

Wilson Audio • Yvette Loudspeakers

" . . . a speaker that fits my space and fulfills my requirements for engaging, dynamic, rich sound."

by [Dennis Davis](#) | March 20, 2017

Everyone into purist audio, it seems, has a Wilson Audio story. Given the company's longstanding occupation of the high-end high ground, that's not that surprising. My own Wilson Audio story goes back further than most, yet the Yvette is the first Wilson speaker I've had in my home.



Price: \$25,500/pair.
Warranty: Five years parts and labor.

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We all know that Wilson Audio is a Utah-based manufacturer, but Dave Wilson only set up operations in Provo, Utah in 1991. Before that, he spent his formative years in Marin County, California, just north of San Francisco. Marin County has always been a hotbed of musical and cultural creativity, home to countless musicians, including The Grateful Dead, Janis Joplin, Grace Slick, Van Morrison, Bonnie Raitt and Carlos Santana. It's also the home of George Lucas and his *Star Wars* franchise, and you get there from San Francisco by going through the Robin Williams Tunnel.

As a longtime resident of Marin County, I like to think that the same creative juices that inspired these (in most cases) living legends helped spark Dave Wilson's early engineering feats. Between 1979 and 1982, we San Francisco-area audiophiles enjoyed an audio society populated with a who's who of audio designers, manufacturers, distributors and journalists. Among the most accomplished of these was Dave Wilson, who stood out at the meetings, not only for his reputation but because he attended meetings dressed better than anyone else, and he came with his wife, Sheryl Lee. Back then, he was best known as a recording engineer, a record producer and an occasional reviewer for *The Absolute Sound*. I knew he was working on an ambitious speaker design, but there were several audio-society members trying to make it as speaker designers.

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Wilson stood apart from even that small crowd, because he wasn't working on a speaker for every man; he was starting not *at* but *beyond* the ceiling of the market. Wilson's early WAMM system was seriously over the top for 1981, and few of us had the foresight to understand that not only would such extravagant speaker systems soon become commonplace, but that Wilson's designs would come to dominate the high-end speaker market. What further separated Dave Wilson from the pack in those days was not only his passion for music and speaker design but also his energy and doggedness. Then, as now, his ability to formulate and articulate his engineering concepts was unmatched. Much of what is found in his (and others') current high-end speaker designs, from the use of high-tech composites to drivers individually adjusted for time-domain accuracy, was being worked out by Dave Wilson before computer-aided design and manufacturing made today's speaker designs viable.

After the WATT/Puppy was released in 1988, my closest audio friend (whose name also just happens to be Wilson) jumped on the Wilson Audio bandwagon and he has stayed true to the brand ever since. I continued to look on from the wayside, as Dave Wilson spent more than a quarter century relentlessly evolving and improving his speakers, and steadily developing his brand. It's a bit of a cliché, but throughout this period, Wilson notably did it his way, developing a dedicated base of repeat customers rather than hitching his wagon to the star power of a prominent journalist. More than that, the Wilson brand has become synonymous with the word *reliability* in a way few other high-end companies can claim. One reason for that corporate stability is that Wilson Audio is very much a family business, the involvement of wife Sheryl Lee and son Daryl ensuring consistency and continuity of the brand's values. Daryl has spent his life working within the company and sharing his father's passion for speaker design and engineering. He has worked on 31 of Wilson's 57 products over the years, culminating in leading the design efforts on the latest generation of products, including the Sasha W/P Series 2, Sabrina, Alexx and Yvette. He was recently named CEO of the company, freeing up his dad to work exclusively on product design, especially the massive WAMM MC project.

