

JOHN ATKINSON

Wilson Audio Specialties Alexia Series 2

LOUDSPEAKER

One of the benefits of being a reviewer is that, of the large number of products that pass through my listening room, occasionally there are those that I really would like to see take up more permanent residence. One of these was Wilson Audio Specialties' Alexia loudspeaker, which I reviewed in December 2013.¹ "Its clarity, its uncolored, full-range balance, its flexibility in setup and optimization, and most of all its sheer musicality, are, if not unrivaled, rare," I wrote, and concluded: "If I were to retire tomorrow, the Wilson Alexia would be the speaker I would buy to provide the musical accompaniment to that retirement." Nothing I subsequently heard disabused me of that dream, though a couple of other speakers, in particular Vivid Audio's Giya G3 and KEF's Blade Two,² joined the Alexia on my bucket list.

Then, in spring 2017, Wilson announced a Series 2 Alexia. On the surface, the new speaker looks identical to the old, with its 8" and 10" paper-cone woofers loaded with a 3"-diameter port on the large cabinet's rear, and a 7" midrange driver and 1" silk-dome tweeter, each in its own adjustable module atop the woofer enclosure. (See my December 2013 review for a detailed description of the original Alexia.) However, the price has risen from \$48,500/pair in 2013 to \$57,900/pair for the Series 2, and there are many improvements. The original Alexia was designed by David Wilson working with Vern Credille, Wilson's lead acoustic and electrical engineer, and mechanical engineer Blake Schmutz; the Series 2 is the result of much development by Dave's son Daryl, who is now the Utah company's CEO. In particular, some of the technology developed for Wilson's limited-edition magnum opus, the WAMM Master Chronosonic,³ has found its way into the Alexia Series 2. Because of all this, I felt that a full review would be more appropriate than a Follow-Up.

Last February, Wilson's Peter McGrath visited to set up the Alexia 2s in my listening room. Such service is not re-



ally a reviewer's perk—when anyone buys a pair of Wilson Audio speakers, the retailer will install them and do the sort of fine-tuning McGrath performed in my room.

The Series 2

I asked Peter McGrath precisely what changes had been made in the Alexia to create the Series 2.

"The two bass drivers remain the same, but the port has been moved to the center of the enclosure so that both speakers launch the back wave in exactly the same way," he

1 See www.stereophile.com/content/wilson-audio-specialties-alexia-loudspeaker.

2 See www.stereophile.com/content/vivid-audio-giya-g3-loudspeaker and www.stereophile.com/content/kef-blade-two-loudspeaker.

3 See www.stereophile.com/content/wilson-audios-ultimate-loudspeaker-wamm-master-chronosonic.

SPECIFICATIONS

Description Three-way, four-driver, reflex-loaded, floorstanding loudspeaker. Drive-units: 1" (25mm) silk-dome tweeter, 7" (178mm) cellulose-fiber/paper pulp-cone midrange, 8" (203mm) paper-cone woofer, 10" (254mm) paper-cone woof-

er. Crossover frequencies: not given. Frequency response: 19Hz–32kHz, ± 3 dB, room-averaged response. Sensitivity: 89dB/W/m. Impedance: 4 ohms nominal, 2.54 ohms minimum at 85Hz. Minimum amplifier power: 20Wpc.

Dimensions 53" (1347mm) H by 15.25" (387.4mm) W by 22.875" (580mm) D. Weight: 260 lb (117.9kg). **Finish** Multiple automotive paint colors; custom options. **Serial numbers of units reviewed** 1457 (left),

1458 (right). **Price** \$57,900/pair. Approximate number of dealers: 39. **Manufacturer** Wilson Audio Specialties, 2233 Mountain Vista Lane, Provo, UT 84606. Tel: (801) 377-2233. Fax: (801) 377-2282. Web: www.wilsonaudio.com.

explained. “Although the bass enclosure’s footprint is only about 1" different, the increase in the internal volume is significant, at around 11%. Also, while the front baffle of the ‘Series 1’ was vertical, it’s now angled back about 3–4°, and that gives better time alignment between the upper woofer and the midrange driver. The internal bracing of the low-frequency enclosure is also improved.

