

Wilson Audio SabrinaX

Five years on and Wilson Audio's Sabrina earns its 'X' – an overhaul that raises the bar for compact floorstanders
 Review: **Ken Kessler** Lab: **Paul Miller**

Five years – that's how long ago the Sabrina was launched and five years seems about right before making a new version of any model as good as the original was – and remains [HFN Aug '15]. Rightly, the upgrade is comprehensive, not a mere facelift, which is reassuring if you're wondering why a £15k per pair model is now priced at £21,500-£23,000. As for the price span, it covers three standard or three deluxe 'WilsonGloss' paint finishes, which can be co-ordinated with five grille colours. Our review sample is pictured here in the 'upgraded' gloss Ivory.

The SabrinaX's main change can be found in its name, as the enclosure is now entirely composed of Wilson's X-material, the latest inert substance preferred by the manufacturer over woods or conventional composites. But that's just one aspect of the model change. CEO Daryl Wilson says that the primary difference – sonic, of course – is the gain in refinement achieved 'by incorporating what we've learned since the launch of the original Sabrina' [see PM's boxout, p43].

SPEEDIER BASS

Heady stuff, for that means trickle-down benefits from the Chronosonic VX and Dave Wilson's swan-song, the majestic WAMM Master Chronosonic. The company has never been shy of pursuing cost-no-object solutions, but now we are entering an area best described as 'unapologetic'. How so? Daryl, like his father Dave, appreciates fine craftsmanship, whether in a pen or a car or a watch or a suitcase, and he 'gets' the luxury sector.

To that end, 'X' means, in addition to the all-X cabinet, improved bracing for better low frequency definition. The new tweeter is the Convergent Synergy MK5 from Wilson's flagship floorstanders, boasting more extension 'with better detail and airiness'. The 146mm mid is that of the original Sabrina, but the 203mm woofer is

now the same as the Sasha DAW's [HFN Mar '19], to provide a 'tauter, speedier bass', I was told.

Further confirming that the changes are non-retrofitable, hardware revisions include a modified woofer port and the mid-port now replaced with a tuned vent, to open up the sound – and this is, for me, the most immediate and impressive initial realisation you will experience. But more about that later.

FINE TUNING

Wilson Audio devised new binding posts with an increased contact area for better coupling – I used 4mm plugs on the Yter cables, but you can use spade lugs or bare wire if you prefer. As expected, the spikes are massive,

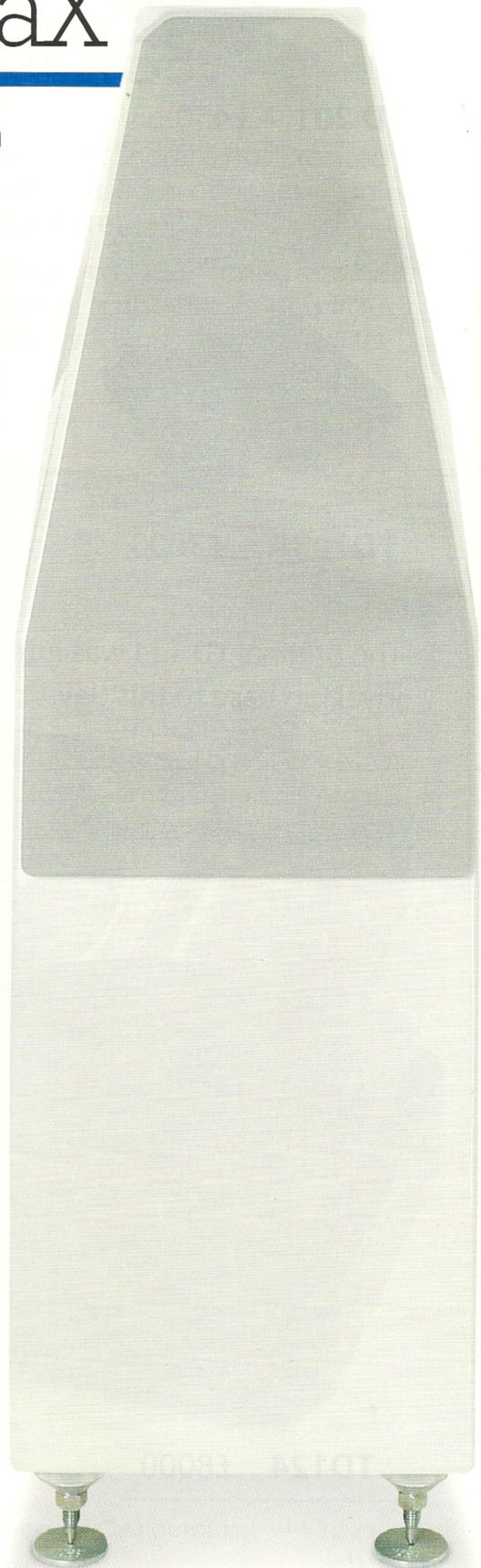
fully adjustable and come with discs to prevent damage to non-carpeted floors. You'll find them in the accessories kit with the necessary tools.

