

Wilson Audio • Sabrina Loudspeakers

Little big speaker.

by [Marc Mickelson](#) | April 11, 2016

Two thousand fifteen was a year of extremes for Wilson Audio. It commenced with the announcement during CES of the most ambitious speaker David Wilson and his company had ever attempted to create: the replacement for the famed, multipiece WAMM system. A press briefing outlined the goals for the speaker, during which a prototype was unveiled for us to see -- and unfortunately not to hear. No pictures of it exist, perhaps because David Wilson fully expected that the finished product would not look like the speaker we saw, which was a true work-in-progress. This still-unnamed speaker remains in development today, more than a year after we first saw it.



Price: \$15,900/pair.
Warranty: Five years parts and labor.

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Also unveiled during the 2015 CES, and with nearly the same amount of fanfare, was the floorstanding speaker that occupies the other end of the product line, the Sabrina, Wilson Audio's smallest floorstanding speaker in over two decades. About the size of the earliest WATT/Puppy models, 39 5/16"H x 12"W x 15 3/16"D, the Sabrina has all of the technological DNA of Wilson's much larger and much more expensive speakers but in a compact, even diminutive, package.

While the WAMM replacement received the lion's share of press attention, the Sabrina may be a more significant product for Wilson Audio and high-end audio in general. Those shopping in the uppermost reaches of the speaker market are certainly not starved for selection, but the Sabrina's far less substantial price point is absolutely crowded with choices. This wider market segment represents both a sizable investment and end-of-the-journey purchase for many audiophiles. These speakers *must* deliver at least a glimpse of statement-level sound at a fraction of statement-level pricing -- a mandate that's difficult for manufacturers of high-performance equipment to meet.

While the Sabrina is easy to juxtapose with the WAMM replacement, it is almost as uncompromised, a true Wilson Audio speaker through and through. The heroic cabinet design and construction of Wilson Audio speakers have a new wrinkle with the Sabrina: a high-tech material that is used for the first time, comprising the entire cabinet, except for the front baffle and bottom plate, which are Wilson's harder-than-steel X material. As with all other Wilson speakers, the Sabrina's cabinet is constructed without screws or metal fasteners of any kind. The various panels are bonded with an advanced adhesive that's cured to provide a joint that's stronger than the solid material around it. Then the entire cabinet is gel-coated -- sealed -- and sanded by hand before it's painted.

The Sabrina's 1" (25mm) tweeter is based on the Convergent Synergy silk-dome driver that debuted in the Alexandria XLF. Wilson calls it a "simplified" version of the XLF driver, likely due to the fact that it crosses over higher than the tweeter in other Wilson speakers. This puts more stress on the Sabrina's 5 3/4" (146mm) midrange, which has to remain linear at higher frequencies. Like other Wilson midranges, its cone material is a composite of fibrous materials, including paper and carbon fiber. The Sabrina's 8" (202.5mm) woofer was first used in the Alexia, where it was paired with a 10" driver in David Wilson's preferred two-woofer configuration. It is modified to be the only woofer in the Sabrina.

The Sabrina's crossover points are . . . a secret. More than any single bit of its proprietary technology, Wilson Audio keeps its crossovers shrouded in mystery, believing that they are central to its method of designing and building speakers. Wilson does reveal that reducing distortion was a particular goal of the Sabrina's crossover. We also know that the treble-to-midrange frequency is higher than with other Wilson speakers. Beyond that, we know only generalities: the tolerances for passive parts are exceedingly tight -- +/- 0.2% -- and the crossover is potted in an aluminum case, as all Wilson crossovers are.

There are two marginal differences between the Sabrina and other Wilson speakers, both a nod to practicality as much as cost. First, there are different, more-discreet spikes that do just as good a job of coupling the speakers to the floor as the more massive ones used for other Wilson speakers. Also, Sabrinas ship in heavy-duty cardboard boxes instead of wooden crates. The speakers weigh just under 100 pounds each, so the boxes, along with the molded foam packing, are more than adequate protection and definitely make unpacking easier.

