

hi-fi news

THE HOME OF REAL HI-FI

& Record Review

GOLDEN SOUNDS

Wilson Audio speakers make beautiful music

Chapter Sonnet-S High-end CD plus hi-rez DAC



'Hi-fi will never be the same again!' p16

SRM Athena SE Spin your vinyl in style



Group Test: £40 headphones Superb sounds at bargain prices



PINK FLOYD
Piper at the Gates of Dawn

AWARDS

EISA 2010-2011

Revealed: This year's very best hi-fi and home theatre



- PLUS 13 pages of music features • **VINYL RE-RELEASE** Kate Bush's *Hounds of Love* on LP
- **AUDIO MILESTONES** SME 3009 series tonearms • **HI-FI @ HOME** Esoterica in South Ealing
- **VINTAGE** Leak Stereo 30 reviewed • **READERS' CLASSIFIEDS** Scores of hi-fi bargains

UK £4.00 US \$9.99 Aus \$9.95



Wilson Audio Sophia 3 (£16,990)

Sasha technology has trickled down to the Sophia. Is the Sophia 3 Wilson Audio's 'easiest' speaker yet? Review: **Ken Kessler** Lab: **Keith Howard**

Since the early 1980s, Wilson Audio has produced speakers as physically small as the Duette and the original WATT, not just behemoths such as the Alexandria. It has been my good fortune to have heard almost every model, either at shows, at the Wilson listening room in Provo, Utah or in friends' homes. And there's a reason why I have used the smaller Wilsons as my primary reference for 25 years or so: they allow me to listen *into* the recording.

Unlike most, though, I don't necessarily believe that the progression from smallest model to largest should incite an automatic desire to follow that ascent. I have been perfectly happy with the WATT Puppy sequence from 1-7 because they suit my room. I repeat: they match the Kessler listening area to perfection. And while I'm certain that some crafty soul

could find a way to convince a pair of Alexandrias to work in my 12x18ft chamber, I wouldn't want to be faced with something that so dominated my field of vision. So, as a result of swearing by the horses-for-courses approach, I have been a Sophia user for a couple of years [see *HFN*, May '09].

Eh? A step down from WATT Puppy to Sophia? To understand this, you have to think like a reviewer whose system changes weekly. While there's absolutely no such thing as a 'universal' component in the truest sense, there are those which are generous with the way they interact with other items. WATT Puppies can be ornery. They can make mincemeat of amplifiers. Conversely, Sophias don't make such demands. They simply make my life

easier. I can even run 'em with a £700 Croft. I love them to bits, however much I fantasise about Sashas.

SOPHIA LORE

But Sophia Series 2 was due for a refresher. As Wilson sees it, the company has – since the '2 first appeared – moved ahead quite radically with its driver technology. Because Wilson is a firm believer in the trickle-down process, it was time for Sophia 2 to share in the tweeter developed for MAXX Series 3 and used in Sasha W/P. This 1in inverted titanium dome tweeter employs techniques conceived to reduce back-wave reflections that might

propagate through the diaphragm, in turn adding noise and distortion.

When it comes to the midband, Sophia 3 enjoys a simplified version of the driver found

in the Alexandria X2 Series 2, MAXX and Sasha, closing the sonic gap between them. As the midrange is the critical speaker in any three-way, it goes some way toward achieving one of Dave Wilson's stated goals for the '3: to provide such an instantly appealing and satisfying sound so that customers won't automatically consider it 'inferior' to its dearer siblings. [See boxout, p34.]

What this Sophia user felt, though, was an even more profound gain involving the lowest octaves. Along with other modifications, the

RIGHT: Three all-new drivers in a vertical line, including a 10in aluminium cone woofer, a 7in cellulose/paper pulp mid and a 1in inverted titanium dome tweeter

'The Sophia 3 offers virtual home cinema without a screen'



new woofer sports a magnet structure twice the size of the Sophia 2's, retaining only its predecessor's voice coil and cone. Describing the sonic gains finds me at a loss for words, despite Wilson providing its own list that includes 'the overall impact, speed, agility and linearity.' What that inventory doesn't include is the transformation of the physical presence of the bass in one's room, with breathtakingly life-like textures and realistic scale.

It's not simply the drivers that ring in the changes. The crossover has been completely reworked, benefiting from Wilson's sophisticated computer modelling, while the enclosure – made of its 'X-material' – has been re-shaped, with special attention paid to the slope of the upper baffle. This provides the time alignment for the mid and treble, an obsession at Wilson.

Hardware includes wheels underneath for use during positioning, which are then replaced with superb adjustable spikes. The only other tweaking is best left for the installer: the Sophia contains changeable resistors to 'tune' the mid and treble output, and which protect the drivers. These have been relocated from the bottom of the enclosure on the '2, to a more-accessible panel on the rear.

