

# the absolute sound

# THE COMPUTER AUDIO ISSUE

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Wilson Alexia



Wilson Alexia

# Sometimes Reality Surpasses Expectations

**Anthony H. Cordesman**

Being an audiophile means living in a constant state of hope. Hope about improvements in the quality of musical performances, in the quality of recordings, and in the media used to provide them. Hope for improvements in every active and passive component. And, let's be frank, a particular hope that somehow the next speaker will have that special magic. The speaker certainly isn't the most important component—everything in the audio chain counts—but it is inevitably the most colored one, the most demanding in interaction with another component (the power amplifier) and in its interaction with the room and listening position.

I've been lucky enough as a reviewer to have had access to some great speakers over the years, although the need to rotate them in my reference system to hear different products has also forced me to say goodbye to some great speakers as well. This is a moment in audio, however, when speakers reach levels of performance that actually do turn hope into reality, and where advances like room correction may soon allow the audiophile to break out of the limitations imposed by the listening room.

It is really hard to make choices today. So, for a long time I've compromised by making two choices of long-term references—plus keeping some older speakers around as references. The Legacy Aeris that I reviewed in Issue 235 is one of my current choices. The Legacy is great value for the money, but some of its strengths for the audiophile present problems for a reviewer.

The Legacy Aeris has powered subwoofers. This means it is not possible for a reviewer to review power amplifiers, as there is no clear way to know how they are affecting the bass. The Legacy also has room correction and the ability to electronically adjust its performance to the listener's taste. This makes the Legacy Aeris an excellent choice for the individual audiophile, but not a neutral reference for reviewing purposes.



“Independent research has demonstrated people are easily able to detect the sonic effects that result when the leading edge of transients from multiple drivers are misaligned in the time domain. In fact, listening trials have shown that timing errors on the order of 20 millionths of a second are readily discernable to the ear. In musical terms, this translates into loss of focus, speed, transparency, and timbral accuracy. In other words, music sounds discernibly less real. Surprisingly, few loudspeaker designers are concerned with precise time alignment, and even those who are can, because of their cabinet designs, only align the drivers for one fixed listening distance and ear height. Wilson Audio has long recognized the only way to build a loudspeaker capable of accurate time alignment in any number of listening environments is to offer both midrange and tweeter adjustability relative to the woofers. Furthermore, by allowing rotational adjustment on the polar axis, the dispersion of tweeter and midrange can be optimized for a wide range of listening positions and room types. Prior to Alexia, this ability (which we call Aspherical Propagation Delay) has only been available on our largest loudspeakers, namely, the Alexandrias. Anyone familiar with MAXX will recognize the unique brass ‘stair step’ now duplicated on the Alexia, an integral part of its Aspherical Propagation Delay system. And with its compact profile, Alexia now makes the most precise and adaptable time alignment a reality for even the most intimate listening spaces.”

Aspherical Propagation Delay may be a bit of a mouthful, but it is one audio coinage that really pays off in sound quality. I’d heard Wilson loudspeakers do an exceptional job of imaging and provide exceptional coherence and transparency before, and my experience made me give these claims enough credence to chose the Alexia over Wilson’s lower-priced speakers and a wide range of competing brands. However, it is one thing to hear a great demonstration from a top-of-the-line speaker in a large demonstration room and quite another to hear it from a moderately-sized speaker at home in a room with a system you live with.

In practice, hope turned into a reality almost instantly. It took only a couple of minutes of listening to hear that Wilson has come a long way from the early days when the benefits of its time alignment were only apparent in a relatively narrow listening area. This is nothing like a one person, head-in-a-clamp speaker. The best listening area is about a seat-and-a-half wide and deep, but the overall area for good listening is exceptionally wide and surprisingly deep. This is a speaker for audiophiles who have spouses, partners, families, and/or friends (or competitors).

I choose the Wilson Alexia as my partner to the Legacy for a number of reasons. I’ve heard and admired Wilson speakers for years, and I was impressed with Jacob Heilbrunn’s review of the Wilson XLF in Issue 225. But more important, I’ve always wanted a full-range cone speaker with the coherence and detail of the best planar electrostatic and ribbon speakers. Wilson’s larger speakers provide this through a careful mix of cabinet rigidity, driver choice, and fully adjustable time alignment, but the Alexia is the first relatively compact Wilson speaker that can be fully time-aligned for a specific listening position. It brings one of Wilson’s greatest strengths into a more compact and affordable package than the Alexandria XLF and Alexandria 2. (Wilson notes that the MAXX 3’s alignment is far less accurate than the Alexia’s, and does not have the Aspherical Propagation Delay feature of the Alexandria series. Aspherical Propagation Delay allows the installer or customer to move the individual driver modules forward and backward for time alignment, and to rotate those modules’ axes for the best tonal balance.)

