

Sept./Oct. 2005
Volume 4 Issue 5

Recent and Upcoming Events

Sept. 15-18, 2005

Milan Hi Fi Show
Milan, Italy
Peter McGrath Attending

Sept. 22-24, 2005

London Hi Fi Show
London, England
Peter McGrath Attending

Sept. 22-23, 2005

ne plus ultra
Austin, Texas
Dealer Training
with John Giolas

Oct. 3, 2005

Montana Audio Systems
Zurich, Switzerland
Dealer Training
with Peter McGrath

Oct. 14-15, 2005

Overture
Wilmington, DE
Dealer Show
with David Wilson
& Peter McGrath

Oct. 20, 2005

Sound Plus
Vancouver, B.C., Canada
Dealer Show
with John Giolas

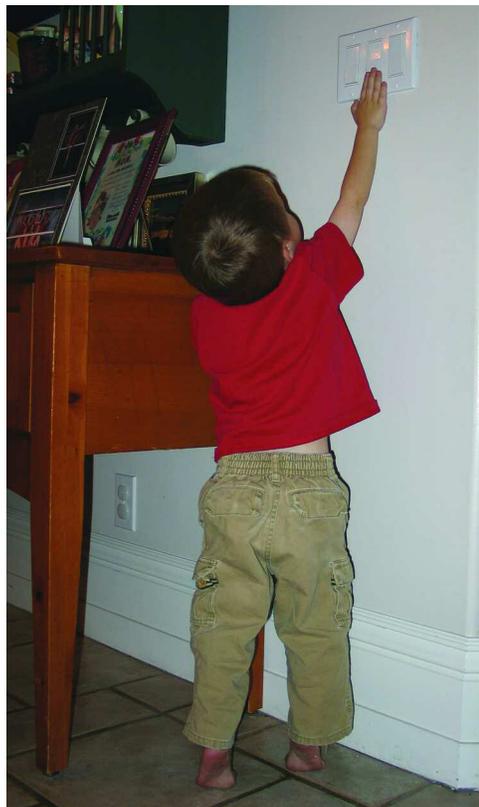
WILSON[®] AUDIOFILES

Wilson Audio Authentic Excellence Part Four: The Effective Demo

by John Giolas

The other day, my three year old, Josh, asked me to turn on the light as we entered a room in our home. Wasn't he tall enough to reach, I asked. Josh gave me one of his half-cocked smiles he reserved for those times when he thought I was being especially silly and dense and said, "Dad, I'm still three. I won't be able to reach 'til I'm four." It was one of those priceless moments of parenthood. Josh spoke with such conviction and surety. To Josh it was perfectly logical: three year olds can't reach light switches.

Josh unwittingly reminded me of the human propensity to great leaps of logic. This is particularly true in the audio world.



There is a long history of manufacturers that mistakenly attach a "technology" to good performance. The audio community is laden with examples of false associations of cause versus effect.

In the late sixties, most amplifier manufacturers were moving away from vacuum tubes, replacing them with the new fangled solid-state transistor. More convenient and stable than tubes, the transistor was knighted as the modern ultra low-distortion device. Tubes were instantly deemed antiquated. Early adapters of the era purchased the new solid state products in droves, junking their old school tube gear.

In an effort to sell the new technology as better, amplifier companies became total harmonic distortion spec-obsessed. Distortion specs, measured in one one-thousandths and even one ten-thousandths of percent, ruled the day. Marketers emblazoned THD numbers, often with many zeros after the decimal, in the headers of ads and literature. Of course, all of this ignored the simple fact these early solid-state audio products sounded universally dreadful.

Later, in the early eighties, the spin-doctors touted the great sonic advances of the digital Compact Disc. The marketers singularly focused on the CD's lack of traditional analogue LP noise, excluding the myriad of issues and problems that made the early CD players nearly unlistenable. "Perfect sound forever" was the hyperbolic mantra that rang out in our industry. It literally took years (as a result of innovations made by specialty audio manufacturers) to make the CD listenable and years more to make it great.