As Sophias 2s were already in place, I simply moved them and positioned the 3s in the same spots. Only marginal adjustments took place over the listening period. I should add, however, that the '3s need a running-in period – Wilson's Peter McGrath

suggests fairly robust levels rather than merely leaving them on over night with soft music. They just got better and better. One suspects that, like LS3/5As, this running-in is like the maturing of a fine wine: they'll continue to mature for the years.

MAGIC BOX

For the listening sessions I fed the Wilsons from an EAT Forte S turntable with a Blue Angel cartridge in the Pro-Ject arm and Linn LP12/Ekos/Arkiv, connected to an Audio Research PH-5 phono stage. Amplification consisted of an Audio Research Ref 5 driving either Quad II-eighty monoblocks or McIntosh's C2200, while digital arrived via a Marantz CD-12 and Musical Fidelity kW DM25 DAC/transport. Wiring was Kimber Select and Yter throughout. And, blessed be, it sounded magical from the first notes I heard.

They were provided by Keb' Mo', because it was the nearest disc to the players and I was eager to hear in my room what I'd only tasted at shows. But it turned out to be a wise choice: a superior recording with a varied complement of instruments, textured vocals, slithery Dobro and some of the most fluid bass you'll ever hear. But you have to try some transposition if I'm to convey the scale of the shock which it provided.

Think of a time when (or if) you replaced an audio component with its Mk II version. Perhaps you upgraded an LP12 from one stage to another, or had an amp re-valved with superior tubes. If the upgrade ⇨

FRESH WILSONIA

Wilson's Peter McGrath told me that the company has settled into a less feverish groove when it comes to new models. Instead, the new releases are more considered, relative the rest of the catalogue. In the past year, only two truly new models appeared, the most important being the Sasha W/P, a complete reworking of Wilson's most iconic, influential and best-selling model: the WATT Puppy. More surprising – to them as well as us – is Polaris, conceived as a centre channel, but one that's so good, it has revived a much-missed form: a high-end loudspeaker that *doesn't* stand taller than the listener. So you might buy one, two, three or five.



LOUDSPEAKER

was worth the re-badging of the model, it should have been startling, not subtle. For the move from Sophia 2 to 3, I am tempted to put it on the same level as that of the last of the WATT Puppies to the Sasha W/P. Staff at Wilson may scratch their heads at my astonishment, and even my presumptuousness at daring to deem the changes as of the same degree, but the effect they had on me was identical to my first exposure to Sashas.

For this to happen, a certain amount of familiarity is required. The music was, of course, beyond familiar, and I'm sure many of you are heartily sick of me using it constantly. My experience of the smaller Wilsons is a matter of record, too. Yet I can liken the scale of the evolution in terms of other products: Leica M4 camera to M6, the generational leaps between Porsche Turbos. And yet it was unmistakably a Sophia, with all that entails.

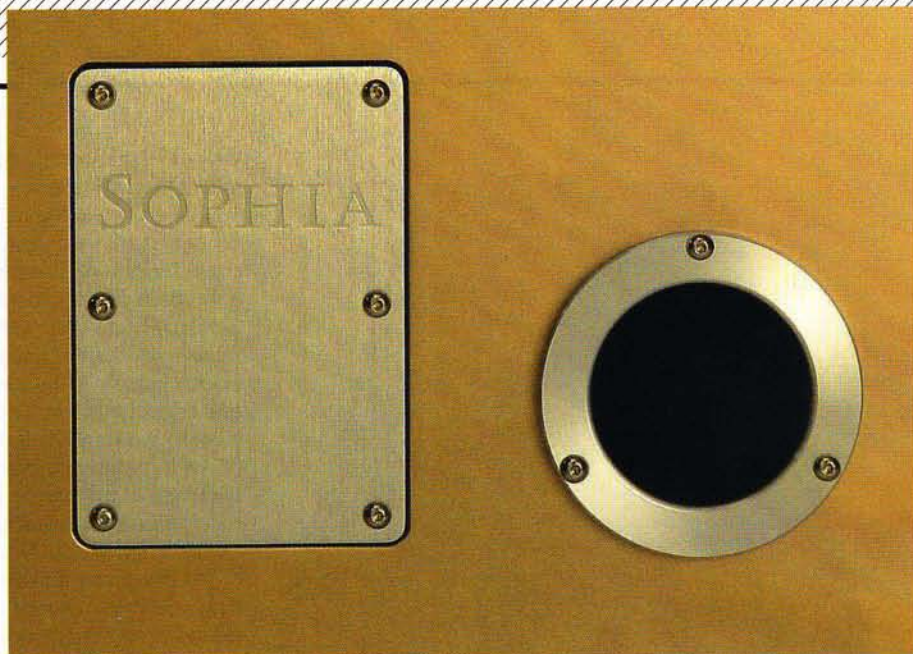
GENTLE GIANT

For me, the Sophia differs from its dearer siblings in terms of gentility, without giving up too many of their virtues. They do not force the listener to sit there like a student in a Dickensian classroom. As Keb' Mo' demonstrates, the Sophia 3 can retrieve detail with precision almost as 'macro' as the Sasha's, while the soundstage and all of its proportions are simply an exact scale replica of the huge floostanders. And still the voice of Keb' Mo' – whom I've stood next to in a lift and know is seriously tall – hovered above the 104cm Sophias,