“The midrange driver is the same in both speakers, but the midrange enclosure has a full 26% increase in internal volume, because of the way we reworked the venting system. The tweeter is now the same Convergent Synergy Mk.5 tweeter we used for the backload of the WAMM Master Chronosonic. The crossover points are very similar, but there have been some modifications, the result of which is that the low impedance dip is nowhere near as severe in the Series 2 as it was in the ‘Series 1.’ The efficiency of the two remains within a dB.

“There are a number of other things. Access to the resistors is totally different: you can just pull a plate off and make changes without having to get out the tools. The Aspherical Group Delay time-domain adjustment of the tweeter now has a far greater level of resolution—you can move the tweeter in $\frac{1}{32}$ " increments, twice the number of adjustments as before.

“The spikes and diodes are more substantial than they had been on the first Alexia. And then, on the top plate of the woofer enclosure, the block where all the resonant components of the upper modules couple via the spikes is made out of a material called ‘W Material.’ This is a [mineral-impregnated resin] that we developed for the WAMM. . . . [I]t is far more absorptive of resonant behavior. However, we can’t paint it, which is why it is not colored the way the rest of the speaker is.”

Setup

Peter McGrath followed much the same setup procedure described in my review of the original Alexia.⁴ Having adjusted the position and tilt of the tweeter and midrange modules for the height of my ears in my listening chair and their distance from the speakers—the exact settings are detailed in the manual’s “Propagation Delay Correction” table—he rolled each speaker back and forth and from side to side on its wheels until he was confident they were close to their optimal positions. Then, using “So Do I,” from singer-songwriter Christy Moore’s *This Is the Day* (CD, Sony 5032552), and listening to each speaker in turn, he moved

⁴ The Web reprint of this review of the Alexia Series 2 will include an audio file embedded with Peter McGrath describing his setup procedure.

MEASUREMENTS

I used DRA Labs’ MLSSA system and a calibrated DPA 4006 microphone to measure the Wilson Alexia 2’s frequency response in the farfield, and an Earthworks QTC-40 for the nearfield and spatially averaged room responses. Because of the speaker’s weight, I was unable to raise it off the ground for the measurements, which reduced the resolution of the frequency-response graphs in the midrange. And as with the original Alexia, there was the problem of which axis to place the microphone on for the farfield measurements. I wanted to measure it at my standard 50" microphone distance, which is optimal for midrange resolution in the resultant graphs, even with the speaker sitting on the floor. So I drew a line from the tweeter to the position and 36" height of my ears, 128" away—the original Alexias had been closer, 106"—then moved the mike up along that line until it was 50" from the tweeter. Other than those used to assess the Alexia’s vertical dispersion, all the farfield measurements were taken at that point.

My estimate of the Alexia 2’s voltage sensitivity was a very high 91.2dB(B)/2.83V/m, which is higher than specified. This speaker will play loudly with just a few volts. However, while it is not quite as difficult a load as the original Alexia, which had a mini-

mum impedance of 1.96 ohms at 86Hz and a combination of 3.6 ohms and -43° phase angle at 54Hz, the Alexia 2 is still a current-hungry design. Its impedance drops to 2.6 ohms at 84Hz (fig.1), and there is a demanding combination of 5.1 ohms and -44° electrical phase angle at 57Hz, both frequencies in regions where music can have high energy levels.

The traces in fig.1 are free from the small wrinkles that would imply the presence of cabinet-wall resonances, and the enclosures were acoustically quiet. I found modes on the woofer enclosure walls just below 400 and 600Hz, but these were low in level. The midrange subenclosure was a

little livelier, with two high-Q modes on the sidewalls and rear panel, at 590 and 870Hz. These were relatively low in level, however, and high enough in frequency that, given their high Q, they shouldn’t be fully excited with music (as opposed to test tones). Peculiarly, the small module housing the tweeter was the liveliest; fortunately, this module is small enough that it won’t couple this behavior to the air very efficiently.

