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No brick in the wall - Wilson Audio's stunning Alexx V



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Wilson Audio Alexx V

Not 'version 5' – the 'V' here refers to Wilson's cabinet material. In fact, the Alexx V is a 'v2' and it's a masterpiece
 Review: **Ken Kessler Lab: Paul Miller**

T rue to form, Wilson Audio allowed five years to pass before revising its Alexx floorstander [HFN Nov '16], avoiding that old high-end crisis of perceived obsolescence. As I always say, what was fine last Tuesday is still fine today, but Wilson tends to upgrade its models with major leaps, not tiny steps, and so it is with the Alexx V (£139,000).

A visual giveaway is the open gantry architecture with magnetically-attached grilles, replacing the original's filled side panels, but it remains so imposing that you have to consider the choice of finish with care. Add 5% above the standard colours for WilsonGloss, or 10% for the Premium Pearl, or talk to them if you want it to match your Bugatti Chiron...

WILSON LEGACY

Aside from input on one of the drivers by founder Dave Wilson, who passed away in 2018, the rest is all son Daryl's work [see PM's interview, p43], along with his seasoned team in Provo. But there's more beyond this being the watershed speaker in Daryl's ascent, if I might regale you with a tale from Wilson's history.

Once upon a time, there were two utterly disparate siblings. No, not like Cain and Abel, but like Arnie Schwarzenegger and Danny DeVito in *Twins*. The original Wilson WAMM – which turns 40 this year – and its immediate sequel, the WATT, could not have been more dissimilar, the latter created to satisfy those who wanted the primary virtues of the WAMM in a portable speaker, for, say, on-site monitoring.

But the WATT, a self-contained two-way speaker, lacked adjustability. Over the decades, it acquired the Puppy woofer section, allowing the mid/treble enclosure to be tilted, reflecting Wilson Sr's focus on time alignment. The big floorstanders that followed the original, fully-configurable WAMM increasingly exploited the flexibility of the mid and treble units, each housed in their own mini-enclosures.

As of 2022, the Alexx V sits in the upper half of a range which starts with single-piece speakers such as the Yvette [HFN Feb '17]. Each step on the Wilson ladder increases the number of driver modules – in the Alexx V, that skeletal gantry contains three modules, placing it somewhere in the middle of the catalogue.

SPECIALIST SET-UP

A bare-bones description of the Alexx V tells you that it's only an inch deeper and taller than the Alexx, with the same width, so it fills a space of 1610x400x680mm (hwd). They weigh 227kg each, hosting one 10.5in and one 12.5in woofer in the lower section, while the three modules contain, in ascending order, a 7in midrange, a 1in tweeter and a 5.75in midrange at the top. Set-up, a minimum two-person task by an experienced Wilson

dealer, typically requires six hours. A detailed list of what distinguishes the Alexx V would run to several pages, the 'V' here not a Roman numeral 5 but the designation of its new cabinet material. Suffice to say, Alexx-to-

Alexx V illustrates what Wilson Audio has been up to over the past five years.

Trickle-down benefits remain a firm part of the procedure. For example, Wilson's 'Acoustic Diodes' (pointy feet to me and you) enjoy their debut here. This brand-new spike system comprises a combination of austenitic stainless steel and V-material, and having heard them under my Sasha DAWs [HFN Mar '19], wow, do they make a difference. And it is truly reciprocal: at the back of the Alexx V are custom-built Wilson Audio binding posts that first appeared in the Sasha DAW, and which accept banana plugs, spade connectors or bare wire.

RIGHT: Drawing on the XVX and WAMM Master Chronosonic, the Alexx V combines a new 1in CSC tweeter with 7in and 5.75in mids in a highly adjustable cabinet system. The 10.5in and 12.5in woofers are housed in a separate cabinet



SETTING THE SWEET SPOT

The ability to fine-tune the acoustic centres, and propagation delay, of its faceted D'Appolito midrange-tweeter-midrange array has been an evolving theme of all Wilson's flagship floorstanders. The various graduated ramps, slots, spikes and miniature 'staircases' within the gantry have been further refined in the Alexx V which sees both (dissimilar-sized) midrange capsules pivoted at the front on the respective enclosures below. The centre tweeter capsule can be tilted at the rear via a single spike, as can the two midrange modules, but the latter have different length spikes available that locate into stepped alignment blocks (the staircases), allowing for a wider range of tilt. This process sets the listening axis of all three drivers. The staircase blocks, meanwhile, slide fore and aft [see inset picture], setting the time alignment of the drivers. There's more than just a coincident wavefront being achieved here, as the changes to the interaction between the trio of modules (reinforcement/cancellation) can also result in quite significant changes in mid/treble response. **PM**



This sharing of tech from model-to-model, as appropriate, is crucial to understanding how Wilson develops speakers, not just the Alexx V. Pretty much all of the upgrades to the Alexx V come from the WAMM Master Chronosonic and Chronosonic XVX, while the Alexx V offers back to the gene pool not only the Acoustic Diodes, but a completely new Convergent Synergy Carbon (CSC) dome tweeter with its 3D-printed, carbon-fibre rear-wave chamber.