DAVE WILSON SPEAKS

Dave Wilson wants the Sophia to be 'a congenial speaker, one that would mate easily with other equipment.' This is not to say that the Sophia doesn't respond to the minutiae of high-end gear, but it certainly isn't dependent on a half-kilowatt of power to work well. If in the past Dave might have been horrified to hear this, he's pleased to acknowledge that – by design! – the Sophia is far from being fussy about placement-to-the-millimetre.

'I've always wanted the Sophia to be an accessible product that provides a level of performance which is instantly recognisable as high-end. I don't want the listener to sit there thinking, "they're not as good as Sashas." It's only when you put them side by side that you detect how, for example, the time coherence is better.' With the transition from '2 to '3, Dave has eschewed upgrade paths that sometimes exist between two generations. 'All that remains from Sophia 2 are the woofer's voice coil and cone. The rest is all-new. As much as we'd like to provide an upgrade path, it's an unavoidable truth that over the life of a speaker, you reach a point in the architecture where you need to change the cabinet shape and not only the drivers and crossover for meaningful gains.' 'Meaningful'? That's understatement.



as if in the room. I'd hazard a guess that the Sophia 3 created a perfect 5/8ths-scale model of the Alexandria's sound spread – an apt reduction for my room, a perfect fit.

This is not a qualitative reduction, but quantitative, adhering again and again to Dave Wilson's desire to create a more cost-effective floorstander which does not constantly remind its owner that there are dearer models in the family. Perhaps the most accurate analogy takes us back to cars: I have yet to hear of a Porsche Boxster owner who lays awake at night wishing it was a 911 in his drive.

Despite lacking the movable top section of the Sasha, the Sophia still delivers the correct time alignment, even though its fixed nature means that it must be a

ABOVE: Next to the lower of the two rear ports is something new: a plate providing access to the user-changeable tuning resistors previously located underneath the speaker

carefully calculated compromise. You can, of course, raise or lower the front or rear spikes to alter the tilt. With the speaker set perfectly level – the top is angled, so I determined this by the bottom plate – I was able to do a direct comparison with the '2, and even this appears to have improved. There is simply no smearing to be detected. The transients are faultless, the speed and decay reminding me so much of the Sasha that I can believe there are, indeed, Wilson devotees who can afford either, but who opt for the Sophia.

PEERLESS PERFORMER

Contrasting sounds further strengthened my belief that the Sophia remains peerless as an egalitarian design. On one hand were 1960s/1970s recordings from Rick Nelson, during his country period. 'Garden Party' is just about the only track that people recall from his post-teen idol years, but the gentle material he recorded was captured sympathetically, paving the way for the Eagles. His voice, pleasant but never powerful, can be swamped by the backing band. Sophia retained his presence front-and-centre, with absolutely complementary levels, which is how one imagined it was meant to sound.

Utterly alien to this is the first CD in Tom Waits' 2006 triple disc epic, *Orphans*. If it's possible to blend the blues, 'Cleveland Industrial' and gospel, if Dr John had a baby with Throbbing Gristle, this is it. What Waits feeds us is an aural landscape somewhere between *fin de siècle* sleaze/romance and post-nuclear holocaust urban decay. In defiance of all that is logical, ☺



LOUDSPEAKER

LAB REPORT

WILSON AUDIO SOPHIA 3 (£16,990)



ABOVE: No bi-wiring here, just a stout pair of custom-made terminals, which can be tightened securely with a supplied hex tool. Badge clearly states 4ohm impedance!

the refined, genteel, even demure Sophia suddenly turns into a wanton trollop. In fishnet stockings.

Atonal, clanging percussion, Waits' growling vocals, greasy harmonica placed way in the background, dirty guitar licks stage left, that wonderful, papery sound that suggests a drum kit in need of re-skinning but the drummer can't afford it: this is virtual home cinema without a screen. Waits himself would appreciate a pair of Sophias, if he ever felt like re-creating in his listening room what he did on tour three decades ago: stage set that could have been lifted from a play by Tennessee Williams.

TEAR DOWN THE WALL

This is what high-end audio is all about: a listener's transcendent involvement with the musical event. For a truly believable experience of an event being reproduced rather than heard live as it happened, the listener must be transported from the synthetic arrangement of sitting in a room far removed from the hall or studio where the music was recorded, to the event itself. The Sophia offers what is surely the aural equivalent of Diderot's Fourth Wall, the indefinable barrier between listener and the music, removed by virtue of an absence of artifice, plus the disappearance of any imaginary haze or unwanted atmosphere between speaker and ear.