The green trace in fig.2 shows the output of the midrange unit, measured in the nearfield. It appears to cross over to the sum of the woofer outputs (blue trace; these have almost identical responses) at around 200Hz. The sharply defined null at 23Hz in the woofers’

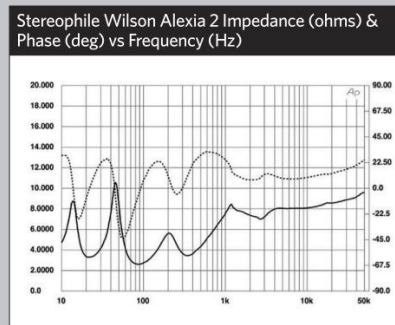


Fig.1 Wilson Alexia 2, electrical impedance (solid) and phase (dashed) (2 ohms/vertical div.).

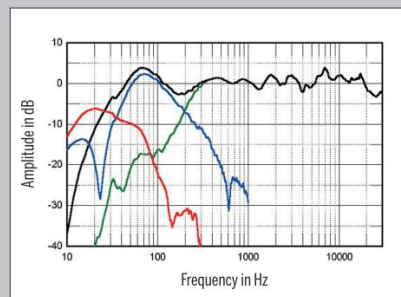


Fig.2 Wilson Alexia 2, anechoic response on listening axis at 50°, averaged across 30° horizontal window and corrected for microphone response, with nearfield responses of: midrange unit (green), woofers (blue), port (red), respectively plotted below 350Hz, 1kHz, 300Hz, and complex sum of nearfield responses plotted below 300Hz (black).



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the enclosures in 1/2" steps in both planes, and adjusted their toe-in until the sound of each Alexia 2 was to his satisfaction. It was time for some critical listening.

Listening

With the Alexia 2s driven by Lamm Industries M1.2 Reference monoblocks, the 1/3-octave bass-warble tones on *Editor's Choice* (CD, Stereophile STPH016-2) sounded powerful down to the 25Hz band, with the 63, 50, and 40Hz warbles a little higher in level than the bands above them, the 32 and 25Hz warbles exaggerated by the lowest mode in my room, and the 20Hz warble only faintly audible. The half-step-spaced tonebursts on *Editor's Choice* spoke cleanly and evenly throughout the bass and midrange regions. When I listened to the woofer enclosure of an Alexia 2 with a stethoscope, all surfaces were relatively inert. The midrange enclosure, too, was well damped, though on the side-walls and rear panel I found some low-level modes between 600 and 900Hz, these an octave higher than the modes I'd found on the Alexia "1"—which suggests improved bracing.

The dual-mono pink-noise track from *Editor's Choice*

sounded smooth and evenly balanced, though with some exaggeration of the very lowest frequencies. With the earlier Alexias I'd found that if I moved my head slightly above or below the axis where the sound was best, I became aware of a narrow band of brightness. This didn't happen with the Series 2s, and it wasn't until I stood up that the pink noise began to sound colored, acquiring a hollow quality. The central image of the noise signal wasn't quite as narrow as I hear with top-ranked minimonitors like the BBC LS3/5a or KEF LS50, but it was stable, neither wobbling nor splashing to the sides at any frequency.

I'd begun my auditioning of the original Alexias with David Wilson's own recording of Beethoven's Violin Sonata 10 in G, Op.96, performed by violinist David Abel and pianist Julie Steinberg (24-bit/192kHz needle drop from LP, Wilson Audio W-8315). I wrote that, through the Alexias, "the balance of the instruments was intimate yet unforced. They were reproduced with faithful tone colors—I heard no colorations—and the imaging was such that the musicians seemed

The midrange driver is the same in both speakers, but the midrange enclosure has a full 26% increase in internal volume.

measurements, continued

nearfield response suggests that this is the tuning frequency of the large rear-facing port. The port's output (red trace) peaks broadly between 10 and 60Hz, and its upper-frequency rolloff is free from any resonance spikes.

