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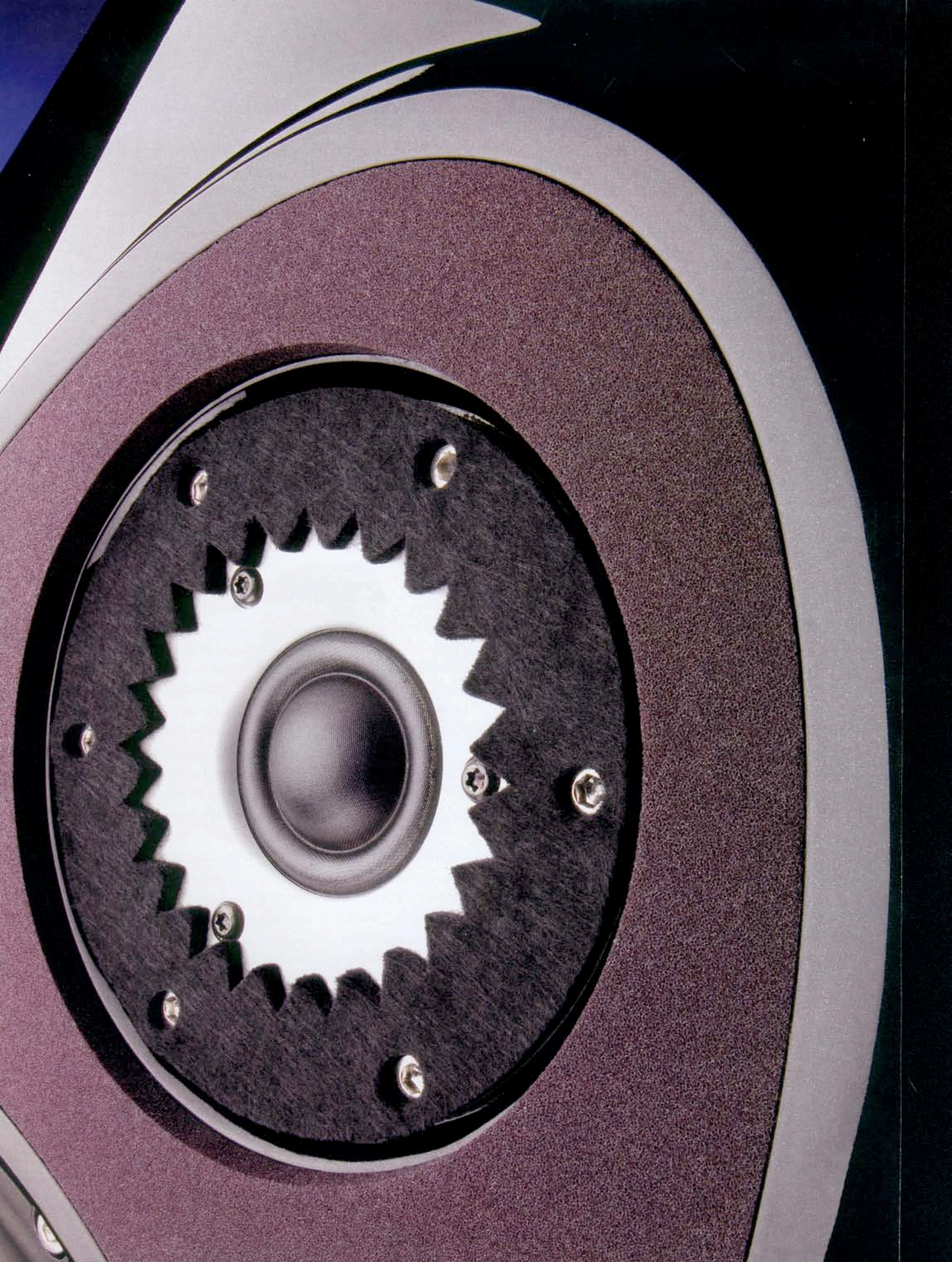
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Wilson Audio Duette Loudspeaker

by Roy Gregory

Once upon a time – well, 20 years ago to be exact – the world first clapped eyes on a little speaker that couldn't. Mind you, that didn't stop it trying. Wilson's WATT, with its truncated shape, minimal frontal area and rigid, non-wood cabinet established so many trends that it could and should be described as revolutionary. It set new standards for focus and transparency; and it set a new benchmark for price. At a little over £5000 it was three times the price of a Celestion SL700 – and you got a pair of stands with those!*

