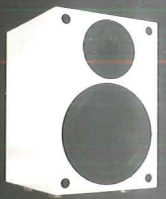


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Wilson Audio Duette Series 2 loudspeaker

by Alan Sircom

Launched almost nine years ago, the original Duette was a combination of entry-point and Swiss Army Knife for Wilson Audio. The standmount two-way was designed to work in as many ways as possible (vertical, horizontal, in free space, against the wall, or, on off the stands) and – although it achieved these tasks admirably, feedback from end users, dealers and distributors alike showed you can have too much of a good thing.

The Duette Series 2 is the response.

Although the original Duette brief may have been more universal, the majority were placed close to or up against a wall – a classic 2pi (or boundary) placement. In the process, it sort of rationalises the starting place of the Wilson line. Instead of the jump from the Duette to the Sophia, we now have a Duette for those wanting a high-end boundary speaker and a Sophia for those after a free-space loudspeaker. After this, however, it's free space all the way.

Boundary loudspeakers were fairly common sights in UK homes in the 1980s, but gradually the pendulum swung toward free-space placement. However, at the same time, house prices soared and new builds were constructed ever smaller. This is possibly less of an issue for many of our American readers, but increasingly we are seeing high-end systems being installed in rooms that can be as small as 8' (roughly 2.5m) wide and 10' (approximately 3m) deep, and it's impossible to use a loudspeaker designed to sit 3' from the rear and side walls unless you intend using them as really big headphones. By designing the Duette Series 2 for boundary use, it can be used in exceptionally small rooms with comparative ease.

The Duette Series 2 retains some common concepts with its predecessor; both are two-way designs with an external crossover, and the most casual of glances will see the family resemblance. However, in reality the Series 2 shares very little with its forbear, and benefits as much from the R&D hours logged to develop designs like the Alexia as it does from the original Duette.

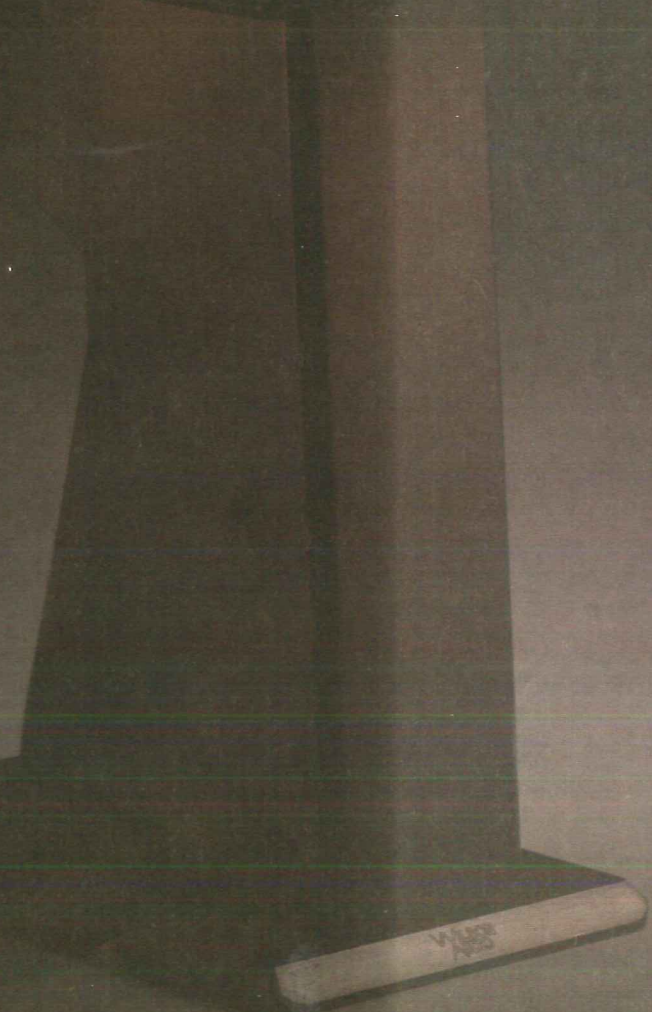
In broad terms, the Duette Series 2 features a 25mm soft dome tweeter and a 200mm bass driver (made to Wilson's own specifications). The tweeter sits in its own sealed enclosure, while the bass driver has a large rear port.

Most of the cabinet is made out of Wilson's own composite materials, specifically the company's cellulose/phenolic resin 'X' material for the bulk of the cabinet and its 'S' material (natural fibres, also in phenolic) for the tweeter baffle. That off-hand description almost masks the careful selection based on laser vibrometry mapping techniques of the cabinet resonant structure and how best to use the different level of rigidity and damping. This also necessitated changes to the cabinet shape, and changes the way the speaker is bolted to the stand (there is also a bookshelf-specific crossover).