As he has done for other Wilson speakers I've reviewed, John Giolas of Wilson Audio set up the Sabrinas in my room, replacing Wilson Sasha Series 2s. The multiple modules of Wilson Audio speakers are well known, their adjustment allowing for some flexibility in listening distance and height. In contrast, the one-piece Sabrina was optimized for use, as Wilson Audio states, "in a typical listening room." This means listening from a distance of 8 to 11 feet, depending on your room's dimensions and the height of your listening seat. The Sabrinas ended up in roughly the same spots as the Sasha 2s, but fine-tuning still took a couple of hours. The Sabrinas once again affirmed the significance of seemingly microscopic adjustments in placement and toe-in, with fractions of an inch one way or the other increasing or decreasing soundstage focus and tonal balance in apparent ways. This has always been a feature, so to speak, of Wilson speakers, the difference between *good enough* and *perfection* being worth the effort to erase.

Wilson dealers set up speakers for their customers, but even if they didn't, the 62-page manual that comes with the Sabrina has by far the most complete discussion of speaker setup I've ever encountered in a product manual. It is augmented by Wilson Audio's speaker-setup app for iPhone and Android platforms. So even without expert help, it would be possible to follow the directions in the manual in conjunction with the app and achieve *perfection* with the Sabrinas.

Once the Sasha 2s were rolled out of the way and the Sabrinas were slid in, positioned, toed in and spiked, my large room seemed even larger. I had become so used to the visual anchors that one pair of big speakers or another had provided that the statement the li'l Sabrinas *didn't* make took some getting used to. And I sort of expected the same thing sonically. The Sabrinas would, as so many small floorstanders do, disappear into the music. This is definitely a good thing, but it can also be a sign of a speaker whose soundstaging with large-scale music has to be imagined more than experienced, a speaker that can do small and intimate but struggles with big and bombastic.

The Sabrinas definitely handled small-scale jazz and vocal music well, but they were just as capable at the other end of the spatial scale. Width and depth were plentiful, but it was the height information that was most impressive -- and surprising. Time and again I would close my eyes when I was listening to the Sabrinas, point to where a particular instrument or singer was coming from, and when I opened my eyes

I was pointing to a spot above my Silent Running Audio equipment rack and six feet from the ground. Most big speakers I have had in my room, especially the Wilson Alexandria XLFs and Alexias, pulled this off, but so did the Sabrinas.

My first and most persistent thought about the Sabrinas was that they were small floorstanders that could truly fill the volume of a large room, so long as the recording obliged, of course. Even with a mono vocal recording, like *Ella and Louis* on Blu-ray Disc [Verve 00602537349807], image height was a consistent surprise, especially for a friend of mine who's not an audiophile but is a hard-core LP collector. With eyes open, he could tell that the image was coming from a spot

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somewhat above each speaker, but when, at my urging, he closed his eyes, pointed and then opened, laughter ensued, because he was pointing to a spot two feet or more above the speakers.

This paid big sonic dividends with orchestral music, the front half of the room melting away, replaced by a venue that was immense -- and much larger than such modest-looking speakers seemed able to re-create. One of my oft-mentioned symphonic faves is the Telarc LP of Copland compositions, including "Fanfare for the Common Man" [Telarc DG-10078], whose tam-tam strikes seem to pierce the air in all directions at once. The Sabrinas were at their most impressive, their most audiophile approved, with this LP, a grand recording that sounded appropriately grand, the orchestra displaying a magnificent scale that belied the music's recorded origins. That sounds hyperbolic as I write it, but it was nonetheless what I thought as I listened, the Sabrinas performing a bit of mind-bending sonic magic.

And all of this was just the starting point. Just as important to the Sabrina's sound was the seamlessness throughout its entire bandwidth, a sense of coherence that seemed even more realized with the Sabrina than with other Wilson speakers. That's really saying something, because coherence has been a consistent quality of Wilson speakers. However, the Sabrina announced a new standard, not just for Wilson Audio but dynamic speakers in general, I think.

Analog was particularly telling; it's coherent by nature, no bits and samples from which to reconstruct the music. It's all lying within the groove, waiting for the stylus to release it. Diana Krall's *Live in Paris* [Verve/Original Recordings Group 440065] is stunning on its own, a recording that neatly balances the physical presence of the musicians with the lavish air and ambience of the venue -- the Olympia in Paris. Say what you want about Krall's pre-eminence in audiophiles' music collections, because so many of her albums have gorgeous sound, but keep in mind that her playing and singing are so finely in tune with each other that she is a singular figure in contemporary jazz.

The resolution of the 45rpm ORG LPs is extreme, and the Sabrinas presented it all with a continuousness that never put me on guard against a stray bit of etch or hardness, everything integrated into the cavernous soundscape. Krall's voice was languid and sultry -- as it always is -- with just a slight hint of sibilance, which is part of the recording. The Sabrinas resisted parsing any of it into extraneous bits of sonic fluff. The music flowed like water from the speakers, a sweeping entity, the LPs acting as conduits to time travel between the moment the music was created and when I was hearing it. Such are the metaphysical constructs these speakers engender.