Wilson Audio's new Yvette is larger than Wilson's original, iconic WATT/Puppy and roughly equivalent in size to the Sophia, which it replaces in the Wilson lineup. What immediately stands out when comparing the Yvette to the Sophia is the faceted front baffle, clear indication that while retaining the one-piece architecture of the Sophia, Yvette incorporates a more sophisticated time-domain alignment. Where the Sophia's midrange and tweeter were built into a single plane, the Yvette gently folds the upper portion of the speaker forward to create a third plane. Additionally, the sides of the tweeter enclosure are shaved, giving the speaker a handsome, sculptured look, making this new design less amorphous-looking than the Sophia, less robotic than the Sasha 2 and, as a result, much more pleasing to the eye. A less obvious development is the slight rake of the bass baffle, shared with the Alexx. Basically, the Yvette design locks in an *ideal* set of driver relationships in lieu of the adjustable sections on the higher-end Wilson models. With the Yvette, the only adjustment available in the time domain is to the base spikes, in order to change the rake angle of the entire cabinet. The Yvette will be most successful in rooms with flexible seating placement. By adjusting the listening position, you should be able to find the spot best served by the Yvette's fixed driver positions.

Dig under the skin and any lingering similarities between the Yvette and Sophia quickly dissipate, underlining exactly why this new speaker is an Yvette and not another Sophia. The driver complement is new, reflecting the incorporation of driver technology developed for Wilson's larger speakers over the last four years. The most striking difference is the tweeter: where the Sophia had a 1" titanium-dome unit, the Yvette incorporates the third version of Wilson's Convergent Synergy Tweeter, the closed back, 1" silk-dome driver used for the Sasha 2 and Alexx. Rather than carrying forward the Sophia 3's aluminum-cone woofer, Yvette uses a new paper/pulp 10" woofer developed for the Alexia, itself a sibling of those found in the Alexx and WAMM MC. The 7" midrange is carried over from the Alexandria XLF. Wilson Audio has continued to tweak the formulations of the proprietary composites it uses to construct speaker enclosures, with the third generation of X material used throughout the Yvette, except for the midrange, where the small, angled baffle is machined out of S material. At 175 pounds, the Yvette weighs ten pounds more than the Sophia 3, testament to its revised cabinet and improved bracing.

The Yvettes arrived packed in two wooden coffins lined with compressed-foam inserts, protecting the flawless paint finish. As delivered, each speaker had heavy-duty casters attached at the bottom four corners, making uncrating and rolling the speakers into place a snap. I used the casters to position the Yvettes roughly, awaiting a visit from Wilson Audio's Peter McGrath, although, for customers, Wilson-trained dealers will carry out final positioning. Before Peter's arrival, I made sure that I ran the speakers in for more than 100 hours. Peter and I removed the casters and inserted the spiked footer assemblies. I say "assemblies" because unlike most spikes that screw directly into the base of the speaker's cabinet, Wilson's large conical "diodes" fasten against the cabinet and into which you then screw the large-diameter spikes and lockingnuts.

The end result is both extremely stable and increases the contact area between spike and cabinet. It's also typical of the attention to detail that Wilson lavishes on their products, as is the systematic setup procedure. Several hours of incremental shifts and nudges later, Peter settled on the best placement in my room. While the distance to the wall behind the speakers was only about a quarter inch different than my initial placement, the final positions, the spikes and the increased toe-in pretty much transformed every aspect of the Yvette's performance.

One way or another, I've heard every speaker in Wilson Audio's current lineup, including the Yvette at the CES and the Rocky Mountain Audio Fest, and the WAMM MC in Dave Wilson's home last October. So I have a pretty good idea of what current Wilson speakers have to offer. The WAMM MC was the most impressive audio product I've ever heard and gives new meaning to the idea that large speakers can disappear in a listening room. However, even if I could afford the WAMM MCs, in the San Francisco Bay Area I'd need to raise at least another \$5 million to buy a house large enough to accommodate such speakers. Thus, I was anxious to hear just how much WAMM MC DNA could be distilled into a speaker that I, and most others, can accommodate in a more modest space, like my 17' x 13' x 8 1/4' room.