Besides which, as I've already hinted, the WATT was wonderful yet flawed, its truncated structure matched by an equally truncated bass response that led to a number of attempted fixes (official and unofficial) before the eventual arrival of the Puppy subwoofers, an addition that proved so successful that the two became almost inseparable. But whilst the Puppies added the necessary weight to the WATTs' performance, they placed an equal burden on the wallet effectively transforming a high-quality compact monitor into a floor-standing speaker with near full-range performance and a price tag to match. Now, eight generations into their evolution (and six for the subs) the WATTs have ceased to be an individual item, the combination simply referred to by all and sundry as System 8. Yes, you can still buy the head units separately, but the public mated them into a single entity many years ago, and what the public puts together only a fool of a

dealer or manufacturer tries to part...

All of which sets the stage for the introduction of a new, compact speaker to perform picket duty on the performance parameters of the Wilson Audio range. But never let it be said that David Wilson doesn't learn from his experiences. The new model is an entirely different beast to the WATT, in thought, finish and action.

Whilst the Duette moniker nicely describes the product's physical nature as a two-driver, two-way system, it operates descriptively on more levels than that. Here's a speaker that offers an introduction to the dual foundations of the Wilson ethos, both Wilson Audio's approach to audio reproduction and the company's almost obsessive standards of fit and finish. Likewise, the Duettes are equally at home as objects of desire for high-end aspirants or as extra, even secondary speakers for those who already own the likes of MAXX or the X2.

If the idea of using £9K speakers in a "secondary" role seems somewhat fanciful, just follow the logic. Wilson's customer base is largely US-centric and extremely affluent. Given the importance of multi-channel and multi-room systems in that market, the company wants to offer customers who have already subscribed to the Wilson philosophy the opportunity to enjoy that thinking and its associated technologies without diluting the quality of their experience. The WATCH series handle the multi-channel requirement admirably. Now Duette

deals with multi-room demands – not to mention all those second, third or fourth homes...

Living in the impoverished UK, this might all seem a tadge removed from reality, but it's a background that's essential to understanding the thinking that's gone into the Duette; thinking that at once makes it a remarkable product, and for European audiophiles, arguably

the most accessible and important Wilson to date. The WATT was (and still is) an astonishing success story, often imitated but never bettered by a host of lookalike pretenders. But now, its sonic performance (as a compact two-way) and even its sales success risks being eclipsed by this new sibling – the Duette really is that good!

Most Wilson speakers have placed a heavy (some would say crushing) burden on the system to which they're connected and the acoustic space in which they're used. When it's right it's wonderful; when it's wrong – you'll know all about it. There's no escaping that monitor DNA. That's what made the WATT startlingly transparent and dynamically coherent; and at the same time super critical of program and set-up (and potentially frustrating as a result). The Duette starts from a different premise altogether. Let's face it, even the super-rich audio enthusiast can't turn over every room in his mansion to the demands of precise speaker placement and massive driving amplifiers. A speaker designed to succeed in such a role is going to need to be easier to place and easier to run – without compromising performance. ▶



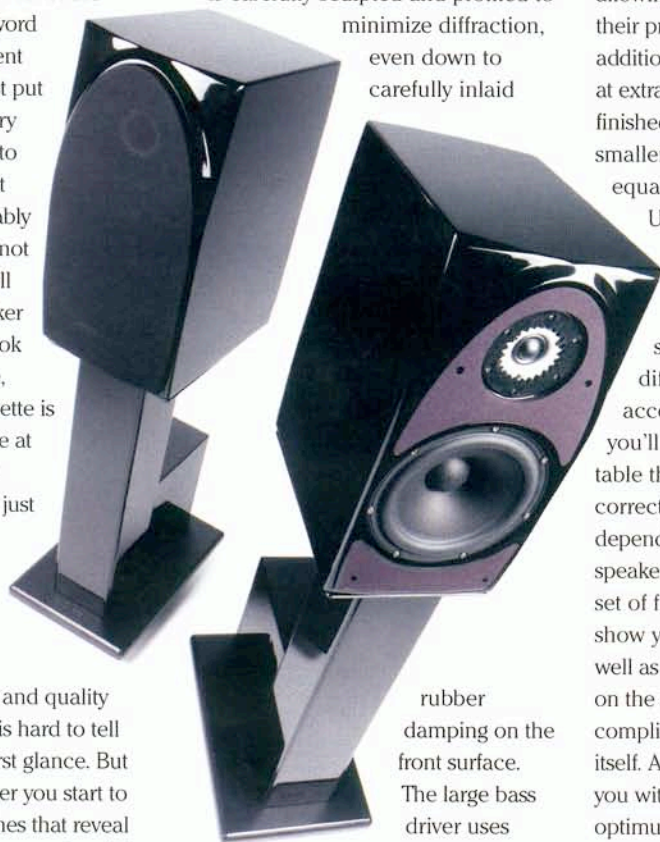
* Which is why I was surprised to hear Wilson expressing doubt about the perceived value of the new Duette. At a little under £9K for the speakers (and with two decades of elapsed time and inflation in between) there's no doubt in my mind that these offer something of a bargain compared to those early WATTs.