Higher in frequency in fig.2, the black trace below 300Hz shows the complex sum of the nearfield drive-unit outputs, taking into account both amplitude and phase. The broad peak in the midbass will be mostly due to the nearfield measurement technique, which assumes that the drive-units are mounted in a baffle that extends to infinity in both planes. Above 300Hz, the response, averaged across a 30° horizontal window centered on the listening axis, is very similar to that of the original Alexia,¹ with small peaks throughout the upper midrange and treble balanced by small dips. However,

while the new speaker, like the old, has a small suckout between 4 and 5kHz—which, I conjectured in my December 2013 review, was due to destructive interference between the tweeter's direct output and the reflections from the midrange enclosure—the Alexia 2 has about 2dB more energy above 6kHz than the older speaker. The two speakers' farfield responses matched very closely, any difference being 0.5dB or less throughout the treble.

The plot of the Alexia 2's lateral dispersion (fig.3) reveals that the tweeter becomes very directional above 12kHz, which might well make the speaker sound a bit lacking in top-octave air in large or overdamped rooms. The apparent off-axis peak between 4 and 5kHz in this graph is due to the on-axis suckout visible in fig.2 filling in to the speaker's sides. Overall, as with the

original speaker, the Alexia 2's off-axis behavior is well controlled and even. In the vertical plane (fig.4), a suckout develops at the upper crossover frequency more than 10° above the listening axis, but the speaker's balance doesn't change by much over a ±5° window centered on the listening axis.

Fig.5 compares the spatially averaged response in my room of the new Alexias (red trace) with that of the originals fitted with the revised tweeter resistors (blue). (The traces were generated by averaging 20 1/6-octave-smoothed spectra, taken for the left and right speakers individually using SMUGSoftware's FuzzMeasure 3.0 program and a 96kHz sample rate, in

¹ See fig.4 at www.stereophile.com/content/wilson-audio-specialties-alexia-loudspeaker-measurements.

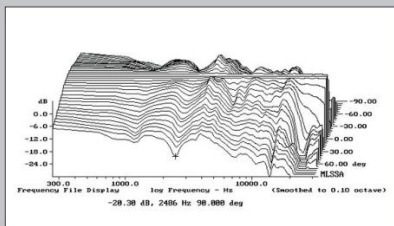


Fig.3 Wilson Alexia 2, lateral response family at 50", normalized to response on listening axis, from back to front: differences in response 90–5° off axis, reference response, differences in response 5–90° off axis.

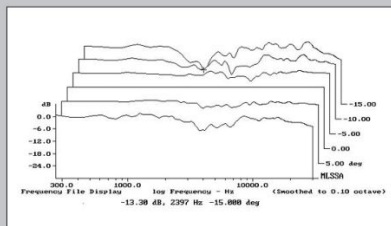


Fig.4 Wilson Alexia 2, vertical response family at 50", normalized to response on listening axis, from back to front: differences in response 15–5° above axis, reference response, differences in response 5–10° below axis.

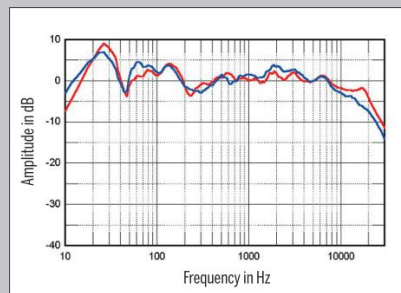


Fig.5 Wilson Alexia 2, spatially averaged, 1/6-octave response in JA's listening room (red); and of Wilson Alexia (blue).

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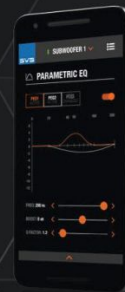


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to be in my room.” My reaction to this recording through the Alexia 2s was the same.