In the base of the speaker the crossovers now include AudioCapX capacitors with access provided to specialised resistors through a panel. These offer a modicum of fine-tuning while also adding a measure of safety, because they are designed to blow before taking out a driver, should a problem arise.

For many of you, this will be the best bit, as it was also the *raison d'être* of the original Sabrina. Take an LP sleeve and put it in the floor. Add a three-inch strip along the back edge and you have the footprint of the SabrinaX. Yup, it's only as wide as an LP at the base and barely deeper. Then, hold your hand 1m from the floor and you have the height. Yes, Wilson's smallest floorstander

RIGHT: Stunningly-finished 'X-Material' cabinet is supported on substantial spikes and hosts a 203mm reflex-loaded paper-pulp woofer, 146mm doped-cone midrange and 25mm silk-dome tweeter

'It was the most exhilarating, in-the-room piano sound'



DARYL'S DIRECTION

Evolution, rather than revolution, is the key to understanding Wilson Audio's direction of travel under the very steady hand of heir Daryl, son of founder David Wilson. Having worked with his father for many years, Daryl clearly has an intimate understanding of what makes each and every design 'tick' and how each and every component of those speakers contributes to their performance as a whole. That's certainly the case with the SabrinaX. Here, the dense, mineral-loaded polymer that is X-material has been reformulated to further 'deadened' the cabinet, just as the structure's internal bracing has been refined – courtesy of laser interferometry – to reduce if not entirely eliminate any remaining flexure of the panels.

There's direct trickle-down from costlier stablemates too. So the Convergent Synergy MK5 tweeter, modified for use in the stately WAMM Master Chronosonic floorstander to improve dispersion, extension and reduce distortion, is now incorporated into the SabrinaX. Similarly, the 203mm paper pulp woofer, complete with modifications to the voice coil former and suspension, has been levered from the Sasha DAW into this smaller cabinet. Bass loading is improved with a reduction in port turbulence and the crossover – its topology 'tweaked' to better optimise the revised drivers – now features Wilson's own AudioCapX capacitors. PM

remains dinky. It even looks more svelte, attesting to the detailed refinement of the faceted, nay, sculpted enclosure the company modestly describes as 'slight aesthetic modifications'.

Each loudspeaker weighs 51kg, so set-up, if not by the dealer, requires another member of the household because you don't want to scratch the gorgeous finish, yet you have to move these continually. Positioning is *excruciatingly* critical. I know: every speaker ever made has optimal siting, so that's a truism, but the SabrinaX responds to every millimetre of change.

BY THE BOOK

A Wilson tradition, however, is the inclusion of a comprehensive set-up guide, one of the best in the industry, which you must follow to the letter. Even though this is a single-piece model, less complex to install than those with separate, adjustable mid and/or tweeter enclosures, you don't get off lightly. The speaker's near-to-ideal sloped baffle deals with signal arrival times, but you can tweak it further by playing with the height of the spikes, tuning the slope relative to your hot seat.

I started with the enclosure's underside parallel to the floor, the spikes screwed into their mid-point to allow adjustment, ultimately adding 10mm height at the back via the spikes and lowering the front by 5mm. The degree by which the focus improved was as severe as the way that tiny changes in toe-in alter the soundstage, especially the sound beyond the outer edges.

Even a centimetre too much toe-in narrows the stage width markedly, though you may find an increase in front-to-back depth.

GRAND DESIGN

EAT's E-Glo I integrated amplifier [HFN Oct '20] proved a sublime match for the SabrinaX, delivering a sonic sensation I can only describe as 'majestic'. I know I use that adjective too much, but here it was undeniably apposite, particularly in light of Daryl citing his inspiration as including the 'vistas throughout Utah' (the brand's home town). The Sabrina defied belief with a soundscape that belied its dimensions, encouraging me to write that 'It sounds as "big" as a speaker double its height'. The SabrinaX sounds even more grand.