► Which is precisely what makes the Duette so special; the very qualities that make it work in its “secondary speaker” role also make it more accessible and attractive to high-end aspirants. This is one Wilson where the cost of ancillaries really needn’t exceed the cost of the speaker itself. And if the word “secondary” seems redolent with compromise, let’s just put it in perspective; secondary in this instance is relative to speaker systems starting at \$40K and going considerably higher in price. Also, let’s not forget that in order to fulfill its function the new speaker has to sound as well as look the part. Make no mistake, sonically speaking the Duette is more than just competitive at the \$10K mark – it’s a star.

On the surface, this is just another expensive two-way. It lacks the startling shape and constructivist aesthetic of a WATT, and in these days of Chinese manufacturing, the depth and quality of one piano black finish is hard to tell from another, at least at first glance. But once you look a little closer you start to recognise the subtle touches that reveal the depth of thought that’s gone into this product. David Wilson designed this speaker from the ground up to work in what he terms “hostile” environments whilst still delivering his signature sound quality. Once you move away from the ideal of free-space siting, then early reflections and boundary reinforcement impinge on performance, so the departure point for the design became bookshelf mounting. Of course, anybody who remembers AR loudspeakers will know that US bookshelves are considerably larger (and presumably sturdier) than their UK equivalents. The Duette too is larger than you might think, a 9” two-way getting on for a cubic foot and a half in volume. And that’s all useable space; the crossover

comes separately, but more on that later.

The cabinet is built from a carefully structured mix of Wilson’s proprietary X and M3 materials, combined to create a rigid yet critically damped enclosure. The two-inch thick baffle is carefully sculpted and profiled to minimize diffraction, even down to carefully inlaid



rubber damping on the front surface. The large bass driver uses a paper cone

designed to deliver the speed and scale that normally escape compact systems using smaller drivers. The massive motor assembly helps maintain dynamic range and efficiency, while the lightweight cone and careful profiling help maintain output up to the crossover frequency: The driver is loaded by a large, rear-facing aluminium port. Tweeter is a Wilson/ScanSpeak co-development of that Company’s increasingly familiar one-inch ring radiator, a design that happens to share more than a few mechanical characteristics with the Focal inverted domes, so long synonymous with Wilson’s speakers. The carefully constructed grille fits snug to the baffle and is built on a carefully

profiled X material frame rather than the more usual MDF; yes, the speaker sounds better without it, but the difference is far more subtle than usual. Both the Grille and the cabinet are each available in four different shades, allowing interior designers to specify their preferred combination, while an additional 12 paint colours are available at extra cost. The end result is a superbly finished cabinet that succeeds in looking smaller than it is, as well as being equally attractive grille-on or off.

Unpack the Duettes and one of the first things you’ll come across is a set of small steel cones. Look closely and you’ll see that they come in three different heights, each stamped accordingly. In the 80 page manual you’ll find a set of diagrams and a table that enable you to select the correct combination of cones depending on the height at which the speaker is placed, as well as an extensive set of frequency response curves that show you the effect of that height as well as vertical or horizontal placement on the speaker’s balance. It sounds complicated but in reality it’s simplicity itself. All Wilson are doing is supplying you with the information to judge the optimum position for your speakers from amongst the options available. So, if you’ve got a shelf at 4’ off the floor and another at 1’6”, the diagrams show you just how those different placements are likely to affect the speakers’ frequency response, as well as selecting the correct combination of cones to tilt the listening axis correctly.