Deep breath: the Alexx V uses the aforementioned 'skeleton' gantry structure for the upper modules to increase openness. The new V-material is used in 'strategic locations' with the primary X-material shell, notably in the top of the woofer section and in the gantry cross-brace. The XVX's 7in Anlico QuadraMag midrange has been fitted to the Alexx V, while the WAMM Master Chronosonic's cable management system is used here to achieve the 'perfect length of speaker cable for each of the upper modules as they are adjusted for correct time-alignment'.

If you recall the XLF [HFN Oct '12], you'll recognise the clever reversible woofer port now applied to the Alexx V, which allows greater optimisation of the speaker's

woofer activity relative to wall boundaries, listening position and the rest. I'm surprised it hasn't been copied by Wilson's rivals as it's such a boon to set-up and final tuning.

As for changes to the crossover, it now contains new Wilson-designed capacitors with gold lugs on the PCB as well as for the connector plate contact points, and resistor connections.

SMART ALEXX

Listening took place in PM's room [see p39] using a dCS Vivaldi One front-end [HFN Feb '18] driving a Constellation Centaur II 500 amp [HFN Dec '19], with Transparent cables throughout. After an initial burst of Fleetwood Mac just to acclimatise myself, and to which I deliberately didn't pay close attention because their classic recordings are – to my ears – unusually bright, I turned to a regimen of tracks which I have played through at least a half-dozen Wilson speakers over the decades. I wanted to deal with the grandeur I assumed would be part of the experience, and looked to – fortuitously, as it turned out – Kodō's *Warabe* [Sony SRCL4671; Japanese CD].

There's a truism which states that any seasoned listener usually knows, within the first few bars of a familiar recording, the measure of a hi-fi system or component. This manifests itself in the realisation that, over a half-century, my first impressions →



ABOVE: Rear-mounted protection and tuning resistors for the mid and treble drivers are now illuminated, for easy access and visibility. The high-pass mid/treble crossover is also mounted inside the upper section of the bass cabinet

rarely change unless there's something amiss, or if the product has not been run in completely and improves over time. With the Alexx V, I was hearing textures and air and bass extension which I had never before experienced from the Kodō title. And that was immediately apparent – in mere seconds in PM's listening room.

What rendered it so revelatory was something I anticipated, based on all those years listening to Wilson speakers. The utter lack of cabinet-induced coloration and the total absence of any dissonant resonances graced the drums with a presence and an authenticity that delivered frisson after frisson of uncanny realism. It was due in no small part to these massive towers simply disappearing with the facility and thoroughness of a well-designed dipole, an electrostatic of Quad ESL-57 calibre, or a seasoned micro-monitor like the LS3/5A.

DRUM DRAMA

Such panel-like transparency and openness can be found in the best of that genre, but the Alexx V's bass extension? The weight? The palpable mass enjoyed by the largest of the drums? The attack, and smoothest, most consistent decay of each note? Old hands might wonder how you control so much wooferage, how they betrayed no

flabby, vague softness, while at the same time eschewing aggression or dryness.

Whether it's the drivers themselves, the enclosure material, the crossover or, more likely, a combination of all three, the Alexx V blended all of the desired properties of deep, realistic bass into a perfectly convincing whole, and that's using the most challenging percussion recordings I can name this side of the *Sheffield Drum Record*. Suitably amazed, I wanted to hear every track in my arsenal of 'money shots'.

UP TO ELEVEN

Instead of feeding more tests to challenge or simply discern the Alexx V's refinement, I went the other way. Turning the wick up

to threshold-of-pain levels, I put on 'Glad All Over' from the remastered *The Dave Clark Five's All The Hits* [BMG BMGCAT408CD]. I am talking Blue Cheer/Kiss loud and arguably the stompingest hit the British Invasion yielded over a

half-century ago, a bombastic masterpiece so well-recorded and so dynamic that you soon forget it's mono.