As with the original Duette, the crossover is external, but in the standmounted version, it's built into the stand. In both cases, the 'Novel' crossover allows some fine tuning, with a series of resistors that allow a ± 1 dB adjustment to the tweeter. This should not be considered an alternative for good installation and room treatment, as the excellent accompanying manual is clear to state.

Installation in Wilson Audio speakers is what often makes or breaks the sound quality. However, with a boundary design, the famed Wilson Audio Set-up Procedure (WASP) requires a bit of a rethink. The goals remain the same, but the distance from the rear wall is virtually a given in this case, and the WASP 'vowelling in' is more about lateral movement than longitudinal. Nevertheless, this is not a loudspeaker designed to be placed without care or consideration and the distance from the side walls and toe-in are crucial, as is running in; this is a speaker that improves over time.

The photographer Garry Winogrand famously observed, "Photography is not about the thing photographed. It's about how that thing looks photographed." That applies here. You want to hear how music sounds through the Duette Series 2. Of course, that relates back to how the music was recorded and the preservation of the natural ambience and the rest of the audiophile ideal. But it also relates to a peculiar thing the really best audio does to you and your music, namely that ▶



► it makes you explore it over and over again. It's not about sound quality. It's about how it *sounds*.

That's a distinction that may seem nuanced, but spending time with speakers of the Duette Series 2's quality, you begin to realise there's too much of a focus on the sound quality as a disparate collection of musical sub-systems (timbre, tone, detail, etc) and not enough on the sound of the music as a contiguous whole. In a way, this is where cheaper audio often scores over the high-end, but it takes something really special to do both. And that's what we have here.

Perhaps the biggest 'thing' to the Duette Series 2 performance is the absence of noise. This sounds weird, because a passive loudspeaker contains no active devices that might raise a noise floor. And yet, the Duette Series 2 has a lower noise floor than most loudspeakers. It just does. You hear it the moment you swap it out for almost anything else. This isn't a 'limpid pools of pellucidity' cliché thing, it's more like painting on a fully prepared canvas or even formatting your SD card before going out for a day's photography. It's a springboard, upon which you can launch your music. And that has profound implications for your listening.

Although I don't subscribe to the whole 'good for classical', 'designed for rock' pigeonholing, there is a kernel of truth in this. However, I suspect it's trying to dress up the limitations of a design by accentuating the positives. The best loudspeakers – and I mean the very best – do not need to accentuate the positive because (and I'm following the lyric sheet here) they work to eliminate the negative. And this is what the Duette 2 does so very well. That lower than you might expect noise floor, coupled with a loudspeaker that does grace, space and pace – and that offer an excellent dynamic range – just makes this a loudspeaker for all seasons. It was possible to put on Pollini playing some delicate Chopin Nocturnes, then take an abrupt change in direction and crank out some swampy early ZZ Top, only to shift gears one more time and play Domingo singing the romanza 'Una Furtiva Lagrima' from Donizetti's *L'elisir d'amore*. This last – from the album *Opem-Gala* (DG) and also featuring Giulini and the Los Angeles Phil is a deceptively tough task. A romanza should be a song of almost infinite sadness, but on less musically adept transducers, it's hard to listen to without thinking of scenes from *The Godfather*. Here, I got the full emotion of the music with only the slightest desire to off Sal Tessio.

So far, what applies could be said of practically any decent loudspeaker. But what singles the Duette Series 2 out for special treatment is its portrayal of image depth, because it's a wall-hugging speaker. A good soundstage is not impossible with a boundary design, but generally there's ►



► an inevitable trade-off with image depth. Usually this is overcome by projecting a wider and more forward sounding soundstage than usual, but this can be a compromise too far. The Wilson Duette Series 2 makes no such compromise, and the soundstage it produces has a sense of depth as well as width, forward projection and height. Once again, I'm keen to disabuse the cliché of a soundstage so deep, it projects into the next town, but the Duette Series 2 does make your listening room sound as if it is bigger than it really is, by projecting a soundstage seemingly beyond the wall the speakers rest against. Thinking back a quarter of a century when I had Linn Kans an inch from the wall, all you got then was a (literal and figurative) wall of sound with almost no sense of soundstage whatsoever. The Duette Series 2 not only shows it can be done, but that the exercise is a worthwhile one. Rather than comparing the soundstage to the relatively limited stereophony of previous boundary loudspeakers, you'll end up comparing this to loudspeakers like the Quad Electrostatic. It's that good. I just wish I knew how it's done!