This type of hyperbolic marketing promotes a mindset where a solitary technical variable becomes (Cont. on pg. 2 as Demo)

Demo (Cont. from pg. 1)

the focus – generally at the exclusion of all others. With early solid state, the audio world was preoccupied with the race toward ultra-low THD; the singular focus with digital and the CD was S/N ratio. All other design and engineering variables commensurate to a faithful musical end result were either diminished or discarded.

Worse, the engineer frequently compromised the performance of a design by pursuing a single technology. The methods used to achieve a desired ingredient often had a negative effect on other, more important musical attributes.

Most disturbing of all is when research and development is driven by the company's marketing in an effort to distill performance into one easily defined, salable parameter. The chosen technical feature becomes the marketing "hook." All subsequent promotions surround this single technology.

The inevitable result is an incomplete and inauthentic product. The disaster escalates when the technical feature, in the mind of the buying public, becomes inextricably associated with good audio performance. The attention of the buyer is on the feature – the technology – rather than on the experience itself. This type of marketing and engineering is, therefore, corrosive to the values and culture (and long-term success) of specialty marketing.

The specialty audio culture was built on the foundation of the engaging musical experience. All experience-based realities depend on empirical exposure to be understood. In other words, an understanding of the experience can only be derived from sensory observation, rather than from the application of logic. For example, logic would suggest that ultra-low distortion amplifiers should sound better. But most of us came to the conclusion via an empirical demonstration process that an amplifier with a higher distortion can sound better than its ultra-low distortion counterpart. Similarly, we have witnessed that some "old school" technologies, such as vacuum tubes and analogue playback, are still viable, even though they measure less well in some (sonically less relevant) parameters.

When we allow our perceptions to be

determined by hyperbolic marketing, we devolve into espousing the very mid-fi ideals we have worked so hard to rise above. Recently, I was shocked when, upon asking a representative of a large loud-speaker manufacturer if I could hear their latest flagship, he informed me they no longer needed to do public demonstrations. Their business relationships and marketing were so strong dealers just bought and sold the product.

The high end spent its renaissance days largely in the pursuit of debunking, through comparative demonstrations, the false dogma of mediocrity. The mass-marketers/merchants were – and continue to be – content with creating the illusion provided by a verisimilitude imitating authenticity. Great high-end specialists are driven to demonstrate a genuine reality. A reality that ads beauty and enhances life.

Being involved in, or more accurately, witnessing the creation process at Wilson is one of the most captivating, gratifying, and enlivening aspects of my work. So the other day, when Dave Wilson asked me to come back to the lab to hear something he and the engineers had been developing, I felt, as I always do before Dave's demos, a sense of anticipatory excitement.

This time around, Dave was comparing tweeters. Mounted side by side in one of Dave's custom jigs were our latest tweeter (appearing in the MAXX Series 2) and a diamond tweeter used in a well-known competitor's speaker. The comparison was revealing in ways that I had not anticipated given my biases.

My bet would have been that the diamond tweeter, which is much more costly than Wilson's already expensive, heavily modified MAXX tweeter, would be the winner. It was not so. While the diamond tweeter sounded quite good, the MAXX Series 2 tweeter sounded more lifelike in every musically relevant way. Instruments sounded more real. The noise floor of the Wilson tweeter was significantly lower, allowing subtle detail and nuance to be revealed. The MAXX tweeter was simply more truthful, more authentic.

The demonstration would have been far less effective if Dave had played each of the tweeters separately and in isolation. If

Dave had played just the diamond tweeter, I would have potentially come away with a very different (and erroneous) conclusion. It was the context of comparison that revealed the salient differences between the two drivers and clearly demonstrated that the Wilson tweeter was far superior. Dave repeated the process for several other competing tweeters, most of which were of exotic material and featured wide bandwidth. To varying degrees, the MAXX tweeter was significantly better than all of them.