Of course, the accuracy of that tilt angle will depend on the precise placement of those small, steel cones. Wilson could just indent or mark positions but that would mar the finish, an important consideration if you have to allow for upright as well as horizontal, mirror imaged placement. So instead they sink tiny magnets into the cabinet, under the paintwork, which ensure that the cones are placed (and stay) in ►

▶ the right position. Those magnets are in both sides and the bottom of the cabinet, thus ensuring the best possible performance whether you stand the speaker up or lay it down, all without a visible blemish. Brass discs are also provided to protect the surface on which the speaker stands. Like I said, they haven't just thought of everything, they've provided elegant solutions to each practical and sonic problem.

You see further evidence of this in the crossovers. These are external and fully potted, the resulting bricks weighing 8.4kg each and matching the speakers for finish. Given that the speaker cabinets themselves weigh in at a significant 17.6kg each, separating the crossovers offers practical as well as sonic benefits. As well as making placement easier and the speaker smaller, who wants to try and mount a 60lb speaker at head height? Each crossover has four pairs of terminals: one pair for input, two for output and the last for adjusting the tweeter level – this is done by strapping high-quality resistors across the terminals, just like on Wilson's bigger speakers. A purpose built and clearly labeled umbilical is provided to pass signal from crossover to speaker.

Delve deeper into the instruction manual and you'll also find an extensive section on building the speaker into a cabinet or wall, for which Wilson will supply a fixing kit, again ensuring optimum termination and mounting in even this least promising of scenarios. You'll also see a section on stand mounting, and this is where things get really interesting. As much as the Duette name refers to the speaker's two-way topology and the fact that you can place it horizontally or vertically, it also indicates that this is one speaker that is equally happy placed close to the wall or mounted in free space, as a discrete supplier of high-quality background music or as the optimally placed outlet for a dedicated two-channel set-up. Which brings us back to that name and perhaps its most important

interpretation. It's this versatility, this duality that makes the Duette such an attractive and novel product. Incidentally, that's what they've dubbed the crossover – the Novel – I guess because if you stand it on a shelf that's just what it looks like; something thick, brooding and heavyweight like a Burgess (but definitely not a Maclean).

Wilson (naturally) offer a set of dedicated stands for the Duette, constructed from a solid X material column linking thick aluminium top and bottom plates. The upper plate is machined to accept the brass discs and cones that support the Duette in its shelf-mounted guise. The bottom plate is spiked and its top surface rebated to accept the cross-over, tucking it out of sight behind the column. You also get a different (white) umbilical and an alternative set of tweeter resistors for free space mounting. If you want to go with the stands but place the speakers close to the wall, stick with the brown umbilical and original resistors. For audiophiles afflicted with small listening rooms and used to the conflicting spatial demands of system and family, this array of options is almost dizzying.



Add to this positional flexibility an efficiency of 89dB, a 4 Ohm impedance (with a reasonably benign minimum at 3 Ohms) and a bandwidth that will stretch down to a -3dB point at 36Hz in room and you can begin to see the appeal. Whilst Wilson suggest a minimum amplifier power of 7 Watts, I'm not sure I'd go that far. I think sensible options start at around 100 Watts of solid-state power, about half of that if you are using valves (those big lumps of iron at the outputs

of tube amps do have their uses). It's an operating envelope that embraces any number of affordable, audiophile integrated amps, bringing the real cost of Wilson ownership well within reach of a huge potential audience for whom the brand was previously nothing more than a wishful pipedream. But the real kicker comes with the musical performance. It's no good having a cut-price



Wilson if the sound is cut-price too. The Duette may have started from a different departure point, taking a different route to its goal, but whilst that goal is ultimately shared with the other Wilson speakers, it's made choices and picked up tricks along its own particular developmental path that give it its own distinctive character and presentation. No it can't match the absolute transparency and super revealing qualities of a MAXX2. Nor can it match the various floor-standing systems' sheer dynamic range. But the Duette has tricks of its own and the result is a less extreme view of the musical event and crucially, one that many listeners will find easier to live with.

