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WILSON AUDIO SYSTEM 8™

The main event in audiophile loudspeaker systems just got even better

PRICE £24,950 per stereo pair CONTACT Absolute Sounds, 58 Durham Road, London SW20 0DE ☎ 020 8971 3909 www.wilsonaudio.com

More perhaps than any speaker in history, the Wilson Audio System 8 and its forbears, defines high-end audio. The original Wilson Audio Tiny Tot broke new ground as a cost-no-object, two-way, standmount design, which was radically improved by the addition of the Puppy bass unit. Although substantially modified in the intervening decades, what worked in the original WATT/Puppy still works today.

The head unit is still a ported two-way, and still features a 25mm inverted aluminium dome tweeter partnered with a 165mm midrange unit. The bass cabinet also features the same driver configuration: a pair of front-firing 200mm bass units. As ever, the two sections are carefully decoupled from one another and only a single-wired cable connects the two.

So, what's changed? Put simply, everything else. Like the Linn LP12 turntable, the Wilson speakers may look very similar to the early models, but that resemblance is superficial. Most of the differences between the System 8 and the previous System 7 are in the treble/mid cabinet. The WATT gets a new tweeter, from a new source, and an enclosure made from Wilson's own 'M' material for its midrange clarity and 'X' material for its non-resonant mass-loading. This makes the cabinet lighter than before but behave as if it were much heavier... a double bonus! The tweeter comes from Wilson's MAXX 2 speaker, and this has meant adapting the crossover to make it more, well, MAXX-y. The midrange and bass units remain unchanged from the previous model, tested in 2004's edition of *The Collection*.

The bass cabinet remains much as it was in the previous incarnation of this speaker, the System 7. That version's Puppy saw the introduction of 'X' material and 'M' material and brought a first rate method of delineating bass from mid-treble cabinets.

One advantage to the use of these clever new materials is that it opens up the finish options. There are four standard and a dozen optional colours, and even a colour-matching service that works with almost any car paint finish you can imagine. Add in four colours of grille along with either silver or black trim and the permutations become truly endless.

With the new system in place, sensitivity remains very high at a claimed 92dB. Wilson suggests the System 8 can be driven by as little as seven watts per channel, but they had better be the best watts money can buy. Except in 'WilsonWorld' (where Alexandrias stand taller

than most men), the System 8 remains a big and heavy speaker, standing just over a metre tall and weighing in at an impressive 77.1 kg per speaker. Perhaps this weight goes some way to explaining how any speaker can deliver bass down to 21 Hz, even if the treble is a remarkably SACD-unaware 22.5kHz.

The two units are notionally available separately, but really should be thought of as a team. If you want a standmount speaker with a Wilson label, arguably the Duette is a more complete option today. Years of symbiosis have made the two parts of the System 8 behave as one.

Wilson WATT/Puppy systems are often thought of as being remarkably adept at analysing what's good and bad in a system, but that used to be at the expense of a touch

with the System 8 re-evaluating every disc you own, gaining in many cases greater respect for the recording engineers' art.

Then, there's the timing. Usually, smaller speakers would out-time a WATT/Puppy design, because of their less than full-range presentation. However, the System 8 redefines timing in high-end loudspeaker systems. It is entirely neutral when it comes to timing; it merely plays the beat that's in the music. This sounds trivial, but a surprising number of speakers fail to deliver this fundamental aspect of musical performance. Couple this with all that detail and articulation and this becomes a powerful high-end performer.

There are few speaker designs that celebrate their tenth birthday and remain a force to be reckoned with. The WATT/Puppy is a notable

"You will most probably spend your first weeks with the System 8 re-evaluating every disc you own"

of grace and subtlety. Because they could go very loud indeed and had a clean, open treble, they were considered 'The PA That God Uses' by knowledgeable journalists. Those days are numbered because, although the System 8 can still play very loud indeed, it's a far more refined beast than before. It's not that previous models were 'shouty' and graceless – far from it – it's just that the System 8 seems to sound more like the smooth-sounding Duette, but with the awe-inspiring scale that WATT/Puppy owners have always craved.

The System 8 has a gloriously open and honest-sounding midrange. It has the dynamic range to hide an orchestra in each speaker, yet it also has a subtle touch. It retains the analytical nature of Wilsons that went before – capable of analysing both discs and systems – but is not so analytical that it renders your music or your hi-fi a work in progress. The System 8 is smoother and more fluid than previous WATT/Puppy iterations, and that means you can hear the changes in the system or the disc, but – unless disc or system is really, really mingling – you remain comfortable with the resulting sound. The Will To Improve is still there, but it's not an overarching demand.

The level of detail is truly incredible. Instruments that were formerly hard to define within a mix are easy to follow and identify. You will most probably spend your first weeks

exception. But it's not preserved in aspic; this is a vibrant, modern design that keeps improving as materials change for the better. You might not notice the changes from the outside, but this speaker sounds better than ever. If only the rest of us could find anti-aging treatments that could work as well. ■

Alan Sircom