As has been the case for me (and many of you) in some of Dave's prior demonstrations, this comparison challenged my preconceived notions – beliefs that were a result of "logical" assumptions about the nature of a featured technology. What I previously believed to be true proved to be incorrect. Without the experience of the context-based comparison, I potentially would have held on to wrong-headed conclusions.

Even though this comparison was profoundly informative to me, I also realize the tweeter is but one of hundreds of variables contributing to MAXX's inherent greatness. And while the technology that makes the MAXX tweeter state-of-the-art could be a potential selling point if singled-out in our promotional material, doing so would diminish the bigger story. For it is the fanatical attention to every detail of design and execution – the utter completeness of approach – that sets Wilson products apart. Strangely, Wilson's commitment to a complete design approach sometimes works against us in the marketplace. When certain fads gain momentum, the market is temporarily distracted. The industry becomes infatuated with the exotic feature and blinded to the broader truth.

The only way to determine the efficacy of a technology is to examine it within the context of the experience it provides. Dave Wilson understands this fundamental truth. As a part of the development process, Dave and the engineers accumulate reams of data and research that he can recite, articulate, and prove. But knowingly, Dave taps a finger on the large stack of charts and graphs and leads us to the soundroom.

Properly (Cont. on pg. 5 as Demo)

Excerpted with permission from the United Kingdom's **Hi-Fi Choice - The Collection**, Oct. 2005

"Wilson Audio MAXX 2"

by Alan Sircom

"No matter how familiar you are with a disc, you are hearing it for the first time through the MAXX 2. It takes simply everything in its stride...and makes every sound the right size and with a sense of scale that is almost impossible to fault...."

"Big speakers are often accused of sounding big at all times - not so the MAXX 2. If a sound is big, it sounds big, if it's small it sounds small. Better still, if there are both big and small sounds on the same recording, both have exactly the right image size....Playing Rachmaninov's *Symphonic Dances* was the clincher - the orchestra had all the right tonality and size, but when the solo saxophone kicked in, there was no sense of the image collapsing. In most systems, it's hard to tell this really *is* a saxophone, but here, you can almost tell what grade of reed the player was using.

"Everything you might want from a speaker, like musicality, dynamic range, neutrality, an image that is cast far, wide and deep, coherence, articulation, detail and more - they are all here, and all better than from practically any other speaker on the planet. But there's something still more to get from the MAXX 2. This is a speaker that has a physical sense of music occurring in a very real, very tangible and very solid sense, as you might expect from a big loudspeaker cabinet, but it also has the speed and musical communication that's typically found in small-box speakers.

"...It delivers supreme scale, accuracy and honesty, coupled with sublime coherence, timing and musicality, in a package that fits the dynamics of most big living rooms...."

"This is almost a review that writes itself. All the boxes are ticked, all the i's are dotted and all the t's crossed. It behooves the job of a reviewer to find fault in anything under review, but sometimes that's impossible. This is one of those rare occasions - there's nothing to find, here. The MAXX 2 rocks."

SoundStage! Adds Feature Reviews

As of August 15, a new addition to the SoundStage! Network is their "Feature Reviews," beginning with a review of Wilson Audio's Alexandria.

Marc Mickelson, SoundStage Publisher, explains the necessity of "Feature Reviews" by stating, "...we still encounter products whose back story makes them difficult to discuss in detail in a 3000-word review. For these we will begin publishing multi-part 'Feature Reviews,' which will give our writers the ability to branch out from our standard format and talk about a product in greater depth. We will reserve 'Feature Reviews' for products like the Wilson Audio Alexandria X-2, a big speaker with a big story, and other products with long and storied histories that lend themselves to expanded coverage."

The multi-part format of "Feature Reviews" will allow for the inclusion of more photographs with each article, thereby adding clarity and emphasis to the points discussed in the review.

"Feature Reviews" may be accessed at www.soundstage.com/equipment.shtml

Part one of the series on Alexandria is indexed under **August 15**. The article discusses a factory tour taken by Marc Mikelson and Doug Schneider who journeyed to Provo to find out what is involved in building a pair of Alexandrias. The two were able to view and photograph pairs of Alexandrias in various stages of production.

