

Wilson Benesch Square Five Loudspeakers

by Roy Gregory, January 2, 2014

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Is it possible, or even sensible, to describe anything as non-essential as a pair of loudspeakers costing £55,000 as a bargain? Well, clearly that depends on your point of view. From the peculiar perspective established by the pursuit of high-end audio, comparisons based on performance, execution and material content (and in the context of speaker systems costing well over four times that elevated figure) clearly make anything possible. In this rarified environment, there can be little doubt that , does indeed represent a considerable bargain -- even if a pair does cost more than the average annual wage in the UK.

So if the Cardinal is a nailed-on bargain, what do you call a speaker that offers virtually the same drivers, arranged using the same novel hybrid acoustic/electrical crossover topology, in a simplified and less extravagant cabinet for less than a sixth of the price?

Okay, so we've all heard that one before -- the product that looks the part but is in reality a pale imitation of the flagship that spawned it. Behind the ostentatious styling or distinctive fascia, the corners have been cut where they can't be seen: motors with magnets a fraction of the size, cones that look the same but are in reality constructed from entirely different materials, crossover components that simply aren't of the same quality. Even the spikes and terminals generally don't escape the cost-cutting exercise.

All of which makes the Wilson Benesch Square Five an exception that's so distinct it's almost perplexing. It may not look like it, but this really is the Cardinal's kid brother and the DNA is way more than skin deep. Let's look at the detail, both in terms of the technology and the actual material content.



Each Cardinal houses no fewer than nine drivers (of six distinct types) all built in-house by Wilson Benesch. Although the Tactic II midrange and bass units all share the same basket, the mechanical behavior of each cone is specifically tailored to purpose. The Isotactic polypropylene material used by Wilson Benesch allows them to tune the bandwidth and roll-off of each driver so precisely that, despite the fact that the Square Five is a genuine four-way system, they can actually dispense with conventional, subtractive electrical crossover filters on three of the driver interfaces. The result is a four-way acoustic system that actually presents the driving amplifier with a two-way, first-order network. That's an extremely clever trick if you can pull it off -- and the Cardinal definitely does.

Twins -- just like Arnie and Danny!

Take one look at the Cardinal's imposing and statuesque form and it's hard to see the link to the almost prosaically bluff exterior of the Square Five. It's called the Square Series for a reason, and its resolutely rectangular appearance is in stark contrast to that of the Cardinal, which hasn't a flat face or horizontal surface anywhere on its main cabinet. But look at the midrange drivers and you'll see that the units used in both designs aren't just similar -- they're virtually identical. Look around the back of the Square Five cabinet, or underneath, and you'll see that the less obvious components, the rear-facing ABR that loads the upper-midrange unit and the downward-firing bass driver are also almost indistinguishable from the

ones used in the Cardinal. In fact, the Square Five drivers are built to the original Tactic design, while the Tactic IIs in the Cardinal have refined motor assemblies and voice coils that deliver slightly higher sensitivity. In all other respects they are virtually identical.

Look closely at the Square Five's frontal array and you'll see that the cone surface of the two midrange drivers flanking the tweeter is actually different. Now, remember what I said about tailoring the response of the drivers and it should become clear that the different weave employed for each allows them to cover different ranges. Although it might look at first glance like a classic d'Appolito configuration, this is actually a combination of lower midrange (placed below the tweeter) and upper

midrange (placed above it) in an arrangement developed specifically for the Cardinal and dubbed the Troika System by Wilson Benesch. In the flagship speaker, the provision of a totally separate lower-mid enclosure to help combat intermodulation distortion actually inverts the arrangement, locating the lower-midrange driver above the tweeter, but the single-cabinet arrangement of the Five allows a more conventional positioning. The topology and midrange drivers (as well as the use of the rear-firing ABR) have been imported straight from the flagship speaker and installed in the Square Five, the only substantial difference being the adoption of a modified ScanSpeak tweeter in place of the company's own Semisphere design. Familiar from the previous C60 and Chimera models, the 25mm (1") fabric-dome tweeter has a modified magnet assembly and no ferrofluid.

