PRODUCTS OF THE YEAR AWARDS
SEE PAGE 65

# THE 50 HOTTEST PRODUCTS OF 2013

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# stereophile

ELECTRONICALLY REPRINTED FROM DECEMBER 2013

Wilson's stunning new Alexia speaker:

## POWER MEETS GRACE

A SOURCE INTERLINK MEDIA PUBLICATION

JOHN ATKINSON

# Wilson Audio Specialties Alexia

## LOUDSPEAKER

With the help of 20:20 hindsight, it looks as if I made a decision when I joined *Stereophile*: to review a loudspeaker from Wilson Audio Specialties every 11 years. In June 1991, I reported on Wilson's WATT 3/Puppy 2 combination (see www.stereophile.com/content/wilson-watt-series-3-puppy-2-loudspeaker), which cost $12,400/pair in an automotive gloss-paint finish. This was followed in July 2002 by my review of the Wilson Sophia ($11,700/pair; www.stereophile.com/floorloudspeakers/619/index.html). And now, in December 2013, I am writing about the Wilson Alexia, which costs a not-inconsiderable $48,500/pair.

I first heard the Alexia at the 2012 Rocky Mountain Audio Fest, but didn't decide that I needed to get a pair into my listening room until the following January, when, at the 2013 Consumer Electronics Show, I heard a pair of them driven by Dan D'Agostino amplifiers and a dCS Vivaldi digital source, hooked up with Transparent cables. As I wrote in my online report from CES 2013 (www.stereophile.com/content/wilson150dagostino 150dc-s150transparent), when I heard the hi-rez master file of Cantus singing Eric Whitacre's *Lux Aurumque*, "not only was the relationship between the sounds of the singers and musicians and the surrounding ambience of the recording venue breathtakingly real, so was the relationship between the musicians and the music. I have played *Lux Aurumque* on dozens of systems—never have I heard it sound so real, so musically involving."[1]

1 You can listen to an excerpt of this work, albeit at 320kbps, 16-bit/44.1kHz MP3 quality, at the bottom of the page at http://tinyurl.com/lalsq2c.

### The Alexia

The floorstanding Alexia bears a strong family resemblance to the two earlier Wilson speakers I reviewed. Its truncated pyramidal profile resembles the Sophia's, while, like the WATT/Puppy, it comprises separate enclosures: the lower, rectangular one holds the two woofers, and the upper, pyramidal one the midrange unit and tweeter on its sloped-back front. And the Alexia is finished in high-gloss automotive paint.

There the resemblance ends. The Alexia is larger than either of the earlier speakers. The latest (and best-sounding) iteration of the WATT/Puppy, the W/P Sasha, reviewed by Art Dudley in July 2010, stands 44" high and weighs 197 lbs. At almost 54" tall, the Alexia is a head taller than the Sasha and weighs a backbreaking 256 lbs. But the newer speaker wears its bulk well, and its footprint in the listening room is not significantly greater than those of the smaller speakers.

The more significant difference concerns the drive-units. Like Wilson's various MAXX and Alexandria models, the Alexia's two woofers are of different sizes. An 8" woofer is mounted above a 10", both loaded with a large, 3"-diameter, aluminum-lined port on the cabinet rear. The idea behind using two woofers of different sizes is that the radiation pattern of the smaller one at the top of its passband better matches that of the midrange unit at the bottom of its passband. Whereas the XLF's woofer cones are made of Focal's proprietary W sandwich material and the Sasha's twin 8" cones are of polymer, the Alexia's bass drivers have paper cones.

## SPECIFICATIONS

**Description** Three-way, four-driver, reflex-loaded, floorstanding loudspeaker. Drive-units: 1" (25mm) silk-dome tweeter, 7" (178mm) cellulose-fiber/carbon composite-cone midrange unit, 8" (203mm) paper-cone woofer, 10" (254mm) paper-cone woofer. Crossover frequencies: not given. Frequency response: 20Hz–32kHz, ±3dB. Sensitivity: 90dB/W/m. Impedance: 4 ohms nominal, 2 ohms minimal at 80Hz. Minimum amplifier power: 20Wpc. **Dimensions** 53.25" (1353mm) H by 15.25" (387.4mm) W by 21.125" (537mm) D. Weight: 256 lbs (116.1kg). **Finish** Multiple automotive paint colors, plus custom options. **Serial numbers of units reviewed** 0381, 0382.

**Price** $48,500/pair. Approximate number of dealers: 39.
**Manufacturer** Wilson Audio Specialties, 2233 Mountain Vista Lane, Provo, UT 84606.
Tel: (801) 377-2233.
Fax: (801) 377-2282.
Web: www.wilsonaudio.com.