Wilson speakers are commonly matched with VTL and Audio Research (ARC) electronics at shows, so I knew that my Audio Research Reference electronics would play well with the Wilsons. The Reference 150 SE stereo amplifier has outputs for 4-, 8- and 16-ohm loads. The Yvettes' nominal impedance is 4 ohms, but connecting to the 8-ohm taps clearly gave a more even performance and stronger bass, so I did all listening with this connection. The Yvettes require at least 50 watts of amplifier power. The 150 watts supplied by my amplifier were more than sufficient, although the Yvettes respond well to larger amplifiers, such as VTL's S-400 II and MB-450 III, which show off the speakers' prodigious bass to greater advantage.

Wilson speakers have always excelled at imaging and reproduction of the soundstage, attributes shared by my longtime reference Avalon Transcendents, and in some ways the two speakers sounded very similar. On the other hand, some differences were unmistakable. My wife and every non-audiophile guest who heard the Yvettes summed up one difference with the identical word: "richer." In other words, these untrained listeners found the sound strong, deep and pleasing. One of the things that marks an outstanding product is the way in which it forces you to reexamine or even question what you're hearing. So what was it that made the Yvette "richer"-sounding and more satisfying than other speakers of similar size?

Tonal richness is most often associated with accuracy in the midrange which, harmonics aside, brackets most of the vocal range, an octave below and several above middle C on the piano, and much of the action in the string section. Yet midrange accuracy can be a somewhat elusive quality, given the difficulty many people have with distinguishing between fact and fiction. It was the Yvettes'

midrange that first caught my attention; familiar vocal and piano recordings suddenly sounded more lifelike. I've heard piano performances in some pretty good acoustic settings over the last couple of years, including the Musikverein in Vienna, Wigmore Hall in London and Davies Hall in San Francisco, in addition to weekly performances in a variety of settings ranging from homes to classrooms. While each venue has its own unique signature, the range of these signatures pales in comparison to the range of sound a piano's middle C can have from one speaker to the next. The same is true for vocal performance; while every voice is different, a speaker should not overlay a signature that says more about the speaker (and its designer) than the singer.

These thoughts raced through my mind as I explored one LP or CD after another. There was nothing forward or aggressive about the Yvette's midrange, or the rest of its range for that matter, and at the same time nothing laid-back either. On a wide array of well-recorded piano music -- including Mitsuko Uchida's *Schubert* [Decca 475 6282], Sergey Schepkin's *Bach Partitas* [Steinway & Sons 30062], Murray Perahia's *The Aldeburgh Recital* [Sony SK 46437] and the Brad Meldau Trio's *Blues and Ballads* [Nonesuch 554678-2], the Yvettes never strayed from dead accurate tonality, brilliantly reproducing the individual signatures of the various recording venues. In other words, each piano sounded distinct and different, but more like an actual piano in real space than a hi-fi piano in some replica venue.

Similarly, the Yvettes returned humanity to the human voice, which is so frequently washed out in hi-fi reproduction. The vocal quality and identity of Peggy Lee on any cut from the *Black Coffee* reissue [Speakers Corner/Decca DL 8358] was so palpable that I almost felt as though I could reach right into the recording and adjust the microphone. Leonard Cohen's "Famous Blue Raincoat" from the LP *Songs of Love and Hate* [Columbia C 30103], a moderately good studio recording with guitar accompaniment and female backing track, should sound good on most systems, and it does. But with the Yvettes, it sounded magical -- more like Cohen: not more beautiful, not warmed up, but more real, more evocative of his pain.

Another painful vocal performance I've wallowed in over the years is Marianne Faithfull's "Why D'Ya Do It" from *Broken English* LP [Island M1]. On most systems, Faithfull's voice seems to come from a head suspended in midair, somewhere in amongst the pounding drum kit and scorching guitar, but the Yvettes place her her head back on a body and let me almost see her lips moving, all the better to appreciate the X-rated lyrics. This LP begs to be played loud, yet her voice remained stable and natural, almost irrespective of level. On a more upbeat note, the fragility of John Lennon's vocal on *Imagine* [UK Apple PAS 10004] became immediately obvious, even through all of the Phil Spector recording goop. On many speakers, the sound of the voice is romanticized, but the Wilsons stripped away the sonic halo. Similarly, Lennon's buddy Paul sounded especially good on *McCartney* [Apple PCS 7102] -- his voice more attached to a body. Some of these recordings, like the Lennon and to a lesser extent the Faithfull, can sound a bit congested and nasally in the midrange,

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and then somewhat brittle as they climb up around 4 or 5kHz. The Yvettes sorted this out as well as any speaker I've heard -- and it's all down to their ability to unearth the chest that underpins the voice, the body behind the instrument.