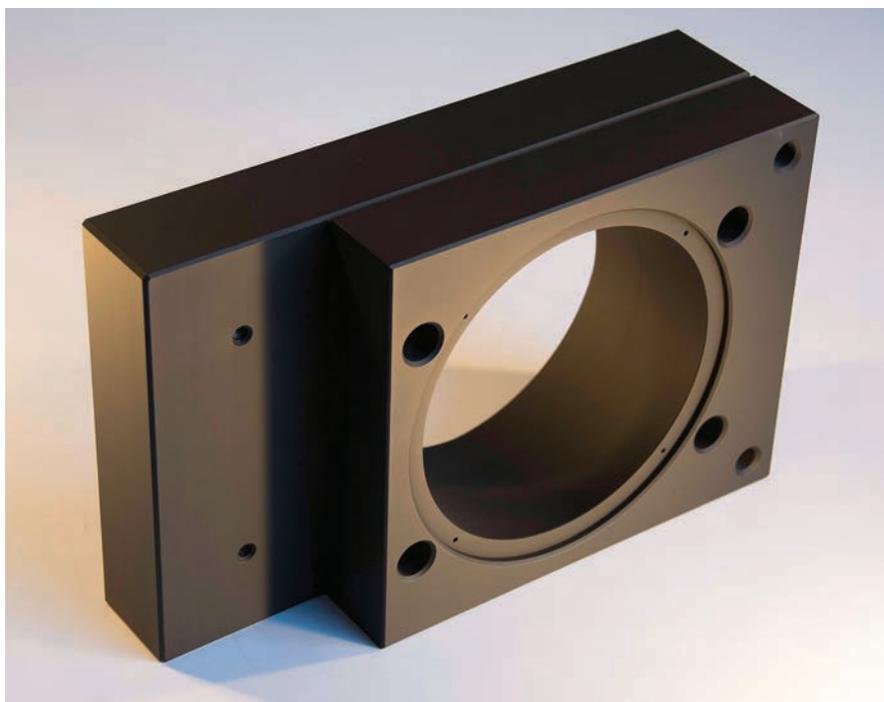




Stand the Square Five next to the Cardinal and the other obvious difference in the driver lineup is the low-frequency leg of the system. The Cardinal boasts a pair of very visible forward-firing bass units, drivers that are actually isobarically loaded by a second pair of identical units, all four mounted on a single massive, and massively machined, aluminum sub-baffle. In contrast, the Square Five has no visible bass drivers -- but that's because they're pointing downwards. Rather than the paired 'barics of the Cardinal, the Square Five makes do with a single, downward-firing bass unit, again isobarically loaded by an identical unit, in this instance mounted above it, also firing down. So the Square Five offers half the swept area of the Cardinal's low-frequency system, but it makes up for that by placing the driver in close proximity to the floor, gaining all the weight and extension benefits of boundary loading.

What's more, the Square Five also mimics the constructional integrity of its big brother. That black block at the base of the speaker is a single lump of aluminum, machined to accept the two

bass units as well as the rear outrigger. This doesn't just ensure the close mechanical coupling of the two drivers, critical to achieving real performance benefits from an isobaric arrangement, it also ensures direct mechanical grounding to the floor, preventing much of the potentially disruptive mechanical energy generated by the bass units from reaching the rest of the cabinet; the bass chamber is vented by a pair of rear-facing reflex ports, rather than the tuned ABR of the Cardinal. So while the physical arrangement of the Square Five's bass drivers might differ from the Cardinal's, the basic topology is identical, but in a layout that is more appropriate to the number of drivers available and the materials used for the cabinet.



Aside from the massive aluminum base, the rest of the Square Five cabinet might be far more conventional than the composite sandwich and aluminum extrusions used in the Cardinal, but that doesn't mean that it's without its own carefully considered wrinkles. You don't need to be Einstein to figure out that this is where a lot of the money has been saved. The carcass itself is built from MDF, but it is heavily braced by both the internal baffles that sub-divide the volume into bass, lower-mid and upper-mid chambers, but also by curved strips of composite sandwich, bonded to the interior walls. It is further tuned with large high-and medium-mass alloy damping pads, constrained-layer blocks critically deployed to ameliorate structural resonance. Overall,

it's a thoughtful and carefully executed response to the problems of creating a well-behaved cabinet from MDF. But then that's pretty much the hallmark of everything that Wilson Benesch do. The basic material might not be mechanically optimum, so just try harder.

