resonances are well controlled. There is just a hint of treble dome breakup at 15kHz

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

| | |
|--|---------------------------------|
| Sensitivity (SPL/1m)/2.83Vrms – Mean/IEC/Music | 89.8dB/89.8dB/89.6dB |
| Impedance modulus min/max (20Hz–20kHz) | 1.8ohm @ 85Hz 9.7ohm @ 20kHz |
| Impedance phase min/max (20Hz–20kHz) | -46° @ 57Hz 34° @ 3.3kHz |
| Pair matching (400Hz–20kHz) | ± 1.4 dB |
| LF/HF extension (-6dB ref 200Hz/10kHz) | 35Hz / >40kHz/>40kHz |
| THD 100Hz/1kHz/10kHz (for 90dB SPL/1m) | 0.2% / 0.5% / 0.3% |
| Dimensions (HWD) | 1353x387x537mm |