Also covered in part one is a demonstration comparing cabinet materials, of which Mickelson states, "We reviewers are not used to listening for the sonic characteristics of different materials, so this demo was one that I won't forget...."

The link for part two of the Alexandria Feature Review is also located at the above address. Part two focuses on the installation of Alexandria's in Mickelson's listening room. The final article covers Mickelson's listening experience.

Excerpted from **Bright Lights, Big City:**

A Report from the 2005 Consumer Electronics Show

Appearing in *The Absolute Sound*, April/May Issue. Reprinted with permission.

Robert Harley's Best of Show

Best Sound at CES: Audio Research and Wilson Audio. "Although I didn't hear nearly as many systems as my colleagues, the system that most impressed me was the Wilson MAXX 2 loudspeaker driven by Audio Research's new Reference 3 linestage preamp and Reference 300 Mk. II power amplifiers at T.H.E. Show. I heard the system on the show's last day, which probably helped. The sound was extremely open and transparent, with gorgeous rendering of timbre (at which the Reference 300s excel), and stunning palpability."

Paul Seydor's Best of Show

Best Sound at CES: Wilson MAXX Series 2. "Aware that the sound of Dave Wilson's speakers is not to everyone's taste, I nevertheless have rarely, if ever, heard the sheer size, scale, dimensions, and dynamic range of a symphony orchestra reproduced with more overwhelming, yet persuasive, force as I did from the MAXX Series 2 playing Michael Tilson Thomas' new SACD of the Mahler Second. After the final chord died away, I was, for all practical purposes, finished listening at the show."

Jon Valin's Best of Show

Most Frequently Heard Demo Music: Peter McGrath's master-tapes/Rachmaninoff Third Piano Concerto/Wilco *Yankee Hotel Foxtrot*. "Well, I only heard them once - via Wilson MAXX Series 2 loudspeakers and VTL electronics in Luke Manley's swell-sounding room - but, folks, once you've heard Peter McGrath's superb mastertapes, it is very hard to listen impartially to any other source."

Excerpted with permission from *The Absolute Sound*, Aug./Sept. 2005.

“Exploring the Art and Technology

The Cutting Edge:

Wilson Audio Specialties MAXX Series 2 Loudspeaker”

by Robert Harley

“I can count on both hands, with fingers to spare, the number of audio components that have refined some aspect of the listening experience. I’m not talking about products that incrementally improve an element of the sonic presentation, but those that have caused me to reevaluate what’s possible in music reproduction....

“To that select list I can now add the \$45,000 Wilson MAXX Series 2 loudspeaker. The aspect of music reproduction that the MAXX redefines, in my experience, is the bottom end, where it combines huge bass power and dynamics with ultra-precise control, coherence, and resolution. More than any other loudspeaker I’ve heard, the MAXX integrates the bass into the musical fabric, both dynamically and tonally, in a way that makes me forget I’m listening to a mechanical reproduction of music rather than to music itself. In addition, the MAXX resolves inner detail and nuances in the bottom end in a way that changes the listening experience with some kinds of music. The audiophile lexicon of superior bass performance - tight, articulate, weighty, deep - simply doesn’t begin to describe the MAXX experience. Rather, this new MAXX renders a wholesale elevation of bass quality, requiring a different approach to describing why it’s different from every other loudspeaker I’ve heard....

“I assumed that the bass quality I enjoyed in the WP7, with its dual 8” woofers, simply couldn’t be achieved with the MAXX’s huge 13” and 10.5” drivers. As much as I enjoy a full-range presentation, I’ll never sacrifice bass quality for quantity. To my surprise, however, the MAXX maintains the WP7’s precise articulation and dynamic agility, yet backs up this delicacy with astonishing power, force, extension, and impact. The combination is truly mind-blowing and why the MAXX is, for me, revelatory....