As already noted, the crossover

also mimics the one in the Cardinal, with exactly the same hybrid acoustic/electrical topology. The in-house-designed and -built terminals are identical, as effective as they are brutal in appearance, and while the spikes aren't as massive or complex as the ones on the Cardinal, lacking the dedicated coupling discs, multi-ball interface and the massive hand wheels for adjustment, they're machined to exactly the same tolerances from the same stainless steel, with beautifully profiled tips, massive lock nuts and a spanner to cinch them up. This is one of the few speakers that I've had recently where I haven't felt an immediate need to replace the supplied spikes with the Track Audio equivalents.



Taken overall, the result is a speaker system that, in physical terms, gives away a pair of bass drivers and the in-house tweeter, along with the fancy composite construction of the Cardinal's cabinet. In numbers terms the result is two-thirds of the height, two-fifths the weight, 3dB less sensitivity and extension to 34Hz as opposed to 25Hz. But then it's also only a sixth of the price - - which makes it an astonishing achievement for the money. Indeed, if the Square Five were developed from scratch, I hate to think how much it would have cost. But because it can piggyback on the development costs already invested in the Cardinal, the result is, in technological and material terms, really quite incredible. A true example of trickle-down technology, it's way beyond a bargain; by any normal measure this is an absolute steal.

The ratings game -- because measurements never lie

When it comes to setup time, the Square Five enjoys several significant advantages over its larger and more illustrious brother. Being smaller and considerably lighter (though still no lightweight) it's a lot easier to handle and move. It's also super stable, with its low center of gravity and wide stance. As usual with such devices, the downward-firing bass driver means that you will need to be super precise with positioning when it comes to getting properly integrated and balanced low frequencies; the good news is that the bass itself is super clean -- I suspect that's partly down to the isobaric arrangement, partly down to the direct mechanical grounding -- so the benefits (or otherwise) of adjustments in location are clearly audible. As a bonus, the flat top and sides make attitudinal positioning an absolute doddle. In my room I ended up with a slight forward rake on the speakers, reflecting the elevated position of the tweeter, while optimum toe-in had their inner faces pointing at my collarbones. Getting the rake angle spot on is crucial with the Square Five. You really need to have the tweeter axis at seated ear height if you are going to realize the full spatial capabilities of the design. The decent bandwidth sets up a large, coherent acoustic and dialing in the tweeter adds focus and transparency, along with added snap to the timing, really locking the (musical) performance together. It's not a subtle difference, so it's worth spending time on this.

The horizontally disposed and non-color-coded, biwireable speaker terminals require a little more care than usual to make sure you've got things hooked up right, but I'll forgive that because the biwireable facility offers an important option. Any speaker with sensitivity below 90dB is going to want power. The wider the bandwidth, the more power -- and control -- it's going to need. At 87dB and with a -3dB point at 35Hz, the Square Five is in danger of wringing out the sort of power amps it's going to be partnered with, given its approachable price. The good news is that the relatively benign impedance helps out -- a lot -- while the biwireable topology makes this a natural for biamping, a far more effective way of injecting dynamic range and control into a system if you are on a budget. The Square Fives crave power the way an old soak craves his next drink, but two reasonably powerful stereo amps will do the job for far less money than a real behemoth of equal quality.

The other thing you'll quickly discover (and another thing that goes hand in hand with lower sensitivity) is that the Square Fives are super critical of volume level. Too quiet and a track will sound shut in and lazy, too loud and -- well, actually too loud isn't a problem if the amplification is up to the job. But each track will have a precise level where it really clicks, and you'll need to be prepared to adjust the system volume on a disc-by-disc and even track-by-track basis. As much as I loath remote controls, in this case I can see the appeal.

I partnered the Square Fives with a number of different power amps, ranging from a Naim NAP300 to an Aesthetix Atlas Stereo hybrid, and although the latter worked really well, there was no ignoring the step up in performance that arrived with the introduction of the Audionet Amp 1 v2, a 200Wpc stereo MOSFET amplifier that possesses a most un-MOSFET-like degree of grip and musical authority. There's none of the softness, rounding or bottom-end vagueness that can plague MOSFET designs. Instead, the amp delivers exactly the clean, quick, transparent and dynamic sound that these speakers thrive on. Crisper and clearer than the Aesthetix, what might stray into clinical in some circumstances in this instance simply allowed the speakers to step away from the music. If the Square Five is a steal, it's going to take an amp like the Audionet to really reveal its qualities; together they make quite a team -- which perhaps isn't such a surprise given

that Wilson Benesch distribute the Audionet electronics in the UK.



