

which turns out interesting and good-sounding products based on a wide range of design theories. We audiophiles know that all products aren't equal; not even all products that qualify as good or very good are, taste accounting for differences in opinion. However, truly great sound speaks for itself to people with discerning ears, and it causes us in the press to examine the product's story -- how it accomplishes what it does sonically. It's a matter of natural curiosity, not to mention our job.

Wilson Audio's story is well known. The company was founded by David Wilson, recording engineer, audio tinkerer and writer, over 30 years ago on the basis of one product: the original WAMM multipiece speaker system, which introduced adjustable propagation delay, a technology that remains a part of today's Wilson Audio speakers. Since then, Wilson and his crew of engineers and craftsmen have created a number of new speakers, updating them incrementally but meaningfully along the way. The MAXX was introduced in 1999 as the model between the time-honored WATT/Puppy and now-discontinued X-1 Grand SLAMM. It was released in an updated form in 2004, which is where my direct experience with it began. I reviewed the MAXX Series 2 and used it as my reference afterwards, always appreciating its wide-bandwidth, dynamic way of presenting music.

In late 2008, Wilson Audio began shipping the MAXX Series 3 (\$68,500 USD per pair). It's an unusual product -- well established on the one hand but altered to such an extent that it is in some ways completely new. The most obvious change is also the one that affects the speaker's performance to the greatest degree. Whereas the MAXX 2 was like the WATT/Puppy -- a two-cabinet system with a midrange/tweeter module that could be tilted -- the MAXX 3 borrows an important characteristic of the X-2 Alexandria: what Wilson Audio calls "Aspherical Group Delay." Here, the MAXX 2's single upper module has been split into a pair of modules, and these move forward and back as well as rotate. This gives great flexibility in setup, allowing for the precise alignment of the drivers' outputs at the listening position. However, this configuration is also used to tailor the



speakers to the space in which they will be used. Wilson Audio's setup routine, called "vowel in," determines the best spot in the room for the speakers -- the locations where slap echo, comb filtering and the like have the least effect. Then the orientation of the upper modules in relation to the massive bass cabinet is determined, with the location of the listening seat and its height, which sets the height of the listener's ears, helping to establish this. After all this work, the speakers are optimized for the room *and* the listener's place in it. It works, something that I verified through experimentation I discuss later in this review.

There are several other important changes to MAXX 3, many of which originated in some form with Wilson Audio's flagship speaker, the Alexandria X-2 Series 2. The newest MAXX uses a slightly different version of the 6" midrange driver developed for its bigger brother. Among the singular features of this driver are the motor system, which Wilson Audio builds partially in-house, and the cone, which is said to be "a unique combination of fibrous materials, including paper and carbon fiber." The Alexandria's midrange has a motor nearly twice as robust as that for MAXX 3's driver. The difference is due to the two speakers' sensitivity: a stated 91dB for the MAXX 3 and 95dB for the X-2 Series 2.

The MAXX 3's new tweeter begins as a proprietary inverted-titanium-dome driver that is remanufactured at the Wilson Audio factory. Its most important new feature addresses to an even greater degree the deleterious effects of the driver's rear reflections. An evolved version of the "diffraction cup" -- a chunk of Wilson Audio's harder-than-steel X material -- is mounted on the back of the driver. In the past, this has been puck-shaped, but for the MAXX 3, David Wilson researched geometries that more effectively damped the energy originating from the rear of the tweeter. The puck for the MAXX 3's tweeter is hollow and contains anti-diffraction material. Each tweeter is also remanufactured with Wilson Audio motors and magnet assemblies, at which time the diffraction cup is installed. All of this leads to a driver that is said to be lower in the noise, both audible and measurable, caused by spurious reflections.

Review Summary

Sound "The treble of the MAXX 3 is artfully balanced, neither sharp nor soft," "the bass displays greater depth and power than most subwoofers, and it remains detailed in the process" and "the musical detail in the MAXX 3's midrange was...a new development." "The coherence from this multi-driver speaker seemed almost impossible. 'Seamless' didn't capture it; there was a sense of single-driver-ness to the sound." "There was undoubtedly greater focus, every musician or singer having both rock-solid outlines and copious presence." "The MAXX 3s utterly disappear when the recording is up to the task, or change with each recording, depending on the size of its presentation." "Thin and disembodied they are not; rife and colorful they are."