“In large-scale orchestral music, the basses have texture and inner detail that makes them sound more ‘organic.’ They are not just a low-frequency sound that’s a rough approximation of a group of wooden bodies resonating; the MAXX brings them to life with a palpability of texture and inner detail that is simply breathtaking....Where the two loudspeakers diverge, however, is when the music gets loud, weighty, and complex. The MAXX rises to the occasion, intensifying rather than diminishing this sense of reality. The MAXX also has a magnificent feeling of force and power in the midbass which for some reason I found deeply moving. This combination of weight and detail resolution is jaw-dropping sonically but, more importantly, is extremely musically involving. The MAXX’s reproduction of large-scale orchestral music was simply sensational....

“The second example is the MAXX’s reproduction of bass guitar and kick drum, which, with great musicians, work together to anchor the rhythm and create that propulsive, visceral involvement...Listen to the spectacularly recorded guitar power-trio album *Suspension* by the Travis Larson Band [The Orchard]. You

can hear the kick drum’s dynamic envelope line up with the bass’ leading-edge transients in a wonderful synergy that must be heard to be appreciated. The bottom end has a center-of-the-earth solidity that serves as the tonal and rhythmic anchor for the music. Moreover, the MAXX resolves the micro-detail that conveys the information that the bass’ sound is made by a vibrating string. Add to this the kick drum’s ultra-fast slam, equally fast decay, and seemingly unlimited extension and dynamics, and you’ve got the makings of an addictive experience. The MAXX will maintain these qualities at any listening level, with no congestion, smearing or lessening of dynamic impact....

“I was surprised that the MAXX’s bass didn’t overload my listening room, which is smaller (14.5’ x 21’ x 9’) than most environments in which the MAXX is likely to be used....

“My beginning this review with a focus on the MAXX’s performance below 200Hz should in no way be interpreted as an indication that the MAXX is a one-trick pony. The MAXX is a fully realized design in every way, and builds on the foundation of its extraordinary bottom end. Resolution of midband detail, for example, was the best I’ve heard from a dynamic loudspeaker. The MAXX was adept at conveying the micro-detail of instrumental textures without sounding etched or analytical, a quality that gave timbres a palpable realism.

“In addition to correctly reproducing the weight of orchestral music, the MAXX conveyed a sense of the physical size of the orchestra....It’s not hard for big loudspeakers to sound big, but the problem is often that they make everything sound big, bloating solo voices and small instruments, and destroying a sense of intimacy with small-scale music. The MAXX, more than any other loudspeaker I’ve heard, has the ability to present a wide range of music with the appropriate scale....

“The MAXX Series 2 produced the best sound I’ve had in my listening room over the past 16 years as a full-time reviewer. Once you hear the newfound resolution of bass detail, the stunning transient fidelity, and the unique combination of finesse and power of which this loudspeaker is capable, there is simply no going back.

But world-class bass reproduction is just the foundation of the MAXX’s performance. This loudspeaker has a top-to-bottom coherence, tonally and dynamically, that makes it disappear into the music. The midband resolution sets a new standard in dynamic loudspeakers, in my experience. And the MAXX’s correct reproduction of the recording’s spatial characteristics - image size and focus, soundstage depth, the ability to resolve the bloom around instrumental outlines - was simply sensational.

Finally, I must mention the MAXX’s absolutely impeccable build and finish quality. These are works of industrial art, not just in the overall design, but in the details that contribute to a visually stunning and flawlessly executed package.”

Demo (Cont. from pg. 2)

executed demonstrations change paradigms. Heightened by the power of context, the comparative demonstration is an especially sharp tool that efficiently cuts through marketing nonsense to reveal the underlying truth. Exposure to this type of demonstration reforms preconceptions germinated from the seeds of hyperbole planted and fertilized by effective marketers. Demonstrations focus on the all important end result – the experience. They establish beliefs and convictions that are irrefutable within the beholder. In this case, the false notion that wide-bandwidth tweeters constructed of ultra-exotic materials must sound better.

