

Wilson Audio Chronosonic XVX floorstanding loudspeaker

by Alan Sircom

Sometimes, when discussing top-end products from big names in high-end audio, we describe them as if they were royalty. Maybe it's the rarity or that they rub shoulders with the audio world's great and good, but often we treat them with the kind of respect one might offer to those born to the purple. However, even royalty has a pecking order and the Wilson Audio Chronosonic XVX stands like a monarch in among minor royals. Well, it is a jubilee year here in the UK.

Visually, the loudspeaker looks a little like the product of the marriage of the WAMM Master Chronosonic and the recently-discontinued Alexandria XLF, although I'd argue that WAMM Master Chronosonic had the dominant genes. The physical dimensions of the Chronosonic XVX are definitely more Alexandria XLF, but the bass cabinet, mid-treble driver array, adjustment system and the cutaway upper side wings are all very WAMM Master Chronosonic. XVX may occupy the space once held by the Alexandria, and fit into large rooms with the same ease as the Alexandria, but its sound is all WAMM Master Chronosonic.

As the spec sheet says, this is a modular four-way, seven loudspeaker design, with a vented bass cabinet and sealed boxes for the midrange and treble units. There is also a rear-firing tweeter for additional ambience. The upper array of two lower-mids (that now sport Alnico magnets), one upper mid, and tweeter are all mounted within an extremely adjustable frame system that allows an unparalleled degree of time alignment and room acoustic control.



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- The installation process has taken several steps forward in the Chronosonic XVX, and is comprehensively described in the manual. It even includes a clever lighting system that helps create the optimum position of drivers in the gantry. There is a lot more to the installation process and the days of piano movers 'plonking' down a loudspeaker before the engineer visits are over; this is a lengthy, intensive process.

Like all Wilson loudspeakers, the choice of enclosure material is precisely tailored to the specific job that enclosure faces, instead of a one-size-fits-all approach. In addition to the physical placement of drivers within the frame, the Chronosonic XVX allows a high degree of control over the crossover network, with a series of resistors that can be used (they sit in an inset covered by a glass panel on the rear of the loudspeaker). These are not commonly supplied, but provide a ±1dB adjustment to the tweeter in extreme cases.

It's difficult to write about loudspeakers with the performance of the Chronosonic XVX. If you write how you feel about it, you come over as some kind of swivel-eyed loon, but unless you use a never-ending series of superlatives, you feel like you are understating things to a fairly massive degree. Writing to a level of semi-foaming at the mouth is hard to achieve and even harder to sustain over thousands of words, but I'll give it a shot...

The Chronosonic XVX is a truly awesome loudspeaker, the kind that stirs emotions in practically anyone who has ever listened to music and liked it. It doesn't really matter what your musical triggers are (in terms of elements of musical performance, the sonic performance of the system or your preferred musical genres), it presses and holds that trigger.

There are two things we all do with this loudspeaker at first glance. The first is to play pieces of music that play to your musical and audio demands; if you are into soundstaging, for example, out come the 'recorded in the church of...' albums that audiophiles prize for their imaging properties. And yes, that might mean *Cantate Domino* [Propirus] and no, I didn't play it. Or, maybe if you are into vocal articulation, out comes Louis Armstrong singing 'St James Infirmary Blues' on *Sachmo Plays King Oliver* [Analogue Productions] or one of a dozen or more classic audiophile recordings that show up and show off what a system can do. And you come away from that humbled.

Then you play it at party levels, maybe playing some classic rock, possibly some ZZ Top at a fair lick, just to see what it can do when 'given some beans'. And you come away from that humbled, too.

In fact, I'd struggle to come up with a scenario where you don't come away from listening to the Chronosonic XVX humbled by the performance. They do everything, and do it well. Heavy opera... no problems. Lo-fi Americana... no showing up how poor the recording is, just get past that and on with the music. Dub reggae... this is like the best sound system you ever heard back in the day. OK, this last, I went to some On-U Sound system gigs

where the sound pressure was so intense, it was weaponising the air in the room; the Chronosonic XVX won't do that and your ears and your neighbours will thank you for that. But if you have the watts and want it loud, they'll play it clean and loud.

