

Wilson Audio Sasha DAW floorstanding loudspeaker

by Alan Sircom



There is almost a hint of sadness about the Wilson Audio Sasha DAW. The suffix is short for 'David A Wilson', the founder of Wilson Audio and father of Wilson Audio's President and CEO, Daryl Wilson. Dave Wilson passed away in 2018, and the Sasha DAW acts both as tribute and legacy.

The Sasha loudspeaker project was developed from the most successful high-end loudspeaker project in history; the Wilson Audio WATT/Puppy. First launched in 1985, the Wilson Audio Tiny Tot (WATT) was a two-way stand-mount monitor loudspeaker that set new standards in performance

(and price; it was more than twice the cost of its closest rival) and was quickly joined by the Puppy subwoofer. This combination went through several iterations in its 24-year lifespan, becoming ever more a combination in name only until its replacement Sasha W/P in 2009. The Sasha W/P still relied on the separate mid-top and bass cabinets, and the familial resemblance could be seen, but this was a very different animal. The Series 2 replaced the original Sasha W/P five years later. And now, five years after that, the Series 2 gets replaced by the Sasha DAW. Looking at it from a distance, this is simply another churn of the product life cycle. ▶

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► In fact, a surface check of the Sasha DAW might conclude it's more 'evolution' than 'revolution', as that basic product roll-out (two-way top box sitting on a twin-driver bass cabinet) is the same and the dimensions appear ostensibly similar to what went before.

Looks can be deceptive. Apart from that familial resemblance, there is almost no point of contact between what went before and the Sasha DAW. Well, not entirely, but aside from the upper module that's more than 13% larger than its predecessor, a new lower module that's over 10% larger than its predecessor, a revisit of the materials that go into the cabinet, the way the group delay mechanism works, resistor access panel, and even the binding posts... it's the same loudspeaker!

Given the significance of the Sasha in the Wilson line, this is as close as it gets to a clean-sheet design; it retains the basic parameters that explain why a loudspeaker system can remain at the top of the tree for 35 years, but it looks at every aspect of the design to re-evaluate the concept from first principles. In the process, the loudspeaker needs to appeal both to potential newcomers who hear Wilson Audio for the first time, and to those who have been there from the get-go. It needs to fit into the Wilson Audio ecosystem (both in terms of physical placement and equipment compatibility – more on that later – and in hierarchy of product line). And most importantly, it needs to sound damn good.

The drive unit roll-out is always the Cliff Notes version of loudspeaker description, but here that almost says the least about the loudspeaker. Wilson has used a 25mm soft dome tweeter and a 178mm mid-woofer in the top box, and a pair of 200mm bass units in the cabinet for the longest time in this design. In fairness, these have been subject to a range of changes (a quick look at the original WATT shows an inverted metal dome where the fabric dome sits). And while we are staying on the 'in fairness' part of the review, those drive units saw some extremely profound revisions in the last iteration, so this isn't the first place to go looking for changes.

The crossover, too, remains the subject of evolution rather than revolution, although the resistor changes used to help the speaker match the unique bass characteristics of different rooms are now accessed through an easier to open panel. This is not some form of tailoring or DSP, but instead

a very slight change in loading to suit different sized rooms. This helps a lot; someone buying a pair of Sasha DAWs in a ranch in America has a very different room load to someone doing the same in an apartment in Hong Kong.

Each successive iteration of the Sasha improves on the group delay system, which is tuned in situ, both in terms of slight changes to the crossover network, but more importantly changes to the pitch of the front baffle of the top-box. This has gone from a relatively simple adjustment to a very precise micrometer, allowing the most precise set-up in room it's possible to get at the price. This really is a trickle-down from higher-end models; what began at the MAXX level and beyond appeared in the last generation of Alexia, and now makes it to Sasha. It can't go any lower than Sasha of course, because the Sasha is the first in the range that includes that kind of top-box adjustment.

There's a misplaced feeling of voodoo about this tuning, in so far as saying it presupposes a fixed head position for the listener. Nod your head forward and the time-alignment is out of alignment. While this has some very raw credibility, it misses the point of all that careful installation made with electrostatic loudspeakers that also uses alignment that notionally presupposes pin-point head position. In fact, the time-alignment works for an optimal space for the listener relative to the room, and time-alignment takes that into account. Yes, it still focuses the best part of the sound into a very precise sweet-spot and those not sitting in that sweet spot don't get anything like the same benefit, but it's not the kind of sweet-spot that requires a head-clamp. Rather it is more like 'a zone of sweetness' that is focused on the listening position. Move a small amount and you'll still be in that zone. A deft installer with time enough to fine tune could extend that zone out wide enough to accommodate two listeners sitting close to one another, a deeper zone in front and behind the best position, or focus that sweet spot in so tight that you might want to think about a neck brace.