Wilson's Alexx V simply got on with the job, handling decibel counts that would have destroyed other speakers, while sacrificing absolutely none of the finesse I'd heard moments before via Kodō. Both are drum dominant, yet worlds apart, The Dave Clark Five's performance filling the room as did the drummers from Japan – and not just the space between the speakers. Nothing was buried by the stomping of the dominant percussion, the sax in particular stealing pride-of-place. ☺

'I was hearing textures, air and bass like never before'

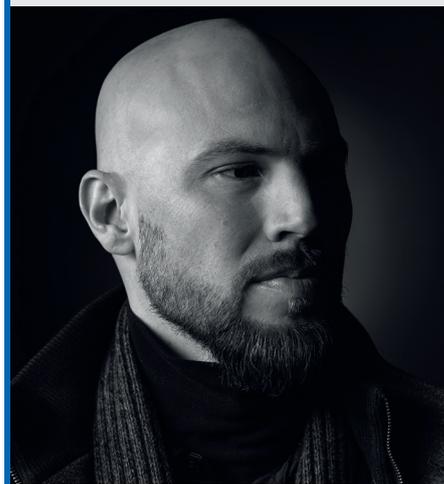
DARYL WILSON

'Whether it's in driver refinements, enclosure materials, hardware elements, crossover components, or the science behind propagation delay correction, all Wilson products benefit from our ongoing R&D', says Daryl Wilson, now CEO of the family firm. Ken has mentioned some of the updates built into the Alexx V, but what else is hidden in plain sight?

'We use the same bass drivers developed for the WAMM Master Chronosonic along with Magnum Opus cable from Transparent for all our internal woofer wiring. There's also a full 16% extra bass cabinet volume over the Alexx v1 – almost equal to the Chronosonic XVX in fact, which allows for deeper LF extension and faster transient settling.'

'Our interchangeable rear and front woofer ports now have larger roundovers, so there's reduced turbulence and noise at extreme levels, particularly in the 20-40Hz region', reveals Daryl, 'and the midrange vents are also fine-tuned to deliver further clarity.'

Wilson has pioneered the use of mineral-loaded polymers in its cabinets, the latest 'V material' just the most recent example. 'X material is still predominant', confirms Daryl, 'with V material nested in strategic locations such as the top of the woofer enclosure, in the Acoustic Diode housing, and in the gantry cross-brace. We still use our S material for the midrange baffles and have removed all screws from the tweeter front plate to reduce sources of diffraction'. Expect to see all this, and more, trickling down into Wilson's more affordable models. PM



LAB REPORT

WILSON AUDIO ALEXX V



LEFT: The Alexx V's gantry features two mini but solid alloy 'staircases', one for each midrange module, for precise time alignment of the drivers [see boxout, p41]. As usual, the main speaker connections [bottom] are single-wire only

From the ridiculous to the sublime, and I just had to hear Lou Rawls and Dianne Reeves charming each other on the title track from *At Last* [Blue Note CDP 7 91937 2]. This is, despite peerless musicianship from pianist Richard Tee and tenor saxophonist Stanley Turrentine, all about the voices. Rawls' guttural rasp, like a honeyed version of Louis Armstrong, and the soaring vocals from Reeves, who forges power with grace. I could hear the generational change in the midband from the smaller, three-year-old Sasha DAWs that coddle me every day in my own room, to something warmer here, even more involving and, yes, exquisitely revealing.

PURE MAGIC

Like his father, Daryl values the retrieval of the finest detail and its role in creating a fully satisfying sonic event. 'Subtle' isn't enough of a description to help you appreciate the manner in which the Alexx V reproduces nuances in voices. It worked magic on Keb' Mo's ultra-delicate 'The Times They Are A Changin'' from *Peace - Back By Popular Demand* [Okeh/Epic EK92687], then rose to the opening scream of Johnnie Taylor's 'Who's Making Love' [Stax CD24 4115-2]. Juice Newton, Mel & Tim, The Staple Singers... Wilson's Alexx V, simply stated, has the magic touch. ☺

This speaker, as gracious and refined as it was designed to be, is deliciously a Jekyll-and-Hyde affair. It rocks like you will not believe, but with composure. What I had to keep telling myself is that its granddaddy thought honky-tonk piano to be shamelessly racy, and drew the line at The Everly Brothers. But founder Dave passed on to Daryl a need to reproduce without flaw the frequency extremes, the softest and the loudest sounds, dynamic swings, and a three-dimensional soundstage. The miracle? The Alexx V transformed a mono track where the meter's needle barely flickers. It was like a Rolls-Royce had mated with a Boss Mustang.

