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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

The Wilson Audio Sasha loudspeaker

by Alan Sircom

The king is dead, long live the king! Wilson Audio's introductory tag-line to its new Sasha (technically, Sasha W/P) loudspeaker could be viewed as supreme arrogance or high hubris. One problem though, it happens to be true.

The Sasha is the replacement to the Wilson WATT/Puppy, a product that – above all others – has earned the right to be called 'king' among audiophile loudspeakers. First sold back in 1986, the Wilson Audio Tiny Tot (soon joined by its woofin' Puppy partner) went on to become the most successful \$10,000+ loudspeaker in history, and became a fixed point in the audiophile firmament. It set the tone for other Wilson designs, bigger and smaller. Recently though, the direction-finder in Wilson Audio sound came from elsewhere in the range. Each successive change made the W/P sound more integrated and lively and brought it more in line with the sort of sound made by other Wilsons, but the bright star of the Wilson line cannot spend its life playing catch-up to products like the Sophia or the MAXX.

In the Sasha, what could have been just another iteration of the WATT/Puppy concept (it would have been 'System 9') has undergone a root-and-branch reworking. The human brain's ability to form associations and patterns is a remarkable thing, but it can be prone to failure (optical illusions are a perfect example of this). A quick glance at the Sasha in isolation will see similarities between this new speaker and the WATT/Puppy products it replaces and we will naturally make associations between the two that simply aren't there. Because there are so many changes between the Sasha and what went before, it's almost easier to point out the bits that aren't changed rather than list what's been swapped: the cones in the bass drivers, the range of 'Wilson gloss' finishes (our ones were finished in an almost black midnight blue) and – I think – the rear port and spikes are held over from what went before. Pretty much everything else is a new speaker.

A fair chunk of Sasha – the 25.4mm inverted titanium-foil dome tweeter and the proprietary 178mm paper/carbon-fibre composite cone midrange driver, for example – are a direct 'lift' from Wilson's MAXX 3. These new units were chosen after a moment of audio epiphany at the Musikverein Concert Hall in Vienna by David Wilson. Other parts are total newcomers, such as the cabinet. Not only is it made from a new kind of material, developed out of the X (cellulose/phenolic composite) and M (wood fibres in phenolic resin) materials found in previous Wilson speakers. The new cabinet material doesn't have a capital letter name, but features as yet undefined natural fibres set in a phenolic resin laminate. This is suggested to make for a low coloration cabinet material with a particularly good midrange. ▶



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▶ The new material has allowed Wilson to completely redesign the chassis, making for increased volume in both cabinets and a head unit with more nonparallel lines. Inside, there's a new bracing design. All of which helps aid rigidity and minimise resonance and standing waves. Those surviving woofer cones are backed up by a new motor and magnet arrangement, which basically means more magnet for the same cone mass.

The crossover has been moved from inside the mid/treble head unit to a rear panel at the top of the bass unit. The panel allows components in the crossover to be altered to suit specific rooms, and also gives the midrange driver more legroom, and supposedly more midrange clarity. One legacy point that is missing from both the Sasha is the grab-handle at the back of the WATT. This marks the end of the WATT's vestigial standalone monitor role; the new head unit is adjustable to better integrate the speaker with the room and the listening position, but it's got nothing to do with being used as a solo speaker.

On paper at least, the end result of all this change is just 2Hz more in the bass. The relatively high sensitivity (91dB/W/m) is tempered somewhat by the impedance plot. Although nominally a four-ohm load, the Sasha is claimed to dip to 1.8ohm minimum impedance at 92Hz. In practice, this means the Sasha is not a friend of the Single-Ended Triode brigade and does place a limit on the choice of amplifiers used with this speaker, but the sort of amplifier one would normally consider a comfy partner for a speaker costing nigh on £28,000 will have no problems handling the Sasha. And when used with a pair of Krell Evolution 900 monoblocs, which deliver upwards of 900W per channel, you have nothing to worry about, except losing hearing. The rest of the system in this case was a four-box Krell Evolution Two twin mono preamp and a Metronome Kallista CD transport and C2A digital converter. Heady, bank account draining stuff indeed. It was playing into a room about 18x24x9, with the main listening position about 10' into the room. The speakers were about four feet from the rear wall, but only two-and-a-half feet from the sides and had about a 20° toe-in.

