



PRO-JECT 9.1 TURNTABLE • PRIMARE CDI10 • CLASSÉ 1080 DVD

www.hifinews.co.uk

Hi-Fi News

PURE AUDIO EXCELLENCE

July 2006 £3.95

IN-DEPTH TESTS



PURE VALVE POWER

Icon Audio flagship LA4 pre-amp and 300B monoblock amplifiers



BOLZANO VILLETTI

First UK test of new omni loudspeaker technology

WORLD EXCLUSIVE
WILSON AUDIO'S FIRST SMALL SPEAKER



WILSON DUETTE

IS THIS £9K SPEAKER THE ULTIMATE BOOKSHELVER?

GROUP TEST



SPECIAL REPORT

How CD copy protection affects you

HIGH-END CD PLAYERS

Meridian • Audio Analogue • Jadis
Arcam • Naim Audio • Marantz

AOL Keyword: Hi-Fi News

US \$ 9.25 Aus \$ 9.95



9 771472 256219 0 7

LOUDSPEAKER TEST



Little Beauty

Wilson Audio has come up with a bookshelf design in its new Duette. In a world exclusive test Ken Kessler marvels at a Wilson he thinks hasn't been hit with the 'ugly stick'

Every manufacturer would like you to think that every product it makes is a milestone in its history, something of earth-shattering importance. Some products will mean a lot more in the greater scheme of things. But it's doubtful that Wilson Audio has issued anything of as great

consequence to its catalogue as the Duette. But why so?

Clearly, the Duette was conceived from the outset to broaden Wilson's appeal, through both its price and size. While hardly cheap – Dave Wilson has stated emphatically, many times, that he cannot make budget speakers because

of the materials he insists on using – the Duette is the company's new entry-level speaker. As for size, well, who can kvetch about an enclosure measuring 9.125 x 18.4 x 13.75in (whd)? This is seriously small. Which brings us to the next crucial element of the design – one that may be its most important feature.

Further to increase the appeal of the Duette, Wilson felt that downsizing and 'down-costing' weren't enough. The product had to be more room-friendly than any of the existing models. So, with deft tweaking of the crossover, with due attention to the wiring, the rear port, the voicing, Wilson has produced a model that actually excels in many ways when

millimetre. But at CES, Dave slapped 'em on a rack straight out of a budget furnishings catalogue – zero rigidity, anathema to audiophiles – and with no attention paid to toe-in, relative height or any other concerns. Still they sang: full-blooded, massive soundstage, enough impact to humiliate systems twice their size.

Now here's where I court some dissent, possibly antagonising Dave Wilson, because I emphatically prefer them on their optional stands, away from the walls, sacrificing some boundary-enhanced bass for greater three-dimensionality and air. This is classic, textbook stuff about near-boundary effects: no mysteries here. I just find the slight loss of

'It's the first Wilson speaker ever that wasn't hit with the ugly stick. It's actually pretty'

used against boundaries. More importantly, the Duette is almost insouciant regarding positioning.

And another thing: it's the first Wilson speaker ever that wasn't hit with the ugly stick. It's actually pretty rather than merely another exercise in form following function. The sculpted front panel that minimises diffraction, the 'cathedral' grille, the breathtaking, automotive-grade gloss finishes – you'd be forgiven for thinking Wilson hired some Italian designer to handle the aesthetics.

PAINLESS POSITIONING

Back to the painless positioning, though. Dave proved this at the speaker's debut in Las Vegas this past January, at the Consumer Electronics Show (CES). Any of you who are familiar with Wilson products, either as owners or simply having experienced them at shows or vicariously through reviews, are aware that anally-retentive set-up regimes are as much a part of the Wilson experience as the gloss paint. You've heard about installers whipping out tape measures to position the speakers to the

augmented lower registers to be inconsequential, compared to the freedom the sound gains by eliminating any sort of congestion. But whether personal taste or domestic issues dictate either position in your listening room, you'll be listening to a proper Wilson. It's just not huge, ornery nor bank-breakingly expensive.

Wilson describes the Duette as '... the first loudspeaker in audio history to be equally at home on a bookshelf, architecturally integrated into a cabinet, or mounted on a speaker stand'. Before the mail floods in – you can start with

DETAILS

-  **Wilson Duette**
-  **£8900 (a pair)**
-  **www.absolutesounds.com**
-  **020 8971 3909**
-  **Warm and textured**
-  **Price, low impedance**

Wharfedale Diamonds, assorted vintage ARs or Dynacos, *et al.*, if you want to contradict that bold claim – let's just regard it as a mission statement with a frisson of hyperbole.