ERIC SWANSON

The Alexia's 7" midrange driver, mounted in its own enclosure, is the same as that used in the XLF; it features a composite pulp/carbon-fiber cone, with a substantial half-roll rubber surround to confer greater dynamic range at the bottom of its passband. The midrange unit is resistively loaded by two foam-lined vertical slots on the rear panel, and the enclosure can be moved back and forth and have its tilt adjusted with spikes of various size that couple its rear to a stepped metal plate on the top of the woofer module. The Alexia's tweeter is a variation of the sophisticated silk-dome model Wilson used in the Alexandria XLF. This, too, is mounted in its own enclosure, which engages with both the top of the midrange enclosure and the underside of the black-anodized aluminum "bridge" that covers the module via spikes that sit in grooves machined into metal plates. The tweeter module can also be moved forward and back, and tilted, with respect to the midrange enclosure on which it sits. Wilson calls this ability to fine-tune the upper-frequency drivers Aspherical Group Delay; I refer you to Michael Fremer's explanation at http://tinyurl.com/pnoncol.

JOHN GIOLAS

The Alexia's tweeter module can be moved with repeatable precision.

Electrical connection is via a single pair of brass binding posts mounted on the rear of the woofer enclosure and standing proud of the cabinet. Two pairs of heavy-gauge cables emerge from the top of the woofer enclosure, and connect to two pairs of binding posts on the rear of the midrange enclosure: one pair each for the midrange and tweeter. All four of the Alexia's drive-units are connected with series power resistors in their feeds from the crossover, which is inside the woofer enclosure. The resistors for the upper-frequency units are accessible behind a metal plate on the top rear of the woofer enclosure. These are mounted on a heatsink and held in place by Allen-head bolts. Replacement is easy, and different values can be substituted to adjust the levels of the tweeter and midrange. Barrel resistors adjust the woofer level and damping; these are not intended to be changed by the buyer.

## MEASUREMENTS

I used DRA Labs' MLSSA system and a calibrated DPA 4006 microphone to measure the Wilson Alexia's frequency response in the farfield, and an Earthworks QTC-40 for the nearfield and spatially averaged room responses. Because of the speaker's bulk, I was unable to raise it off the ground for the measurements; this will reduce the resolution of the frequency-response graphs in the midrange. Then there was the problem of which axis to place the microphone on for the farfield measurements. Yes, the way the tweeter module is mounted atop the midrange module facilitates repeatability in adjusting its position, but I wanted to measure the speaker as it had been set up by Wilson's Peter McGrath. I also wanted to measure it at my standard 50" microphone distance, which is optimal for midrange resolution in the resultant graphs, even with the speaker on the floor. So I drew a line from the tweeter to the 36" height of my ears, 106" away, then moved the mike up along that line until it was 50" from the tweeter. Other than those used to assess the Alexia's vertical dispersion, all the farfield measurements were taken at that point.

My estimate of the Alexia's voltage sensitivity was slightly higher than the specified 90dB/2.83V/m, at 91.3dB(B)/2.83V/m. This speaker will play loudly with just a few watts. However, it demands quite a lot of current from the partnering amplifier. The Alexia's electrical impedance and phase angle are shown in fig.1. (This graph was taken with the original, higher-value tweeter resistors.) The impedance magnitude stays between 2 and 6 ohms from 12Hz to 4kHz, with a gentle rise above that frequency. The minimum value is 1.96 ohms at 86Hz, and there is a demanding combination of 3.6 ohms and –43° phase angle at 54Hz.

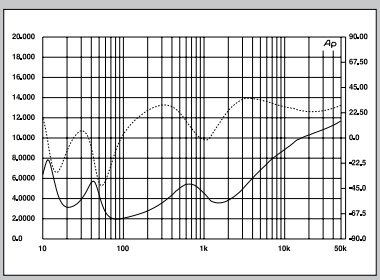


**Fig.1** Wilson Alexia, electrical impedance (solid) and phase (dashed) (2 ohms/vertical div.).

The traces in fig.1 are free from the small glitches that would hint at the presence of vibrational resonances in the enclosures. Looking for the existence of such resonances with a simple plastic-tape accelerometer (similar to a piezoelectric guitar pickup), I could find nothing on the woofer enclosure. I did discover some modes on the walls of the midrange enclosure (fig.2), but these are very low in level; I am confident in saying that they will have no effect on sound quality.

