

Wilson Audio SabrinaX floorstanding loudspeaker

by Alan Sircom

Every time I write the word 'SabrinaX' it looks funny. I want to pronounce it 'sab-rine-inks' even though it is actually 'Sabrina-X'. I'm getting this out of the way first because it's the only bit of criticism I can level at the Wilson Audio SabrinaX. Really... that's it. I'm down to discussing the spelling of the product name in critical terms. I may as well be grumbling about the font in the brochure for all the relevance it has to the product. It should mean I have failed you, dear reader... I have failed in my responsibility to act as audio critic by not finding anything constructive to criticise.

The problem is to find something critical about the sonic performance of the SabrinaX would be, basically, making stuff up. And that doesn't seem to be a better option.

SabrinaX is the present entry-point to Wilson Audio's floorstanding loudspeaker range, with just the TuneTot beneath it (sadly, the Duette Series 2 – which I still use daily – is no more). It replaces the popular Sabrina as a part of Wilson Audio's rolling development of its product lines. In truth, improving on the Sabrina was going to be a tough call. It was hugely popular for a reason. Several reasons, in fact; it played nice with more down-to-earth electronics, it wasn't particularly room fussy (although the more time you spent setting it up, the better it got), it went nice and loud when called upon, but wasn't just some shouty brute-force design, it looked good... and you almost had to try hard to make it sound bad.

Big shoes, SabrinaX. Big shoes to fill.

As the name might suggest, one of the big changes between Sabrina and SabrinaX was the cabinet material. The Sabrina used Wilson's own X-Material (a proprietary high pressure composite of mineral, polymer, carbon and paper) only in its baffle and lower spike plate. Now, SabrinaX's outer enclosure is constructed entirely from X-Material. A quick knuckle-rapping test shows just how dead that makes the cabinet, and that lack of resonance or, well, anything from the cabinet pushes the SabrinaX cabinet toward the notional non-intrusive/silent box ideal every speaker brand wants and that Wilson has systematically pursued for decades.

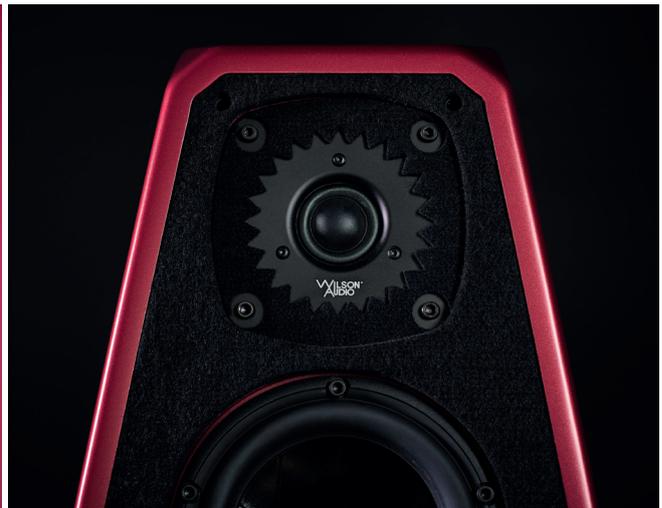
SabrinaX also features the brand's Mk5 tweeter (the one that comes from the cost-no-object Chronosonic XVX), an ultra-low distortion 25.4mm soft dome built and selected to uncompromising standards even by the standard of audio's obsessive compulsives. Couple this to new woofers made specifically for the SabrinaX (and designed to take advantage of that new inert SabrinaX cabinet) and the 'if it ain't broke, don't fix it' previous iteration's midrange unit and you have a compact package that might look superficially like its predecessor, but has moved ahead in almost every manner.

In fact, in so many respects, it's more apt to consider the SabrinaX less like an updated Sabrina, and more 'Honey, I Shrunk The Chronosonic XVX' because there are so many parts of that mighty loudspeaker that have directly trickled down to the SabrinaX; right down to the latest hardware (more important than people think; not only does this make the SabrinaX one of the first Wilson designs to accept the 4mm banana plug, the quality and direct access to the knurled rings around the speaker spikes makes for an easier and ultimately more precise installation).