Years ago, dealers engaged in comparative demonstrations on their own, both for client education and for their own edification. Today, there is far more competing for the dealers' attention, especially since the advent of custom install. Most dealers neither have the time nor is it a priority for them to conduct ongoing product compar-

isons on their own. As a result, the dealers may speak with less authority on the validity of the experience they offer than they did in the past. The dealer, as such, has lost a measure of his authority established by the knowledge and expertise that came from ongoing, personally conducted comparisons.

Larger companies have the resources and will to market their products via expensive schemes. Our marketing philosophy is very simple: tell our story truthfully and well, and educate our dealers and potential clients through proper exposure to our products. We believe that Wilson loudspeakers have the inimitable ability to convey an authentic and rewarding experience. To gain understanding of the value of Wilson products, the most instructive type of presentation is still the well-engineered and choreographed comparative demonstration.

The other day, I didn't have the heart to tell Josh that his lack of vertical virtuos-

ity has very little to do with his age and a lot to do with his genes, passed onto him by diminutive parents. He will come to learn this in his own due time. Through observation and experience, he will come to realize that most of his three-year-old peers can reach the light switch (sorry Josh). He will then begin to ask the right kind of questions that will lead to the truth.

Similarly, we at Wilson believe in the ability of our loudspeakers to convey, on their own, the elevating qualities and attributes utterly unique to them. We know that it is up to us to distinguish our loudspeakers from other choices in the marketplace. All of the fanatical work that goes into the design and execution of a Wilson product is the means to an end, not the end itself. It is the experience Wilson products create that truly matters. We know of no better way to clarify that experience than through demonstrations within the context of comparison.

Robert Stiffler: Finishing Up

by Sherri R. Burge

The last thing Wilson Audio does in producing a speaker enclosure is to paint it. Sounds simple, but as Robert Stiffler, a 9 year veteran in Wilson Audio's paint shop, can tell you, painting a Wilson speaker is a little more complicated than it might sound.

Robert is the perfect one to explain what it means to paint a Wilson speaker because he has worked in every stage of the finish process: prep, paint, and polish. He compares the many-step finish process to the process chrome plating requires.

From raw cabinet to finished enclosure, the myriad of steps including gel coat, sanding, base color, buffing and more would be difficult for a novice to keep track of. Although he could easily

explain both the way the paint process works and the whys behind the process, Robert knows the amount of time it has taken to perfect the technologies involved in achieving that mirror-like Wilson shine. A shy grin protects the proprietary information, but Robert readily admits that of all the jobs to do in the paint shop, his favorite is simply, "playing with paint."



Outside of Wilson Audio, Robert spends his time, well, painting. For the past 25 years Robert has been involved in air brushing art work and graphics on automobiles. Most of the work he does appears on show cars, like his Toyota pickup. He's painted everything from sunsets to wolves. Although he may begin with a photograph for an idea, the finished work is original art; no pre-packaged stencils involved.

Another interest Robert has is remote control airplanes. The 10 planes he has in his current collection range in size from a two foot wingspan to a six foot wingspan. Not only does he fly them, he builds them. Often the planes are made from kits, but he has also built planes from scratch, including, of course, doing the paint job.



The new series of Wilson Audio Authentic Excellence posters are photo quality and suitable for framing. The posters measure 16" X 20" and are now available to dealers.

point five percent



Caleb Mower is hand soldering point-to-point wiring on one of our crossovers. He's using two different types of solder: one chosen for the upper frequencies, the other for the lower. Meanwhile, most other high end manufacturers are wave-soldering their components to printed circuit boards, which are inherently poor conductors of high current music signals.

All crossovers use capacitors and inductors; even the best typically deviate from their rated values by +/- 10 percent. Left unaccounted for, the measured performance of each crossover—and hence each loudspeaker—will vary by an audible margin. Wilson Audio dictates that the loudspeaker you buy sounds indistinguishable from the product Wilson designed. That's why we spec our speakers more than an order of magnitude tighter than the industry standard.

And that's why, when Caleb measures his finished crossover, it will match the reference within plus or minus .5%.

Wilson Audio · Authentic Excellence™

