

Wilson Benesch Square Five loudspeaker

by Alan Sircom

Wilson Benesch's recent brush with the top-end of loudspeaker design – the Cardinal – was a distinct success, but it remains a top-end loudspeaker, and those who cannot afford top-end loudspeakers, such lofty goals and lofty performance is as nothing unless these things trickle down to less lofty price points. The Square Five is that loudspeaker.

Those who judge things by surface might not see any link between the Square Five and Wilson Benesch's upper slopes. It could be mistaken for just another exercise in stuffing drive units in a nicely veneered MDF box. Look closer... there's a lot going on in this loudspeaker.

In fact, the Square Five is a four-way design, not a three-way as might first be thought. That 'plinth' it rests on is in fact a high-mass chamber for a down-firing, isobaric-loaded pair of 170mm Tactic drive units (WB's own design). Then what looks all the world like a D'Appolito layout of mid-treble-mid is in fact what WB dubs its Troika layout. This means the 170mm Tactic unit above the tweeter acts as midrange proper, while the 170mm Tactic driver below acts as a lower-midrange/bass driver. The rear panel gives some clue to the differing arrangement, with a rear-firing ABR and rear ports performing supporting roles for the different driver configurations. This is only possible by the use of a complex series of chambers within the loudspeaker cabinet, reducing the possibilities of drive unit interaction. Aside from the sheer number of drivers and the complexity of the cabinet design, from a driver viewpoint, the Square Five eschews the company's own Semisphere tweeter and uses a 25mm ScanSpeak soft dome tweeter, modified to WB's demands.

Even that cabinet is out of the ordinary. It's MDF as opposed to carbon-fibre, but the design is very carefully designed, with strips of carbon-composite bonded to the inner facings of the cabinet, further braced by the internal chambers required to produce the Troika layout and then mass-loaded and tuned by constrained-layer damping blocks of varying mass carefully positioned for the best possible effect. Add to that the extremely high-mass block of solid aluminium that forms the back of the plinth and its outrigger, and even the high-tech spikes/feet WB has designed to isolate the Square Five from its environment, it's clear this is the Cardinal for us mortals.

The Square Five is about average on the easy to drive stakes; a claimed 87dB sensitivity rating and an impedance plot that hovers around six ohms with the occasional dip into four ohm territory isn't (on paper, at least) going to prove too great a challenge. But this just gives the Square Five the ability to pick amplifiers of great quality rather than be forced into using tub-thumpin' powerhouses. As we will see, that's an important consideration.

The Square Five is a loudspeaker that you need to charm. It doesn't put out on a first date; it keeps its honour until you prove your worth, wooing the loudspeaker with the finest electronics, and finding the ultimate listening position. This means well clear of the side and rear walls, even to the point of sacrificing some bass depth (fortunately, there's a lot of bass on offer, even before you go down the optional Torus infrasonic generator route) and painstaking experimentation with fine tuning of placement and toe-in. This is also a relatively long process, one best performed by the listener and associates, rather than someone installing to a deadline. Yes, you can get almost all the way 'there' fairly quickly, but the final stages of fine-tuning take time and are well worth the effort.

The same applies to the selection of electronics. This is no amp-crusher of a loudspeaker, but it benefits from a quality over quantity approach. It's a revealing loudspeaker; although it doesn't demand the best, it's more than capable of showing what the best is capable of. The net result of this means the Square Five will survive more rounds of upgrades than most components in your system, if that is your audio trajectory. With products picked carefully, the Square Five could be the most expensive part of



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▶ a system that will see you into dotage, but it could also end up being the cheapest part of a very high-end system and still be capable of resolution to spare. Such is the flexibility of the Square Five. In terms of general care and feeding, the Square Five is happiest with inherently uncoloured electronics; you could argue that so does everything else, but this is not necessarily the case – some speakers tend toward working with slightly warm and soft sounding electronics, some need a bit of pep from the amps to wake them. Do this with the Square Five and you'll wonder what all the fuss is about. Wilson Benesch's connection with the German electronics brand Audionet is a good starting place, but the Square Five is capable of not sounding out of place in amongst some true high-end royalty. We're talking big dCS Vivaldi stacks, Jeff Rowland or Aesthetix amps and so on... in other words, the kinds of electronics normally seen driving Wilson Alexias and beyond. If a £9,000 can keep its head in such esoteric company, then you know you are on to something really quite remarkable.

When everything is in place, what you get is a loudspeaker that combines the analytical powers of a Sherlock Holmes with the entertainment value of the Minions from *Despicable Me*. Well, almost.