It caused a listening frenzy that ran, initially, to eight hours, my wife appearing periodically with tea and bemusement. What rocked my world from the outset was the 1962 soundtrack to *Show Boat* [Columbia OQ487; open-reel tape], the overture so massive I thought there could be no more surprises until the chorus arrived. But then such recordings always sound huge.

No, what made the grandeur even more impressive was the air that remained even through quieter sections. I know from the outset this stage show has been



LAB REPORT

WILSON AUDIO SABRINAX

LEFT: Rear view shows Wilson remains committed to single-wired, rather than bi-wired/bi-amped, connections. Note separate, dedicated port for bass and a resistive slot for the midrange driver

the fabulous new release of The Crickets' 1970s canon, *A Long, Long Way From Lubbock* [Rollercoaster RCCD3075]. It contains that lost masterpiece, *Bubblegum, Bop, Ballads & Boogies*, with Glen D Hardin, Elvis' pianist, delivering the finest-ever cover of Huey 'Piano' Smith's 'Rockin' Pneumonia And The Boogie-Woogie Flu'.

FREE KICKS

This boasted the most exhilarating, in-the-room piano sound I could have hoped for, with speed, clarity, attack and – crucially – low-end mass to add richness. Can a system swing? Spare me the 'pace-rhythm-timing' spiel of yore. The SabrinaX simply freed the recording. It was all there, unleashed. I sat stunned, for here was truly a half-pint Sasha DAW, which remains my reference.

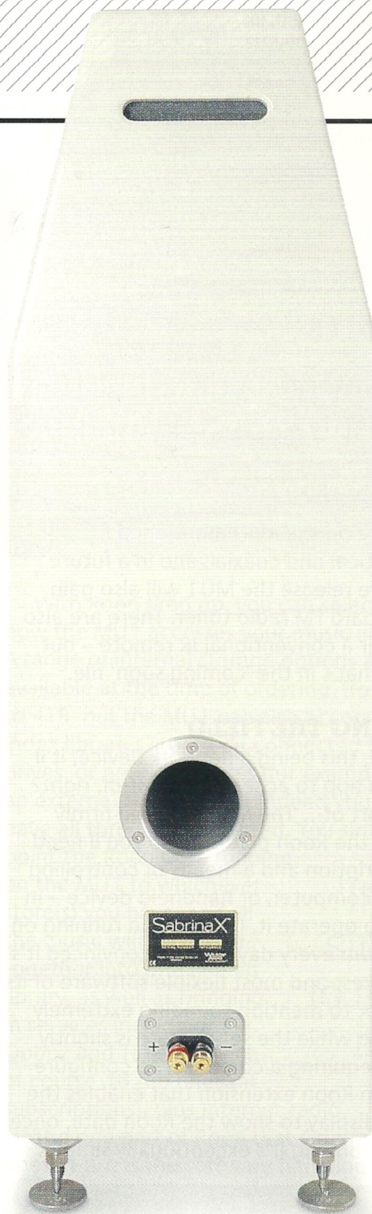
But here's where we come to a crisis, as I'm painfully cognisant of 'audiophile neuroses' and those who suffer apoplectic rage when their 25-year-old preamps have been upgraded. If you own the Sabrinas and loved them last Tuesday, you will love them next Tuesday. They are still magnificent loudspeakers. You needn't rush to replace them.

If, however, you have £22k to spare, and you desperately need a floorstander that won't take over your home, while still delivering John Ford-scale panoramas, Daryl Wilson has a speaker for you. ☺

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

Wilson's Sabrina was, for me, one of the best compact high-end loudspeakers ever – delivering the scale of a behemoth from the form of a wee sprite. The SabrinaX expands the soundstage and extends the bass in ways that shock me, even when played side-by-side with its big sister, the Sasha DAW. So I leave you with an ideal analogy: the SabrinaX is to the Sasha DAW what a 4oz filet mignon is... to an 8oz. Delicious.

Sound Quality: 90%



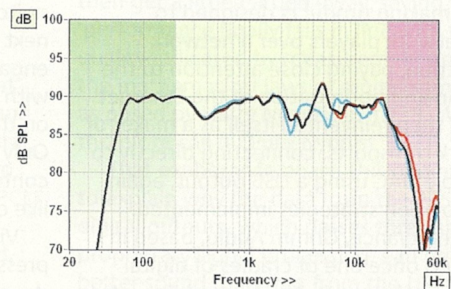
controversial because of its subject matter, but hearing the depth of the male voice on 'Ol' Man River', followed immediately by a stunning delivery of 'Can't Help Lovin' Dat Man' (one of Jerome Kern's greatest masterpieces) rendered me dazzled.