What's undeniable is the conscious effort Wilson has made for achieving what they rightly call a 'paradoxical feat.' Succinctly, they described the project thusly: 'Instead of taking a loudspeaker designed and voiced for optimal room placement, with plenty of air behind and beside the speaker, and then trying to force it into a "bookshelf" mode, our engineers did the opposite: they designed Duette from the ground up as a "hostile environments" loudspeaker'. 'Hostile environments' – I like

differing circumstances, possibly even to address specific amps or cables. The flexibility this imparts is almost limitless.

ONLY LAPSE

Two sets of resistors are supplied with the Duettes, one for near-wall set-ups and one for freestanding mode. This is the only lapse in build behaviour: the resistors are loose and unpotted, with fiddly bare wire connections to the terminals on the back of the Novel. A speaker of this calibre deserves a nicely finished plug-in block.

Tuning details don't stop there: the connection between the Novel and the Duette is through supplied umbilical cables, one set each for near-wall and free-space,

an 8in woofer that appears to employ classic paper cones. Those who have always preferred this will revel in the scarily fast bass – probably the most surprising characteristic of the Duette, as it exhibits none of the whoofing of ported speakers. If you didn't know better, you'd swear it was a sealed box; it's that tight and crisp. The driver is also a long throw type, so the Duette goes deeper and louder than you'd ever demand of a speaker this size.

An all-new tweeter unique to Wilson was also developed for the Duette, a 1in cloth soft dome to give generous off-axis

REVIEW SYSTEM

Sources: Audio Research CD7 & Marantz CD12/DA12 CD players; SME 20/12 turntable, 312S arm, Koetsu Urushi cartridge

Amplifiers: Audio Research PH5 phono stage; McIntosh C2200 pre-amp; McIntosh MC275, Quad 909 power amps

behaviour. Remember: Wilson didn't want the Duette to exhibit classic sweet spot behaviour. In the real world, speakers need to satisfy audiences not locked into hot seat positioning. A number of superlative tweeters were tried, but none gave as wide a window.

"The first loudspeaker in audio history to be equally at home on a shelf, in a cabinet or on a stand"

that. It describes 99% of the listening rooms on this planet. And now there's something that might suit the majority of them.

ONLY LAPSE

Although in reductio the Duette is simply a two-way speaker with a rear port, to dismiss it as such is to ignore some of the most complex manoeuvring I've seen in a small box since the Sonus faber Extrema. At the very least, the Duette is a two-chassis speaker in that it employs an outboard crossover for many reasons. Dubbed the 'Novel crossover module', probably because it's the size of a fat book, it stands vertically and it will sit nicely on a shelf below the Duette itself.