Features "The MAXX 2's single upper module has been split into a pair of modules, and these move forward and back as well as rotate. This gives great flexibility in setup, allowing for the precise alignment of the drivers' outputs at the listening position." "The newest MAXX [also] uses a slightly different version of the midrange driver developed for its bigger brother [the X-2 Series 2]." "Among the singular features of this driver are the motor system, which Wilson Audio builds partially in-house, and the cone, which is said to be 'a unique combination of fibrous materials, including paper and carbon fiber.'" There is also a new tweeter, a new cabinet material, and a new reflection-absorption material on the front of the speaker.

Use "Regarding break-in, Wilson Audio works out its drivers for many hours before they are installed in each speaker, and this seems to ensure that each speaker comes into its own quickly -- in as few as a dozen hours. I can't say the MAXX 3 improved appreciably after the first heavy day of use."

Value "All things being basically equal in terms of the hit to my personal finances, I'd buy X-2 Series 2s.... However, that's not going to happen, so I'm glad that the X-2 Series 2's stiffest competition costs \$90,000 less."

Other drivers -- 11" and 13" woofers -- have not changed, but the speaker's crossovers have been thoroughly revised. Wilson Audio is so preternaturally guarded about this part of its technology, however, that this is the most anyone outside the company will know. The MAXX 3's new cabinet features Wilson Audio's fourth-generation M material, appropriately named M4. It's an epoxy-based laminate, whereas the first generation material was a wood-particle-based laminate, and the next two versions were phenolic laminates. M4 is used in only two spots on the entire speaker: the front baffles for the two upper modules. Its physical properties translate to defined acoustic characteristics that Wilson Audio feels are ideal for use wherever there is a midrange driver. The rest of the cabinet is made from X material, a mineral-and-fiber-filled phenolic resin. The wool-based natural-fiber material that covers the entire front of the MAXX 3 has been used only around the tweeters of other Wilson Audio speakers. It is said to be more effective at absorbing baffle-born reflections than the spongy material used previously, especially in the high frequencies.

The MAXX 3 remains a big, heavy speaker: 67 13/16"H x 16 1/8"W x 24 1/4"D and 425 pounds. A pair of the speakers ships in four crates that total almost 1200 pounds. Average in-room response is said to be 20Hz-21kHz, +/-3dB, and the speaker's impedance is given as 4 ohms, with 3 ohms minimum. The MAXX 3 is still rather easy to drive, with Wilson Audio recommending 15 watts minimum. The modules are connected in the rear of the speaker, which is also where the bass cabinet and both of the upper modules are ported. All of this is worth seeing for its clean, technological look.





As with all Wilson Audio speakers, there are four standard colors from which you can choose for your MAXX 3s, with optional colors limited only by your imagination. Beginning with a coating of marine-grade gel and progressing through Wilson Audio's 12-step painting process, the cabinets are devoid of screws or other fasteners and immune to the effects of low or high humidity. They look striking to my eyes. "The reason we pay such attention to our painting process," John Giolas, Wilson Audio's director of sales and marketing, once told me, "is that, unlike cars, our speakers never move." The finished product holds up under close inspection, with a speaker in a particularly unusual optional finish drawing admiring stares and soft caresses.

Used with...

The MAXX 3s were the sun in a universe of audio equipment that has made its way through my listening room over the past several months. Amplifiers included Lamm M1.2 Reference and ML3 Signature monoblocks, Raysonic M100 monoblocks, Zanden Model 9600 monoblocks, and an Audio Research Reference 110 stereo amp. Preamps were a Convergent Audio Technology SL1 Legend, a Lamm LL1 Signature, an Audio Research Reference 3, a Zanden Model 3000, and an Aurum Acoustics CDP, which doubles as a CD player.

Digital sources in addition to the Aurum CDP were an Ayre C-5xeMP universal player, an Esoteric X-01 D2 CD/SACD player, an Audio Research Reference CD8 CD player, and the Zanden Model 2000P/Model 5000S transport/DAC combo connected by Zanden's own I²S cable. For analog, a TW-Acoustic Raven AC turntable with Graham B-44 Phantom and Tri-Planar Mk VII UII tonearms supporting Dynavector XV-1s stereo and mono cartridges fed the signal to the internal phono stages of the CAT SL1 Legend and Aurum Acoustics CDP preamps, and Audio Research PH7 and Lamm LP2 Deluxe standalone phono stages. Turntable accessories included a Harmonic Resolution Systems (HRS) Analog Disk record clamp/weight, an HRS Nimbus Coupler and two Spacers under the turntable's motor, and a Boston Audio Mat 2 record mat.