The Evo 900s demonstrated one of the joys of the Sasha; no limits imposed. With nigh on a Krellowatt being pushed up its speaker terminals, the Sasha has the throat needed to roar, but does so with subtlety as well as gusto. That means you can play at the sort of levels that cause rimshots and massed choirs to leave your hearing relaxing between notes and yet allows you to hear the springs beneath the snare resonating and lets you pick out individual singers in the mix. Normally, this is an either/or situation; either you get the full-blast sound, or you get the subtlety. Here, you get both.

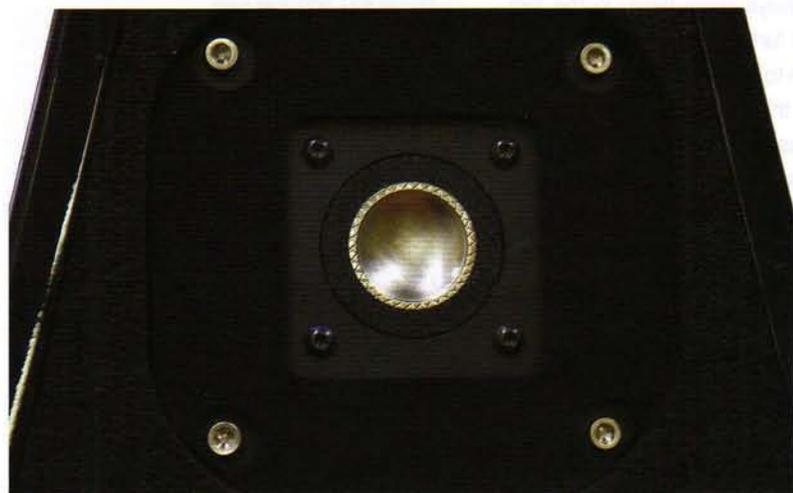
It's also a bigger speaker squeezed into a Sasha-sized box. Those who know their way around the Wilson portfolio are in for a surprise here. "Hey, where did you hide the MAXX'es?" will likely be the stock question. It's got most of the bass dynamics, bass depth, almost physical solidity and power

of the MAXX models – as well as its utterly transparent midrange and soaring top end – but in a smaller package. You get more from the MAXX, but the gap has closed considerably with the launch of the Sasha. In fairness, much of this is based on exposure to the MAXX 2; I'm pretty far from instrument rated on the new model.

Recently, I highlighted a step-change in audio, that I called the difference between 'Hummers' (big and bling) and 'Humlbers' (forget the speakers, the music impresses first and foremost). The Sasha is very much on the Humbler side of the equation. It scales beautifully – swap a Big Band sound for a fey girl-with-guitar and the soundstage accommodates accordingly. Now move from breathy songstress to full-on dub reggae then to large-scale orchestral work, a jazz trio, live rock at full tilt and all points in between and the Sasha adapts beautifully. You don't get eight-foot tall singers or an inch-high second violin... everything played has an appropriate sense of scale. Wilson has been moving the W/P design further from the enlarged sound of the footie score models (WATT 3/Puppy 2, Caledonians vs Queen of the South... match abandoned due to catastrophic pie failure) for some time.

A lot of this comes from the work done (both in the cabinet and the use of that MAXX driver) to improve the midrange. The W/P always had a good, clean and extended treble (it's got better, cleaner and possibly more extended in the Sasha, but the improvement is more like a developmental progression than a jump) and has been well-respected for its big, powerful bass (once again, a developmental improvement), but the midrange was always a big part of the Wilson character. And the move to the Sasha brings the Wilson midrange in line with the MAXX above and the Sophia below. It gives the Sasha something of an electrostatic-like transparency to the midrange.

That beacon for audiophiles – imaging – is excellent, but curiously it will take you some time to notice this. Because your attention is focused elsewhere, like on the dynamic range, the solidity, or even the sheer exuberance of the sound, that reference-class imaging passes almost unnoticed. Part of this is because the overall performance is so very, ▶



Because your attention is focused elsewhere, like on the dynamic range, the solidity, or the sheer exuberance of the sound, that reference-class imaging passes almost unnoticed.

