

Equipment Report



Wilson Audio Alexx V Loudspeaker

The Force Will Be With You

Matthew Clott

I grew up in a *Star Trek* house; and I make no apologies for it. My entire family watched the re-runs whenever they were on television, which in our home was a 25" Zenith (my brother and I were the remote control). We all quoted the show constantly and pretended everything was a phaser. I couldn't walk through a doorway without making the "Shhh" noise. In 1975, *Star 1999* came out. The stories were wonderful and the

effects wondrous, but no new ground was really broken. Then *Star Wars* debuted in 1977. I was six years old. The ticket lines wrapped around the theaters three times. To this day (almost 45 years later) I remember the moment the lights went down, John Wil-

liams *magnus opus* began, and "A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away..." came on the massive screen. I get the chills even thinking about it. And then *Star Wars* and the now famous text crawl as a world no one had known or imagined was introduced to us for the very first time. Even before seeing the ships, the droids, the heroes and heroines, the aliens, the most terrifying villain in cinematic history, and the light sabers (oh, the light sabers!) I was overwhelmed—awestruck. By the closing credits, my little six-year-old processing system had been completely blown apart. My mind had been blown 31 years before the expression "mind blown" became a thing! I became emotionally linked to what I had experienced at a deep, near-transcendental level and could no longer imagine (didn't want to imagine) a world without *Star Wars* in it.

That moment of ecstasy—that feeling of overwhelming emotional connection, of a moment frozen in time when everything just seemed right—has only happened to me thrice since. Once was after I finished reading Frank Herbert's *Dune* for the first time, once at the conclusion of the first act of *Wicked* in NYC as Idina Menzel finished singing "Defying Gravity," and most recently during my first session in my listening room after the Maestro Peter McGrath of Wilson Audio and Chris Forman of Innovative Audio finished the meticulous job of setting up a pair of absolutely spectacular Cranberry Pearl Alexx V loudspeakers, and I sat down to listen for the first time. It was a moment of breathlessness, of dis-reality.

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Why Worry?

I will admit a modicum of trepidation in agreeing to review the Alexx V. I believed that Wilson's next-down-the-line Alexia 2, which had been my reference up to this point, suited my 15-foot by 19-foot listening space perfectly, and I was concerned that the Alexx V would physically and acoustically overpower the room. I could not have been more wrong. The Alexx V's new, more slender physique looks narrower and less massive than my Alexia 2. Yes, it is taller, but the upper gantry's open, skeletonized architecture and the beautiful lines and taper towards the top slenderize the original Alexx design. Even the massive lower-bass plenum, housing 10½" and 12½" woofers, looked more petite in comparison to the original Alexx bass unit—which is doubly impressive considering that the V's cabinet volume has increased. As a plastic surgeon, I truly admired the engineering and effort that clearly went into reducing the V's footprint and improving its overall aesthetic.

Sonically, the speakers nuzzled into my medium-sized room like a dog curling up on an armchair. Measurements were taken, submitted to Wilson Central Command in Utah, and after being churned through Wilson's computer, position settings were returned to optimize the individual driver distances to my ears. I was told this allows correction in the time domain to less than 10 microseconds. That is, the outputs of all the drivers were time-aligned to that extremely tight specification at my particular listening distance and listening height. I was also told the XVX can accomplish this within a two-microsecond window. (I have heard the XVX, and I believe it.) From what I understand, the threshold of time-domain sensitivity of the human auditory system is 8–12 microseconds. The initial launch of the drivers' outputs are, according to Peter, both time and phase coherent. The speaker can be ported to the front or to the rear, and we opted for the front-porting. The result was me sitting approximately nine feet from the speakers and them utterly vanishing. My room is well treated, and I do think this helped allow the Alexx V to shine. But there is no question that the professional positioning (combined with computer-assisted setup of the adjustable five-driver/four-cabinet system to optimize wave-arrival time) results in mesmerizing staging, imaging, and holography, extending well beyond the speaker boundaries—not to mention meticulous tonal and timbral accuracy.

Yup, I'd say the Alexx V's fit my room nicely.

Why Worry, Part 2?