One of the strangest parts to this review is writing up the sound quality, in that the words just sprinted onto the page. This is usually a sign of a very good or very bad speaker indeed. In this case it is a positive sign. There's an aspect of good audio that is often forgotten in the path toward getting 'better' sound; it's also got to be enjoyable. There are a ►

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▶ number of loudspeakers that you listen to and find yourself full of respect for the sound, but musically unmoved. They aren't 'sterile' or 'harsh' sounding... just 'not for you'. And often you hear consensus among those who heard that speaker; great speaker, does everything right, but don't like the sound. The absolute opposite applies to the Wilson Sasha DAW

There's a bit of a buzz going around the audio world about the Sasha DAWs. It's one of those 'have you heard them?' moments, not dissimilar to the buzz about the mighty WAMM Chronosonics, but with wider accessibility. It's between those who haven't heard them and wonder what all the hype is about, while those who have heard them are weighing up which formerly vital organ they have to sell to get a pair. Even people far farther up the loudspeaker food chain have been known to re-evaluate their position, wondering how they can get that performance from their typically larger and more expensive existing loudspeakers, and often concluding

that the Sasha DAW is a feasible upgrade to more expensive loudspeakers. This isn't just the usual hyperbole and self-aggrandisement from reviewers (we can be guilty of being a touch 'carney barker' about high-end at times), but the genuine 'why I got into this business' moments of interest that don't come round too often. And that is precisely what the Sasha DAW offers.

This isn't jaw-dropping, unless the music calls for a spot of jaw-dropping. If you want jaw-dropping, put on von Karajan's 1969 recording of 'Wellington's Victory' [DG]. It's like the 1812's louder brother with more cannons. Be prepared to sit back a bit or turn the music down. The Sasha DAW will do jaw-dropping like you are guzzling down radium milkshakes.

Like all good Wilsons, the Sasha DAWs go crazy loud and crazy clean too. I played Ernest Ranglin's 'Surfin' from his 1996 album *Below the Bassline* [Island], played at close to club levels. You need a powerful amplifier to keep up ▶

“The uncanny ability to listen to the intent of a musician as well as their performance.”

- ▶ (Constellation helps), but your ears surrender long before these speakers begin to hit problems. In fact, in normal rooms, your eyes give in from the pressure before the drivers!

But, where it's simple to dismiss loudspeakers that go after impressiveness, this is only the first stage in understanding what the Sasha DAW does. Move over to some more textured and subtle music – such as Jackie McLean's 'Bluesnik' (from the album of the same name, Blue Note, XRCD) – and the level of texture and layering is excellent, but even this hardly scratches the surface. Yes, as you go deeper you get the outstanding levels of detail, articulation, and solidity of instruments in a rich and large soundstage. But these are just world class aspects of a world class performance... there's much more.

There is a level of musical communication here that comes along so rarely it stops you in your tracks. The big WAMM Master Chronosonic has it, and so does the Sasha DAW, albeit writ smaller. It's the uncanny ability to listen to the intent of a musician as well as their performance, that marks the Sasha DAW out as outside the audio norms.

It didn't matter what genre of music you played, or no matter how tortured the sound in an attempt to slip up the Sasha DAW; it was so musically assured, so sure-footed in its performance, it was an exercise in futility. 'Me and the Devil' from the Cowboy Junkies 1986 *Whites Off Earth Now* album [Latent] was telling. Well recorded but 'earthy' in performance, this can easily fall one of three or four ways: too flat sounding, too exaggerated, too loud, or undynamic. All of which depends on how good your speakers are at dynamic shading, staging, and sheer headroom. Compromise is the only way for most speakers, and compromise ruins the album. With the Sasha DAW here was no need for compromise, just music; raw and fun and enjoyable.

In fact, the Sasha DAW's only real weakness is possibly also its greatest strength. This is not a loudspeaker that ever sounds bad (its greatest strength), but it also has the potential to sound truly soul-shakingly good. There will be some pairs of Sasha DAWs where that potential remains untapped. This is a loudspeaker where going to the extra place is not simply an exercise in navel-gazing but returns the kind of performance that can stop you in your tracks. Here's a perfect test of the Sasha DAW's true power; play something evocative like

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Two chassis floorstanding three-way loudspeaker

Drivers:

Woofers: Two – 8 inch (20.32 cm)

Midrange: One – 7 inch (17.78 cm)

Tweeter: One – 1 inch, Dome (2.54 cm)

Enclosure Type Upper Module: Rear Vented Midrange, X&S-Material

Enclosure Type Woofer Module: Rear Ported Woofer, X-Material

Sensitivity: 91 dB (one watt at one meter at 1kHz)

Nominal Impedance: 4 ohms/minimum 2.48 ohms @ 85 Hz

Minimum Amplifier Power: 25 watts per channel

Frequency Response: 20 Hz–30 kHz +/- 3 dB room average response [RAR]

Dimensions (HxWxD): 113.67 × 36.83 × 58.26 cm

Weight: 107.05kg per channel

Price: £39,998 per pair

Manufacturer: Wilson Audio

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Jacqueline du Pré's remarkable rendition of the Elgar Cello Concerto [Barbirolli, LSO, EMI]. Unless the system has been set-up with a pick-axe, you will get goose-bumps. When the system is fully on song and at its very best, you find yourself in tears. It's an uncontrollable, almost atavistic, reaction to the music that happens when the system pulls the music into focus. You can find this in very well set-up systems, but usually in very well set-up systems that cost so much they could depth-charge the economy of a small island nation.

There is a tendency to view any suffix after the name of a product as simply a new version of that product. There was a Sasha W/P and a Sasha Series 2 before this, so one might be forgiven for thinking the Sasha DAW to be a 'Mk 3' model. Except that, once you actually hear the Sasha DAW, thinking that way is unforgivable. The Sasha DAW is no Sasha Mk 3... it's Sasha reborn, pure and simple. It's also perhaps the best way to honour Dave Wilson in a way he would have loved... with one of the best loudspeakers you can own right now! **+**