“Hush-hush and strictly on the QT”

Of course, the real question is not how much of the Cardinal’s technological DNA has found its way into the Square Five, but to what degree the flagship speaker’s considerable sonic attributes are reflected in the more affordable product. If the feature count is remarkable, the sonic similarities are even more so. Once again, stand a Square Five next to the Cardinal and you are hardly going to confuse the two, visually or sonically, but separate them from direct comparison and it really is quite uncanny just how similar the two speakers sound.

First things first. What’s missing from the Square Five that you get with the Cardinal? In essence it comes down to two things -- bandwidth and immediacy. The bigger (and far more expensive) speaker goes deeper at the bottom and higher at the top. It also has a responsiveness to input that gives it a more obvious sense of presence, a quality that makes it more accommodating of different amplifiers than the Square Five. The result is a low-frequency performance that breathes with an effortless clarity (doubtless helped by the sophisticated cabinet design) and a natural, unexaggerated air and space that are testament to the quality of the in-house Hemisphere tweeter. It’s this easy, unforced and expansive coherence that makes the Cardinal so special.

Having listed what the Square Five lacks relative to its bigger, shinier and far more fancy brother, let’s now consider what it *shares* -- a list that is long and impressive.



Given that you’ll need to be picky with amplification and assuming that you choose an appropriate partner, what should you expect? The big thing here is the overall coherence and almost physical integrity of the sound. The Square Five sets up a substantial soundstage that is wide, deep and tall -- but more than that, it’s spatially convincing. You don’t sit in front of this speaker and marvel at the image, the transparency or the intra-instrumental space; you sit in front of it and marvel at the sense of performance. Dismantle the soundstage into its constituent parts and you’ll find it’s all present and correct. It’s just devoid of that hyped, spot-lit exaggeration that typifies speakers that “really image.” Instead, the musical presentation is based on the absolute continuity and coherence across the

speaker’s bandwidth. There are no obvious breaks or transitions between drivers, either tonally or in terms of dynamic response or dispersion. Those cues that normally betray crossover points or subtractive elements used to smooth a speaker’s response are absent here -- along with the crossover elements that cause them. The ability to tailor the driver roll-offs so precisely, along with the consistency of material used across all of the cone drivers

in the speaker (and thus the majority of the musically important range) delivers a degree of continuity that would be worthy of comment in any speaker, let alone one as apparently complex yet affordable as this one.

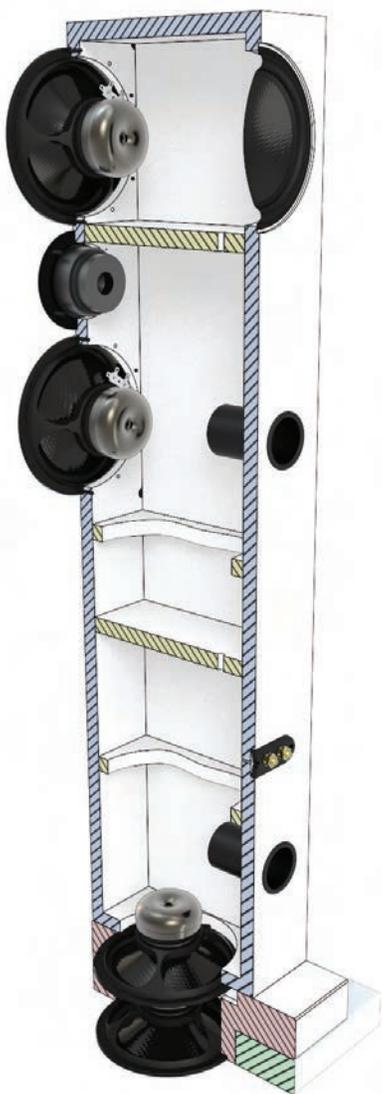
It is the ability to shape each driver’s response with such precision, to fit it so precisely to purpose, that makes the Square Five possible. The result is not just tonally even and dynamically coherent; absent the discontinuities in harmonic color and musical energy that mar so many loudspeakers, the Square Fives achieve a level of musical expression and



Afterthoughts: budgets, amplification and the Living Voice IBX-RW

communication that belies their price and their prosaic, no-nonsense appearance. As plain and simple as this speaker looks, its musical abilities are anything but. Instead it brings a sophistication, nuance and substance to the musical event that makes for both instant engagement and long-term satisfaction.