Currently suffering an unquenchable thirst for country

music, I overindulged in Lefty Frizzell, the Judds, Juice Newton, Tennessee Ernie Ford and Chet Atkins. These performers run the gamut of vocal types, from the *basso profundo* of Ford, to redneck nasality, to the crystalline warbling of the distaff members of this collective. Slapped bass, slide guitar. Mono to stereo. Atkins' take of 'Mister Sandman' is a lavishly liquid feast of the guitar as a substitute for vocals. The Sophia caressed them, respected them with the same equanimity shown to Waits' *film noir* look at life. Every contrast was highlighted, yet kept in proportion. In effect, the Sophias embodied in their sound what David Wilson values above nearly all other manufacturers' standards: authenticity. ☺

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

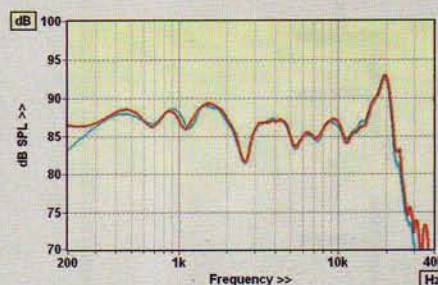
A Wilson user for over two decades, I'm used to the leaps between incarnations. Just as Sasha shocked listeners in 2009, so does the third Sophia represent a disproportionate jump. Sophia 2s remain magnificent; I could live with them for the rest of my days. But the gains in bass authenticity and presence, the impact of the extreme treble and the overall coherence of the '3 are simply dazzling. A major coup indeed.

Sound Quality: 89%

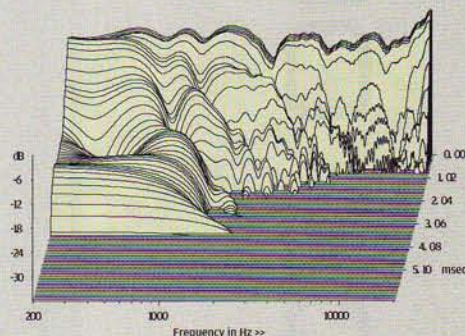


Wilson claims 87dB sensitivity for the Sophia 3, which is 2dB less than for its predecessor. This accords well with our measurement of 87.2dB on pink noise, about 1dB better than we achieved with the Sophia 2. Note that this is from 300Hz-20kHz rather than the usual 200Hz-20kHz because the Sophia 3 was too heavy to lift off the floor, making the measurement window shorter. Although one of the stated aims for the Sophia 3 is that it be suited to use with a wide range of amplification, it still presents a quite testing load. We measured a minimum modulus of 3.0ohm at 108Hz (Wilson specifies 3.1ohm at 98Hz) and a minimum EPDR (equivalent peak dissipation resistance), which takes into account impedance phase angle, of 1.6ohm at 69Hz. So the Sophia 3 is no pussy cat – although neither is it a monster.

On-axis frequency response errors at 1m, measured at tweeter height over the same frequency range, were a little higher than for the Sophia 2 at ±5.6dB and ±5.7dB respectively but pair matching was tighter at a fine ±0.9dB. Principal feature of the response [see Graph 1, below] is a shelving down of about 2dB in the presence band, which was not present in the Sophia 2. Diffraction-corrected near-field measurement recorded an impressive -6dB frequency of 33Hz (re. 200Hz), precluding any need of a subwoofer for most users. At the other frequency extreme, though, output falls away rapidly above the tweeter's low, ~20kHz breakup resonance. The cumulative spectral decay waterfall [Graph 2, below] is notably clean – more so than the Sophia 2's – suggesting that Wilson's new cabinet has helped suppress structural resonance. KH



ABOVE: The Sophia 3 has a slight presence dip missing with the '2 but pair matching is better



ABOVE: Waterfall indicates that Wilson's improved cabinet design has further minimised resonances

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Sensitivity (SPL/1m/2.83Vrms – Mean/IEC/Music)	87.8dB/87.2dB/86.8dB
Impedance modulus min/max (20Hz–20kHz)	3.0ohm @ 108Hz 12.8ohm @ 20kHz
Impedance phase min/max (20Hz–20kHz)	-47° @ 52Hz 31° @ 491Hz
Pair matching (300Hz–20kHz)	±0.9dB
LF/HF extension (-6dB ref 200Hz/10kHz)	33Hz / 24.5kHz/24.6kHz
THD 100Hz/1kHz/10kHz (for 90dB SPL/1m)	0.2% / 2.5% / 0.1%
Dimensions (HWD)	1045x346x481mm