Listen to the Duette and the first thing that strikes you is just how understated, immediately accessible and downright inviting it sounds. Indeed, it delivers so much simply plonked down straight out of the crate that you might be fooled into thinking that you've struck lucky and leave it at that. But rest assured, this is just your first lesson in the reality of the Duette. This speaker never sounds bad; but don't let that convince you that it ▶

▶ can't sound even better. Nor is set-up the trial of determination and fortitude demanded by other Wilson designs. An experienced practitioner will have the speaker set up and optimized in a few hours – about half of which will have been spent unpacking and assembling them. Still, seemingly small adjustments in position can still elevate the performance from the merely excellent to the truly spectacular. Which is where, as a customer you can happily leave things, sit back and enjoy the results. But as a reviewer, a product like the Duette demands more than that. As well as assessing the way it sounds, you have to look at the why too, which is where this latest Wilson gets so interesting – and challenging.

Sit down and start to dissect the performance of the Duette and certain things should be immediately apparent (I've avoided the term "obvious" because as we'll see, very little that the Duette does can be described as obvious). First will be the way that the speakers simply disappear within the soundfield. Even with hard left-right recordings, the instruments never seem to be lodged in the cabinets, voices don't centre on the cones and the music isn't defined by the plane or the height of the speakers. Hand in hand with that comes the coherence of the soundstage – assuming of course there is one on the recording. Width, depth and height of the acoustic are all clear, as is the relative size and position of instruments within it. Importantly, the scope of that soundstage differs dramatically from one recording to the next, an important aspect when it comes to another Duette strength – scale. These speakers are so invisible, their stage so massive and their

dynamics so surprisingly effortless, that if you shut your eyes and play something full-range like an orchestra, they'll readily fool you into thinking they're much bigger than they are. Indeed, with adequate power (which means



just that – not DI from the national grid) this compact two-way will provide all the scale and impact many listeners will ever need. But the really clever bit is that the scale thing works both ways.

Small, intimate recordings are exactly that, never overblown or out of proportion. Instead, the Duette seems to expand or contract on demand and without apparent compromise; when it's soft it's very soft, but when it's big it's BAD. Play the RCA Soria *Carmen* and the speakers are unphased by this most bombastic of overtures, played I might add, with typically Gallic flair. These are not so much crescendos as orchestral detonations, yet the picture never gets confused or collapses, the space never wavers as the system scales the huge dynamic swings.

The first act opens onto a wide stage, the square in front of the cigarette factory, sleepy and barely peopled. Again, the speakers bridge the difference in scale and presentation utterly effortlessly. Likewise, as the chorus starts to people the stage, everything is held in scale and proportion, a trick these speakers achieve almost unnoticed. So, as easily and deftly as they track *Carmen*'s voice, as intimately as they portray her challenge to Don José, they also preserve the privacy of it amidst the

swirl of the chorus and the tolling of the shift-change bell. All of which contributes significantly to the sheer believability and drama of events, the quality that lets you listen to the musical performance itself, rather than the performance of the bits doing the reproducing.

But, if you stop to think about those qualities, interestingly they are all external to the musical performance itself, enabling and presenting rather than comprising it. Try to look inside, to dismantle what is going on and how it's happening and things get much more complex. Let's take a fairly prosaic characteristic like detail as an example. Normally, it's immediately obvious that a speaker is detailed – but not here. Indeed, if you let someone listen to the Duette for a while and then ask them afterwards whether it's a detailed speaker, chances are they'll say something along the lines of, "Not really". Now ask them while it's playing; you can almost see them listen into the music, you probably will see them realise just how much detail there is. The difference is that the speaker isn't firing it at you. It's there all the time – you're just not aware of it unless you think about it and the beauty of the Duette is that that thought never occurs.

Listen to Gillian Welch and David Rawlings performing 'Revelator' (from *Time (The Revelator)* Acony ACNY0103) and you'll hear the two guitars, perfectly separate in space and tone, the images realistically proportioned, the harmonies so beautifully executed, the measured pacing and subtle building of the level and attack in the playing. Nothing stands out, but if you want to follow one part, appreciate perhaps the deft control and constrained power in Rawlings' picking for instance, it's there, just as clear as you like. That dynamic discrimination is what brings this track to life and gives it such power, the balance between Rawlings' attack and Welch's measured strumming. The Duettes allows it full rein delivering ▶

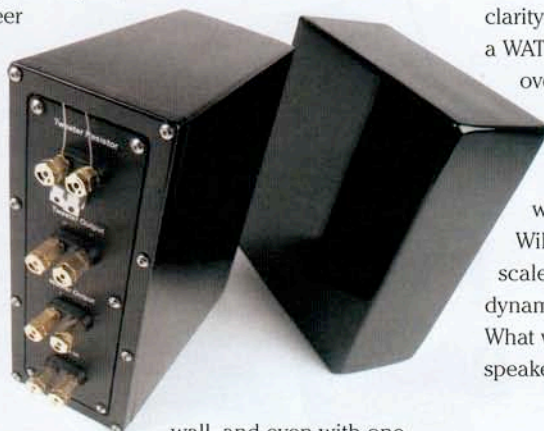
▶ the full, unfettered expressive impact of this raw recording and performance as a result.

