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Bigger Than It Looks... And Cleverer Too! Wilson's Wonderful Duette

by Chris Thomas

Being a long-standing fan of stand mount speakers meant that I was always going to jump at the chance of a serious listen to the "baby" Wilson. But after several months conditioning by the remarkable Eben C1 it soon became clear I was going to need to make a bit of a head jump to understand and enjoy them. They are bigger than I had imagined from the photographs and quite room dominant, piano black and tall on their stands. And what about that big bass/mid driver and Scanspeak ring radiator tweeter? This is the very antithesis of the Eben's ceramic and ribbon units, to say nothing of their resonance-controlled stand. In comparison, this Wilson is a bit of throw back in terms of driver technology but has obviously had tremendous attention paid to the cabinet and crossover.

Precision and procedure are needed when it comes to installation. Tiny changes in position bring about big changes in sound and toe-in especially needs to be thought about with no regard for previous experience to influence you. RG and I painstakingly installed them in their free-air guise (as you'll probably already know, they can also be configured for near wall use) but even so, it may take a further day or so of tiny refinements to optimize them as they settle in – but believe me, it is time well spent because, when it is cooking, the Duette is a very interesting design indeed and one that offers an almost unique solution to some of the limitations intrinsic in stand-mount speaker performance. It should go without saying that the system itself and its installation in particular will need to be exemplary but, thus equipped, you will find that the

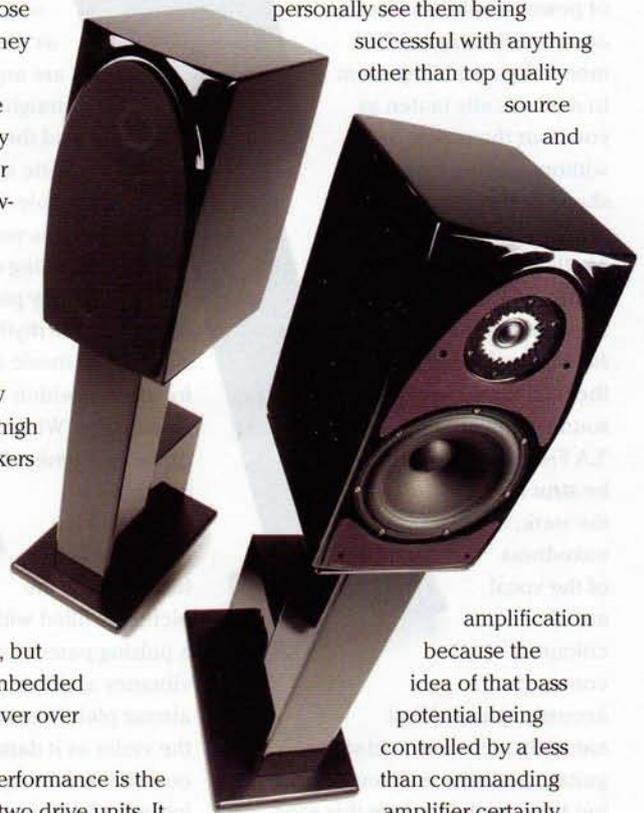
Duettes are so vice-free that you will be able to listen to music for hours on end. Where most high quality stand-mount speakers project the music vividly into the room, the Wilson produces deep and expansive views of the recording that just seem to appear in and around the speakers. I suppose you could say that they are somewhat laid back but I really like the perspectives they offer, especially their portrayal of ultra low-level detail and the way they preserve ambience within recordings. They are certainly not as explicit and finely etched through the high frequencies as speakers like the baby Eben or the Beryllium-equipped Focal speakers and don't have their obvious articulation, but they have notable imbedded resolution, that is never over analytical.

The key to their performance is the integration of those two drive units. It is remarkable and music is portrayed as a whole, living, breathing thing. The scale and full-blown size of the sound means that you never run up against that small-speaker brick wall where the music simply cannot fill the room. The more you appreciate just how comfortably the speaker copes with any musical situation, the easier it is to understand Wilson's decision to go with that big bass/mid driver that just squeezes into the cabinet. Then there

is the bonus of good efficiency and bandwidth as the Duette, while not exactly subterranean in bass response, reaches down and moves air with power and authority at frequencies that other stand-mounts merely suggest.

This is one of the reasons why I cannot personally see them being

successful with anything other than top quality source and



amplification because the idea of that bass potential being controlled by a less than commanding amplifier certainly doesn't appeal to me

at all*. But, get it right and they are concise and to the point. Overall I find their tonal balance a touch on the dark side but, where individual instruments are concerned, they are superbly charismatic with a subtle delicacy and space that brings their character ▶

*Although both RG's and AS's experiences suggest the contrary. I guess that assumptions are hard to overcome, because I just can't see how it would work...

▶ to life and this helps enormously if you are interested in examining technique and playing style.

At first I thought they were a little slow but time and experience have changed my mind. They certainly don't have the snap and obvious pace of the micro-focussed Eben C1 but they deal with music in a very different way to that speaker. Their speed is not linked to tonal sharpness like many other two-way designs, but drive the Duettes hard with a pair of power amplifiers like the accomplished Ayre MXR mono-blocs and they seem to rhythmically tauten as you pour the power on, without losing their shape or that expansive quality and atmosphere that are their most compelling attributes. Listen to the opening track of *Heartworn Highways* and the high and lonesome sound of Guy Clark's 'LA Freeway' and you'll be struck by the stark, dry nakedness of the vocal and the colourful contrast and acoustic space of that naturally recorded steel-string guitar. It's just a man and his guitar, but through the Duettes this song is positively tactile and it becomes impossible to do anything else other than to listen to the story unfolding as every small melancholic vocal inflection and chord change is ripe with expression and dripping in presence.

In another musical land completely you'll find *Drive East* by a classical Indian collective known as Yashila that consists of a very hot percussion duo playing an array of Indian

instruments and Kala Ramnath's simply gorgeous violin. She is a truly incredible musician who plays wildly exotic Indian classical passages in a series of slurred notes that are perhaps harmonically alien but so attractive to the Western ear. Classical

Indian musicians playing music inspired by the landscape of Andalusia? It works for me, but now the system challenges are very different as the tempos are anything but straightforward and the tonal palette is wildly variable. The Duettes were

simply stunning on this album, as they picked up on the whole rhythmic sway of the music and focussed it within a deep soundstage. While a drone instrument floats its ambient mood-making influence in the background, the picture is filled with a pulsing percussive vibrancy and this almost plaintive call from the violin as it darts in and out with scattering runs full, of the intense and vivid flavours of the East. It's that word atmosphere again and the speaker's willingness to bend to the demands of such wildly variable material without imposing its own characteristics. I loved the intensity that the Wilson's bring and the fact that they never seem breathless or stretched and this album can certainly tax a system's reserves and in particular its ability to deliver that violin's full vocabulary from the shape of the note to the

sometimes edgy rasping colour that she puts on it.

The Duette's are certainly different to any stand-mount speaker I have used for a long time. In many ways they have more in common with a pair of Acoustic Research speakers I owned many years ago. The big, paper-coned driver also gave that speaker an expansive and full-bodied weight that I remember with fondness. These are very different from the advanced material drivers that we find in the high-tech designs of today.

I like both approaches and have come to believe that these Wilson Duettes are really quite special. By offering a totally different set of compromises they also provide an alternative view of the music, but one that is no less interesting, involving or enjoyable. The more I used them, the more I liked them – and you can take that as a firm recommendation. ➤+



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