Is the Yvette's tonal honesty in the midrange simply the product of Wilson's exceptional midrange driver, or is something else going on here? I'm guessing that the improved bracing and damping materials also figure heavily in the equation. Roy Gregory, [in his review of the Sasha 2](#), made special note of the speaker's new low-frequency articulation and agility, which coupled seamlessly with the midband. One of my earliest impressions of the Yvettes was that they shared this quality with the Sasha 2s. While the Yvette's 10" woofer may not dig quite as deeply as the Sasha 2's dual 8" woofers (both speakers are rated to 20Hz), their shared architectural DNA is reflected in their sound. In the end, 20Hz is only a number; what matters is how well the low-frequency output integrates and articulates with the rest of the range. The Yvettes have a beautifully integrated and expressive bottom end, but one difference between them and the Sasha 2s is that the more expensive, modular speaker is more versatile and tunable in a range of different environments. The Yvettes are certainly capable of remarkable deep-bass performance, but be prepared to work (or have your dealer work) to realize it.

Listen to an exceptionally well-recorded jazz LP like *The Sonny Clark Memorial Quartet* [Black Saint BSR 0109], a recording that perfectly captures the full keyboard of Wayne Horvitz's piano while at the same time keeping pace with the other three instruments in the quartet. On the best speakers, and the Yvette ranks up there, the musical flow is breathtaking. Compare this version of "Cool Struttin'" with Sonny Clark's original [Music Matters/Blue Note ST-81588] and the speaker's ability to nail the very different performance and recording aesthetics of the two groups is immediately obvious. If this were all I listened to, this review could be very short and still accurately convey the inherent personality of the speakers, as the Yvettes are really without peer on this kind of music.

And yet, as good as the Yvettes sounded on pop and jazz, it was classical recordings where they really bridged the gap between very large and expensive speakers and smaller, more practical speakers. When you are talking about a speaker that's smaller and lighter than your body, there are always significant compromises in creating a design that can reproduce complex orchestral music. A small speaker can make a jazz quartet or acoustic pop group sound realistic in size and dynamics. Heavy rock music is more difficult, but still doable with many smaller speaker systems. Trying to squeeze Prokofiev or Shostakovich orchestral compositions out of a modestly sized speaker is another thing altogether. But what I took away from my experience with the Yvettes is that it's not just size that matters. Sure enough, get below a certain internal volume and things fall by the wayside. But expanding the height of the speaker and the size of the bass driver do not add up to exceptional sound unless everything is properly integrated, and the Yvette certainly integrates.

One composition I've never been able to reproduce adequately at home, at least not from speakers the size of the Yvette, is Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. With all other modestly sized speakers, when the chorus joins the orchestra, all bets are off. The 1963 von Karajan [Deutsche Grammophon Gesellschaft SKL 101/8], Fricsay [Deutsche Grammophon Gesellschaft SLPM 138 002/3] and Solti LPs [Decca 6BB 121/2] have been pulled from their boxes dozens of times over the last 40 years, waiting for a speaker that can accommodate the dynamic demands and sheer scale of the piece. Smaller speakers with the ability to throw a large soundstage have gotten closest to satisfying, but that soundstage inevitably seems to end up stretching the canvas to accommodate all the musical pieces, the result of which is usually a lack of tonal saturation: washed-out instruments that are more watercolor than rich, true color. The Yvettes passed even this test, the "Ode To Joy" finally bringing joy to my heart, with the rich instrumental colors having the texture and richness of an oil painting. The choir no longer floats in midair but is firmly rooted on a platform behind the orchestra.