The fact that the binding posts for the tweeter and midrange unit are accessible allowed me to examine the farfield acoustic crossover on the listening axis. Fig.3 reveals that the crossover between the tweeter (black trace) and the mid-


JOHN GIOLAS

A choice of spikes of different lengths engage a stepped metal plate to allow adjustment of the midrange module.

In common with the W/P Sasha and Alexandria XLF, the Alexia's enclosures are far removed from the usual rectangular monkey coffin. A subtle wave motif is machined into the woofer enclosure's side panels, and a pair of vertical walls flank the midrange module. The midrange enclosure is fundamentally a truncated pyramid, but with shoulders machined into the side panels and enclosing sidewalls rising either side of the small tweeter module, to support the metal bridge mentioned above. The walls of the woofer enclosure are built entirely of Wilson's proprietary X-Material, a mineral-loaded phenolic compound that is both extremely stiff and difficult to machine. Laser interferometry was used to optimize wall thickness and the placement of internal braces. Cloth-over-frame grilles are provided for each of the three modules; these have pins that plug into matching sockets in the front baffles.

The Alexia was designed by Dave Wilson and Vern Credille, Wilson's lead acoustic and electrical engineer. It is gorgeous to look at, but what matters most to audiophiles is how it sounds.

## Setup

Wilson Audio is known for its attention to detail, even when that detail might seem unnecessary. For example, the manual states, "Place the ODD numbered modules in the LEFT channel section and the EVEN in the RIGHT channel position." Even the packaging is superbly thought out, and complete sets of tools and accessories are provided. Perhaps as should be expected at this price level, Wilson works hard to maximize the purchaser's pride of ownership. The head units are both contained in one crate; each woofer cabinet rolls out of its individual crate on sturdy wheels, which allow the speakers' positions in the room to be easily fine-tuned despite their size and weight.

When you buy a pair of Wilson Audio Specialties loudspeakers, the retailer will install them in your home and perform that fine-tuning. In my case, Wilson's Peter McGrath did the deed. Having adjusted the position and tilt of the tweeter and midrange modules for the height of my ears in my listening chair and their distance from the speakers—the exact settings are detailed in the manual's "Propagation Delay Correction" table—he rolled each speaker back and forth, and from side to side, until he was

**measurements, continued**

range unit (green) is set at a low 1.5kHz. Though some cone-breakup modes are evident in the midrange unit's output more than a couple of octaves above the crossover point, these are well suppressed by the low-pass filter. The tweeter's output is basically flat within its passband, and extends at full level to the 30kHz limit of this graph. However, a narrow suckout is visible between 4 and 5kHz, this perhaps arising from destructive interference between the tweeter's direct output and the reflections from the midrange enclosure.

To the left in fig.3 are shown the nearfield outputs of the midrange unit (green), the woofers (blue), and the port that loads the woofers (red). (Though they have different radiating diameters, the two woofers behave virtually identically, so I have shown the sum of their outputs.) The midrange unit has a very wide passband; it slopes down a little throughout the midrange, before crossing over to the woofers around 150Hz. For clarity, I haven't shown the nearfield output of the twin slots that load the midrange unit; they don't extend the unit's output, but, as in other Wilson speakers, act to increase its dynamic-range capability at the bottom of its passband. The woofers cover a narrow passband, though this

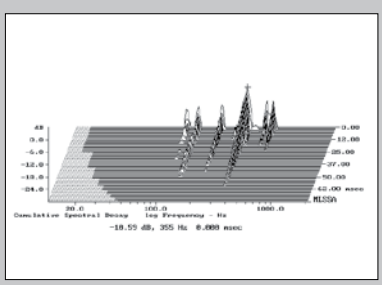

**Fig.2** Wilson Alexia, cumulative spectral-decay plot calculated from output of accelerometer fastened to center of midrange-enclosure side panel (MLS driving voltage to speaker, 7.55V; measurement bandwidth, 2kHz).

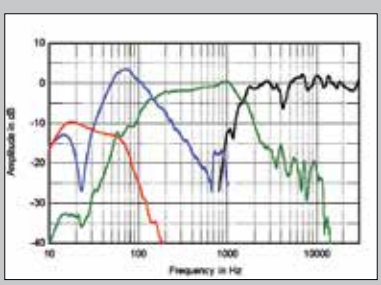


**Fig.3** Wilson Alexia, acoustic crossover on listening axis at 50", corrected for microphone response, with nearfield responses of: midrange unit (green), woofers (blue), port (red), respectively plotted below 350Hz, 1kHz, 300Hz.