Call this coherence, continuousness, completeness -- whatever you will -- but it is the backbone of the Sabrina's performance, and it helps explain why Wilson Audio is so guarded about their crossovers. The sonic fingerprint of the crossover and its combining of the drivers' outputs is a determining ingredient of any speaker's sound, so why reveal the fine points of creating it? It's a trade secret -- a trick the magician *should* keep to himself.

Each new Wilson speaker, it seems, has as one of its professed goals "greater expression," sometimes timbral, often dynamic. Expression is not the same as resolution, the simple retrieval of detail from the recording; it's a much more comprehensive and elusive quality: the translation of that detail into a more recognizable and truer analog of the instruments, voices and recorded venue. More than anything else, this constant quest may be what drives David Wilson to create better and better speakers. I've listened and discussed sound with him, and besides his discerning recognition of what he hears, he often talks (perhaps unknowingly) in sonic absolutes: the attack of a piano (especially one he recorded), the rosiny texture of a violin, or the flinty quality of a voice. These are not qualities of *recorded sound* but of *sound, period*.

This is the "expression" Wilson and his speakers are after: a construct of live-music absolutes that informs the design process and against which all Wilson Audio speakers are ultimately judged. Of course, recorded sound falls short of its live equivalent in so many ways, although there is one instrument that a very good recording can come very close to re-creating with that same construct of absolutes: solo acoustic guitar. Its range, even at its extremes, and transient qualities are within the ability of a very good speaker to convey, and the recording engineer doesn't have to be a savant to capture them.

I love Michael Hedges and Leo Kottke, but an acquaintance of mine, John Hasbrouck, knows their work much better than I do -- a good thing, given that he's a talented fingerpicker. John made a couple of albums of his own playing, one of which, *Ice Cream* [Ruthless Rabbit Records RRR1961], has cuts he recorded himself on a portable DAT deck. Maybe he was particularly inspired that day or just got lucky, but those DAT tracks sound stunningly immediate. His arrangement of "As Time Goes By," famous from *Casablanca*, is a revelation: a cover that at once sounds both familiar and utterly new. The Sabrinas were a revelation -- no hyperbole -- with this cut. Their realistic sizing and especially speed into and out of each note conveyed a sense of reality -- a spooky kind of verisimilitude -- that, again, belied the fact that the music was recorded. Put another way, played at realistic levels, this cut over the Sabrinas came exceedingly close to the gold standard for audiophiles: putting a musician into the listening room.

While the Sabrinas don't feature the double woofers that larger Wilson speakers sport, they still go very low -- lower than you'd think, in fact. Bass-heavy favorites such as Keith Richards' *Main Offender* [Virgin V2-86499], not to mention the massive bass-drum whacks on "Fanfare for the Common Man," sounded appropriately powerful and had plenty of slam. What aids this is the sub-90dB sensitivity; with the Sabrina, Wilson Audio trades some sensitivity for greater bass extension. Because of this, dynamics are not quite as freewheeling as with the larger, more sensitive Wilson speakers, but the Sabrinas still soar with ample power behind them. Both the 75Wpc Audio Research Reference 75 SE stereo amp and 110W Lamm M1.2 monoblocks were capable of re-creating substantial large-scale dynamics, but the Sabrinas also never glossed over the small changes in volume that define so much music, especially solo guitar, which relies on the player's touch as much as his dexterity.

And so it went with the Sabrinas: expectations were not just met, but exceeded. And then something occurred while I

was finishing this review, something so telling of the Sabrina's true capabilities, that I had to amend the text. John Quick of dCS USA visited to set up dCS's Vivaldi digital separates for review. We've written about the four-piece Vivaldi "stack" -- transport, DAC, clock and upsampler -- in a number of show reports, where it has never failed to wow TAB's writers, sometimes bettering even very good analog rigs in terms of both unforced resolution and sheer authority.

I told John before his arrival that in my system for his visit were the Sabrinas along with Ayre's VX-5 Twenty stereo amp -- another serious overachiever. I explained that other speakers and amps, eventually my Wilson Alexias and a VTL S-400 II, would be in the system, so I would at some point get to hear the dCS rig with products that were more in keeping with its over-\$100,000 price. Besides, it's never a bad thing to hear a review product with a cast of sonic characters instead of only a fixed lineup.