As the sonata drew to a close, Roon suggested another David Wilson recording of David Abel and Julie Steinberg, this time playing Brahms’s Sonata 1 in G, Op.78 (24/176.4 AIFF file, Wilson W-8722). This passionately lyrical sonata has been a favorite of mine for decades, and the versions in my library range from Anne-Sophie Mutter’s 1982 recording with Alexis Weissenberg (CD, EMI CDC 7 49299 2) to my most recent purchase, Christian Tetzlaff and Lars Vogt’s superbly idiomatic performance (DSD128 files, Ondine ODE1284-2D/HDtracks), with stops along the way at Arturo Delmonì’s recording, with pianist Yuri Funahashi (ALAC ripped from CD, John Marks JMR 2), and my own unreleased recording from the 1996 Santa Fe Chamber Music Festival, with Ani Kavafian accompanied by Max Levinson (16/44.1, 192kbps MP3).

Not only did the Wilson speakers not editorialize on the tonal colors on these very different recordings, they clearly revealed the different recorded perspectives: the mellow-toned Wilson; the rather scratchy-sounding Mut-

ter; the rich-toned Steinway on my own recording, with less-well-defined stereo imaging than the Wilson; Delmonì’s dry-sounding, rather careful performance, but with better-defined stereo than the Kavafian; the superbly stable stereo imaging of the Tetzlaff, though with a more distant perspective than the Delmonì. Images weren’t bloated. Everything that had been captured on each recording was reproduced at the appropriate scale.

I very much enjoyed the three months the Alexia 2s spent in my home.

DSD128 files from NativeDSD.com. Solo piano is always difficult for speakers to reproduce correctly, because piano notes have high levels of energy in the region where speakers tend to have resonances of various kinds, and because the nature of the music often doesn’t mask those resonances once they’ve been excited. Nevertheless, Chopin’s Ballade 4 in f, performed by Silverman on what sounds like

The weight given the piano in the Tetzlaff and Kavafian recordings led me to play our February 2018 “Recording of the Month,” *Chopin’s Last Waltz*, performed by pianist Robert Silverman (IsoMike 5606). Robert Baird’s review had been of the LP; I purchased the

measurements, continued

a vertical rectangular grid 36" wide by 18" high and centered on the positions of my ears.) The two speakers again look to be very similar, but you can see that the older Alexias had more presence-region energy and a reduced top-octave output. The new speakers had a little less midbass energy, but excited the lowest-frequency mode in my room a bit more.

The full-range, floorstanding speaker I most recently reviewed was GoldenEar Technology’s Triton Reference, in January 2018.² The Triton’s in-room response, measured in the identical manner, is shown in fig.6 (blue trace). Above 300Hz, where the spatial averaging has minimized the influence of low-frequency room resonances, it is very close to that of the Alexia 2 (red trace), though with slightly more

energy, both in the high treble between 8 and 16kHz, and in the midrange. Both speakers excite the lowest-frequency room mode to the same degree, but the GoldenEar also has a peak at the tuning frequency of its passive radiators. The Wilson has a greater output in the upper bass.

Turning to the time domain, the Alexia 2’s step response on its listening axis is shown in fig.7; it reveals that the tweeter is connected in positive acoustic polarity, the midrange driver in negative polarity, and both woofers in positive polarity (confirmed by their nearfield step responses, not shown). The slight discontinuity at 4ms suggests that the woofers’ output would be better integrated with that of the midrange slightly below the axis on which I took the measurement. How-

ever, this would disturb the excellent integration of the midrange unit’s and tweeter’s outputs.

The cumulative spectral-decay plot on this axis (fig.8) was very similar to that of the original Alexia. While looking not as clean as I expected from what I heard, it doesn’t have the significant resonances at 3 and 6.4kHz that Keith Howard found in his measurements of the Alexia 2 published in the March 2018 issue of our sister magazine *Hi-Fi News*.

Like its predecessor’s, the Alexia 2’s measured performance reveals some idiosyncrasies; but overall, there is nothing to contradict the very positive results of my auditioning. —John Atkinson

² See www.stereophile.com/content/goldenear-technology-triton-reference-loudspeaker.