I'll admit to another reason why I hesitated to review the Alexx V's. My experience with the Alexia 2s had established their exceptional performance and synergy with my room and my system. Not to say that I haven't reviewed other exceptional speakers that I would have been happy with forever (e.g., Magico A5s and Kharma Exquisite Midis). But the Wilson Alexia 2s added pace, rhythm, and serious low-frequency extension to the game, while maintaining a cohesive whole that delivered what I wanted personally and needed professionally to be the best reviewer I can be. Considering the price delta between the Alexia 2 (\$58k) and the Alexx V (\$135k in standard finish), I was terrified I was going to fall in love with the Alexx V, even if they didn't fit my room—

and even more terrified after I realized that they did fit! Also, the Cranberry Pearl premium finish they came in would make any hot rod stand up and take notice; it is simply spectacular.

Alexx Grows Up

Alexx was a great speaker. But the Alexx V is a massive improvement over its previous iterations—closer to a baby XVX in so many ways. This five-driver tower utilizes Wilson's proprietary V material extensively, and incorporates every new technology Wilson has up its ever-growing sleeve. The V material is CNC'd on site and allows for both increased complexity and rigidity in design and fabrication.

As most of this info is available on Wilson's website I'm not going to go into hyper detail, but I will highlight some of the bigger changes. As previously mentioned, the open, skeletonized gantry (with an added rear light to accentuate the beautiful wiring and fabrication and make setup easier) helps to reduce the mass of the speaker significantly and improve its aesthetic. I'm convinced it also helps with lateral wave diffraction, improving staging. As previously mentioned, the woofer cabinet has increased volume and retains Wilson's XLF reversible woofer port, which was definitely better in my room opened forward. Bass performance is simply otherworldly. Wilson also introduced its new Acoustic Diode spike/isolation system with the Alexx V. As a huge believer in vibration isolation, I was happy to see this, and attribute some of this speaker's profound sonic improvement to the Acoustic Diodes. Proprietary

in-house AudioCapX-WA capacitors are now used throughout the crossover and are credited with increasing low-level resolution. The new, 3D-printed, Convergent Synergy Carbon rear-wave chamber helps to better the performance of the V's soft-dome tweeter. Having heard the Alexx a few times (and my Alexia 2s near-daily), I can say that the Convergent Synergy Carbon tweeter is a major breakthrough, and I look forward to seeing it trickled-down to less expensive Wilson models. Driver improvements also include the QuadraMag 7" midrange, trickled down from the XVX. Finally, the Alexx V utilizes the newer Wilson binding posts, first introduced in the Sasha DAW, while also implementing improved gold lugs and connectors throughout the signal path from speaker cable to driver. Each improvement yields perceivable improvements in performance.

Industrial Sound & Magic

It is a stereo component and speaker manufacturer's goal to fool your mind, soul, and senses into believing what is coming from a conveyance is actually what it portends to be. There is no part of a speaker that is a French horn, a piano, a soprano, or a bass guitar; yet, when a system is done correctly, we believe those instruments are "there."

Three things get in the way of that absolute illusion. One is the ability of the speaker to generate the immediacy, refinement, tone color, resolution, and heart of the recording. The second is limitations in the temporal and spatial presentation that allow the location and presence of each recorded object to be accu-

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Specs & Pricing

Type: Four-way, five-driver dynamic loudspeaker

Driver complement: One 12.5" woofer, one 10.5" woofer, one 7" lower midrange, one 5.75" upper midrange, one 1" tweeter.

Loading: XLF port, front- or rear-firing (woofer); rear vented (lower-midrange module); rear vented (upper-midrange module)

Frequency response: 20Hz–32kHz ±3dB

Sensitivity: 92dB/1W/1m at 1kHz

Nominal impedance: 4 ohms, 2.0 ohms minimum at 250Hz

Minimum amplifier power: 50Wpc

Dimensions: 15.75" x 63.3" x 27.9"

Weight: 500 lbs. per speaker (1400 lbs. total shipping weight)

Price: \$135,000 (standard colors; upgrade, custom, and premium colors at additional charge)

WILSON AUDIO SPECIALTIES

2233 Mountain Vista Lane
Provo, Utah 84606
(801) 377-2233
wilsonaudio.com

Associated Equipment

Analog source: Lyra Atlas SL cartridge, VPI HW40 turntable and arm, Manley Steelhead phono stage

Digital source: Taiko Extreme, Laufer Teknik Memory Player MP64, Plium Elektra DAC, Light Harmonic Davinci 3, DCS Rossini (on loan from DCS)

Preamplifier: Plium Alexander

Amplification: Plium Achilles stereo, Lamm Industries ML2 SET monoblocks, Manley Neo-Classic 500 monoblocks; darTZeel CTH-8550 model two, Octave V80SE with Super Black Box integrated amplifiers

