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Wilson Duette on the Road

MARTIN COLLOMS ASSESSES WHAT MIGHT WELL BE THE ULTIMATE STAND-MOUNT – EXTRAVAGANTLY PRICED BUT EXQUISITELY BUILT, EXCEPTIONALLY FLEXIBLE AND OBSESSIVELY SPECIFIED. TONY FAULKNER ADDS A FIELD REPORT ON USING IT ON LOCATION AS A PROFESSIONAL RECORDING MONITOR.



Wilson Audio is no ordinary loudspeaker maker, and the *Duette* is no ordinary loudspeaker. Discounting the *CUB* (which was best suited to home cinema systems), this is the company's first statement stand-mount loudspeaker since the original *WATT*. Founder and designer David Wilson makes no excuses with this *Duette*. He has simply set about making the finest compact or bookshelf speaker he can, with no ifs or buts.

Built to exacting standards, it costs what it costs. The idea of building to a price does not appeal to this man, nor does subcontracting its construction to less costly overseas sources. Much as a serious purchaser of a good piano would not consider a lower cost Far Eastern import, a Wilson Audio customer is well aware of the proposition on offer.

This particular reviewer is sometimes excessively led by value-for-money considerations. At a higher price than any equivalent – an extravagant £8,888 for the speakers

plus £2,000 for the partnering stands here in the UK – the *Duette* challenges this perception. With so many large, capable floor standing speakers on the market, why produce such a very costly compact? For an answer we need to go back to the early, glory days of audio, before 1970, when the popular format, especially in the US, was the large 'bookshelf' speaker – the term 'bookshelf' being optimistically applied in view of the bulk and weight often involved. These speakers were usually mounted on their sides, and more or less acoustically matched to this boundary condition. Perhaps the most famous example of the 'East Coast' sound was the Acoustic Research *AR3*, a classic and deservedly popular 'bookshelf' design, and no pipsqueak as it was a full three way with advanced mid and treble dome units and a powerful 12in bass driver. In the same era, JBL's similarly massive 'bookshelf' *L100* epitomised the 'West Coast' sound.

Aesthetic considerations mean that our ideal of a free space stereo layout can be too intrusive for some, so some demand remains for high quality 'bookshelf' models, even though the apocryphal 'bookshelf' has now given way to a proper stand.

The *Duette* is a powerful yet compact full range loudspeaker with as little engineering compromise as possible, targeted at near wall siting despite its known limitations. It's a versatile two-way based on the classic and potentially powerful combination of a 220mm (8.5in) bass/mid unit and a 25mm (1in) soft dome tweeter. While stand-mounts have tended to become rather diminutive these days, often using 130mm (5in) bass/mid drivers with a 90mm effective cone diameter, the *Duette* has a 170mm diameter main cone radiator. Given its considerable peak excursion and powerful c50mm (2in) voice coil, its acoustic capacity is close to four of those small 130mm units.

The crossover network is separately housed in its own box, which is neatly stowed away in the stand structure. The speaker is supplied with two different sets of umbilical cables, specified either for wall or free space siting, connecting the crossover to the enclosure terminals, and there are also accessory resistors to trim the treble to match. These are selected according to detailed instructions provided in the comprehensive operating manuals.

Technology

Engineers will be impressed by the micro-grained, energy-dissipating lower surface of the brass cups, which sit between the enclosure's hardened magnetic cones and milled recesses on the stand's alloy top plate. The tripod coupling between enclosure and support is inherently self-adjusting, and the stand has generous, adjustable floor-coupling hardware. Between the milled alloy top and bottom plates, the stand has a massive non-resonant central pillar of 'M' material, a proprietary mineral-loaded polymer, locked in by tensioned, hardened steel bolts.

The enclosure, made from the same tough yet well damped proprietary 'M' material, is singularly inert, and reinforced by complex bracing. Providing the drivers with a firm foundation, the front panel is 50mm (2in) deep, and the material is so tough it may be threaded directly to take the driver fixing screws. Internal volume damping relies on a familiar combination of acoustic foam pads and a well packed pad of fibre absorbent fixed behind the bass driver only, leaving the main volume unobstructed. Were that all loudspeakers were built as well as this one.

Computer aided design was combined with extended listening to design the crossover, which provides 18db/oct slopes for each driver at a lower than usual 1.8kHz frequency. External mounting makes the crossover largely immune from vibration and electromagnetic interference. To attain the 90dB sensitivity, it's a 4ohm system, using a custom built SEAS *Excel* series 3.9ohm bass/mid unit with a unique cone, dust cap, termination and voice coil assembly. It has an open construction die-cast frame, and a complex progressive non-resonant spider. The 3.6ohm tweeter is a well terminated soft dome from ScanSpeak, built on a massive alloy plate, solidly bolted to the enclosure, and with rear cavity back wave termination. Both drivers have conductive copper elements in their magnetic circuits to reduce eddy-currents and minimise distortion.

Sound Quality

I first heard a quartet of near wall mounted *Duettes* in a 40 seat demonstration at last September's Heathrow show, ably operated by Peter McGrath. I heard a convincing, generous, enveloping and focused sound field of fine bandwidth and exceptional dynamic range. At times Peter used the new Wilson subwoofer, but on one particularly impressive organ piece we then discovered that he had forgot to switch on the sub. 'Who needs it?' we said to a man. Later I popped over to Henry Wood Hall to hear them monitoring one of Tony Faulkner's recording sessions, and was impressed by their dynamic and vibrant replay, and their grip on the live acoustic. (Tony reports separately on his *Duette* experiences.)

The ex-dem review speakers were well run in and seemed free from strain from the moment they were installed. While the bookshelf option was not attempted, near-to-wall and free space locations were both tried.

Initial listening with LPs was very civilised. One hallmark of a refined well blended design is the ability to pay baroque music quite loudly. This sat comfortably with one facet of my consciousness, while allowing me to write down these observations without mental anguish.

Despite the large physical disparity between the bass and treble drivers I could not hear the join between them. The sound is not spoiled with the grilles on, but I suspect most enthusiasts will leave them off for the ultimate level of micro detail and dynamic expression. Happily the drivers look reasonably finger-proof.

In free space very good results are possible when used as suggested with the appropriate supplied cable and HF resistor, although the perfectionist might well still note a lightness to midrange tonality, and a thinning of voices. The lower registers of a piano are recessed, leaving the higher notes sounding somewhat coloured and boxy. Initially fretting over this, I thought that Wilson might well have considered a crossover option more objectively optimised for free space: perhaps a bit more inductance in