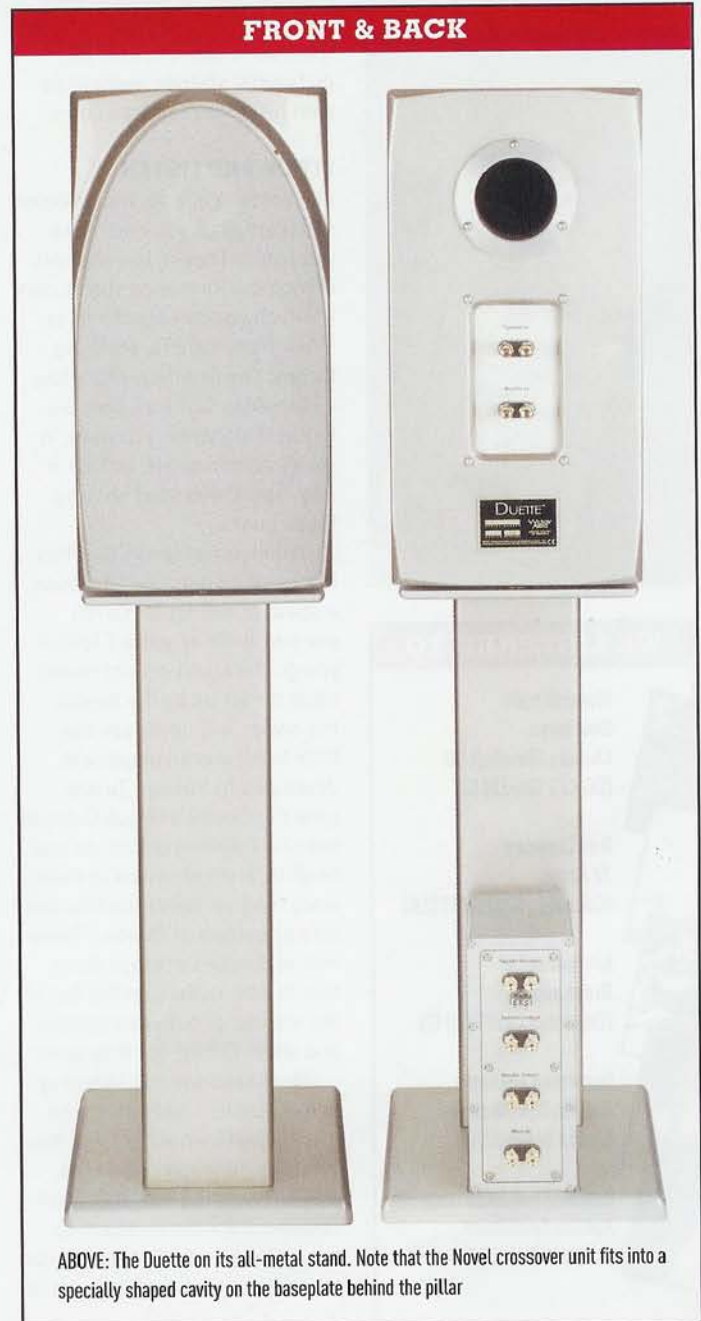
The Novel is adjustable externally via resistors mounted on its rear plate. In keeping with established Wilsonian practice, these adjustments address group delay and the tonal effects of near-boundary placement, and – as Dave will inevitably experiment with them through the speaker's life – one suspects that over the years, there will be even more resistor combinations on offer for

carefully configured for length. Again, they are dedicated to the requirements of the two positions, and you will hear detrimental effects if you try the wrong ones.

Other benefits occur by making the crossover an outboard component. It allows Wilson to keep Duette relatively small, while benefiting the midrange/bass driver with the extra internal volume regained by removing the crossover from the cabinet. Another upside is that the Novel crossover module's remote location removes it from proximity to the magnetic fields generated by the drive units. Wilson points out that the Novel crossover can therefore use: 'Alexandria-sized, Alexandria-quality inductors and crossover components. The outcome of this approach is bass extension, dynamic impact, and a sense of scale normally associated with much larger loudspeakers. Additionally, the crossover is unaffected by any resonances within the enclosure, so distortion is reduced and resolution enhanced'.

Two new drivers were designed for Duette, including

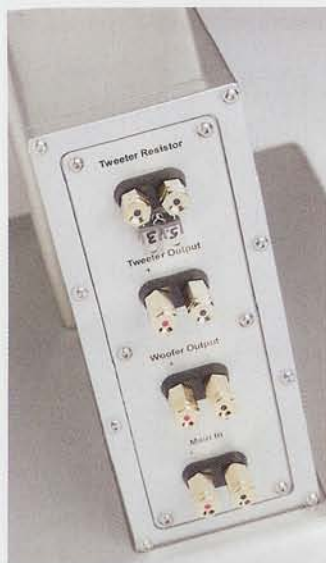
FRONT & BACK



ABOVE: The Duette on its all-metal stand. Note that the Novel crossover unit fits into a specially shaped cavity on the baseplate behind the pillar



ABOVE: Cabinet sports gloss finish
BELOW: Outboard crossover requires resistors to be fitted externally



While I maintain that the open-air performance is superior, I couldn't fault the off-axis behaviour when I had the Duettes close to the walls. You can sit anywhere you like with the Duette, because the sweet spot is the antithesis of, say, the original WATT/Puppy's onanistic listening zone.

Housed in a gorgeous box fashioned from Wilson's proprietary cabinet materials, the drivers provide a clarity and focus that is, effectively, the Wilson signature. But Dave managed to respect all of his obsessions – three-dimensional sound, retrieval of low-level detail, phase coherence, ultra-transparency – without cursing the Duette with the kind of dictatorial attitude associated with his larger loudspeakers.