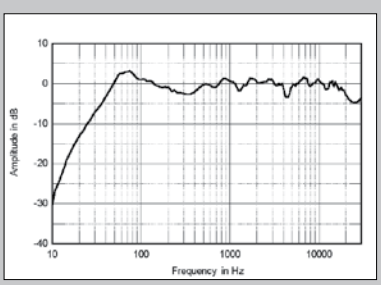


**Fig.4** Wilson Alexia, anechoic response on listening axis at 50", averaged across 30° horizontal window and corrected for microphone response, with complex sum of nearfield responses plotted below 300Hz.

confident that they were close to their optimal positions. McGrath then placed two strips of masking tape at 90° to one another, each marked with a 1/2"-spaced grid. Listening carefully to each speaker in turn, he moved the enclosure in 1/2" steps in both planes and adjusted the toe-in until each Alexia sounded its best. (The grilles were left off.) He then replaced the wheels with the spiked feet and declared himself satisfied.

McGrath had fine-tuned this setup using a single track: "So Do I," from singer-songwriter Christy Moore's *This Is the Day* (CD, Sony 5032552). I asked him what was so helpful about this recording. "This track features two acoustic guitars, double bass, and voice. There's a little bit of reverb on the voice, enough elements to make it sufficiently complex, but not overwhelmingly so," he explained. "The voice has been recorded without microphone proximity effect, so if you hear what sounds like proximity effect, it's actually due to a room mode."

JOHN GIOLAS

The Alexia wears its bulk well.

## Listening

When Peter McGrath left, I began my own listening. Pink noise sounded smooth and uncolored when I was sitting in my chair on the exact listening axis set by McGrath, using the position adjustments for the tweeter and midrange modules and the precise amount of toe-in he'd settled on. However, if I moved slightly above or below that position, a narrow band of brightness became apparent.

The 1/3-octave bass-warble tones on *Editor's Choice* (CD, Stereophile STPH016-2) sounded powerful down to the 25Hz band, with the 40Hz warble slightly down in level, the 32Hz warble exaggerated by the lowest mode in my room, and with the 20Hz warble still faintly audible. The half-step–spaced tonebursts on *Editor's Choice* spoke cleanly and evenly throughout the bass and midrange regions. When I listened to the woofer cabinet with a stethoscope, all surfaces were impressively inert. The midrange enclosure was also well damped, though the rear panel above the terminals was slightly lively around 525Hz, and the sidewalls had a low-level mode between 300 and 400Hz.

Enough of test tones. Fittingly, the first musical work I played through the Alexias was Beethoven's Violin Sonata 10 in G, Op.96 No.1, performed by violinist David Abel and pianist Julie Steinberg (24-bit/192kHz needle drop

**measurements, continued**

is visually exaggerated in fig.3 by the usual boost in the upper bass that results from the nearfield measurement technique. They roll off above 150Hz with what appears to be a second-order slope, and have a sharply defined notch in the low-bass output at the low port tuning frequency of 23.5Hz. The port's output covers a wider range than usual but rolls off rapidly above 70Hz, with no resonant modes visible.

Fig.4 shows how these individual responses sum in the farfield, averaged across a 30° horizontal window centered on the listening axis. The response is impressively flat throughout the upper midrange and treble, though that small suckout between 4 and 5kHz is still apparent. There is a slight lack of energy in the lower midrange where the outputs of the woofers and midrange unit slightly overlap. The peak in the midbass is entirely due to the nearfield measurement technique. The Alexia appears to have a slightly overdamped reflex alignment, which results in its nearfield output being down by 12dB at 20Hz. However, as the speaker's low-bass output will be reinforced by boundary reflections in all but very large rooms, this alignment optimizes low-frequency clarity without sacrificing effective bass extension. Very sensible.

If you compare the traces above 20kHz in figs. 3 and 4, you can see that the averaged response is more rolled off than the listening-axis response. This is because, as can be seen in the plot of the Alexia's lateral dispersion (fig.5), the tweeter becomes very directional above 12kHz or so. The apparent off-axis peak between 4 and 5kHz in this graph is due to that on-axis suckout noted earlier filling in to the speaker's sides. The same is true for the small depression in the on-axis response between 1 and 2kHz. Overall, the Alexia's off-axis behavior is well

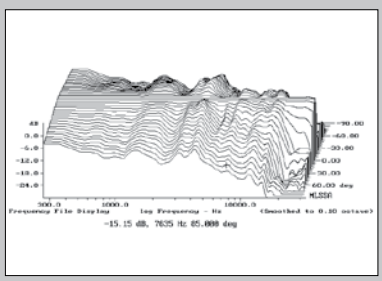

**Fig.5** Wilson Alexia, lateral response family at 50", normalized to response on listening axis, from back to front: differences in response 90–5° off axis, reference response, differences in response 5–90° off axis.