It's amazing how a loudspeaker this physically big can disappear so dramatically, but in sonic terms, the Chronosonic XVX is nigh on invisible. It simply lets you play your preferred musical choices, and play them brilliantly. More importantly, perhaps, the Chronosonic XVX can reawaken dormant musical interests and spark wholly new ones. That spirit of musical enquiry that sometimes fades a little as one gets jaded by life can respawn and restart here. This is the kind of loudspeaker that I wish I had at school when our fun music teacher was replaced by the really dreary one who really liked William Walton's 'Crown Imperial' and not much else. He all but bored the music out of me, and I'd play him everything from Bach to Basie to Bowie and on to even someone like Nils Frahm to show him just how alive and vivid music should be. Had we had these loudspeakers – and a more dynamic teacher – I might not have given up the piano and clarinet so soon.

Why this personal aside? Because that's what the Chronosonic XVX does for you, it lays you open to musical investigation both internal and external. I'm convinced that armed with these loudspeakers and a good collection of music, someone who only likes ceremonial marches with pomp and bombast would see the joy in jazz. It could make heavy rock fans like opera and turn a lot of people on to Bhangra. Give me an hour with these loudspeakers and I'll get the most curmudgeonly and entrenched listeners doing the 'twist the lightbulb, pat the dog' dance. ▶

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► This highlights another key aspect about the Chronosonic XVX; they are fun. High-end audio has a habit of taking itself far too seriously at times, and while there's nothing intrinsically wrong with that, music isn't always as serious a business as high-end audio makes out. OK, that doesn't mean you spend hundreds of thousands of pounds to pump out 'Chippy Tea' by The Lancashire Hotpots (and no, I didn't make that up), but it means you play music that you like, rather than you think you should like, while evaluating the loudspeakers. Sure, I have my usual test tracks – of which 'Chameleon' by Trentemøller [*The Last Resort*, Poker Flat] and the title track of *Electrified* by Boris Blank [Blank Media] were especially telling because of the prodigious amount of bass on offer and the speed and texture of that bass. But this is the kind of loudspeaker that makes you reach for the Etta James records because they are fun to hear, as well as the Ella Fitzgerald records because they are the right recordings for the job.

As someone who writes about audio, you have to force yourself back into reviewer mode when describing the Chronosonic XVX, just as you have to do with the WAMM Master Chronosonic. Because both of them remove your vocabulary. The regular comments about aspects of performance fall very flat here because the loudspeaker not only aces them all, but does so at a standard beyond your powers of description. When we discuss an element of performance, we benchmark it against something like the Platonic ideal form of that sound; often the live instrument in a natural acoustic space. When we

describe something, even when we describe it as 'good', the implication is '...but not as good as the real thing.' Why the WAMM Master Chronosonic made me forget how to do words properly was because it pushed us a step closer to removing that implied phrase. It got us very close to the real thing. And the Chronosonic XVX gets almost as close. That's wordsmithery on another level, and one that we don't have the language for yet.

You end up discussing the Wilson in a form of meta-language. You can answer any question about the loudspeaker with the same answer, "I don't know what you have or what you like but the Chronosonic XVX does it, and does it better than what you have right now." It's a cover-all that sums up the Chronosonic XVX's performance in every facet. If you want to make it sound less brutal, you simply fill in the blanks. It doesn't really matter how those 'don't know' parts get filled in; the result is the same. You like ►



"It does a great job of bringing out the best in good equipment."

► good imaging, well guess what? You like detail, dynamics, articulation, coherence, deep bass, soaring treble, lithe and vanishing midrange, tonal accuracy, timbral precision, rhythmic integrity... the Chronosonic XVX has got you covered. And then some.

Wilson Audio made a loudspeaker that reminds you of the first time you heard a really good audio system and had 'that moment'; the slack-jawed moment when you discovered just what a good audio system can do and how you need to get in on that action. A significant percentage of a lifetime later, neuropsychology says that 'first time' effect is impossible to replicate, because that first experience came with a dopamine release in your brain's reward regions, and subsequent exposures will always reduce that dopamine release. But the Chronosonic XVX side-steps that; it restores that first-time feeling, and that is sustaining for longer than you might expect.