Surely such less-crowded pieces beg for intimacy? Smallness? Absolutely. And yet there was a feeling of all-embracing atmosphere, of presence, of – yes, air on a colossal scale. It happened again with Nancy Wilson's *Just For Now* [Capitol Y1T 272; open-reel tape]. Her breathless, edgy take on 'That's Life' was made all the more real by details which attested to the Wilson (Audio) bloodline. I wish Dave were alive to hear what Daryl's design did with this 1967 treasure. You could sense the studio's space.

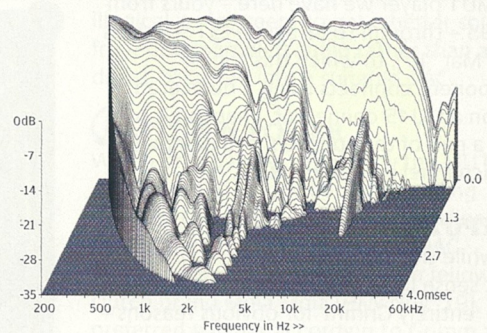
So far, so subtle. But I really needed something that wouldn't tax my tear glands, so I turned to

Although the SabrinaX's drivers are either new or improved, the forward response characteristic of the 'X' clearly inherits the dips at 380Hz, 2.8kHz and subsequent peak at 4.9kHz, plus associated mild driver resonances [see CSD waterfall, Graph 2], that we recorded for the original model [HFN Aug '15]. These account for the modest ± 2.9 dB response variations but the consistency of Wilson's driver QC is revealed in the superb 0.6dB pair matching [black/red traces, Graph 1] even if the press-to-fit grille frame adds its own modification to presence and treble [cyan trace, Graph 1]. Especially impressive is the SabrinaX's low 0.1-0.2% THD through bass and midrange (re. 90dB SPL) – a quality assisted by the enhanced 89.6dB/1kHz sensitivity of these new speakers, a full 2dB higher than Wilson's own conservative specification which is more in line with the mean figures of 88.8dB (500Hz-8kHz) and 86.6dB (200Hz-20kHz).

The diffraction-corrected bass shows a fairly steep 52Hz/–6dB roll-off [re. 200Hz; green shaded area, Graph 1] but this improves with rear-wall reinforcement. Moreover the bass output is clear of significant spurious pipe resonances, the port offering a useful 27Hz-85Hz tuning to support the 60Hz-280Hz passband of the 203mm pulp woofer (all –6dB limits). Nominal impedance is quoted as 4ohm with a specified 2.6ohm/135Hz minimum which is only slightly more optimistic than the 2.4ohm/155Hz measured here. Moreover, with a broad sub-8ohm from 60Hz-8kHz, the SabrinaX represents a reasonably challenging load, particularly through the bass where the boldest swings in phase of $-60^\circ/67$ Hz (5.8ohm) to $+27^\circ/255$ Hz (3.6ohm) are found. PM



ABOVE: Response inc. nearfield summed driver/port [green], freefield corrected to 1m at 2.83V [yellow], ultrasonic [pink]. Left, black; right, red; w. grille, blue



ABOVE: There are mild driver resonances at 2.8kHz, 5kHz and 17kHz coincident with peaks in response

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

| | |
|---|---|
| Sensitivity (SPL/1m/2.83V – 1kHz/Mean/IEC) | 89.6dB / 88.8dB / 86.6dB |
| Impedance modulus: minimum & maximum (20Hz–20kHz) | 2.39ohm @ 155Hz 15.9ohm @ 19Hz |
| Impedance phase: minimum & maximum (20Hz–20kHz) | -60° @ 67Hz $+27^\circ$ @ 255Hz |
| Pair matching/Resp. error (200Hz–20kHz) | 0.6dB/ ± 2.85 dB/ ± 2.90 dB |
| LF/HF extension (–6dB ref 200Hz/10kHz) | 52Hz / 30.3kHz/32.9kHz |
| THD 100Hz/1kHz/10kHz (for 90dB SPL/1m) | 0.2% / 0.1% / 0.5% |
| Dimensions (HWD) / Weight (each) | 965x305x390mm / 51kg |