Likewise, du Pré's Elgar *Cello Concerto* (the concert performance on Testament) quivers with life and energy, the drama and tension of the playing augmented by the tactile sense of sheer energy in the bowing, both of the solo instrument and the orchestra, especially the basses, but also by the extraneous noises and shuffles of players and audience. Vocal details in familiar songs, the sense of enunciation and the singer working their voice, their relationship to the microphone, these things and more are all there to be heard, but more importantly, to contribute to the sense and life of the performance itself. Those insights into the playing and technique of the performers – even just the effort that they're putting in – bind that performance to reality, breathing life into the recording.

What you are hearing is detail, but detail in the service of the music as opposed to being an end in itself. The result is astonishing musical coherence, built on layers of musical and dynamic nuance, the whole greater than the sum of its parts. Just like real music in fact – which is why the Duette is so instantly and easily gratifying. It's not just detail or dynamic discrimination, harmonic colour or structure, focus and transparency; it's all those and more, bound together into a single, coherent whole. What these speakers get right is the inner balance between all those attributes and the whole they create. Music ebbs and flows with a natural pace, unforced and unrestrained, rhythmically or dynamically. Sure, they don't have the bass depth, texture and power, the sheer impact and astonishing transparency of a MAXX, but within their dynamic envelope (which is far wider than you'd think) they are remarkably satisfying and convincing, and that holds true for the listening seat, walking around the

room or listening from the next room. This is one speaker that doesn't make a fuss or draw attention to itself, it just gets on with the job.

Although the majority of my listening was done on stands and in free space, I also ran the Duettes close to the



wall, and even with one on a stand and one on a shelf. Nothing I did disturbed that inner calm and sense of structure. Sure, you lose some soundstage depth and a little of the space and air around instruments, but the speaker remains entirely recognizable, its essential character and considerable musical strengths preserved intact. I also ran them with a wider than usual set of ancillary equipment, and whilst the Duettes were quick to reveal differences between source components or driving amps, they never allowed those differences to dominate the musical performance. I achieved excellent results with amps as varied as the SQF Pharao, the c-j CA200, the Linear Bs, and most memorably of all, the Connoisseur 4-2L SE driving the RADIA or briefly but spectacularly, the Karan KAM 1200s – a truly awesome combination.

Through it all, the Duettes' musical coherence reigned supreme, their sense of natural balance preserved undisturbed. David Wilson has indeed achieved his goal, mating the levels of musical insight demanded by his brand name with a practical package which, if not entirely unconcerned

by the niceties of site and situation, remains musically unimpaired. Under the least promising of conditions their performance is remarkable; optimized and ideally sited it really is spectacular. It might lack the immediately astonishing, stop you in your tracks clarity and precision of something like a WATT, but it offers a more inviting overall coherence in its place – and burgeoning satisfaction as a result. In the Duette we have a speaker system that works on many levels: it is a true Wilson, it is a compact that does scale, that does staging, that does dynamics. Above all, it does music. What we have here, finally, is the little speaker that can. ▶+

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Two-way reflex loaded stand or shelf mounted speaker
Driver Complement:	1x 25mm fabric ring radiator 1x 9" paper cone
Sensitivity:	89dB
Impedance:	4 Ohms (3 Ohms minimum)
Bandwidth:	36Hz – 32.5kHz ±3dB
Dimensions (WxHxD):	283 x 467 x 349mm
Weights –	
Duette Speaker:	17.6kg
Novel Crossover:	8.36kg
Finishes:	4x Laquers as standard with 12 further options 4x Grille clothes
Prices –	
Duette Speaker:	£8900
Matching Stand:	£1800

UK Distributor:
Absolute Sounds Ltd.
Tel. (44)(0)208 971 3909
Net. www.absolutesounds.com

Manufacturer:
Wilson Audio
Net. www.wilsonaudio.com