There's not a lot of strikes against the Chronosonic XVX. It needs good care and feeding, naturally; installation is as vital as ever, the physicality of the design places it into large rooms and it demands the best audio equipment you can get upstream. This last is a sign of how Wilson Audio has changed over time, however; it's not that the Chronosonic XVX will sound musically unconscionable with 'lesser' equipment (in fact, it does a great job of bringing out the best in good equipment, regardless of where that equipment is in audio's hierarchy), but more that because the loudspeaker does such a remarkable job at reproducing the musical signal, you will automatically want that signal to be served up as best as possible. In fact, rather than being a strike against the Chronosonic XVX, chalk this one up in its favour because it opens up new ►

“They have the ability to shut up and humble the loudest of us.”

► channels of opportunity that might be denied elsewhere. So, while the usual modus operandi of working with loudspeakers like this one is partnering it with incredibly powerful solid-state amplifiers, the Chronosonic XVX sits just as snugly alongside valve-based power. No, it will never be the loudspeaker of choice for the three-watt triode brigade, but the Chronosonic XVX gives more flexibility of options than many of its peers lack.

OK, so I'd wager that the majority of Chronosonic XVX systems will be used with amplifiers of similar stature, and that means a lot of power. They soak up and love power, but the joy of this loudspeaker is if your electronics love lies elsewhere, the Wilson loudspeakers are still a viable option. That's a big change.

While it's impossible to compare directly, it's worth spinning up my feelings about the big WAMM Master Chronosonic in relation to the Chronosonic XVX. Despite the top billing the Chronosonic XVX would get in most companies, the big WAMM sits above the XVX, and the combination of WAMM Master Subsonic and WAMM Master Chronosonic (which I've not had a chance to audition, but having tried to speak to those who have is an experience that transcends even that of the WAMMs alone) that pinnacle product is in another league. However, the WAMM Master Chronosonic is in another league in terms of demands too. The Chronosonic XVX is a big and imposing loudspeaker, which needs a large room to breathe and a fine system to bring to the fore, but these demands are dwarfed by the requirements of the WAMM. Let's put it this way, the main room in Ronnie Scott's jazz club in the heart of London and Studio Three in Abbey Road are only just slightly on the large size to house a pair of WAMMs. The Chronosonic XVX is a considerably more manageable proposition in terms of that kind of care and feeding. They will fit into large domestic spaces even in Europe, and will do so without swamping the listener. In outright terms, the XVX gets within 'a gnat's crotchet' (to quote the late, great Humph from 'I'm Sorry I Haven't A Clue') of the WAMM. They have the ability to shut up and humble the loudest of us, it's the extent and the reach of that silence that marks the difference between the XVX and the WAMM; with the XVX, the humbling process extends for a few days after your first listen, while the WAMM is more like a personal reboot, and you'll be still not talking about it years later.

I'd be laughed out of the industry if I said that the XVX is 'the WAMM for the rest of us' because 'the rest of us' probably don't have £330,000 to spend on a loudspeaker, but the fact the Chronosonic XVX exists and that it is so good is one of those levelling-up moments in audio. Rival companies will have to make products that compete with the XVX's performance, that makes less 'heroically' priced loudspeakers have to raise their game to stay competitive. And that ripples right through the audio world, even beyond the trickle-down effect this will have on other Wilson loudspeakers. And while the same could be said of the WAMM, its exclusivity kept that process at one remove. The XVX on the other hand, is going to result in better loudspeakers all round. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Modular four way ported floorstanding loudspeaker

Front firing drivers:

1x 25.4mm Convergent Synergy (Mk5) doped silk fabric dome tweeter
1x 101mm paper pulp composite cone upper midrange
2x 178mm doped paper pulp cone lower midrange, Alnico magnets
1x 267mm hard paper pulp cone woofer
1x 318mm hard paper pulp cone woofer

Rear firing drivers:

1x 25.4mm Convergent Synergy (Mk5) doped silk fabric dome tweeter

Enclosure Type:

Tweeters: Sealed Enclosure

Midranges: Rear Vented

Woofer Module: XLF Ported, Adjustable

Enclosures for midranges and treble sections are set within an adjustable gantry that sits atop the bass enclosure

Nominal Impedance: 4Ω

Minimum Impedance: 1.6Ω @ 326Hz

Sensitivity: 92dB @ 1W @ 1m @ 1kHz

Frequency Response: 20Hz–30kHz ±2dB

Minimum Amplification Power

Recommended: 100 watts/channel

Dimensions (HxWxD, w/o spikes):

187 × 42 × 84cm

Weight: 310.71kg each!

Price: £330,000 per pair

Manufactured by: Wilson Audio

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Distributed in the UK by:

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