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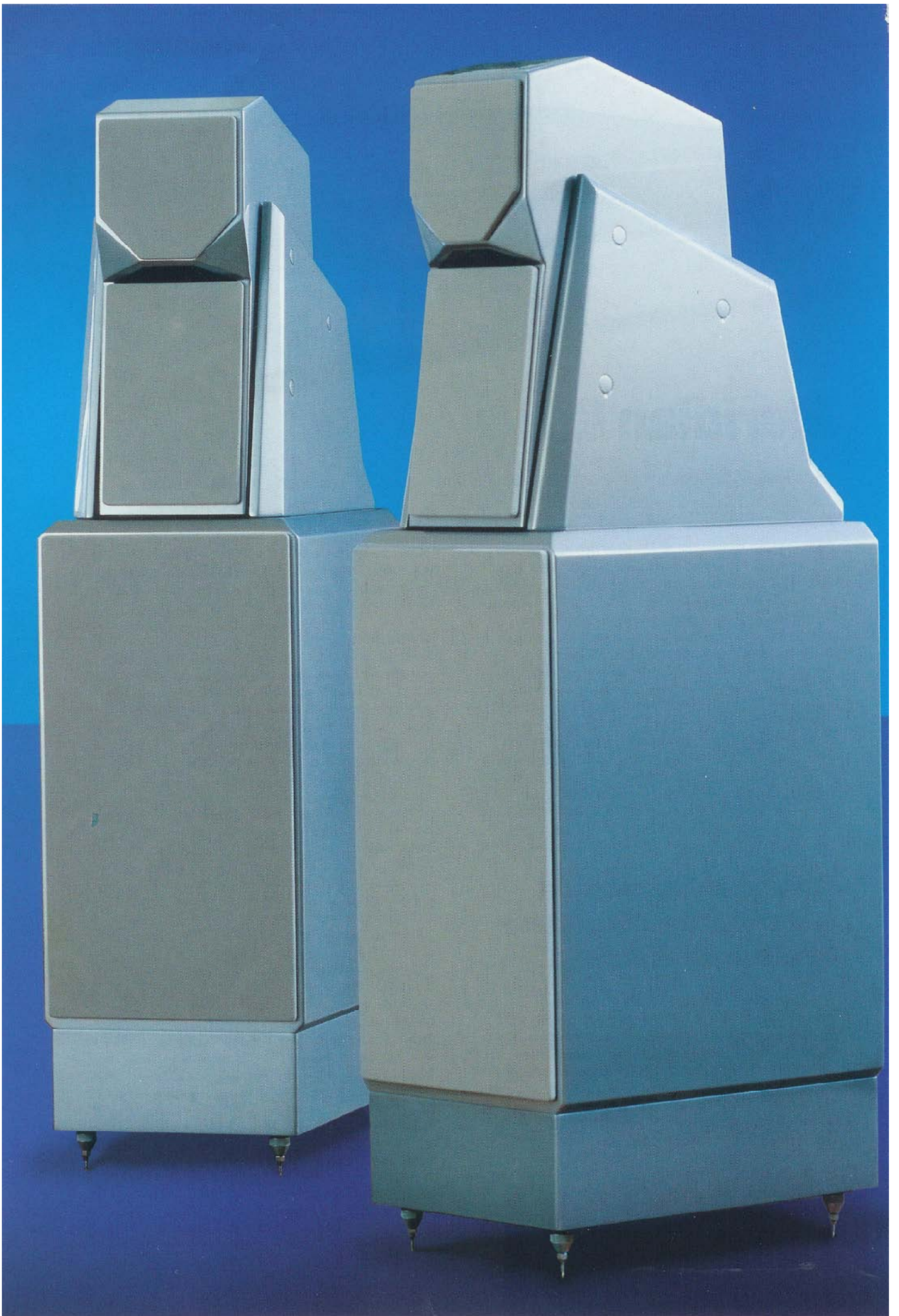
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The Collection 2005

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





Wilson Audio MAXX 2

With speakers this good, who cares if they are ballerina tall, Rik Waller heavy and cost £41,000?

PRICE: £41,000 per pair CONTACT: Absolute Sounds, 58 Durham Road, London SW20 0DE ☎ 020 8971 3909 🌐 www.wilsonaudio.com

There's something intimidating about big Wilson speakers. The 'boat-tail' curved cabinet design that's currently so prevalent among high-end speakers isn't attempted here – the look is big, bold and hard-edged, like a mainframe computer from the early 1980s. The speaker shouts 'audiophile' from the rooftops, and looks a bit like a slightly anorexic Dalek on tip-toe.

The dimensions of the MAXX Series 2 give the game away. Let's forget metric for a moment: 160cm tall means nothing practical. These speakers are five foot three inches tall – smaller than the giant Alexandria, but that's still about the height of the average ballerina, or four Kylie Minogues laid end to end. The 43cm width and 56cm depth are pretty impressive too. But perhaps it's the weight that really sums up how physically massive this speaker is. The whole package weighs 500kg. Unboxed, each speaker weighs 186kg. So, despite the wishes of some, there's no way these babies will fit in a box room on the third floor of a nifty Victorian home.