Interconnects and speaker cables were AudioQuest William E. Low Signature or Shunyata Research Aurora-IC and Aurora-SP. A Shunyata Research Hydra V-Ray Version II cleansed the power coming from the wall, except when the CAT preamp was in use, in which case it was either run straight into the wall outlet or through an Essential Sound Products Essence Reference power distributor. A number of Shunyata CX Series power cords handled power duties, trading time with some ESP Essence Reference power cords. Phono cables were an AudioQuest LeoPard that was used with the Graham tonearm and the Cardas-sourced cable that's an integral part of the Tri-Planar tonearm.

Preamps, phono stages, the turntable and single-box digital players all rested on a Silent Running Audio Craze 4 Reference equipment rack. The Lamm amps had dedicated pairs of Silent Running Audio products underneath: Virginia-Class platforms for the ML3s and Ohio Class XL Plus² platforms for the M1.2s. The Zanden digital separates rested on HRS M3 isolation bases.

As is *de rigueur* with Wilson Audio speakers, the MAXX 3s were painstakingly set up for me in my listening room. John Giolas and Trent Workman did the deed, as they have done numerous times in the past. I have come to consider their expertise, and by extension the expertise of Wilson Audio dealers, an indispensable part of the company's products. Such setup is no reviewer's perk; anyone who buys a new pair of Wilson Audio speakers gets the same valuable treatment.

It took John and Trent parts of two days to complete the assembly and positioning of the MAXX 3s. Fine-tuning required movements measured in fractions of an inch. I found it curious that each of the two speakers was toed in independently of the other, with various musical cuts providing the insight needed to make the adjustments. As I've noted in the past with other Wilson Audio speakers, I could easily hear the difference that a half-inch movement made with

the MAXX 3s, the speakers edging toward their full sonic potential in little cat steps, not by leaps and bounds. This is really what voveling in is all about: refining the setup process down to the nonextraneous. Any careful listener can hear that it works.

Regarding break-in, Wilson Audio works out its drivers for many hours before they are installed, and this seems to ensure that each speaker comes into its own quickly -- in as few as a dozen hours. I can't say the MAXX 3 improved noticeably after the first day of heavy use. Hallelujah for that!

The ear test

My familiarity with the Wilson Audio speaker line is complete. I've heard every one of the company's current models, from the Duette to the X-2 Series 2, at home, and I've heard each speaker in other venues -- the Wilson Audio factory or rooms at audio shows -- as well. There are unmistakable sonic traits that they all share, and each speaker fits tidily into the company's pecking order. As good as the Duette is, for instance, one listen to the Sophia 2 proves its worth and justifies its higher price. And as you move up the line, you are rewarded with greater bandwidth and dynamic capabilities, among other important qualities that lead to a more comprehensive sonic performance.

With all of this in mind, I found the MAXX 3 to be a conundrum of sorts. While upgrades are generally evolutionary in nature, the MAXX 3 represented something greater. Even as it was being set up, I heard things in its sound that seemed considerably better than they did with the speakers they replaced -- leaps and bounds this time, instead of little cats steps -- some of which challenged the X-2 Series 2, which had left my listening room only a couple of months earlier. The coherence from this multi-driver speaker seemed almost impossible. "Seamless" didn't capture it; there was a sense of single-driver-ness to the sound -- "absolute sonic uniformity" read my listening notes. There was undoubtedly greater focus, every musician or singer having both rock-solid outlines and copious presence. The musical detail in the MAXX 3's midrange was also a new development. Like the X-2 Series 2's, the MAXX 3's midrange was lusciously resolved, voices taking on an added measure of texture and thus verisimilitude, everything through the music's busiest region sounding better defined and more liquid at the same time. The bass didn't go any deeper, but it certainly sounded more agile, better able to differentiate bass lines, kick-drum whumps having greater speed and impact.