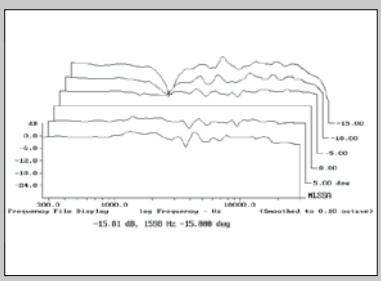

**Fig.6** Wilson Alexia, vertical response family at 50", normalized to response on listening axis, from back to front: differences in response 15–5° above axis, reference response, differences in response 5–10° below axis.

from LP, Wilson Audio W-8315). David Wilson, founder and president of Wilson Audio, had recorded this LP 30 years ago using a modified ReVox A77 tape deck with a pair of Schoeps omnidirectional microphones and a modified Audio Research preamplifier. In a February 1984 review, J. Gordon Holt described this recording as having "sound so completely and disarmingly natural that after 30 seconds you're unaware it's reproduced." Through the Alexias, the balance of the instruments was intimate yet unforced. They were reproduced with faithful tone colors—I heard no colorations—and the imaging was such that the musicians seemed to be in my room.

Next up was bluegrass virtuoso Chris Thile's performance of his transcriptions for mandolin of J.S. Bach's Sonatas and Partitas for Solo Violin. John Marks had sent me a YouTube link to Thile performing the *Preludio* from the Partita 3 in E (www.youtube.com/watch?v=ADtJqVMtAM); even with YouTube sound quality, Thile's musicianship was so convincing that I purchased the complete set (24/44.1 ALAC files, Nonesuch/HDtracks). I was right to do so. Thile gets the essence of these very violinistic works right. Yes, the mandolin's four courses of doubled strings are tuned the same as the violin's four strings, but that in itself does not guarantee that the transcriptions will work. However, Thile's light and shade in his phrasing is so empathetic that he almost convinces the listener that Bach had the mandolin in mind. The image of his instrument hung between and behind the Alexias, uncolored and well defined, with just the occasional plectrum stroke splashing off the walls of the dry recording venue.

Some big speakers sound big all the time. By contrast, the Alexia, though by no means a small speaker, was a chameleon. When the music demanded it, as with the Chris Thile album, the Alexia was a minimonitor. When the music was of larger scale, as with a 1987 recording of Fauré's *Requiem* with Robert Shaw conducting the Atlanta Symphony and Chorus (CD, Telarc 80135), the Alexias grew to accommodate the recorded sound, but without individual objects within the soundstage becoming exaggerated.

**The Alexia needs a tight fist on its low frequencies.**

This was one of the strengths of the Alexias: stereo images weren't bloated. With naturally captured recordings, everything was to the right scale. The image of the solo violin in the *Sanctus* of Fauré's *Requiem*, for example, was appropriately tiny. Similarly with the solo violin backed by a string choir that introduces the mezzo-soprano aria "Erbarme dich, mein Gott," from John Butt and the Dunedin Consort's performance of Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* (24/88.2 Studio Master download, Linn CKD 313P): Instrumental images were the right size at all frequencies. The original 1924 acoustic recording of the Paul Whiteman Concert Orchestra performing *Rhapsody in Blue*, with Gershwin himself on piano (an MP3 transcribed from 78s; see http://tinyurl.com/jvseqzg), was reproduced as a nearly dimensionless sphere of sound midway between the speakers. The piano had good body to its tone, and despite the mono recording,

**measurements, continued**

controlled and even, at least up to the point where the tweeter becomes directional. In the vertical plane (fig.6), a sharp suckout develops at the upper crossover point more than 5° above the listening axis, but the speaker otherwise appears relatively unfussy. There is nothing to suggest why I felt that moving my ears slightly above or below the listening axis introduced a narrow band of brightness, as mentioned in the "Listening" section of this review.

The blue trace in fig.7 shows the spatially averaged response of the Alexias in my listening room, fitted with the original 4.5 ohm series resistors in the tweeter feeds. (The trace was generated by averaging 20 1/6-octave-smoothed spectra, taken for the left and right speakers individually using SMUGSoftware's FuzzMeasure 3.0 program and a 96kHz sample rate, in a vertical rectangular grid 36" wide by 18" high and centered on the positions of my ears.)

As I mentioned, I felt that the Alexia lacked a little top-octave air in my room, so Wilson sent me substitute 3.5 ohm resistors to increase the output of the tweeters. The in-room response with these resistors is shown as the red trace in fig.7. You can see that the change increased the level of the region covered by the tweeter by approximately 1dB.

