

Wilson Audio Sabrina

Wilson Audio's latest single-piece loudspeaker fills the gap between Duette and Sophia, and it's a stunner!

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

Wilson Audio has a serious problem: the all-new Sabrina, although far from budget-priced at £15k per pair, screams 'bargain' so loudly that every model the company sells for below £35k is under threat. Everyone who heard the Sabrinas at a closed-door event at the recent Munich High End Show [see p18] was astonished, and the *coupe de foudre* we all felt proved accurately prophetic when I got to hear the speaker again on my own. It was no fluke, no case of venue or occasion colouring the initial reaction. We knew we were in the presence of a game-changer, a milestone, but time spent alone with it was a revelation.

To create this little miracle – one I suspect will in future be regarded as highly as other bottom of the price-list gems like Audio Research's D70 or the Krell KSA-50 – *père-et-fils* Dave and Daryl Wilson looked backward to the original WATT/Puppy, as well as to the current Alexandria XLF [HFN Oct '12]. Just as the former massacred speakers of twice the dimensions, the Sabrina had to do the same – even the size is similar to its forebear's. As for the XLF influence, the new baby had to exhibit exceptional time-alignment, despite employing an enclosure lacking the tuning capability of designs using two or more adjustable sections.

SLEEK SCULPTURE

The Sabrina's sleek, angular form breaks away from the parallel-sided, wooden or black boxes so loathed by the house-proud. This is, therefore, wholly modern, functional sculpture. Unlike its larger, modular siblings, it is more eye-friendly and not 'busy'-looking like an XLF. Because all Wilson cabinets are made with proprietary materials, the finishes provide the option to choose the colour of what will invade a room despite its relatively diminutive size. That's how it is these days with speakers larger than a small loaf, and so the Sabrina

is offered in three standard gloss colours, including silver, grey and black, with white and red as available extras.

In keeping with Wilson tradition, the Sabrina's cabinet is hand-assembled in Provo, Utah, where the 'X-material' panels are glued with proprietary adhesives. Once constructed, each enclosure is hand-sanded, gel-coated and painted with multiple layers of automotive-grade paint in Wilson's bespoke booth.

THE HIGHEST STANDARDS

Anyone familiar with Wilson speakers knows they're among the best-finished on the market. Having visited the factory a couple of times, I've seen where your money goes: each is inspected, then polished and buffed to standards that are the same from Duette [HFN Apr '14] up to XLF. (Such is the paint quality, one local luxury car dealer admitted it beat his own body shop's capabilities.) Lest one imagine that the Sabrina is a

Sophia squeezed into a more compact enclosure, do recall that the Sophia's driver array consists of a 10in aluminium cone woofer, a 7in cellulose/paper pulp mid and a 1in inverted titanium dome tweeter [HFN Oct '10]. It is effectively a one-piece, mini-Sasha [HFN Jun '14] and one of my all-time fave speakers, period.

For the new baby, Wilson's designers fitted an 8in paper cone woofer from the Alexia [HFN Mar '13] modified specifically for use in this enclosure, a 5¾in paper pulp mid and the company's proprietary 1in doped-silk dome Convergent Synergy Tweeter.

In many ways, then, it's more like a scaled-down Alexia than a cut-down

RIGHT: Photos, especially *sans* grilles, do not do justice to the gorgeous looks of the Sabrina when *in situ*; driver complement includes same tweeter as the mighty Alexia



CHIP OFF THE BLOCK

When Wilson starts with a clean sheet, the results often stupefy. Because there was a big enough gap between the Sophia and Duette, and because the latter isn't a floorstander so much as a solution for those who want Wilsons on a shelf or stand, the company had to come up with a new entry-level model. Moreover, the Sophia's price of £18k has crept up enough to leave a hole to fill, and the Sabrina is the result. One other crucial consideration: Wilson long ago abandoned the notion that sound quality was enough and that a manufacturer could get away with ugly speakers if the performance was exceptional. The Sabrina isn't merely domestically acceptable, it's downright gorgeous. With son Daryl hitting his stride, boding well for the second generation of the clan, the voicing is reminiscent of the Sophia and Alexia, on which he worked alongside dad Dave. All the Wilson virtues – detail, dynamics, soundstaging of truly 3D character – remain, but with a newfound ease and accessibility. Dave, you trained him well.