Regarding that coherence, the majority of speakers manufactured today are very good to excellent when it comes to the transitions between drivers, but the unique character of the treble and midrange -- the integration of their inherent sonic personalities -- is where issues often exist. I've not heard *any* speaker that's better than the MAXX 3 when it comes to driver-to-driver continuity, let alone one with *five* drivers. There are many instruments that can test this, but none rivals the human voice for determining if the progression from the tweeter down to the midrange, where our ears are especially sensitive to anomalies, holds together. When it's portrayed well, Diana Krall's voice sounds casual and effortless. More than most singers, Krall interprets songs through modest touches -- a nearly imperceptible change in pitch or volume, an exhale to begin a phrase -- so it's important for any audio system to reproduce these but not in such a way as

to make them more significant than they actually are.

With the release of the deluxe Original Recordings Group LPs of *The Look of Love* (Verve/Original Recordings Group ORG 004) and *Live in Paris* (Verve/Original Recordings Group ORG 003), audiophiles get to hear Krall at her absolute sonic best. *The Look of Love* sounds sultry and very smooth, while *Live in Paris* captures both the band and the venue -- the famed Olympia -- with unusual insight, giving listeners something truly akin to a seat in the hall. Krall's voice was a marvel through the MAXX 3s, but it was her piano that stole the show sonically, resounding throughout the Olympia, each note well defined from the other instruments and well articulated in space. Here is where coherence pays off, in a stunningly complete portrayal that will conjure images in your head about where each of the musicians is and how far back you are from the stage. I'd say about 15 rows and dead center, the applause enveloping after each cut. This sonic magic was courtesy of the wonderful LP, the MAXX 3s anchoring it all.

Which brings up another point. Like Wilson Audio's massive X-2 Series 2 speakers, the MAXX 3s utterly disappear when the recording is up to the task, or change with each recording, depending on the size of its presentation. My room is very large, and the MAXX 3s can fill its 20-foot width with big-sounding music. But even more noteworthy is how minuscule these speakers can be with a mono recording, for instance. The Mobile Fidelity SACD of R.L. Burnside's *First Recordings* (Mobile Fidelity UDSACD 2026) is memorable in this regard, sounding as close to the thrilling immediacy of live music as recorded music gets. I've discussed in the past some mono cuts by Bob Dylan, all of these played from CDs. A few months ago, I broke down and bought all ten Sundazed Bob Dylan mono LPs -- the group price, \$135 delivered, was just too enticing. While the vinyl here isn't as silent as that used for various other reissues, the sound is pure and immediate. It's unnerving and surprising to hear a speaker the size of the MAXX 3s shrink down to reproduce Dylan's voice, guitar and harmonica on "The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll" from *The Times They Are A-Changin'* (Columbia/Sundazed LP 5108) with pinpoint precision, the image locked between the speakers at chest level. Height is another bit of spatial information the MAXX 3 resolves. With some recordings, singers sound absolutely full-sized, as though they are standing in front of you, and with others the perspective is what you'd experience from the upper deck at a stadium concert: a bird's-eye view, with the music coming from a more low-slung, diminutive spot.

This spatial morphing is something the X-2 Series 2 also achieves, and it's rare among speakers of any size, but especially ones that are physically massive. During my listening, I started to wonder why the two Wilson Audio speakers could pull this off so deftly, and the most obvious answer, because of its uniqueness, seemed to be their multi-piece configuration and the way those pieces can be oriented in relation to each other -- in other words, Aspherical Group Delay. So I did a test I suggest you *not* do with your Wilson speakers: I futzed with the arrangement of the modules, taking them out of alignment, first by a little bit and then by a lot. The sonic effects were interesting, repeatable and easy to hear. The music lost a great deal of its sharp focus, making for a muddled presentation that with some recordings seemed almost out of phase. Image outlines weren't as crisp and well defined either. I can't say the sound was bad, just not as supremely present and crisp as when the modules were perfectly aligned.

More interesting than a loss of focus, however, was how misalignment affected the MAXX 3s' ability to convey unique spatial signatures. Here, the presentation became much more homogenous, not as differentiated from recording to recording. In fact, some recordings that were distinctly different -- like Sundazed's *The Times They Are A-Changin'* and *Bringing It All Back Home* LPs (Columbia/Sundazed LP 5108) -- now sounded rather similar in size and perspective. I listened to the MAXX 3s out of alignment for a few days, getting used to the new view of the music they created, then realigned everything, relying on notes and pictures to ensure exact results. And the result was the return of exactness -- the focus and spatial contrast that helped to define the MAXX 3s' performance.