It seemed logical to begin the process by bringing Sheffield to Sheffield, playing 'Fair Annie' from the bonus disc of Martin Simpson's excellent *Vagrant Stanzas* [Topic]. This 'kitchen table' recording of essentially just voice and acoustic guitar is geographically about as close as it can get to the WB factory. Not that it matters on a musical standing, but locally grown produce sounds wonderful here. Through the Square Fives, his voice reveals all the wisdom of his years and the honesty he brings to these folk tunes. As to the guitar playing... you can here he's using an alternate tuning (but not one I know well, there's something a bit odd and droney with the two top strings for DADGAD or Dropped D tuning) and the sound is both melodic enough to almost bring tears to your eyes, and analytical enough for most guitarists to realise just how good a player we have in Martin Simpson.

Some speakers produce a sense of space around the music. Some create a tight ball or wall of sound. The Square Five does none of these things. It just makes the recording sound like the recording itself. If the soundfield on the disc is expansive, it will sound like a big soundstage, if it doesn't, it won't. There's no artificial sense of scale or size – big or small – at work here. It presented the music as is. So, after the tidy, cosy sound of man and guitar, I moved on to John Pickard's *The Flight of Icarus*, played by the Norrköping Symphony Orchestra, with Martyn Brabbins conducting [BIS]. This powerful piece of modern classical – a tribute to the Apollo space program – is an exercise in dynamic range. Any sense of scaling problems are easily spotted and here the Square Five aced this particular test with consummate ease. From the bombast of the percussion to the subtleties of the strings, from the loudest parts to the quietest this made this sound like a complex, yet coherent work... not incidental music to Planet of the Apes.

And so it went, whatever I played. The Square Five portrayed the music with accuracy and honesty. Not stark honesty – it's not a bright loudspeaker at all – but with a sense of precision and clarity that many strive to attain and few others reach at this price point. It's exquisitely ▶

► detailed; you can tell why that recent Daft Punk album reputedly cost a million to make – there are real musicians playing professionally and skilfully with no ‘fix it in post’ or ‘clean that up with AutoTune’ mentality, but it also gets past the musical detail and digs up the reason why that album was so absurdly popular last year; its sense of fun and infectious rhythm.

That ability to play to both the cerebral and the visceral is what makes the Square Five so remarkable. Its peers tend to be either good at the detail aspect, but leave the music cold and drab, or make everything upbeat and exciting, at the expense of the technical aspects of the music. The Square Five – virtually alone at its price point – combines both aspects perfectly. Yes, there are others that provide some of these aspects of the overall musical picture, but sacrifice others in the process.

A pair of Square Fives do not look imposing in a small room, and while it's physically possible to put the speaker into a room 3m wide and 4m deep, you will never get to hear what these speakers are capable of if you do. The slightly thornier issue of personal taste also plays a part, though. Although almost every hi-fi buff on the planet seems to claim what they want is more honesty and less distortion from their loudspeakers, when faced with the unvarnished truth, some go all ‘ignorance is bliss’. That's not easy to unpack until experienced directly, but I suspect there are some who find the idea of neutrality more attractive than the reality. To those, I'd say the Square Five is not for you, and you can pretty much cross off whole swathes of high-end loudspeaker designs in a single pass. Genuine seekers of musical truth (that sounds a bit culty) will think very differently though, looking at the Square

Five as an honest way of extracting £20,000 or even £25,000 loudspeaker performance without crossing the five-figure Rubicon.

It's more than just a reflection of high-end loudspeaker design; it's an outstanding performer in its own right. If you want a loudspeaker that tells it like it is, and you are willing to put the effort in to achieve that goal, the Square Five is the most serious contender at the price and way, way beyond. Highly Recommended. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Four way, isobarically loaded floorstanding loudspeaker

Drive Units: 1x 25mm Soft Dome W-B Spec tweeter

1x 170mm W-B mid-range Tactic drive unit

1x 170mm W-B bass Tactic drive unit

2x 170mm W-B isobaric Tactic drive unit

Low-frequency loading: Assisted Bass Radiator/Bass ports

Sensitivity: 87dB

Impedance (Nom/Min): 6ohms/4ohms

Frequency response: 34Hz-24kHz

Crossover frequencies: 500Hz/5kHz

Dimensions (WxDxH): 20x25.5x111.5cm

Weight: 47kg

Finish: Gloss: Piano Black, White, Red Birds Eye, Birds Eye Maple, Burr Walnut, Ebonised Walnut, Walnut. Satin: Natural Cherry, Maple, Oak

Price: £8,950 per pair

Manufactured by: Wilson Benesch

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