The vertical scale in fig.7 has been exaggerated to emphasize the difference made by the tweeter resistors. The red trace in fig.8 repeats the in-room response of the Alexias with the new tweeter resistors, plotted with my usual scaling. For reference, the blue trace in this graph shows the spatially averaged response of YG Acoustics' Sonja 1.3, which I reviewed in July. This kind of in-room response should gently slope down with increasing frequency, due to the increasing absorptivity of the room furnishings at high frequencies, and that is what the Alexias do. The YGAs had a little too much energy in the mid- and high-treble regions, the Wilsons a little

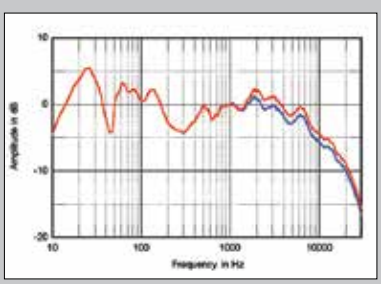


**Fig.7** Wilson Alexia, spatially averaged, 1/6-octave response in JA's listening room with: original tweeter resistors (blue), new tweeter resistors (red). Note expanded vertical scale compared with fig.8.

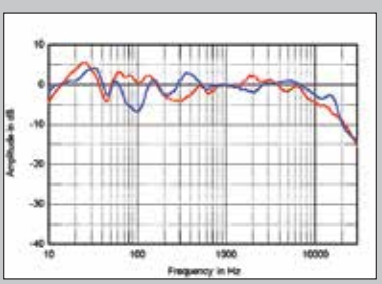


**Fig.8** Wilson Alexia, spatially averaged, 1/6-octave response in JA's listening room with new tweeter resistors (red); and of YG Acoustics' Sonja 1.3 (blue).

the music was well differentiated from the background shellac noise.

After a few weeks, I began to feel that some recordings were lacking in top-octave air. For example, the jingles of the tambourine in "I Got Plenty o' Nuttin'," from Brian Wilson's *Reimagines Gershwin* (ALAC files ripped from CD, Walt Disney), a delightful arrangement with bass harmonica echoing the signature of *Pet Sounds*, were a little suppressed. I asked Wilson Audio for a different set of resistors that would increase the tweeter level a little.

As you can see from the "Measurements" sidebar, the new resistors raised the tweeter's sensitivity by about 1dB. This might not seem a lot, but it turned out to be very audible—not surprising when you consider the tweeter's wide passband. (A speaker I reviewed several years ago had 0.5dB tweeter-level adjustments; the optimal setting turned out to be *between* two of these steps.) The 1dB boost was a little too much with the Classé CTM-600 monoblocks, but was perfect for the softer-toned Pass Labs SA-60.6 amplifiers. The Alexia's bass needed the Classés' firm control, however—this speaker needs a tight fist on its low frequencies. The bass guitar in the Levon Helm Band's live performance of Dylan's "It Takes a Lot to Laugh, It Takes a Train to Cry," from *MerleFest Ramble: MerleFest, NC 4/26/08* (26/96 Apple Lossless file transcoded from FLAC, FestivalLink.net), sounded just too tubby with any of the amplifiers I had to hand, other than the Classés.

But with less overcooked recordings, the Alexia's low frequencies spoke with clarity and authority. The tone of my fretless Carvin bass, played through a PJB Bass Briefcase with an auxiliary Hartke 2x10 cabinet—a sound I know *very* well—in a live recording I made of George Gershwin's

2 Though no longer available from the shop at Stereophile.com, this CD can be purchased at www.cantussings.org/buy-music/.

## ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

**Analog Sources** Linn Sondek LP12 turntable with Lingo power supply, Linn Ekos tonearm, Linn Arkiv B cartridge.
**Digital Sources** Marantz NA-11S1 media server; Astell&Kern AK100 media player; Parasound Halo CD 1 CD player; Ayre Acoustics C-5xe$^{MP}$ universal player; Apple 2.7GHz i7 Mac mini running OS10.7, iTunes 10, Pure Music 1.89; MSB Diamond DAC IV D/A processor with Diamond Power Base; dCS Vivaldi SACD player-D/A system; Electrocompaniet ECD2, NAD M51, Arcam FMJ D33 D/A converters; Ayre Acoustics QA-9 USB A/D converter.
**Preamplification** Linn Linnto, Channel D Seta L phono preamplifiers; Pass Labs XP-30 line preamplifier.
**Power Amplifiers** Classé CT-M600, Lamm M1.2 Reference, MBL 9007, Pass Labs XA60.5 (all monoblocks).
Loudspeakers Sony SS-NA2ES, YG Acoustics Sonja 1.3.
**Cables** Digital: Kubala-Sosna Elation! AES/EBU, AudioQuest Coffee, Belkin Gold USB, Transparent USB (with dCS Vivaldi). FireWire: AudioQuest FireWire 400 (prototype). Interconnect (balanced): Kubala-Sosna Elation!, Transparent, AudioQuest Wild Blue; Speaker: Kubala-Sosna Elation! AC: Kubala-Sosna Elation!, manufacturers' own.
**Accessories** Target TT-5 equipment racks; Ayre Acoustics Myrtle Blocks; ASC Tube Traps, RPG Abffusor panels; Shunyata Research Dark Field cable elevators; Audio Power Industries 116 Mk.II & PE-1, APC S-15 AC line conditioners (computers, hard drive). AC power comes from two dedicated 20A circuits, each just 6' from breaker box.—**John Atkinson**

**measurements, continued**

too much presence-region energy; the latter may well correlate with their superb retrieval of recorded detail. Though both speaker models have two spaced woofers, the Sonja 1.3 deals better with the "floor-bounce" region in the lower midrange. The Alexia, however, has a more even output in the bass, with more energy apparent in its port-tuning region below the frequency of the lowest mode in my room.

In the time domain, the Alexia's step response on its listening axis is shown in fig.9. This graph reveals that, as in the Alexandria XLF, the tweeter is connected in positive acoustic polarity, the midrange driver in negative polarity. However, with the tweeter module set up by Peter McGrath, the graph also shows that the negative-going decay of the tweeter's step smoothly blends with the negative-going start of the midrange unit's step, confirming the excellent frequency-domain integration of their outputs seen in fig.4. Moving slightly above or below the intended axis destroys that smooth blending of step responses. Fig.9 also reveals that the woofers are both connected in positive acoustic polarity (confirmed by their nearfield step responses, not shown), with, at this too-close distance, the upper woofer's output clearly arriving at the mike before the lower woofer's. The cumulative spectral-decay plot on this axis (fig.10) did not look as clean as I was expecting. There is a minor ridge of delayed energy around 15kHz, this coincident with a small, narrow notch in the on-axis response, but this will be benign.

Overall, the Alexia measures well. Its Aspherical Group Delay feature appears to be effective at optimizing its performance at the height of the listener's ears—not only in the time domain, but also, I conjecture, in adjusting the frequency and depth of that small mid-treble suckout in the direct response to have minimal effect on the music.—**John Atkinson**

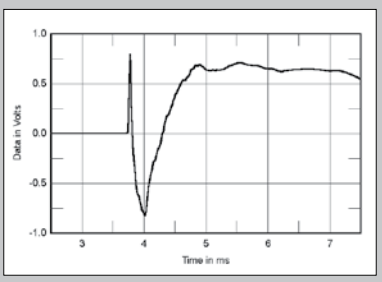


**Fig.9** Wilson Alexia, step response on listening axis at 50" (5ms time window, 30kHz bandwidth).

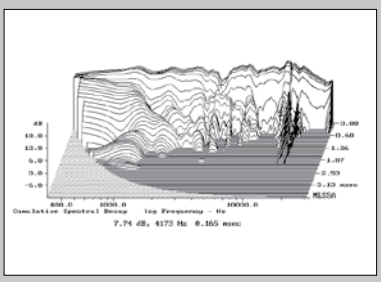

**Fig.10** Wilson Alexia, cumulative spectral-decay plot on listening axis at 50" (0.15ms risetime).

"Summertime," accompanying Bob Reina on Rhodes piano and Mark Flynn on drums, and using a crossed pair of DPA cardioids and my Nagra-D recorder, was as natural as I have heard. And the ambience of the outdoor, poolside venue—including the ringing of someone's cell phone—was almost fetishistic in its resolution of fine detail.

**At one-fourth the XLF's price, the Alexia gets remarkably close to its bigger sibling in terms of musical satisfaction.**

I had played with Bob on another live recording of "Summertime," this time at the Chicago Experience during the 1993 Summer CES. I was playing my Fender Precision through an Ampeg SVT 8x10 cabinet, and Bob was using a Hammond organ stop on his electronic keyboard. Unfortunately, the tessitura of his left-hand register neatly overlapped the bass guitar's, and through most speakers the two bass lines, as they underlie guitarist Frank Doris's killer solo lines, blur into mud. Not through the Alexias.