Sophia – which explains why I fell in love with the Sabrina within 20 seconds of my initial exposure: I've been an Alexia user since shortly after they appeared.

The Alexia, however, is emblematic of Wilsons using adjustable driver modules, which exist, in their words, 'to provide unprecedented control over time-alignment in a large variety of listening environments.' The company adds, however, that, 'in a single cabinet speaker such as the Sabrina, the concept is still valid, as the sloping front baffle of the loudspeaker has been optimised for correct driver time alignment in the typical room.'

The crossover is also integral to this alignment and with each hand-built to match the reference network within a tolerance of $\pm 0.2\%$.

SIMPLY REAL

There was no point in ignoring the near-Apogee-like impedance dip that precludes valve amps [see Lab Report, p39]. So listening was undertaken with Constellation's 300W Centaur Stereo and the Inspiration One Preamp [HFN Jul

'15] driven by Metronome's C8+ DAC and T6 transport, with all wiring courtesy of Transparent. Note that the positioning involved a toe-in that formed an equilateral triangle, the baffles facing directly toward the hot seat.

Starting with a burned-to-CD transfer of Otis Redding's '(Sitting On The) Dock Of The Bay', the first thing that struck me – something which will always be the primary concern of those who might be downsizing – was the bass. Remember, I had already faced a pair of Sabrinas and there was no surprise left in the convincing and massive scale (which I will get to shortly). What I hadn't noticed before was the absolute control of the lower registers or, especially, the dryness.

Is that a virtue? For me, yes, as I hate soggy, 'flubby' lower registers, as much as I loathe over-damped bass, wherein a speaker makes all bass material sound like the products of a synthesiser. It was the drumming – the magnificent Al Jackson – that sounded so utterly real, with proper decay, which immediately rendered Sabrina's size a non-concern.

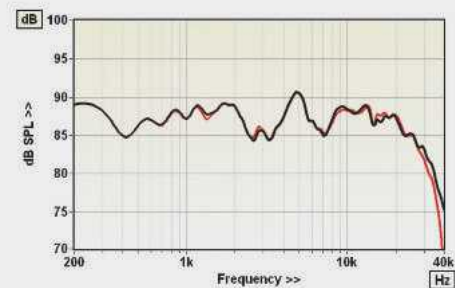
Weight, impact, tautness where needed... I do get it when a hardcore fan of paper woofers pooh-poohs polypropylene. Allied to the scale, this impeccably behaved, bottomless bass turns the Sabrina into something inexplicable, like a suitcase that never seems to fill, no matter what you stuff into it. This is a Mini pretending – successfully – that it's a 7-Series BMW.

For this song, scale might not seem that important, but when the brass section swells, you appreciate that intimacy can be preserved even when the performance involves more than a duo or trio. The way that these Sabrinas merged any three-dimensional aspects with tonal realism ➔

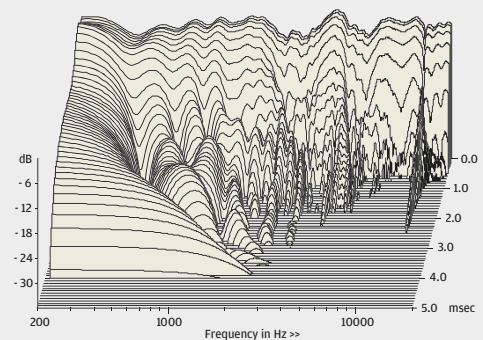
WILSON AUDIO SABRINA

Wilson Audio claims 87dB SPL sensitivity for the Sabrina at 1kHz. Our broadband pink noise figure of 87.6dB suggests that this is, if anything, slightly conservative. Nominal impedance is quoted as 4ohm with a specified 2.53ohm minimum at 139Hz. Setting aside the unrealistic accuracy of the latter figure (we measured a minimum modulus of 2.4ohm at 146Hz), it indicates that 3ohm would actually be a more representative nominal value. Impedance phase angles are quite large at low frequencies which, combined with the low modulus, drops the minimum EPDR (equivalent peak dissipation resistance) to a challenging 1.1ohm at 89Hz, indicating that the Sabrina is a notably difficult load to drive and which demands an amplifier capable of high current delivery.

