

HIFICRITIC



AUDIO REVIEW JOURNAL

Vol2/No2 MARCH/APRIL 2008 £8

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Duette Monitoring

TONY FAULKNER TAKES THE DUETTES OUT MONITORING



As a professional classical recording engineer I am very dependent on the quality of my monitoring equipment. When I am working, the information supplied by my monitor speakers and/or headphones determines whether the producer and I think we have our microphones and settings in the right place. The monitoring also presents our work to artists and clients, who can decide whether they like what they hear or not.

Most recording engineers end up using a loudspeaker that tells them what they need to know, and is consistent for them in its presentation and tonal balance however dubious the quality of the listening room. We primarily need to know where we are in the time available for setting up, and thereafter to get on with our microphone technique and musical duties alongside the producer and artists. In such a context, people like me are nervous of using typical consumer floorstanding loudspeakers originally optimised for controlled home listening in a living room. With a few exceptions (such as B&W and ATC in the UK), consumer moving-coil speakers are not usually ideal for monitoring, nor would it be reasonable to expect them to be so. Home speakers can be excessively awkward and heavy, time-consuming to set up, and often do not sound nice in makeshift control-rooms where the bass end can run wild with booms and honks.

It's no secret that I am an enthusiastic user of Quad's electrostatic loudspeakers for monitoring, as they give me so much of what I need to hear, though I acknowledge they are not to everyone's taste. Their stereo imaging is excellent, the midrange is transparent and consistent, and they provide masses of fine detail without having to turn the volume too high – a serious issue because listening too loud makes one tired and impairs judgment, as well as making a bad control-room sound even worse. Hence my trepidation at being asked to try a pair of Wilson *Duettes* as monitors for a Busoni recording project for Hyperion, with pianist Hamish Milne in London's Henry Wood Hall. My doubts about the Wilsons proved ill-founded, and I found that the *Duettes* were overall the finest two-driver moving-coil speakers I had heard to date. My only complaint is that having heard them I'm now confronted with trying to find the wherewithal to buy a pair.

First major feature of importance to an electrostatic enthusiast is that there is no obvious 'moving-coil' weakness in the crossover zone between the two drivers, and the clarity, integration and transparency are unusually uncompromised. Listening to a recent recital recording of Christine Brewer (soprano) and Roger Vignoles (piano) for the Wigmore Hall Live label, it was immediately

apparently that the *Duettes* reproduced the components of the singing voice as though they came from one entity. Many other moving-coil models somehow separate the human voice into unnatural unintegrated components, with high and low frequencies living different lives – the tweeter squeaking with consonants and the woofer sounding chesty and a bit boomy. Here the bass is very well controlled and sensibly voiced for the size of cabinet and drive unit, and can be simply and convincingly fine-tuned by moving the speaker closer to or further from the wall behind it. The treble is extended and does not shriek nor squeak, unless the recording is shrieky or squeaky, and the balance is ideal for detailed listening. The *Duettes* deliver oodles of headroom for high power work, with no glare, boom or rattle.

The *Duettes* will never replace my Quads, but for circumstances where I need significantly higher output, especially in bass power handling, and/or want the alternative qualities of a finely tuned moving-coil loudspeaker to suit the music and/or circumstances. These Wilsons are so very convincing and are fundamentally both accurate and very pleasurable to listen to. They come with all sorts of fine setting-up procedures for audiophiles, but in my professional work I seldom have time to do hours of tweaking beyond moving the loudspeakers a foot or so until they sound more or less right. When I come to use them on a more regular basis, I suspect I shall determine a nominal median arrangement and not mess around with them too much. Their conventional 2-wire connection worked well for me, and was a change from wrestling with the bi-wire plugs needed with some other designs. The highish 90dB sensitivity was very helpful, and the load was fine for my EAR valve monoblock power amps, using the 40hm output terminals. The *Duette* crossovers are fitted within the speaker stands (two sizes, normal and high, the latter useful for Pro users on the road). This feature makes the system more easily transportable, as it's divided into four reasonable size and weight boxes, rather than two unwieldy backbreaking ones.

The designer of this unique speaker deserves congratulations, for creating a model that reproduces music faithfully and confidently without imposing its presence in any ostentatious way, visually or audibly. It simply delivers without sounding noticeably 'audiophile' at all. I winced when I heard the price, but 'no compromise' describes both design and manufacture, and such quality does not come without some penalty.