AC Power: Dedicated Square D 125-amp panel w/10 gauge runs to each outlet, Furutech GTX-D-NCF rhodium outlets, dedicated circuits for each outlet, Environmental Protection EP-2750 ground filter on each circuit, EP-2050 surge protection/waveform correction

Power conditioning: Shunyata D6000, Richard Gray 400S, Torus RM20BAL

Support: Custom TimberNation rack, Adona SR4 racks, Symposium Ultra shelves, Symposium Rollerblocks 2+ doublestacks, HRS Nimbus, Shun

Mook Giant Diamond Resonator, IsoAcoustics Titan Cronos (on the TimberNation rack), Gaia 1 & 2, IsoAcoustics Orea Bourdeaux

Analog cables: Crystal Cable Absolute Dream, Analysis Plus Micro Golden Oval XLR, Shunyata Anaconda S 8.5m XLR, Cable Crystal Connect Reference Diamond 1.5m RCA phono w/ground cable, AudioQuest Wind RCA, Wind XLR

Digital cables: Light Harmonic Lightspeed 20G USB, AudioQuest Diamond 0.75m RJ/E Ethernet, Diamond USB A-B 5m, Wireworld Platinum Starlight USB, Empirical Audio 1.0m SPDIF, Crystal Connect Monet Ethernet

Loudspeaker cables: Crystal Cable Absolute Dream, Silversmith Fidelity, AudioQuest William Tell Ag, Analysis Plus Big Silver Oval

Power: Shunyata Z-Tron NR 15 amp, Shunyata Z-Tron NR 20 amp, Enklein David 15 amp, Clarus Power Hi-Current

Acoustics: Dedicated room, Vicoustics, GIK, Acoustic Wings, Auralax,

Room: 15'1" x 18'5" x 9'2"

rately portrayed in your space. And the third is the variable capacity of a conveyance, a speaker, to recreate the scale, dynamics, and majesty of the real thing. I could stop here and simply say that, other than the Wilson XVX, the Alexx V comes closer to fooling my mind, heart, and soul into believing what I am experiencing is real than anything I have heard in my home, at a dealership, or at a show. I must give a quick nod to the Rockport Lyra, which I heard once for just a few songs, but the experience left me believing it to be in the same class as the Alexx V. Where I can only say I was seriously impressed because of my brief time with the Lyra, I can rave endlessly about the Alexx V, as it resides in my listening room. I do believe that if I heard the Kharma Exquisite Midi Grand or the Veyron 2D or 4D in my room (the bigger brothers to our previous Product of the Year winner), I would feel similarly, although my instincts tell me the low-frequency extension of the Alexx V would have more body and depth, while the Kharma would see into the very soul of the music a bit deeper. Obviously, there are other brands to consider, but they fall outside of the scope of my experience in my room and of this review.

Other than the wonderful MQA tracks that Peter brought, what did I listen to? Well, *Star Wars* and science-fiction movie

soundtracks, of course, all my usual tracks, as well—and then more, and more, and more. I couldn't stop listening. My wife had to call down to my listening room (in the basement) on my cellphone over and over to finally get me to come to sleep. I became awash in a musical rendering of colors, shapes, and emotions that was hard to fully process.

There is something to be said for a big speaker. The sense of grandeur and majesty it can convey with truly full-range performance energizes the room in a way that a smaller speaker just can't. I have had other huge speak-

ers in my room and none of them have worked as well; I simply could not get far enough away from them to permit the drivers to become a cohesive whole. The Alexx V's vertical dimensions also allow the speakers to convey a proper sense of scale and height, reinforcing the "you are there" experience. And these speakers are all about "you are there." In fact, I have no doubt in my mind that the engineers' primary objective was to put the listener in the venue, at the recording site.

Let's talk about the CSC tweeter for a moment. Wilson has taken an interesting route with high-frequency repro-

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Supporting Cast

I must give some of the credit for this blissful experience to the supporting players. First, I must thank John Quick from dCS for lending me a spectacular dCS Vivaldi One to digitally translate the fabulous MQA-encoded tracks provided by Peter McGrath. Peter is truly a gifted recording engineer, and every track of his we listened to proved that, as a well-recorded file allows a system to truly show its abilities. Peter's original master files were later encoded in MQA and then decoded by the dCS. I was also fortunate enough to have recently acquired a Taido Extreme music server, which has proven to be the finest I've experienced. The remainder of my system is the breathtaking Piliun Alexander preamp, Achilles stereo amp, and Elektra DAC, which shared equal play time with the Vivaldi One. (Both are world-class DACs.) A reference pair of speakers deserves equally exceptional equipment, and I believed my gear was up to the task.

duction. In the past, the company had a reputation for analytics and sterility that polarized many enthusiasts. Detail was highlighted, but so were the technical aspects of the reproduction, sometimes forcing the listener to get stuck in "analysis mode." Daryl Wilson brought a new flavor to the company and embraced a warmer overall tonal palate. Now, with the CSC soft-dome tweeter, Wilson seems to have found that magic balance between David's passion for accuracy and Daryl's love of engagement.