- ▶ very natural – the ‘holographic’ cliché doesn’t apply here, because the sounds are too controlled and solid for that.

We’ve supposedly been ticking off all the boxes for superlative loudspeakers for some years now, and the Wilson WATT/Puppy ticked them all a long time ago. What’s left on offer and what makes this one so much better than what went before? Along with the bigger speaker in a smaller box and the more open than ever midrange, the Sasha does something very, very few loudspeakers can do, irrespective of price. It manages to reconcile the world of the audiophile with that of real people. Audiophiles choose – and design – products in adherence to Harry Pearson’s benchmark of the sound of live, unamplified music occurring in real space. However, there are people (a lot of people) who do not possess a single piece of live, unamplified music and typically find systems designed for audiophiles to sound ‘boring’. Products – especially loudspeakers – that reconcile the two are extremely rare. The Sasha is one of the very few exceptions.

The reconciliation process is not perfect – play a compressed or badly-mastered recording and the Sasha keeps it distinctly in the sow’s ear region. But what it does well is exactly what the predecessor was praised for, only more so. The studio sound that Wilson tried for with the WATT/Puppy is here in full effect. Play the Sashas and you are in the control room, listening to the sort of sound the producer and engineer always wanted you to hear.

Although the Sasha changes are not necessarily driven by increased competition, the days of Wilson Audio having this market more or less to itself are long gone. And the new speaker gives us a perfect opportunity to remap the high-end landscape, to see just where products like the Sasha fit in. Of course, there’s no easy way to compare large, top-grade loudspeakers. This is because it’s almost impossible to compare them side-by-side; it can take as much as five days just to install, set-up, fine-tune, bed in and repackage a pair of speakers like these, and often the best place in the room for one pair of speakers is the same place for another. But, we can draw parallels and this reasserts Wilson’s place at the acme of speaker design at this price. It was never really in doubt.

Broadly speaking, there are four equally valid ‘sounds’ at this price level; there’s ‘music as art’, ‘music as magic’, ‘music as science project’ and ‘music free from influence’ loudspeakers. Wilson has always been firmly in the last camp, and with the Sasha it digs its heels in still further. The Sasha is not a magical window on the composer’s soul, a talisman to make all music wonderful or a product that lays music bare. It does all these things, but it’s principally the studio monitor we all wish every studio used, because they’d make better music in the process. It will expose weaknesses in the recording, in the performance and in the audio system with stark clarity, but curiously these don’t detract from the enjoyment, any more than the surface noise on a good LP played through a top turntable stops you from enjoying the music.

Sasha highlights a difficult admission for reviewers. We are apt to look at incremental changes in designs as dirty great changes in sound.

It comes from many of us getting our degree in Reviewology from the Centre for the Easily Impressed. The problem arises when we actually happen across a genuine large-scale change in sound and we end up like the (middle-aged, beer gutted) boy who cried wolf. And Sasha is a dirty great big change in the right direction for the W/P system. In fairness, previous W/P designs did offer distinct improvements over earlier models; however some – like System 6 – were bigger and more significant than others. Sasha is the biggest change of them all.

So, should you turn in your WATT/Puppy system for the Sasha? Not necessarily; the W/P remains one of the few legends in high-end and that reputation is still richly deserved. Just one thing though; if you aren’t planning to upgrade soon, you might want to steer clear of hearing the Sasha. Even the briefest exposure may make you change your mind about upgrading.

Le Roi est mort, vive le Roi! +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Three-way, two cabinet floorstanding loudspeaker

Drivers: 2.54mm titanium-foil inverted dome tweeter; 178mm paper/carbon-fibre composite cone midrange
2x 203mm poly-coated woofers

Frequency Response: 20Hz-22kHz ±3dB

Sensitivity: 91 dB/w/m at 1kHz

Impedance: 4 ohms nominal, 1.8 ohms minimum at 92 Hz

Minimum Amplifier Power: 20 watts per channel

Dimensions (WxHxD): 356x1118x539mm

System Weight: 89.36 kg

Price: £27,900 per pair

Manufacturer:

Wilson Audio

URL: www.wilsonaudio.com

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URL: www.absolutesounds.com

Tel: +44(0)208 971 3909