The biggest beneficiary, however, remains hidden to the naked eye. It's the AudioCapX capacitor technology that is – at present – unique to this model and Chronosonic XVX. Of course, the Chronosonic XVX was the first beneficiary of this technology, the first design to benefit from Wilson's recent integration of capacitor design and manufacturer into the factory in Provo, Utah. To design this, Wilson's in-house lab developed a proprietary multi-wound capacitor specifically for the XVX, which the engineers dubbed Wilson AudioCapX-WA. The team took a similar approach with the SabrinaX's crossover, which benefits from a version of the Wilson AudioCapX specific to its needs. It is said the new capacitor technology, "significantly lowers the noise floor to even greater extremes, allowing the listener to hear more detail and resolution." I normally don't like to quote manufacturers opinions on their own products, but I'll give Wilson that as there is a lot of detail and resolution with the SabrinaX, and it's a very, very noise-free design too. ▶



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▶ ‘Honey, I Shrank The Chronosonic XVX’ only ends with the size and modularity of the Big Boy, and the fact it’s limited to three basic and three upgrade finishes, instead of the plethora of Wilson Gloss options open to Chronosonic XVX owners. Oh, and the fact you can buy almost 15 pairs of SabrinaX for the price of a Chronosonic XVX. Of course the comparison is silly at this point; the Big Boy will deliver the sort of dynamic range, frequency extension and headroom that only a tiny handful of loudspeakers could ever hope to replicate, it needs a giant room and a system commensurate with that grand level of loudspeakery. But, in many very real ways, the SabrinaX approach brings you more than just a glimpse of the Chronosonic XVX performance and brings it into real-world systems and listening rooms.

Set-up is crucial to the SabrinaX, although it sharing its predecessor’s ability to always sound pretty good is a double-edged sword; ‘pretty good’ is about a tenth of the way there. There is so much potential in the SabrinaX that it should prompt you to take the set-up to the limits. While many will rely on the WASP (Wilson Audio Set-up Procedure) to ‘vowel-in’ the SabrinaX in room, I think it might be time to consider that a part of the installation journey, and not the journey entire. Careful attention to front tilt and remarkably tiny adjustments within the WASP placement region in room can yield excellent results.

The same part-cautionary advice applies to partnering equipment. Sure, you can use it with a comparatively inexpensive amplifier or receiver and you will get a good sound out of the system, but to get the most out of the SabrinaX, be a little more bold in your amp choices. You could conceivably build a system where every other component (even down to the equipment platforms) was considerably more ‘high-end’ (in price at least) to the SabrinaX and still have not hit its resolution and detail end stops. But yes, like the TuneTot, it can sing a siren’s song even with considerably less auspiciously-rated audio components. My speakers had some dealer miles on the clock, so I can’t speak to the importance of running in, however. It’s great having others to do your work for you!

There was no work here. Listening to these loudspeakers is about as far from ‘work’ as it gets. It’s a solid gold brick of pleasure to listen to the SabrinaX in fact. They get under your skin and the skin of the music at the same time, and as a result you get a seemingly direct connection with the music that is all too often lost in a sea of detail and precision. Of course, the SabrinaX has that detail and precision in droves, too. But this is a loudspeaker that does the visceral, the emotional and the cerebral in equal measure, and you find yourself smiling as a result. You could point to almost any type of music and it cuts to the quick of it; ‘Spitfire’ by Public Service Broadcasting [Inform - Educate - Entertain, Test Card] ▶

► is basically a three-piece band riffing over samples taken from the WWII movie *The First Of The Few* (US title: *Spitfire*), with the sound of a Merlin engine front and centre and a more muted speeches from Leslie Howard and David Niven. Often, you get a choice of something incredibly detailed that allows you to hear into the mix and pick out more of what Howard is saying, or more upbeat designs that make you want to tap your feet to the guitar parts. The SabrinaX is one of those rare loudspeakers that brings both together; you get the growl of the Merlin engine, the clipped accent of Howard giving his most famous speech in the movie and the rhythmic intensity of musicians playing over these samples. It goes from being an interesting exercise in neo-kosmische electronica and post-prog sampling to a moving, yet rocking tribute to both the movie and the men it portrays. OK, so I'm a British man of a certain age and even a poorly recorded sample of a Spitfire banking makes me want to salute something, but this really moves into higher gear on the SabrinaX.

