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Wilson Sophia 3

Sexy floorstander that delivers top performance at a more affordable price

Giving loudspeakers a woman's name is a bit risky. When your wife suddenly learns you've got a date with a mysterious, exotic creature called Sophia, things could get a bit sticky.

This Sophia we dated is a loudspeaker from the famed American company Wilson – makers of the fabulous Alexandria and Maxx. It's a compact three-way ported floorstander that retails for just south of £17,000. While definitely not a bargain basement, this is almost budget-price compared to other Wilson speakers.

However, don't be fooled into thinking 'downmarket compromised version' of Wilson's larger more expensive offerings. The company's website points out that many well-heeled listeners – easily able to afford Wilson's bigger costlier offerings – choose the petite Sophia because they love the sound of her voice...

The original Sophia launched in 2001 and was seen as Wilson's entry-level speaker. Compared with the company's bigger models, Sophia was deliberately designed to be less critical of amplifier quality and room placement, while still delivering the clarity, focus and precision Wilson speakers are noted for.

The new Sophia 3 boasts a number of improvements over previous versions, among them better midrange and high-frequency drivers, as used in Wilson's more expensive Sasha and Maxx models. The woofer has a more powerful motor, while the cabinet is more rigid, resonance-free and phase-aligned.

SOUND QUALITY

Sophia's voice is smooth, open, well-balanced, natural and very truthful. The music sounds crisp and focussed, with extended highs and lows. Imaging is very precise, with left/right positional information handled superbly well. Transients display impressive attack and immediacy, with no smearing or overhang.

Although there's plenty of detail, the sound avoids being over-analytical – you never worry that the music is going to be pulled apart. Overall, the result struck us as impressively homogenous and integrated – almost as though the cabinet housed just a single drive unit, rather than three.

Clarity is excellent. On music with dominant vocals, you could always follow quieter backing voices and instruments – things don't 'come and go', depending on how loud the main voice is. Even on demanding complex music, the whole sound picture stays clear and solidly focussed.

We used a darTZeel pre/power combination and Metronome CD player; without question, an amazing ensemble. But, all credit to Sophia 3 for revealing the special qualities of these expensive components, and highlighting the amazing focus and precision they're capable of.

Bass is full-bodied and surprisingly extended. The low frequencies sound clean and free from boom, with good pitch definition and dynamics. The midband is smooth and open, delivering a neutral, truthful tonality. The highs are clean and razor-sharp, with crisp transient attack.

Although we've drawn attention to the detail and precision of the sound, we actually feel Sophia 3 itself has little or no

sonic signature. The presentation is very neutral and unexaggerated. Any faults or colorations heard are more likely to be down to the recordings played, or the partnering equipment, than the loudspeakers.

Imaging is tight and precise. Listening to a solo piano recording, we briefly wondered if the image was perhaps a little too 'wide'. Instead of a centrally-placed instrument between the speakers, we experienced a slightly-spread piano image. But, this was not a loudspeaker fault – Sophia was merely showing how the recording had been made.

Playing a wide variety of recordings, we kept noticing how the sound changed to reflect the qualities of the source. On multi-miked recordings, for example, it was very clear how certain voices and instruments had been spotlighted to enhance clarity. Given such precision, these speakers would make excellent studio monitors.

While Sophia 3 is not exactly unkind to faults, such innate precision makes it very revealing. It's a loudspeaker that

“Music sounds crisp and focused with extended highs and lows”

thrives on detail, allowing subtle differences to be perceived. For this reason, it pays to partner this speaker with the finest ancillary equipment you can run to – but then, don't all ladies have a taste for the best?

Sure, Sophia 3 is discerning and revealing, but it's not excessively demanding or high maintenance. During complex busy passages, we found it easy to chat over the music without having to shout to make ourselves heard. The music sounded crisp and imposing, but was never unpleasant or forceful. We put this down to low distortion and a lack of cabinet resonance – things that allow you to hear deep into the music/recording. Given a good source and a high-class amplifier, you'll find Sophia 3 very transparent – almost as though the music were materialising in the space between, behind and above the enclosures.

Sophia 3 is a speaker that delivers on two levels. She can be enjoyed uncritically because she speaks in a beautifully natural and coherent voice. At the same time, a wealth of fine detail invites critical listening, and demands you pay attention. It's a lovely mix; ear-candy and real substance. The perfect woman? Could well be. Just don't tell my wife.

Jimmy Hughes

