

Wilson Sabrina floorstanding loudspeakers

by Alan Sircom



To say Wilson Audio Specialties Inc. of Provo, Utah has been on a roll in recent years is something of an understatement. The company's recent output has been success after success after success. Whether it's a wholly new venture (like the Alexia) or a revised version of one of the company's existing models (such as the Duette Series-2), it's as if the company can do no wrong.

All of which left us thoroughly unprepared for the Sabrina!

The Sabrina is the new baby of the Wilson range. It's a surprisingly small, elegant three-way, rear-ported floorstanding loudspeaker. Although it looks like none of the existing Wilson range (if anything, it looks like an inverted and extended version of the company's Alida surround loudspeaker), it also looks like it could only be a Wilson Audio loudspeaker. There is a commonality of form and line, akin to very different architectural designs from the same architect. I happen to think it's also one of the more elegant designs from the firm, like a streamlined Sophia, and is small enough not to dominate a room. Those of us without the joys of a dedicated listening room approve!

In a way, the basic componentry for any high-end loudspeaker is like describing a singer by their shoe size. This is especially relevant in the Sabrina, where a bald description of the technology has almost no bearing on the end result. So, the fact it has the company's own 25mm silk dome tweeter coupled ▶



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▶ with a 146mm pulped paper midrange cone and the 208mm paper woofer cone found in the Alexia is almost unimportant. However, the cabinet is built predominantly from Wilson’s proprietary X-Material and finished in one of three standard and two premium ‘Wilsongloss’ colours. Sabrina is single-wired at the bottom of the rear of the cabinet, with two rear-firing ports – one slightly above the axis of the tweeter and a larger one below the bass driver. The loudspeaker delivers a nominal impedance of four ohms, with a rated 2.53 ohm minimum impedance at 139Hz. This kind of precision sounds like hyperbole, but Wilson can specify the speaker this way because it fine-tunes every crossover by hand to get the speaker to an extremely tight specification tolerance of $\pm 0.2\%$ in the crossover network. It also has a claimed sensitivity of 87dB. In other words, it should be a fairly easy loudspeaker to drive, unless you are using relatively basic chip amps or a small SET amp (neither of which have the horsepower when dealing with lower impedances). Wilson recommends a 50W amp as a bare minimum, and this seems a sensible starting place.

In the first draft of this review, I found I wrote the phrase “the clever part...” at the start of about 35 sentences. Having stripped back the repetition, it’s Sabrina that has the word ‘clever’ running through it like a stick of Blackpool rock. And ‘clever’ even extends to the installation process. The Sabrina joins the Duette Series-2 and the Sophia as Wilson loudspeakers with a ‘fixed’ shape: the Sasha Series-2 and beyond all have an ability to shape midrange and tweeter sections to fit the room and the listener’s position. The complexity of this adjustable installation process is demanding and best performed by a trained professional installer. Instead of aligning the upper-register modules to suit the installation, the Sabrina relies on a rigid placement of drive units, time aligned to suit a broad spectrum of room/seating arrangements. The non-adjustable Sabrina could end up more demanding, because to get something approximating the micrometer-precise treble and midrange would normally require some very careful back-and-forth positioning. Wilson’s WASP installation techniques (commonly called ‘vowelling in’) could be extremely important and time-consuming. Except the Sabrina isn’t like that at all.

In fact, the Sabrina is one of the least fussy high-end loudspeakers when it comes to installation. The mid and top more or less take care of themselves; just move the loudspeaker forward and back to ensure the bass is balanced for the room and your listening position, then a little bit of fine-tuning for toe-in and you are away! Granted, the more you experiment with careful positioning and precision installation, the better the performance, but simply pulled out of the box and placed in broadly the right position returns a 9.5/10 on the ‘nailed it’ scale. Only ▶



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▶ the ‘put them against the wall and you are done’ Duetto beats the Sabrina on installation simplicity stakes. In fact, I’d go so far as to say you might have to deliberately work at it to install the Sabrinas to make them sound bad!

The same applies with amplification, valve-free 50W minimum notwithstanding. I’m not going to labour the point here, but it’s possible to put a Sabrina-based system together where everything else in the chain is an order of magnitude cheaper and have it sound good. It’s also possible to put the Sabrina into a system where everything else is an order of magnitude more expensive and come up with a result that’s nothing short of astounding. This is perhaps why at almost every high-end show in the latter half of 2015, there were more ‘Best in Show’ rooms featuring Sabrinas, and Wilson Sabrinas were top of the shopping list for brands wanting to show off audio electronics. You don’t need a powerhouse to drive the Sabrinas. In fact, you need quality rather than quantity; it sings with a high-grade integrated unit, such as the Audio Research GSi75, but more on that in the next issue!

So, precisely what do the Sabrinas do so well? It’s the sense of seamlessness across the frequency range. Try hard to listen out for crossover points – I mean really try hard, like you are pretending at being an audio analyser – and you’ll struggle to hear points of inflexion, and in the real world of playing music – forget it! This speaker has all the integration of one big drive unit, without any of the hang-ups and frequency extreme issues of ‘full-range’ drivers. The curious thing about this seamless integration across the frequency range is it’s most instantly audible when using music far outside the normal audiophile stock, like ‘Voices’ from Alice in Chains’ *The Devil Put Dinosaurs Here* [Capitol]. On this track, Jerry Cantrell and William DuVall’s haunting vocal and guitar parts only work if played as a gestalt, not a frequency response. And through the Sabrinas, the work becomes so brooding, so chilling, you feel like you need counselling to get over the listening session.