I recently had the good fortune to experience a performance of the Ninth by the San Francisco Symphony. No, the Yvettes don't cheat the laws of physics -- the real thing sounds far more real than any reproduction. I wouldn't bet against the WAMM MCs along with their soon-to-come subs moving enough air to make an ideal (*i.e.*, one that doesn't exist) recording of the Ninth truly come alive at home. Fantasy aside, the Yvettes' performance was awfully close to what larger Wilson speakers can achieve with such complex music, these modestly sized speakers delivering a musically coherent performance with enough detail and tonal beauty and subtle enough scaling to make acceptable the reduction in size and impact compared to the real thing.

The ability to place instruments and voices in a believable space and to deliver exceptionally rich tonal color was just as evident on small-scale classical music. Hilary Hahn's duets with pianist Cory Smythe on *In 27 Pieces: The Hilary Hahn Encores* (LP [Deutsche Grammophon 00289 479 6664], CD [Deutsche Grammophon B0019103-02]) are a case in point. While the LP was released after the Yvettes had arrived, the CD had been out long enough for me to listen to it on other speakers in my home and still others in showrooms and at shows. My initial reaction to this disc was of mild disappointment, with Hahn sometimes sounding uncharacteristically harsh and the piano parts lacking a sense of integration and conversation with the violin. With the Yvettes in the system, Hilary Hahn regained her poise and precision, her violin better recorded than I've heard from any of her other Sony releases. The piano parts fell into place, underpinning not just the violin but the importance of that articulate low-frequency alignment, the impact and intensity of the music becoming almost overwhelming on some of the album's cuts.

Many -- perhaps even most -- audiophiles value the sound of a speaker almost to the exclusion of its beauty as an object. Count me out of this club of anti-aesthetic ascetics. The most important function of a speaker is to deliver sound that will transport the listener to a higher plane of consciousness. However, I also value how any object that becomes part of my daily routine *looks* while it fulfills its function. Steve Jobs recognized the importance of marrying form and function, creating everyday products that deserve a place in a museum devoted to modern art. (Jobs also owned Wilson speakers.) Wilson's speakers have always hovered on the edge of modern art, and [Roy Gregory's comparing Wilson's WAMM MC to Roy Lichtenstein's *Whaam!*](#) is telling. For me, the organic design of the Yvette makes it the Wilson product that comes closest to the magic of an Apple design --- and the one most pleasing to my eye. That beauty in the eye of this beholder, combined with its rich tonal palette, its facility to re-create a large lifelike soundstage

and its flair for sounding larger than it is, make the Yvette my new reference -- a speaker that fits my space and fulfills my requirements for engaging, dynamic, rich sound.

It might have started a long time ago, but my Wilson story is kind of like a Dickens novel: it revolves around a single family; it's long, with 57 chapters (though no chapter 11); it holds up a mirror to its times; and it takes its time to reach a satisfactory conclusion. After all of these years, I will be joining my friend Wilson as a Wilson owner, because these Yvettes have found a home. ☺

Associated Equipment

Analog: Spiral Groove SG1.2 turntable with Centroid tonearm, Lyra Atlas stereo and Titan i mono cartridges, Nordost Valhalla 2 tonearm cable, Audio Research Reference Phono 3 phono stage.

Preamps: Audio Research Reference 6.

Amplifier: Audio Research Reference 150 SE.

Digital: Neodio Origine CD player.

Speakers: Avalon Transcendent.

Cables: Nordost Valhalla 2 interconnects, speaker cables and power cords.

Power distribution: Quantum QB8 AC-distribution unit and Qx4 power purifier, Furutech GTX D-Rhodium power receptacle.

Supports: HRS RXR rack, MSX Isolation Bases, Damping Plates, and Vortex footers; Stillpoints ESS Grid, Ultras and Ultra 5s; Neodio Origine B1 supports.

Accessories: Record Doctor cleaning fluid and brush, VPI "magic bricks," Audio Physic cartridge demagnetizer, Shunyata Research Dark Field Elevators, Acoustical Systems SMARTractor, Dr. Feickert Analogue's Platterspeed app.