I’d also heard Peter McGrath of Wilson give some outstanding demonstrations of Wilson speakers at shows and at a local dealer. In the process, he demonstrated that Wilson speakers have steadily broadened the listening area in which its Aspherical Propagation Delay performs at its best. I also got enough audio scuttlebutt to be aware that the Alexia’s new tweeter had probably corrected my one concern about the timbre and dynamics of Wilson speakers—a slight hardening in the upper-midrange and treble. Moreover, the midrange driver used in Alexia is nearly identical to the midrange found in the far more expensive Alexandria XLF

Just like every other audiophile, however, I could not be sure how the Alexia would actually perform in my system and in my room until it actually was put in place. If there is any iron law in audio, it is that no speaker ever sounds exactly the same in two different rooms. No matter how much you audition, question, and prepare, hope may spring eternal but reality can still snap back in your face.

This time, however, the listening experience both met and actually exceeded my hopes. The speakers came one morning—all 770 pounds worth—in large crates with a total of six modules (three per channel), hardware, and with more than a few special set-up tools and instructions. Fortunately, I had the same help that every other buyer will get. JS Audio (Wilson Audio’s dealer in the Washington, D.C., area) uncrated the Alexia, moved them in, and provided expert installation. In my case, I also worked with Peter McGrath, Wilson Audio’s Sales Manager, who provided some additional setup.

The Alexia system was uncrated, assembled, and more or less in place within two hours. The result was stunningly close, in my experience, to listening to Wilson’s far more expensive models.

The first thing I noticed was a soundstage width with good centerfill and depth. This came as a bit of shock since I really didn’t believe Peter McGrath’s initial setup would work. It seemed too wide to really lock in and provide a coherent stage. As it turned out, however, it was immediately apparent that the centerfill was solid in spite of the space between the two speakers, and that the soundstage was exceptionally detailed in imagery and depth.

This performance tracks closely with Wilson’s claims about the merits of precise time alignment and Aspherical Propagation Delay. Wilson Audio describes this technology as follows:

## Wilson Alexia

After several days of intense listening, the Alexia's merits became even clearer. You get stable timbre and good imaging on any form of music from solo piano and violin to complex chamber music and acoustic jazz recordings. The Alexia unravels the most demanding orchestral music, revealing both clear imaging and hall ambience characteristics. The drivers are exceptionally well integrated at almost any meaningful listening angle. The new tweeter is both sweeter and more musically accurate than what I have heard from earlier Wilson tweeters. It also seems to have smoother and better dispersion. Add to this an equally good midrange.

Peter McGrath of Wilson also showed me during the setup of the Alexia that Wilson's emphasis on precise time alignment is not hype. Once he fully adjusted each driver section of the speaker, he then showed me what happened to the sound when the tweeter was altered by even one small adjustable step. I could hear the sound focus change, and go slightly soft. The ability to alter the time alignment of both the midrange and tweeter made a major difference.

The second discovery I made was that the Alexia provided both extraordinary detail and exceptional dynamic range. Don't get me wrong, the Legacy Aeris—and my previous Vandersteen 5 Carbons—are no slouches in this regard, but the Alexia doesn't simply play loud. This loudspeaker can reproduce the details of full-range dynamic contrasts to a degree I never before heard from any speaker this size and they don't compress or distort at really high listening levels.

Moreover, the Alexia is just as good with low-level details. This exceptional ability to handle the loudest and most complex musical material is matched by



equally extraordinary low-level musical realism. If you love solo instruments—guitar, piano, violin, whatever—you are going to find that the Alexia provides a level of clarity that matches the best planar and electrostatic drivers from the highest frequencies through the lower midrange to the midbass.

If you get the chance to audition them, just bring in the most musically detailed and dynamic recording you own. Listen for a combination of detail, dynamics, and transparency without any trace of hardness as you increase the volume. Try this with your best solo piano, violin, or acoustic guitar recording. The resulting transparency and realism are immediately exceptional.

Moreover, in terms of practical listening, the Alexia does not push you to pick and choose between given types of good recordings or fail to be musical when the performance is far better than the recording. I now have more than 9000 albums on my Sooloos, plus a substantial number of direct digital recordings on my computer. I also have many SACDs, and a substantial LP collection. Some speakers have trouble resolving the latest and most detailed digital recordings and in coping with their dynamic ranges. Others seem to demand the best recordings to give them life. The Alexia performed well with every type of recording, and you do not need to trade Rubinstein for the latest young pianist or vice versa.

As for the lower bass, this was an area where I do have some caveats. Cabinet size and sheer speaker radiating area still matter when it comes to moving air, providing really deep bass at high volumes, and producing bass detail. My Legacy Aeris has two subwoofers with individual 500-watt amps in each loudspeaker. They do go lower, and deep bass really matters. It not only matters when you feel a desperate desire for escape into hearing deep bass move the room during sonic spectaculars, but in also establishing ambience—a true sense of the hall when that data are on the recording—and in “framing” your music in a realistic context through the reproduction of subtle low-level sounds in the deep bass.