So John and I set about unpacking the Vivaldi units and putting them on my equipment rack, where they took up half the space of the double-wide SRA Craz² 8. The plethora of cables needed to tether the dCS Vivaldi system together is dizzying, as is the Vivaldi's wide-ranging feature set, all of which you'll read about. After connecting a WiFi router and two external hard drives, John and I had a listen. The sound coming from the Sabrinas was absolutely dazzling. The resolution, endearing naturalness and ease, spatial focus and iron-fisted grip into the lowest reaches of the bass were all obvious. What was most surprising, however, was that the Sabrinas, the li'l Sabrinas, were making it all plain. Their coherence was the perfect complement for the analog-like outpouring of the Vivaldi separates, and I said to John something I still feel is true, as I continue to listen to this audio odd couple: "In many ways, this is the best sound I've ever heard in my room." That includes all of the gigantic speakers and over-the-top electronics -- systems that sometimes approached a half million dollars at retail pricing.

This was sound that disarmed, that suspended disbelief as a matter of course. I will have much, much more to say about the Vivaldi separates, and some of it will be due to the Wilson Sabrinas. While it's doubtful that dCS will sell any Vivaldi "stacks" for use with Sabrinas, I can make a very strong case for pairing this *über* digital rig with the littlest Wilsons, no sonic excuses required.

David Wilson and his staff of engineers and craftsmen have been very good at ensuring that any new speaker they introduce is not a mere placeholder within the company's product line -- representing a defined price point where a customer able to spend a certain sum can settle for a Wilson speaker. Instead, each is a self-contained portion of the company's R&D and manufacturing time, a singular product that crosses performance lines, a sonic destination point for its owner.

This is all the more true of the Sabrina. It is neither a shaved-down nor next-best version of any of the more expensive Wilson speakers, and I can honestly imagine audiophiles planning to spend multiples of its price choosing it over much more expensive competition, such is the magnificence of its scale, its coherence, its expressiveness, its musical completeness. Pound for pound and dollar for dollar, the Sabrina is Wilson Audio's best speaker, *ever* -- the one that gives the biggest slice of the company's considerable sonic cake for the least amount of money. ☺

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Associated Equipment

Analog: TW-Acoustic Raven AC turntable; Graham B-44 Phantom Series II Supreme and Tri-Planar Ultimate U12 tonearms; Denon DL-103R and Dynavector XV-1s (stereo and mono) cartridges; Nordost Valhalla 2 and Odin 2 phono cables; Audio Research Reference Phono 2 SE and Lamm Industries LP2.1 phono stages.

Digital: Ayre Acoustics DX-5 "A/V Engine"; CEC TL1 CD transport; dCS Vivaldi transport, digital-to-analog converter, master clock and upsampler; Timbre Technology TT-1 digital-to-analog converter; Genesis Digital Lens; Toshiba Satellite laptop.

Preamplifiers: Audio Research Reference 5 SE and Reference 10, Convergent Audio Technology SL1 Legend, Lamm Industries LL1 *Signature*, VTL TL7.5 Series III.

Amplifiers: Audio Research Reference 75 SE, Ayre Acoustics VX-5 Twenty and Jeff Rowland Design Group Model 825 stereo amps; Kenwood L-07M, Lamm M1.2 Reference and VTL Siegfried Series II Reference monoblocks.

Loudspeakers: Paradigm Signature S2 v2, Wilson Audio Sasha W/P Series 2 and Alexia.

Interconnects: AudioQuest William E. Low Signature, Nordost Valhalla 2 and Odin 2, Shunyata Research Zi-Tron Cobra and Anaconda.

Speaker cables: AudioQuest William E. Low Signature, Nordost Valhalla 2 and Odin 2, Shunyata Research Zi-Tron Cobra and Anaconda.

Digital cables: Nordost Valhalla 2 S/PDIF and AES/EBU cables.

Power conditioners: Essential Sound Products The Essence Reference, Quantum QB4 and QB8, Quantum Qx4, Shunyata Research Hydra Triton.

Power cords: Essential Sound Products The Essence Reference and MusicCord-Pro ES, Nordost Valhalla 2 and Odin 2, Shunyata Research Zi-Tron Cobra.

Equipment rack and platforms: Paradigm J-29 speaker stands, Silent Running Audio Craz² 8 equipment rack and Ohio Class XL Plus² platforms (under Lamm M1.2 amps), Harmonic Resolution Systems M3 isolation bases.

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