Piano was well served by the Alexias. My favorite performance of Brahms's Piano Concerto 2 is by Emil Gilels with the Berlin Philharmonic conducted by Eugen Jochum (Apple Lossless files ripped from CD, Deutsche Grammophon). The low notes of the piano's entrance following the lonely horn motif at the start literally growled out of the Alexias. Yes, the orchestral sound on this 1972 recording is a little on the dry side, and the orchestra tends to peer over the shoulders of the solo instrument, but the piano was muscular on the Wilsons.

With the increase in tweeter level, Keith Jarrett's piano on *The Köln Concert* had a vivid, vibrant sound (24/96 FLAC files, ECM/HDtracks)—perhaps a touch *too* vibrant. However, the high frequencies of Art Lande's equally closely miked Steinway on his *While She Sleeps* (SACD, Blue Coast BCRSA 2012a) sounded perfectly in balance with the midrange.

What the Alexias did better than almost any other speaker I've had in my listening room was to preserve differentiations among singers. In close harmony, the characters of individual voices didn't run together, yet ensemble blends were not diluted. This is very much what you hear in real life. For example, in 2007 I recorded Cantus's *While You Are Alive* (CD, Cantus CTS-1208), the album of contemporary choral music that included Eric Whitacre's *Lux Aurumque*, mentioned earlier.[2] That album takes its title from a line in the lyric of *A Sound Like This*, settings of poems by Kabir (translated by Robert Bly) commissioned by Cantus from Minnesotan composer Edie Hill. Hill wrote the piece with each of the nine singers featured on this recording in mind, specifically tailoring the tessituras and harmonies for their voices. In an aleatoric section in the penultimate movement, each singer enters in turn, singing the same lyric but with a different pitch and timing. Very rapidly, what was originally the pure tone of one singer is transformed into pitchless chaos. The high-resolution file postpones that onset of chaotic sound a little compared with the CD—yet such was the resolving power of the Alexias, especially when driven by the Lamm monoblocks, that that breakdown of pitch was postponed even longer.

And in the fourth movement, *Thinkers Listen*, spoken dialogue is accompanied by hand claps, knee and chest slaps, and stamping feet, all of which, via the Alexias, lit up the acoustic of Goshen College's Sauder Hall like photographic flashes.

Peter McGrath's use of a Christy Moore track to fine-tune the Alexias' positions reminded me that Moore had once played with Irish band Moving Hearts. Though their 1985 instrumental album, *The Storm* (LP, Tara 1304), doesn't include Moore, it was in heavy rotation in my system in the days before I joined *Stereophile*. This album mixes traditional Irish melodies and instruments with synthesizer, electric and acoustic guitars, bass guitar, saxophones, bouzouki, and rock drums. The day before the Alexias were to be returned to Wilson, I ripped *The Storm* to 24/192 AIFF files using the Ayre Acoustics QA-9 A/D converter.

The needle drop demonstrated all of the Alexia's strengths: The speaker's superbly clear low frequencies kept separate the similarly pitched sounds of the bodhran and tom toms, and allowed the bass guitar to remain clearly differentiated in the mix from the kick drum; the clean, uncolored treble allowed Davy Spillane's uilleann pipes to wail convincingly; the unrestrained dynamic range revealed the layering of musical dynamics that Spillane achieves by increasing the complexity of his ornamentation at climaxes as his pipes are doubled by other melody instruments; the speaker's superb clarity allowed the subtle ambience surrounding Spillane's low whistle and Eoghan O'Neill's fretless bass in the final track, "May Morning Dew," to be readily resolved; but most important, as with *While You Are Alive*, the Wilson speakers allowed the integrity of the music making to shine, unencumbered by artifice.

## Summing Up

I have now listened on several occasions to Wilson Audio's Alexandria XLF speakers in Michael Fremer's listening room, as well as in David Wilson's own listening room and at retailers Definitive Audio (Seattle) and Innovative Audio (Manhattan). As impressed as I have been by Wilson's flagship loudspeaker—bear in mind that the XLF costs a mind-blowing $200,000/pair—I am actually more impressed by the Alexia, which, at one-fourth the XLF's price, gets remarkably close to its bigger sibling in terms of musical satisfaction.

Yes, $48,500/pair makes the Alexia still an expensive loudspeaker. But its clarity, its uncolored, full-range balance, its flexibility in setup and optimization, and most of all its sheer musicality, are, if not unrivaled, rare. If I were to retire tomorrow, the Wilson Alexia would be the speaker I would buy to provide the musical accompaniment to that retirement. ■