The drive unit line-up is equally impressive. The bass module (itself taller than most regular speakers) sports one 330mm driver and another 267mm unit, while the moveable head module includes a pair of 178mm midrange drivers and an inverted 25mm titanium dome tweeter. All of which combine with a rear port to deliver sound from 20Hz right up to 21kHz, within claimed -3dB limits. Yet, this is achieved with remarkably easy drive capabilities – it's claimed to deliver a sensitivity rating of 92dB at one watt (2.83 volts at one metre) and have a nominal impedance of eight ohms, with a three-ohm minimum. Wilson suggests any amplifier of seven watts or more would be fine for driving these speakers, but realistically, to get decent levels out of the speaker, try an amplifier of ten or even 100 times that power. Of course, you need quantity *and* quality to get the best from these speakers.

Wilson has performed considerable changes to the MAXX since its first iteration. There's even more Alexandria DNA in this new version. It may look similar to all modern larger-than-System Seven designs, but the cabinet has been substantially revised. The upper chamber has been especially modified to include a rear port and what Wilson calls its Group Delay mechanism: essentially a pivot to raise or lower the head module to time align it accurately. The head module then couples to the sides plates that stand tall from the top of the bass unit using a

sextet of nylon bushes. Clever, and remarkably effective. Of course, the redesigned crossover with even greater time-alignment properties helps. And don't forget the tweeter, which has been wholly revised, despite being the typical inverted dome used in all Wilson models.

The bass unit has undergone less dramatic upgrades, but features improved damping properties. This is in line with developments that have helped transform other Wilson speakers over the last few years. One thing that hasn't changed in Wilson designs is the total lack of bi-wiring. Despite some healthy

“It's the height of the average ballerina, or four Kylie Minogues laid end to end.”

cabling connecting the mid/tweeter module to the bass block, the main connections are single wired. The huge Puppy Paw style feet are a Wilson motif too, but these look entirely in keeping with the overall design.

The whole look is brutally sculpted (a bit like a Frank Lloyd Wright building is sculpted) and surprisingly effective, especially as Wilson can provide the MAXX 2 in almost any colour scheme you can envisage. But it's still huge...

SOUND QUALITY

These are big speakers and need a big room and plenty of space to breathe. You need a good couple of metres behind and to the sides of the speakers, and at least a metre between the top of the tweeter box and the ceiling. A moderate amount of toe-in is required too, but this follows a prescribed Wilson formula. Good job too – there's no way you'll want to experiment with positioning a 29-stone speaker.

No matter how familiar you are with a disc, you are hearing it for the first time through the MAXX 2. It takes simply everything in its stride – Zappa's percussion noodling on *Civilization Phase III*, Leftfield's afro-techno polyrhythms, even the spoken word – and makes every sound the right size and with a sense of scale that is almost impossible to fault. The extremes we heard during our all too brief test sessions were remarkable; not just extremes of frequency, but of level too. We played some deep, widdly-widdly Jeff Beck guitar spanking at ear-splitting levels, followed soon after by ultra-genteel ECM jazzy sax meets choral singing on *Vivaticum*, played at little more than a whisper. With both extremes – and every volume level in

between – the Wilsons maintained their remarkable coherence and listenability.

Big speakers are often accused of sounding big at all times – not so the MAXX 2. If a sound is big, it sounds big, if it's small it sounds small. Better still, if there are both big and small sounds on the same recording, both have exactly the right image size. This really doesn't happen that often – usually the overbearing character of the speaker dominates the size of the image elements within a recording. The Wilsons never do this, and sound all the more remarkable for it.

Playing Rachmaninov's *Symphonic Dances* was the clincher – the orchestra had all the right tonality and size, but when the solo saxophone kicked in, there was no sense of the image collapsing. In most systems, it's hard to tell this really *is* a saxophone, but here, you can almost tell what grade of reed the player was using.

Everything you might want from a speaker, like musicality, dynamic range, neutrality, an image that is cast far, wide and deep, coherence, articulation, detail and more – they are all here, and all better than from practically any other speaker on the planet. But there's something still more to get from the MAXX 2. This is a speaker that has a physical sense of music occurring in a very real, very tangible and very solid sense, as you might expect from a big loudspeaker cabinet, but it also has the speed and musical communication that's typically found in small-box speakers.

Such revelations are not easy to come by. This is not a speaker that reveals its magic in a ten-minute listening session – at that point, you are too wowed by the impressive sense of scale – but over several hours, it begins to show the true inner nature of its performance. It delivers supreme scale, accuracy and honesty, coupled with sublime coherence, timing and musicality, in a package that fits the dynamics of most big living rooms. It's an Alexandria for those with ceilings under 5m high.

This is almost a review that writes itself. All the boxes are ticked, all the 'i's are dotted and all the 't's are crossed. It behoves the job of a reviewer to find fault in anything under review, but sometimes that's impossible. This is one of those rare occasions – there's nothing to find, here. The MAXX 2 rocks. **HFC**

Alan Sircom