As hinted at earlier, the music emerges through SabrinaX from a blacker background. That might sound pompous... right up until you hear it for yourself. Play 'Bahia' from Anouar Brahem's *Blue Maqams* [ECM] and the opening oud solo and subsequent slow build come out of an incredibly black studio background, making them more vivid and 'there' in front of you, sitting in a three-dimensional space around the loudspeakers. As the music hypnotically weaves its way through everything from gypsy jazz through almost Indian ragas to Sufi ghazals underpinned by some very tight modern jazz drumming until finally does that thing unheard of in jazz... it speeds up. With the silent backgrounds of the SabrinaX, there's no impediment between you and the music and your pulse quickens with the music. It's exciting and impassioned.

Maybe the most noticeable aspect of the SabrinaX's performance – and certainly the part you are most immediately drawn to – is the speed and energy of bass transients. My long-standing go-to torture test for ported loudspeakers is 'Chameleon' by Trentemøller [*The Last Resort*, Poker Flat]. At one point, the port will 'choke up' on these fast-delivered bass square-waves... it's just a question of volume. The SabrinaX, however, pushed that question away by keeping the bass unbelievably fast and powerful. Eventually the room gave in before the loudspeaker. This makes it a loudspeaker that even the Pace, Rhythm and Timing crew would approve of!

Of course, the SabrinaX has its limitations, but they are not a concern in reality. Hear me out... no, the SabrinaX doesn't have the bass depth or gut-wrenching dynamic range of far larger loudspeakers. Wilson Audio is not trying to break the laws of physics as they apply to acoustics and

loudspeaker design. But, where the SabrinaX has its lower bass limits and its dynamic headroom ceiling are neatly just within the limits of the dynamic constraints of smaller rooms. If you try to put a loudspeaker that delivers a sub-30Hz bass at full level in a smaller room, you'll spend much of your time trying to control that bass. By way of contrast, the Wilson SabrinaX puts just enough energy into such rooms as to make the sound appear deep and powerful and more dynamic than you would want to stand... without the bass booming away from the corners. No, Wilson isn't the first company to do this, and the SabrinaX isn't even the first Wilson speaker to do this kind of presentation, but it just does it so well, it's as if the speaker had been designed specifically for your room.

The conclusion you are looking for (and probably expected from the opening lines of this review) is "I like the SabrinaX" I like them a lot. What they do right is a perfect fit for the rooms and systems that a pair of SabrinaX would likely partner. What they don't do is not strictly relevant given the constraints imposed by those said rooms and systems. What they do wrong is nothing in my book. The original Sabrina had more than success, it developed a following like the original WATT/Puppy did all those years ago. The Wilson Audio SabrinaX will create even more of a following. Mark my words! +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Enclosure Type: Rear Ported(bass), Rear Vented (midrange)

Woofer: 8 inches (20.32 cm) Paper Pulp

Tweeter: 1 inch Dome (2.54 cm) Doped Silk Fabric

Midrange: 5 3/4 inches (14.61 cm) Doped Paper Pulp

Sensitivity: 87 dB @ 1W @ 1m @ 1kHz

Impedance: 4 ohms/2.60 ohms minimum @ 135Hz

Minimum Amplifier Power: 50 Watts per channel

Frequency Response: 31 Hz–23kHz: +/- 3 dB: Room Average Response [RAR]

Dimensions (WxDxH): 30.48 x 38.96 x 102.34cm (incl spikes)

Weight: 50.80 kg

Price: £21,498 (Upgrade Colours: £22,998)

Manufacturer: Wilson Audio Specialties

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UK Distributor: Absolute Sounds

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