The forward frequency responses, measured at tweeter height with the grilles removed [Graph 1, below], indicate a flat overall trend but the unevenness is sufficient for the response errors to be ± 3.2 dB and ± 3.1 dB respectively for the review pair (200Hz-20kHz) – fair but not exceptional figures. Over the same frequency range pair matching was very good at a tight ± 0.8 dB. Our diffraction-corrected near-field bass measurement recorded the bass extension as 55Hz (-6dB re. 200Hz) – a typical result for a modern floorstander of this size. At the other end of the spectrum the output of the soft-dome tweeter begins to fall away only just above 20kHz and is -6dB by about 30kHz (re. 10kHz). The cumulative spectral decay waterfall [Graph 2, below] shows fast initial energy decay over much of the spectrum but a number of low-level resonances are visible as ridges through the treble. KH



ABOVE: Pair matching is good although the forward response is uneven through presence/lower treble



ABOVE: Cabinet shows quick energy decay but there are resonances coincident with the uneven response

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

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|------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Sensitivity (SPL/1m/2.83Vrms – Mean/IEC/Music) | 87.7dB/87.6dB/87.6dB |
| Impedance modulus min/max (20Hz–20kHz) | 2.4ohm @ 146Hz 20.1ohm @ 20Hz |
| Impedance phase min/max (20Hz–20kHz) | -64° @ 68Hz 32° @ 253Hz |
| Pair matching (200Hz–20kHz) | ± 0.8 dB |
| LF/HF extension (-6dB ref 200Hz/10kHz) | 54Hz / 31.0kHz/29.0kHz |
| THD 100Hz/1kHz/10kHz (for 90dB SPL/1m) | 0.3% / 0.3% / 0.3% |
| Dimensions (HWD) | 965x305x386mm |



LEFT: Rear view shows that Wilson remains committed to single-wiring-only connections, not bowing to bi-wiring or bi-amping. Note separate, dedicated 'ports' for bass and mid/treble sections

Angie Stone's cover of 'You Will Know' for the Stevie Wonder tribute, *Conception* [Motown MOTW-33401-2/038 579-2]. Again, the percussion was the element that grabbed the ear, but the track also has a unique atmosphere, a fluidity that contrasts with the crispness of the drumming. The vocals – so natural and real as to defy belief – hovered without seeming disembodied because the Sabrina recreates both the ambience and the spatial specifics.

ALL IN THE NAME

Suddenly, the Sabrina seemed to resemble the result of a dirty weekend between a BBC LS3/5A and an Alexia: the pinpoint precision, the vocal authenticity of the former speaker with the sheer command and scale of the latter. Believe me, no LS3/5A was ever accused of command or scale beyond miniature facsimiles of both. But here was that LS3/5A magic, on steroids!

If it turns out that the Wilsons named its Sabrina after the eponymous 1954 romantic comedy starring the inimitable Audrey Hepburn, it would be far more apt than anyone besides a cineaste might appreciate. Should you not know the film, *this* Sabrina is just like that much-missed actress: elfin, delicate, refined and charming, but with inner strength. Here's hoping the Wilsons never watch anything with Roseanne Barr. ☺

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

Sometimes, you *really* don't have to look a gift horse in the mouth: the Sabrina is the best-value Wilson speaker ever – and I've heard all of 'em since the first WATT. It sounds as 'big' as a speaker double its height and there isn't a trace of compression when blasting loudly. Indeed, it's so startlingly good that I almost considered swapping the Alexias for this more 'small room-friendly' alternative. It's truly sublime.

Sound Quality: 88%



ensured that the experience was as fresh as at any point since it was first heard 48 years ago.

Deferring to mono, The Cardinals' 'The Door Is Still Open' and 'Shouldn't I Know' [Collectibles COL9977] demonstrated the Sabrina's capacity for focus. Considering that I have heard these over 100 times through the three-times-dearer Alexias – songs that continue to remind me of mono's validity – the smaller speakers' treatment of a central image exhibited the same enchanting qualities, truly Alexia-like in its ability to make the listener forget that the sound was in mono.

Then again, it was so rich and involving, it could possess nothing other than an ability to transport the listener. The peerless vocals were so grand, so in-the-room that I was staggered by the realisation that these recordings were 60 years old. From 2003, however, came