# Wilson Alexia

The sacrifice in ultimate deep bass energy, however, proved to be much less important than I anticipated. I was lucky enough to have two really superb high power amps in for review—the AVM SA8 and the Pass Labs Xs300s—at the time the Alexia came in, along with my reference Pass Labs XA160s. I also had a set of the latest Transparent Audio Reference MM2 interconnects and speaker cables that were specifically adjusted to the impedance and other characteristics of my electronics as well as to the load of the Alexia.

This setup showed the Alexias are not as extended in the deep bass region as the Legacy Aeris or Wilson's larger speakers, but they come damn close both in musical listening and measurement using a wide variety of bass test tones and two different sets of FFT and RTA measurement systems and mikes. Moreover, the Alexias are a speaker for real-world listening rooms. They worked beautifully when placed well away from the sidewalls and near the rear walls in my listening room. They have a surprisingly flat response down to around 34–37Hz, going much deeper with a slow roll-off, with audible and measured power to below 30Hz.

With the right setup and listening position, they proved to be far flatter in the deep bass throughout my entire listening room than all but a small handful of the speakers that have come and gone over the years. Nothing is ever free of room coloration in the bass, but the Alexias not only measured very well, but had minimal standing-wave interactions and their enclosures were nearly inert at test-tone volumes and were doing just a fine job of locating every area of resonance in very solid plaster and lath walls.

I should also note that I found that the Alexias did an excellent job of preserving low-frequency output at high volumes. I ran through my usual organ spectaculars, Saint-Saëns, low bass drum in Mahler, Telarc bass drum spectaculars, synthesizer, and bass guitar, and the Alexias consistently were exceptional for any speaker their size in both power and detail. There are a lot of speakers that have extended frequency range into the deep bass at limited power and with limited output. The Alexias are not actively amplified in the subwoofer region like the Legacy speakers, but they do move a lot of deep bass air and they move it cleanly below 35Hz even at really high volumes.

Do I have any caveats beyond the deepest bass? No, not really. I can't tell you the Alexias will perform as well in your room as they did in mine. I am also a bit dubious about Wilson saying they can be used with amplifiers with a minimum of 20W of output power. That is a bit too optimistic. They are high in sensitivity, and a friend's low-power tube amp was very musical, but even a borrowed McIntosh MC-275 with 75 watts per channel could not provide the same deep bass energy and control as really high-powered, high-current solid-state amps.

This doesn't mean that moderate to high-powered tube amps won't work with the Alexias or won't have their own merits. I had my usual reaction to the best tube amps and felt the McIntosh amplifiers offset any deep bass problems with their performance in the rest of the audio spectrum. Nevertheless, I'd recommend that you use the Alexias with high-power, high-current amplifiers if you want the most magic they can provide in the deep bass and with truly loud, dynamic passages of music. They present a moderately difficult load at low frequencies, where their impedance drops to 2 ohms at around 80Hz.

I also would recommend you experiment with different cables. It had been a while since I had heard the Transparent Audio interconnects and speaker cables, and as the sidebar attached to this review shows, I also had never tried cables tailored to my specific system. They did, however, perform superbly, and better in

this particular system than my reference AudioQuest and Kimber.

The audible differences between really good interconnects and speaker cables are relatively subtle compared to the differences between most active components. And yet, a combination of the EMM Labs XDS1 DAC and SACD player, Pass Labs XP-30 preamp, Pass Labs Xs300 amps, and the tailored Transparent Audio reference MM2 interconnects did have a special magic my other interconnects could not provide in this system. Put more simply, the Alexias are extremely revealing, and you will hear the differences between speaker cables.

Finally, I do have one criticism of the Alexias. Like all of the top speakers I've used and reviewed, I really wish their sound and technology could be available at much lower prices. I've had more fun with the Wilson Alexias and Legacy Aeris—and in exploring their radically different characteristics and merits—than I've had with audio in a long time.

The Alexias are also superbly styled and finished and get around the décor issue better than the vast majority of speakers with anything like their performance. I can see how difficult they are to manufacture and how much sheer work goes into providing the capability to make such precise time alignments. But I do hope Wilson Audio will find some way to make most of their performance available at a lower price. These are great speakers and a musical adventure I wish that everyone could share. **tas**

## SPECS & PRICING

**Driver complement:** 10" woofer, 8" mid/woofer, 7" midrange, 1" dome tweeter

**Loading:** Rear-ported

**Frequency response:** 20Hz–32kHz +/-3dB

**Sensitivity:** 90dB/1W/1m

**Nominal impedance:** 4 ohms (2 ohms at 80Hz)

**Minimum amplifier power:** 20Wpc

**Overall dimensions:** 53" x 15" x 21"

**Weight:** 256 lbs. each

**Price:** \$47,500 per pair

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