The treble of the MAXX 3 is artfully balanced, neither sharp nor soft. It fits right in with the way the speaker presents the music -- with rich presence. The bass displays greater depth and power than most subwoofers, and it remains detailed in the process. The midrange, however, is where the action is with the MAXX 3, bettering that of not only the MAXX 2 but every other large speaker I've heard except for the X-2 Series 2. It is more lively and animated, more detailed, textured and expressive than it was, while never giving the impression that the frequency response, for instance, has been contoured or goosed. This wasn't a matter of output as much as input -- the ability to convey important musical information from recordings, once again differentiating them from each other. The JVC XRCD (JVC JVCXR-0047-2) and Japanese-pressed LP (Prestige/Victor LP 7076) of Miles Davis's *Walkin'* illustrated this beautifully. J.J. Johnson's recognizable trombone on the title track was evenhanded on the CD and more variegated on the LP. In fact, I hadn't heard the CD in quite a while before cleaning and spinning the LP, and what I heard made me pull out the CD to hear how it sounded. There was certainly an endearing smoothness, but the LP showed more modulation in volume and tone, and a slightly raspier quality as well -- all from a recording that's more than a half-century old, all courtesy of the MAXX 3's skillful midrange.

What you won't get from the MAXX 3 is the sort of thin, disembodied sound that some listeners consider true to the recording. The presentation is rife with tonal color, what gives recorded music its greatest boost toward the sound of live music, amidst high resolution of the performance from downstream equipment and the recording itself. It is a fallacy of the first order to conclude that what's on a recording is the equivalent of live music, the equipment used to produce it being the only limiting factor. Recorded music is to live music what a movie is to live action: a representation, not an exact copy. Thus, it is the end product, what emanates from the speakers, that is *the reality* of reproduced music, the dream of duplicating exactly what happened when any recording was made remaining exactly that. What the best components do is fill in the holes between the dream and the reality in such a way as to trick our sense of doubt. They present recorded music in a way that sounds real, even with the obvious limitations inherent in the recording process, and the MAXX 3s are supreme at this. Thin and disembodied they are not; rife and colorful they are.

Exit the X-2 Series 2

Among the speakers that are widely considered the very best available sits the Wilson Audio Alexandria X-2 Series 2 (\$158,000 per pair). Perhaps more than any other speaker on the market, the X-2 Series 2 is the one against which others

that claim state-of-the-art status are measured. There are a few reasons for this. First, more of them are out in the world than other contenders (over 500 pairs worldwide; 168 pairs sold in 2008 alone). Second, the profile of the company that makes them ensures a certain stature for its top offering, just as with similar products from Ferrari, Rolex and other makers of high-performance luxury goods.

The X-2 Series 2 is a speaker whose sound makes louder claims for it than any marketing plan could. I reviewed it last year, spending a few radiant months cycling amps through my system and generally enjoying its wide frequency and dynamic ranges, its ability to convey changes to equipment upstream, its delicate beauty with great music. Everyone won't value the X-2 Series 2 to the same degree, but there are things about its performance that are so obvious that denying their existence calls into question the hearing of naysayers along with their credibility.

The X-2 Series 2 speakers departed to take up residence in their new owner's listening room a couple of months before the MAXX 3s arrived in mine, one big speaker taking the place of another that's even bigger. With the sound of the X-2 Series 2s still distinct in my memory, I began listening to the MAXX 3s and had an overpowering feeling of déjà vu. These two speakers sound very nearly alike with a wide range of music. This should come as no surprise, given the similarities in their design and execution -- Aspherical Group Delay and the closely related midrange drivers being the two most obvious ones.

