

# THE ULTIMATE HI-FI GUIDE

# HI-FI CHOICE

SPECIAL EDITION

SUMMER 2006 | £3.95 | WWW.HIFICHOICE.CO.UK

## *The Collection*

IN-DEPTH REVIEWS OF THE WORLD'S FINEST HI-FI





# Wilson Sophia 2

Wilson's 'entry-level' floorstander combines tremendous sonic scale with a more user-friendly approach

PRICE £11,998 per pair CONTACT Absolute Sounds, 58 Durham Road, London SW20 0TW ☎ 020 8971 3909 🌐 www.wilsonaudio.com

For most companies, a £12,000 loudspeaker would be the pinnacle of development and the top of the range. But for Wilson Audio, it's entry level. The Sophia 2 is the company's cheapest floorstander.

Wilson usually likes to separate the bass box from the tweeter and midrange cabinet in its floorstanders. This means less interaction between bass and midrange/treble, but also more complexity, more cabinetry and more cost. The Sophia 2, with its single-box design, is far more cost effective and arguably more elegant in the process – it looks like a Wilson WATT/Puppy, given a smooth and streamlined Pininfarina touch.

The original Sophia, launched in 2001, was a three-way design, with twin rear ports and single-wire terminations. Five years on, not a lot's changed. From the outside, the difference between Version One and Version Two of the speaker is minimal to say the least – the new, pinned grilles are the only observable difference. In fact, all manner of changes have been made, many of which trickled down from the developments made to the higher priced models... and some innovations have 'trickled up' from the new Duette 'bookshelf' speaker. Fortunately, those with original Sophia speakers can upgrade.

The driver configuration remains: the single 250mm aluminium cone ScanSpeak-derived bass driver, the single paper cone 175mm midrange (also from ScanSpeak breeding stock) and Focal 25mm inverted titanium dome tweeter are effectively the same models used in 2001, designed specifically for the Sophia. The integrated cabinet with backswept, time-aligned tweeter and midrange section appears unchanged, too. And it's still available in almost any colour you can think of, given Wilson's custom painting studio. So, the move from Sophia 1 to Sophia 2 is principally in the crossover network, but this should not be thought of as a trivial upgrade.

The technologies used in the change affect the bass alignment, a crossover redesign to make the speaker deeper, faster and more articulate in the bottom end. There is also what Wilson calls 'Anti-Diffraction Technology', which appears to be an adjustment to the tweeter and its port to eliminate back wave interference, and 'Anti-Jitter Technology', that minimises the interaction of drivers on one another and thereby lowers the noise floor of the speaker. Yes, the term 'jitter' is usually used in relation to digital audio, not loudspeakers, but give the company some creative credit. We

hi-fi types know what jitter is (it's bad!) and that's more meaningful than 'driver interactivity reduction programme'.

The Sophia 2 stands almost 105cm tall, is nearly 33cm across (at its widest point) and is practically 46cm deep. Each speaker weighs a healthy 72kg and in typical Wilson fashion, the speaker's sensitivity is claimed to be an undemanding 89dB. Nominal impedance is around three ohms and there's a seven-watt minimum amplifier specification. Frequency response is rated at 29Hz-22.5kHz (within -3dB limits). As ever with a Wilson design, that 89dB sensitivity is not permission to use budget amplification; while the Sophia is reasonably amp-friendly, it remains a demanding speaker, in terms of load and sonics.

## SOUND QUALITY

Any £1,000 integrated amplifier worth the price tag will deliver the physical drive capabilities to run the Sophia 2 to decent levels, but you'll get to hear just what restrictions a £1,000 price tag does to an amplifier design. Turn that instead into a £10,000 amplification system and suddenly the speaker takes off. Like all Wilson speakers, this needs a fair chunk of breathing space to the sides and back of the room to spring to life.

**“It's the awesome sense of sonic scale that really hits home with the Sophia 2. Most loudspeakers sound tiny by comparison.”**

In many respects, this is the best Wilson speaker for day-to-day use. A £40,000 pair of MAXX 2 speakers are brilliantly analytical and staggeringly dynamic, but there are times when you just want to chill out. The days of Wilson speakers being 'too good' for any amplifier are long gone and the Sophia 2 has a symmetry of sound – where the music holds together exceptionally well – that's truly alluring.

How this manifests itself is through a soundstage that is wide, deep and natural, in the manner of real-world musical instruments. This is perhaps where it differs the most from other Wilson speakers: while the soundstage is ultra-precise by most standards, the Sophia 2 doesn't go for the micrometer imagery found in the System 7 or the MAXX 2. This is ideal for those who want to simply listen to their music instead of analysing where every last violin is placed. Of course, the likes of the MAXX 2 manage to combine stunning imagery

and detail levels with a fine sense of musicality, but when you aren't in the market for a £40k, two metre tall speaker, the compromise made by the Sophia 2 seems no compromise at all.

It's the awesome sense of sonic scale that really hits home with the Sophia 2. It's not big sounding, it's right sounding, making most loudspeakers sound tiny by comparison. There's that remarkable sense of bass depth and sheer force that is a Wilson trademark (although slightly curtailed compared to the company's big guns), which comes across as every bass guitarist's dream. It doesn't overstate the lower regions of the musical spectrum, it merely plays them as they should be played – with bite and snap when needed, soft and flowing when that's what's required. Don't expect an enforced rhythm, either. The pace of the speaker is absolutely tight and precise, but you won't find a beat where there isn't one in the recording. The Sophia 2 simply gives you the music – all of the music – just as it appears on the disc.

There's also the extended yet never bright treble that has become a Wilson trademark. And in between the crisp highs and deep lows is a midrange that absolutely fails to make its presence felt, in all the right ways. All of which makes a lucid speaker that doesn't draw

attention to itself, despite the 'wow' factor of that big sound. It's quite something.

Wilson's System 7, MAXX 2 and Alexandria are all better speakers than the Sophia 2 in some fundamental ways. They give the listener more bass depth, more grunt. They also give the system they're connected to a much tougher time. Finally, they give the listener a bit more of a work-out, too. The Sophia 2 is not an undemanding speaker. It will show up limitations in your system and your discs, but it keeps the music close at hand, too. And that makes it a more 'real-world' speaker and perhaps a better all-rounder than those above it in Wilson's range.

Don't think of this as a 'System 7 Lite'. It's much more than that. It brings that big, engaging Wilson sound to a more attainable price level, with a more user-friendly design that will suit a wider range of systems. Brilliant! **HFC**

Alan Sircom