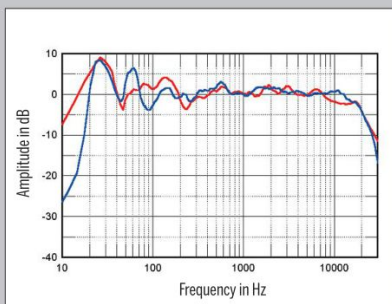


Fig.6 Wilson Alexia 2, spatially averaged, 1/6-octave response in JA’s listening room (red); and of GoldenEar Technology Triton Reference (blue).

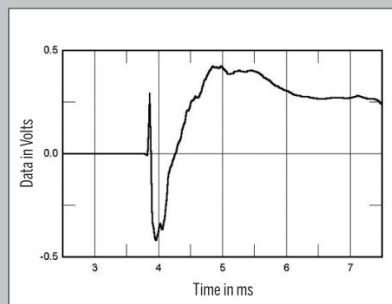


Fig.7 Wilson Alexia 2, step response on listening axis at 50° (5ms time window, 30kHz bandwidth).

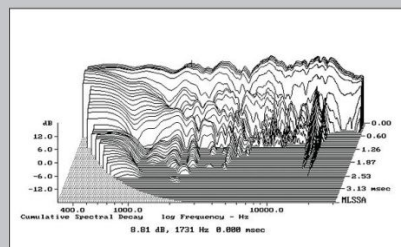


Fig.8 Wilson Alexia 2, cumulative spectral-decay plot on listening axis at 50° (0.15ms risetime).

a well-prepared Steinway grand, was reproduced without coloration in the midrange, and with a suitable degree of majesty in the low frequencies. Even so, the Alexia 2 still suffered from a slight emphasis on some notes on my “torture” recording of solo piano: Andras Schiff playing a Haydn keyboard sonata on *Encores After Beethoven* (16/44.1 AIFF, ECM New Series 1950).

But what about larger-scale music? Although my longtime reference speakers are relatively small two-way stand-mounts, I don’t often play symphonic music through them; although they faithfully reproduce the sounds of the instruments, and excel at throwing a stable and tangible stereo image, what they don’t get right is the music’s *scale*. This disparity was thrown into sharp relief during a visit to Michael Fremer, when I listened to a familiar orchestral recording through his huge Wilson Alexandria XLF speakers. When I got home, I played the same recording through my KEF LS50s. As much as I love the little KEFs, it sounded as if a *toy* orchestra were playing in the room.

A favorite performance of Beethoven’s Symphony 7, bought after reading Larry Greenhill’s mention of it in a review of a Tannoy subwoofer in February 2016, is by the San Francisco Symphony Orchestra conducted by Michael Tilson Thomas (24/96 ALAC files, SFS Media). The minute I heard the big chords at the beginning of the first movement through the Alexia 2s, I felt I could turn up the volume—and then turn it up some more—without there being any sense of strain. It was like sitting in Row C of the concert hall, so alive was the sound of the orchestra through these speakers. Though the image wasn’t as deep as I was expecting, this was probably due more to the recording than to the Wilsons—through them, my own recordings have as much depth as I know I had captured, and that they contain.

“Daddy, what are you listening to? *Why* are you playing Justin Bieber?”

It was my daughter Emily, drawn down to the listening room by the bass notes shaking the house’s upper stories. With the Wilsons’ ability to play loud without distress, I was playing a track recommended by On a Higher Note’s Philip O’Hanlon as loud as I wanted: The SPL at the listening position, measured with Studio Six Digital’s SPL Meter app set to Slow on my iPhone 6S, peaked at 102.5dB(C). Because of the Alexia’s high sensitivity, the RMS levels at the speaker terminals were around 10V, well within the capability of my Lamm monoblocks.

“It’s actually Will.i.am’s “#thatpower,” I explained, “though yes, it does feature Justin Bieber.”