"It is especially surprising to hear the X-2 Series 2s seemingly morph from some of the largest speakers extant to minimonitors when reproducing a solo guitar, and then fill every inch of the room when a full orchestra lets loose." I wrote this about the X-2 Series 2, and it's true of the MAXX 3 as well. I didn't know it when the X-2 Series 2s were in my room, but it's clear now that the acute way in which the drivers can be aligned is primarily responsible for their shape-shifting. With Alexander Brailowsky's idiosyncratic recording of Chopin's *24 Preludes* on mono LP (Columbia ML 5444), I have never heard a piano sound more spry and moving. Its focus, locked in between the speakers, was supreme with the X-2 Series 2 and the MAXX 3. I also own the stereo version of this recording (Columbia MS 6119), and it's not as good, the dense image of the piano wavering some. However, when Duke Ellington's band cuts loose in stereo on *Jazz Party* (Columbia/Classic Records CS 8127), the soundfield is huge and thunderous, a reminder of how splendid this 1959 LP sounds.

"Compared to the signature of other extreme speakers, the X-2 Series 2s sound colorful and sweet. A ragged treble, harsh upper midrange and overall analytical character are simply not present, the speakers being easy on the ears at all volume levels." Check, check and check for the MAXX 3 once again. Neither it nor the X-2 Series 2 has the whitened tonality and thinned-out harmonics that some other competing speakers display and strike my ears like the worst kind of sonic oddities. The sounds all around us each day aren't this way, and reproduced music shouldn't be either. A masterful recording like Hans Theessink's *Hard Road Blues* CD (Minor Music 801047) is ideal on either of the Wilson Audio speakers, but overly lean and reverberant on others. I don't know which presentation is truer to the recording, but I do know which one sounds truer to real life, and I suspect you would too.

"Dynamic limitations are also removed from consideration with the X-2 Series 2. This is one speaker that can truly take all of the power you can throw at it *and* bring out the very best in low-power amps." Again, true of the MAXX 3, but the slight nod goes to the X-2 Series 2 because of its greater sensitivity, which translates to a slightly more dynamic character. The Lamm ML3 Signature monoblocks, which output 32 glorious watts, can drive either speaker without issue, but they seem a bit more authoritative with the X-2 Series 2s, which also go a touch lower in the bass with the rare recordings that can show this. These things aside, or in systems or rooms where they won't be discerned, the MAXX 3 is every bit the speaker of the X-2 Series 2.

Which raises a question: Is it wise to create your own competition? I won't be surprised if some X-2 Series 2 customers choose the MAXX 3 instead; it certainly holds its own on sonic grounds alone. However, for people with the money, for whom the difference in cost between the two biggest Wilson Audio speakers is negligible, the X-2 Series 2s will always be the top audio prize. All things being basically equal in terms of the hit to my personal finances, I'd buy X-2 Series 2s (and put a pair of equally expensive amps like the Lamm ML3 Signatures on the tab as well). However, that's not going to happen, so I'm glad that the X-2 Series 2's stiffest competition costs \$90,000 less.

Competing with yourself

Write about high-end audio long enough and you will inevitably cross paths with an upgraded version of an amplifier or CD player you've already written about. My review of the MAXX Series 2 from almost five years ago was one of the longest I've ever written. The instinct when you review a product whose story and sound are incredibly rich is to say *everything* you can about it. I fear I've done the same thing with the MAXX 3, so easily does this speaker lend itself to effusive commentary. The way it is able to change with each recording, the seemingly unlimited animation of its midrange, its dynamic prowess, and its wide bandwidth are only overshadowed by the way it portrays music, with all the color and feeling intact. There is a *humanness* to the MAXX 3's performance; it doesn't seem to be the product of acoustic engineering as much as the astute, careful observation of people who are intimately familiar with the sound of live music and will settle for nothing short of it.

One night, after I had finished most of the writing for this review, I decided to play one last LP -- I always choose analog for consequential listening nowadays -- to ensure that there wasn't something about the MAXX 3 I had overlooked. Did I miss mentioning some tidbit so vital that my review would be incomplete without it? I had just gotten *Louis Armstrong Plays W.C. Handy* (Columbia CL 591) from a seller on eBay. It was cleaned and ready for a spin.

I listened intently through half of the first side, then opened my eyes and looked at the speakers. "Oh, yeah," I blurted out, "no grilles." "Leave the grilles off for best sound," I wrote in my notes. Then it was back to listening. Louis Armstrong's recognizable rasp and virtuoso licks hovered in front of and slightly above my equipment rack, which sits between the speakers. "Beyond gorgeous," I wrote.

There is always more to say about the MAXX 3.

...*Marc Mickelson*

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Wilson Audio Specialties MAXX Series 3 Loudspeakers

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