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

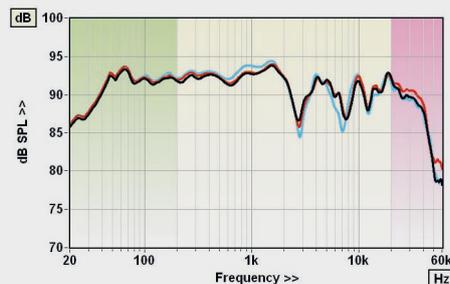
What the Alexx V represents, to this veteran Wilson listener, is the utopian midpoint between the WATT's focus and scale of the Chronosonic XVX. This enormous system delivers the soundstage and presence expected of a coffin-sized construct, yet it produces detail and precision to rival any point-source. It's dangerous to say these words, but here goes... the Alexx V is the best damned speaker I have ever heard.

Sound Quality: 95%

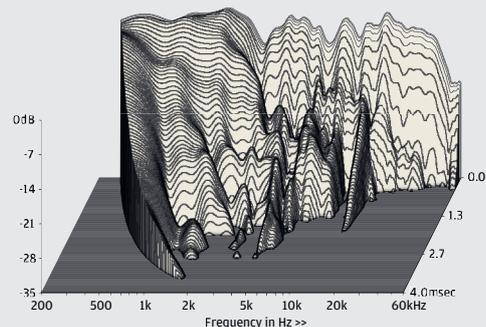


Measuring a tall, multi-way system configured for farfield listening is tricky, not least because our default test distance is 1m with a time window sufficient to exclude all reflections within 4-5msec of the incident wavefront. Thus the ~6dB notch in the Alexx V's forward response at 2.7kHz [see Graph 1, below] is indicative only of very nearfield listening, this midrange suckout progressively filling in with distance, tightening the ± 3.3 dB response error to a superior ± 2.5 dB. The grilles add further disruption [blue trace] to what is otherwise a generally flat trend and are not recommended for critical listening. Pair matching is state-of-the-art at 0.2dB (200Hz-20kHz), with a very narrowband 0.9dB at 2.8kHz/10kHz) and the CSC tweeter delivers a strong performance out to beyond 30kHz [pink shaded area, Graph 1], reaching ~43kHz (-6dB re. 10kHz). This matches many hard/alloy dome tweeters, minus the aggressive breakup modes...

Moreover the Alexx V can go very loud, broadly achieving its rated 92dB/2.83V sensitivity at 92.8dB/1kHz and 91.3dB from 500Hz-8kHz. A pair of Alexx V's will sustain ~109dB SPL at 4m listening distance, incurring <0.4% THD (200Hz-20kHz) while 'ticking over' at 90dB SPL. Bass extension is low but not exceptionally so - the 267mm and 318mm woofers each spanning 40Hz-126Hz (-6dB), joined by the (rear) port at a low 18Hz to achieve a corrected LF limit of 27Hz (-6dB re. 200Hz). All this is achieved at the expense of a punishing load - a min. of 1.9ohm/249Hz (sub-4ohm from 48Hz-5.4kHz) and tough reactive regions in the bass (-52°/4.7ohm/47Hz) and treble (+40°/3.85ohm/5kHz). High-end amps only need apply! PM



ABOVE: Response inc. nearfield summed driver/port [green], freefield corrected to 1m at 2.83V [yellow], ultrasonic [pink]. Left, black; right, red; w. grille, blue



ABOVE: The 'X' cabinet material is very dead, exposing only low-level mid cone modes between 5-20kHz

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Sensitivity (SPL/1m/2.83V - 1kHz/Mean/IEC)	92.8dB / 91.3dB / 89.1dB
Impedance modulus: minimum & maximum (20Hz-20kHz)	1.91ohm @ 249Hz 8.97ohm @ 37Hz
Impedance phase: minimum & maximum (20Hz-20kHz)	-52° @ 47Hz +40° @ 5kHz
Pair matching/Resp. error (200Hz-20kHz)	0.9dB / ± 3.6 dB / ± 3.3 dB
LF/HF extension (-6dB ref 200Hz/10kHz)	27Hz 43.4kHz/43.3kHz
THD 100Hz/1kHz/10kHz (for 90dB SPL/1m)	0.3% / 0.35% / 0.3%
Dimensions (HWD) / Weight (each)	1610x400x680mm / 227kg