This track also highlights the clever (that word again) handling of bass. This isn’t a loudspeaker with an obvious bloom or boom in the mid-bass to compensate for physical limitations in the low bass, and yet it is not a full-range loudspeaker... So why does that not present any such limitations in the listening? It’s not faking the bass – if you play very low organ pedal work, you’ll notice the absence – but you become aware of how little you care thanks to the Sabrina’s overall presentation.

The Sabrina has the large-scale sound that has made Wilson loudspeakers so successful, so much so in fact that if you close your eyes you’d swear there’s a bigger speaker in the room. But, this, like the excellent imaging and great dynamics for a small loudspeaker by high-end standards, almost goes unnoticed because you are simply enjoying ▶

▶ the feel of the music you are listening to. We expect music to have structure, clarity, and texture when playing through a high-end design; we just don't expect it to sound this good too!

Musical examples abound. Chamber music is especially expressive, and the Sabrina gets right to the musical marrow: the late string quartets of Beethoven played by the Takacs Quartet [Decca] is the finest example I heard, as the Sabrina didn't just extract the musical information well, it got 'behind the notes' and portrayed the lyricism of the playing and the intent of a composer at the height of his powers and the end of his life. It should be a work of passion, but through the Sabrinas that passion boils over. You'll sit enthralled and end the disc emotionally drained, yet uplifted. Good audio should expand your musical experience and tastes, and the Sabrina is the perfect vehicle for such explorations; you'll get the fire and excitement of opera, the technical exactitude of Bach, the perfection of Duke Ellington, and even the wry humour of Belle & Sebastian. Lo-fi recordings will not challenge you, but hi-fi recordings will astound you. Put simply, listening to the Sabrinas is like restarting your audio journey anew!

So, where is the shortcoming, the limitation that stops the Sabrina from being the £100,000 giant killer speaker of doom? Well, aside from it not being a full-range loudspeaker, there isn't one. And, truth to tell, I would far rather have the Sabrina with all its poise, integration, and downright enjoyable presentation, than a loudspeaker that sacrifices just one of those elements in order to reach the last few bass notes. So, no... the Sabrina isn't a giant killer in the bandwidth sense, but when it comes to the important fundamentals of musical replay, I'd take the Sabrina over a less well 'sorted' loudspeaker with that bandwidth in an eyeblink. And if you listen to music instead of the sound it makes, you would too. Between the Sabrina and the Duette I use, the Duette wins out, but primarily because my room and boundary loudspeakers work seriously well together. For most people, the Sabrina is the sweet-spot. And it might even be the sweet-spot in the whole Wilson range. In fairness, if you like what the Sabrina does, you probably have to skip over a lot of other speakers until you find something that is sonically superior – you might need to think Alexias as your next step. And, the true joy of the Sabrina is that might never happen – I can see the Sabrina as many people's first Wilson and their last loudspeaker.

Like the Duette before it, the Sabrina is the Wilson loudspeaker for those who want the Wilson sound, but lack the wherewithal to achieve that goal. That doesn't just mean the listener's bank balance, but an honest appraisal of room sizes in the wider world. There will always be those who want to shoe-horn vast loudspeakers into tiny rooms, but for the rest of us, there is a need for a loudspeaker that delivers what Wilsons do best, in a package sized and designed for typical modern living spaces. Where the Sophia is for those able to house the Sasha, but can't quite afford a pair at the moment, the Sabrina is designed and voiced for those who are a house move away from being able to house Sashas. That is an important distinction, and a fundamentally correct reading of the wider audiophile and audiophile-in-waiting world.

In part, the new generation of Wilson loudspeakers is happening because there is a new generation of Wilson at the controls. Designs like the Sabrina are

indicative of Dave Wilson passing the baton to his son Daryl. Daryl has big shoes to fill, but if designs like the Sabrina are expressions of his audio skills, there's nothing to fear in passing the baton from father to son.

There are lots of good loudspeakers. Some are very good. But the Wilson Audio Sabrina is something special. Even in the context of the track record of Wilson Audio, this is above the norm. This is quite simply one of the most enjoyable loudspeakers at any price I've heard in a long time and comes extremely highly recommended for anyone who takes their music seriously. Wow! +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

- Type:** Three-way, rear ported floorstanding loudspeaker
- Drivers:** 1× 25.4mm doped silk fabric dome tweeter, 1× 146.1mm paper pulp midrange unit, 1× 203.2mm paper cone woofer
- Frequency Response:** 31Hz–21kHz ±3 dB, Room Average Response
- Nominal Impedance:** 4 ohms
- Sensitivity:** 87 dB @ 1W @ 1m @ 1 kHz
- Minimum impedance:** 2.53 ohms @ 139 Hz
- Finish:** Desert Silver, Galaxy Gray, and Obsidian Black as standard. Biarritz White and Titan Red optional
- Dimensions (W×D×H):** 30.5×38.6×100cm (incl. spikes)
- Weight:** 42.6kg per channel
- Price:** £14,999 per pair
- Manufactured by:** Wilson Audio Specialties
- URL:** www.wilsonaudio.com
- Distributed in the UK by:** Absolute Sounds
- URL:** www.absolutesounds.com
- Tel:** +44 (0)20 8971 3909