The new 7" midrange driver and its 5½" brother are located below and above the tweeter; each is assigned its own frequency range. In fact, no driver significantly overlaps the passband of another, including the massive 10½" and 12½" woofers. The midrange tilts ever so subtly toward the warm side of neutral, like 5.000001 on a scale from 1 (sterile) to 10 (lush). There is a sense of cleanliness about this design that projects effortless dynamic scale and speed without sacrificing clarity and resolution. In fact, nothing is sacrificed anywhere. No, it is not perfect. But, boy, does it check all the audiophile boxes!

Speaking of boxes, the woofer enclosure's ability to adjust the porting direction forward or backward made a huge difference in my room. Front-porting disconnected the low frequencies almost completely from my room and added a sense of visceral impact and slam. The continuity, the sonic integrity, especially in the lower (and I mean *lower*) registers, is mesmerizing. Transitions between drivers on bass riffs and organ ostinatos are unnoticeable; in the bass, the V maintains a seamless sense of texture, tonal realism, and power. These speakers are unabashedly full range. I did find (at Peter's suggestion) that when I cracked open my listening room door, the bass instantly tightened and disconnected from the room even more—a trick I have used on occasion over the years, and while it can make a difference with the right speaker in the right room, the difference it made with the Alexx V's far surpassed any previous experience. The speakers simply move so much air that they pressurize my room like nothing

I have previously experienced. Wilson speakers have always been known for their low-frequency power and extension. But what the Alexx V represents in low-frequency speed, recovery time, and timbral fidelity surpasses what I ever expected from a ported enclosure.

Staging and imaging flat out blew me away. There is no other way to say it except to say I heard things behind me. I invited audiophiles and novices alike over, and many novices asked me where the rear-surround speakers were. The stage extended from three feet in front of the drivers to well beyond the wall behind the speakers. Left-to-right staging was whatever the venue was. I must attribute this to the near simultaneous arrival of wavefronts as a result of the adjustable driver enclosures. I have heard tracks I know well project laterally on many systems, but the degree of projection, accuracy of placement within a 360-degree space (simultaneously in front and around me), and the capacity to impart a sense of visceral palpability were uncanny, almost unnerving, with the Alexx V.

Does It Deserve a Seat on the Jedi High Council?

Given the price point, size, and physical prowess of the speaker, it is blessed with the luxury of minimal restrictions in design, parts, and fabrication. The XVX and WMM surpass the Alexx V in terms of adding "more" of everything. But it's sort of like asking what happens when you add one to infinity.

I cannot attribute any one specific quality or even several to what engaged me so with the Alexx V. It is the over-

whelming sum of its parts that riveted my attention and took my breath away. Everything just seems so right.

The Alexx V delves deeper into the soul of music than any speaker I have had in my room (except maybe the Kharma Exquisite Midi, which simply didn't come close to the full-range experience of the Wilson). The presentation of finesse, stage, and scale offers not just a sense of realism, but of reality itself. The music flows in natural tonal layers of textural complexity and grace with a sense of ease and effortless-ness akin to waves upon an ocean shore—such power, yet such serenity.

If I were to reach to find a criticism, it would be that the dome tweeter does sacrifice the last ounce of micro-detail compared to the insane resolving power of the best diamond and beryllium drivers. But even there, the CSC dome tweeter system helps bridge the gap, and the Wilson tweeter simply suits the overall presentation that the Alexx V offers. As a result, you end up with all three boxes checked: heart, breadth, and scale. The V is certainly one of an elite few of the most spatially coherent, tonally accurate, dynamically grand, emotionally inspiring speakers I have ever heard.

While Daryl Wilson is undoubtedly a chip off his father David's block, in many ways he has grown beyond his father—not because of superior technical skills, but because of his heart, his soul, and his ability to connect with music lovers. **W**