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Two-way standmount loudspeaker

Drive units: 25.4mm soft dome tweeter, 203.2mm bass driver

Enclosures: sealed combination X/S material (tweeter), rear ported X-Material (woofer)

Frequency Response: 33Hz-21kHz \pm 3dB

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

Nominal impedance: 4 ohm

Minimum impedance: 4.35ohm at 160Hz

2pi design

\pm 1dB treble adjustment to crossover

single-wired external crossover

Range of finishes: four standard colours, 12 upgrade colours, six grill colours, two hardware options.

Dimensions (WxHxD, speaker only): 26.7x47x23.3cm

Dimensions (WxHxD, stand): 30.2x55.6x47.6cm

Weight (per speaker): 20.41kg **(per stand):** 29.48kg

Price: £19,500 per pair with stands

Manufactured by: Wilson Audio Specialties

URL: www.wilsonaudio.com

Distributed by: Absolute Sounds

URL: www.absolutesounds.com

Tel: +44(0)208 971 3909

There is also an almost inescapable temptation to play 'how low can you go?' with respect to products up the chain. This comes from the original claim that the Wilson Audio speaker that can be used with some surprisingly humble system components. In my own tests, I'd say the Arcam A19 (50W, 1/20th the price) was the cut-off point. The Duette Series 2 still sounded good when used with the little A19, but it was clear the relationship was getting a bit strained.

A source of some upset for me, though is I inadvertently created a match made somewhere between Salisbury and Provo, because using this speaker with the Naim Nait XS2 worked brilliantly. No caveats, no ifs or buts. This was one of those systems that sang together so well, you knew you were on to a winner. So, why the 'upset' part? Because the chance of anyone else (in the UK at least) replicating this system is slim to remote. The two brands move in different circles here. Now, while I'm not advocating this kind of 'mullet' system (in great fairness when my Devialet came back from its 240 upgrade and used with similarly more appropriate electronics, it really shone), it shows just how liberating the Duette Series 2's shake-off of high-end demands really is. There's a lot of logic behind the 'get the room and speakers right and the rest falls into place' argument, and the Duette Series 2's sensible demands on the amplifier means if you want to take that logic to the extreme and spend way more on the speaker than the amp, this is the speaker to go for.

Alongside the upset, there's some regret, but a very personal regret. Some years ago, about 100 or so of my LPs were damaged beyond repair. Most I replaced or replicated on CD, but not all of them. And one in particular is so far removed from the audiophile canon as to be of little relevance to most people, but I realised when I was listening to the Duette Series 2, this would have been the finest album to play on so many levels. That album was *Scientist meets the Space Invaders*, a mixed bag of whacked out dub from 32 years ago. It would have been great for several reasons: First, the Duette Series 2 have the bass and the drive and the drama and the fun to make it happen; second, it might have been a good test of the speakers (although that was a minor concern) and finally it is the inverse of the vision of the stuffy audiophool listening to his well-recorded jazz through wonderful equipment. The only other personal regret is a constraint laid by the strictures of professional audio writing and a respect for the people who build these speakers, but I want to start shouting and swearing about how good they are, like a bit of a nutter.

The deeper I delved into this design, the more I realised it is one of the most important high-end loudspeakers ever. It achieves all the demands of a good high-end design

(detail, macro and micro-dynamics, stereo separation and soundstage, vocal articulation, even more detail, and deep, orderly bass) but can do so in the sort of rooms that would be dismissed as inhospitable by most speaker manufacturers, and on systems that would never normally be used with loudspeakers at this price point. In other words, it brings the high-end to new places where normally it cannot go.

As a consequence, it's difficult to think of this in terms of direct rivals. For those wanting a boundary design, a free-space loudspeaker system is often untenable (thereby ruling out most high-end speaker designs), while those that share a boundary layout frequently miss so much of what the Wilson speaker does, a comparison would read more like bullying the little guy. Normally when something stands outside the normal patterns of audio, there's a tendency to wonder if it's a product in search of a market, but I don't see this here. Instead, this is possibly one of those product categories that are best considered to be a force for

good for high-end, because it allows space for people to enter the market with most of their existing equipment intact.

My usual listening room is no match for big panels and a pair of Alexandria XLFs would be wonderful, but I'd end up having them in adjacent rooms. But if you have a small room and want that Alexandria XLF sound, the Wilson Audio Duette Series 2 is the only answer. And as such, the Duette Series 2 are not going anywhere, any time soon! ✦