“Don’t play it—you’re too old!”

I kept playing the track (16/44.1 FLAC MQA, Interscope), turning up the volume a tad to make the point: As hard as it might be for David and Daryl Wilson to appreciate (but not, perhaps, Peter McGrath, whom I’ve witnessed rocking out to James Blake’s *James Blake*), and as well as the Alexia 2s reproduced classical chamber and orchestral music, they were also made to play such limited-dynamic-range recordings as “#thatpower,” with its vast levels of dropped bass and punchy drum samples, without strain or fatigue. They kept it clean while they kept it loud.

Conclusions

How did Wilson’s Alexia 2 compare with the original Alexia? Five years is too long to be sure of one’s aural memory. Heck, under some circumstances, five *minutes* is too long! What I *can* say is that I very much enjoyed the three months

ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

Analog Source Linn Sondek LP12 turntable with Lingo power supply, Linn Ekos tonearm, Linn Arkiv B cartridge.

Digital Sources NAD Masters Series M50.2, Roon Nucleus+ digital players; Ayre Acoustics C-5xe^{MP} universal player; Ayre Acoustics QX-5, PS Audio PerfectWave DirectStream D/A converters; Ayre Acoustics QA-9 USB A/D converter.

Preamplification Channel D Seta L phono preamplifier.

Power Amplifiers Bricasti Design M15, Lamm Industries M1.2 Reference (monoblocks).

Integrated Amplifiers Luxman L-509x, NAD Masters Series M32.

Cables Digital: AudioQuest Coffee (USB) & Vodka (Ethernet), Canare (15’, AES/EBU), DH Labs (1m, AES/EBU), Esperanto Audio (S/PDIF). Interconnect: AudioQuest Wild Blue. Speaker: AudioQuest K2. AC: AudioQuest Dragon Source & High Current, manufacturers’ own.

Accessories Target TT-5 equipment racks; Ayre Acoustics Myrtle Blocks; ASC Tube Traps, RPG Abffusor panels; Shunyata Research Dark Field cable elevators; Audio Power Industries 116 Mk.II & PE-1, AudioQuest Niagara 5000 Low-Z Power/Noise-Dissipation System. AC power comes from two dedicated 20A circuits, each just 6’ from breaker box. —John Atkinson

Everything that had been captured on each recording was reproduced at the appropriate scale.

the Alexia 2s spent in my home.

I can also say that Wilson Audio speakers can provoke polarized responses. I was at a dinner a couple of years back with several

other audio writers. “I don’t get it,” one of them said to me. “How could you recommend the Wilson Alexia, when just over a year later you favorably reviewed the Vivid Giya G3? You’re an engineer—you *must* agree that the Vivid and the Wilson are as different as it is possible for two speakers to be. How can they *both* be rated Class A in *Stereophile*’s ‘Recommended Components?’”

Yes, I’m an engineer, but I don’t mistake the road for the destination. Designers can and do take many roads, but their ultimate destination is the same: to allow listeners to be transported by their music to that place where worldly cares cease to exist. And *that* the Alexia Series 2 did to perfection—without smoothing over the recordings’ imperfections, without bowdlerizing the meanings of the music. I can’t pretend that the life of a magazine editor is not stressful—I knew it was going into it. But evening after evening, after taking the subway home from the office, I cracked open a beer—Dale’s Pale Ale, or New Belgium Fat Tire Amber Ale, or Firestone-Walker Union Jack IPA, or Sierra Nevada Torpedo Extra IPA, or even Raging Bitch Belgian-style IPA from Flying Dog Brewery⁵—settled back in my listening chair, fired up my iPad, set the Roon app to its random-play Radio function, and let the Wilson Alexia Series 2s take me far, far away. That is what great speakers do. ■

⁵ Blame my English son-in-law, Joe, for introducing me to Raging Bitch. It is the wonder of the craft-beer age that, here in Brooklyn, *all* of these great brews are stocked by our local corner grocery store.