SIT UP AND LISTEN

Martinets to a fault, most Wilson speakers grab you and make you listen. They're like the sort of high-performance sports cars in which you can't really relax: TVRs, Porsche GTs, anything Italian. The Duette is more like a Mercedes SL or a Lexus GS: tootle along when you want, in comfy saloon mode, or kick it into 'Sport' and start shifting those gears.

Which is not to say that this is a lunatic-free zone. Because a speaker selling for £8900 per pair (with an extra £1800 if you go the stand-mount route) must be set up by the dealer, the owner will never see the little feet/cone arrangement developed by Wilson. To fine-tune the Duette's Group Delay for specific listening distances and heights, a set of spikes in three sizes magnetically attach to the side or bottom of Duette. These rest in dimples in brass discs that fit into indents on the top of the stands, or between speaker and shelf. Fiddly, but they work.

Mere seconds into listening to the Duette, I had confirmed everything I learned at CES. You can take the most miserable, joyless, selfish Bitch-Wife From Hell and dare her to object to this speaker, which is almost so conveniently room-friendly as to qualify as an in-wall.

Note that the Duette is easy to drive. But, because it's so revealing, don't think of wasting the speaker's potential with cheap amplifiers. What seem like subtle differences between CD players, or LP pressings, suddenly become vivid – it's a retailer and reviewer's dream, because the Duette lets the listener hear everything. But at the same time, it's not so in-your-face as to be oppressive.

And here's where Wilson succeeded in making the Duette

to the suggestion that the musician is in the room. Even with the heavily treated vocals of Garfunkel's lush 'I Only Have Eyes For You' – a studio creation if ever I heard one – there's still a frisson of realism that can only be put down to an utter lack of artifice. No cabinet colorations intrude; nothing suggests an onset of listener fatigue even over long sessions. With that track, you will understand the notion of 'liquidity' in sound, and you will marvel at the coherence,

'You can take the most miserable Bitch-Wife from Hell and dare her to object to this speaker'

pretty darn close to 'all things to all people': If you want to rock, it will tear the roof off. If you want smooth, it will pour Dino's drink. I played material from Katrina & the Waves power pop to the sheer silk of Art Garfunkel to the cheesy mono original of 'Volare', every song handled deftly and with respect to its genre.

Already mentioned are scale and transparency. What mustn't be overlooked, though, are warmth, texture and tonal accuracy, all of which add

despite the mix of instruments and textures.

Most of all the speakers impress because they seem to vanish in the manner of a great dipole. This really is a 'Quad-In-A-Box'. But Dave has respected the Wilson pecking order: you have to consider a Sophia or WATT/Puppy if you want the sort of levels that inflict hearing damage, or the bass that causes subsidence. Then again, one doesn't expect Wilson to re-write the laws of physics. ■

WE LISTENED TO

Mendelssohn
Overtures
Claudio Abbado/LSO
(DG 423 104-20) CD

Neil Diamond
12 Songs
(Columbia 82876761312A)

Art Garfunkel
Breakaway
(Columbia 468873 2) CD

Domenico Modugno
Nel Blu Dipinto Di Blu
(Decca DL8808) LP

Katrina Leskanich
Katrina Leskanich
(KATSWEB-002) CD

DATA FILE

MAKER'S SPECS

Nominal Impedance:	.....4 ohm, 3 ohm min
Woofer:	..... 8in
Tweeter:	..... 1in soft dome
Sensitivity:	.....89dB@1W/1m
Minimum amplifier power:	.....7W/ch
Frequency response:	.....(+0, -3dB) 36Hz-32.5kHz
Dimensions:	..... 9.125 x 18.4 x 13.74in (whd)
Weight Duette:	.....39lb (each)
Weight Novel crossover:	..... 19lb (each)
Approx shipping weight:	..... 210lb (for complete system)

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

If the Duette is as important as I suspect it to be, then the implications go beyond the coffers of Wilson Audio. Like the Sonus faber Guarneri, we have here a milestone in high-end, small box speaker design. The fact that it's painless in every way (except its price) will win it legions of fans: it's neither power-hungry nor room fussy, it delivers the sort of performance you'd expect of a much larger speaker, and it is unlikely ever to be obsolete, given Wilson's evolutionary practices. Aside from some brain-dead Eminem fan requiring more bass or higher maximum SPLs, I can't think of a better way to fill a room under 25 x 15ft.