The tumbling guitar riffs that cascade across the Cure's "Push" (from *The Head On The Door* CD [Fiction 964 001-6]) have a substance, momentum and unstoppable,



almost gravitational energy that sees them plummet across the soundstage, a sonic Niagara in front of those solid, solid drums. They may not make a case for the speaker's subtlety, but they'll pin you to the seat with sheer musical intent. For the gentler end of the artistic palette, look no further than Willie Nelson's CD *To All The Girls* [Sony Legacy 887 65425862]. Eighteen duets, each with a different partner, it certainly tests a speaker's ability to distinguish both individual voices and their expressive range. The Square Five easily identifies and separates the vocal style and characteristics of familiar voices like Carrie Underwood and Shelby Lynne, Alison Krauss and Dolly

Parton. It also leaves you in doubt as to the sheer class and enduring elegance of Emmylou Harris. In what amounts to an album of musical mug shots, there's no problem identifying the singers that stand head and shoulders above the rest -- and those who (despite their audiophile fan base) are found wanting. But the really

Read the review and hopefully you'll realize that the Square Five is as special as it is unusual. But like all products that redefine the boundaries of expectation, it also asks questions about systems and wider scenarios that are outside the strict confines of a review. Yet they are still relevant -- and in this case significantly so.

Like all speakers, the issue of matching to an appropriate amplifier is critical, but the demands of the Square Five are more specific than most. It needs quick, clean power and plenty of it. The Audionet Amp 1 v2 is a spectacularly effective partner, but other alternatives spring to mind. How about teaming the Square Five with Jeff Rowland's new Continuum S2 integrated amp, or the Simaudio Moon 400M Neo monoblocks? Either promises excellent results; both happen to match the Square Fives almost exactly for price -- at least they do in the UK.

Which throws an interesting spotlight on the issue of system budgets and how you should distribute them -- a perennial debate within the world of hi-fi. Given that price is no guarantee of performance and that there's no reason that it should cost as much to achieve a given level of performance from a loudspeaker (using its technology and materials) as it does from an amplifier or CD player (each using its own technology and parts), it's a far more complex equation than it might appear. It might simply be coincidence, but with all these £9000 solutions cropping up, each individually impressive and each perfectly suited to operate in concert, we have an intriguingly symmetrical set of options to play with.

In fact, the Square Five is such a perfect balance of price and performance that it will serve as the lynchpin around which a quite exceptional system might be built -- each component offering the same price/performance virtues. With Audionet preamp/power amp, Simaudio Moon or Jeff Rowland delivering the electronics, we have a range of equally attractive options that could be tailored to meet a "just add source" brief. On the other side of the speaker, what about adding the Wilson Benesch Torus sub for added extension and even more



impressive thing is the way the speakers step away from the process, neither imposing their thumbprint on the signal nor intruding on the parade. The musical performances are front and center -- you don't even notice how they got there.

The RPO's performance of Beethoven's 6th Symphony with Marc Ermler wielding the baton [Centurion SACD 222802-203] is more measured than sprightly, although not without its charms, one of which is a broad, stable and clearly defined soundstage. The Square Fives deliver that dimensionality with impressive clarity and a stability that maintains instrumental separation even through the short "Storm" section. It's a recording that demands both spatial and dynamic coherence and one that also demonstrates the Square Five's particular perspective. This speaker sets the stage slightly higher than some (a function of the Troika topology?) behind and totally separate from the cabinets themselves. But what's really impressive is the way that the drums and double basses are perfectly placed and integrated with the rest of the orchestra, despite the distance between the lower-midrange driver and the bass drivers firing through its bottom. What experience suggests might be a problem is, on the contrary, one of the speaker's strengths. Soundstages are projected free of the plane of the speakers, the music coming from the space around and behind them rather than being anchored to the cabinets. Shut your eyes and these speakers do disappear, not just visually but sonically as well.

Last action hero -- they do *big* and they do *clever*

Does that sense of physical coherence and structural integrity come with a cost in terms of agility? Whilst the Square Five will never compete in terms of sheer immediacy with a far more efficient speaker like the Living Voice Avatar IBX-RW, it delivers more in terms of acoustic presence, scale and spatial coherence, stepping back to a more midhall balance and perspective. No, you won't "hear" the rosin spraying from the bow, but that's not to say that the speaker lacks expressive intent, the ability to jump when it has to. Just play Gli Incogniti's impressively lively and vivacious small-group recording of Vivaldi concerti [Zig Zag ZZT080803] to experience just how quickly these speakers can change gear when called upon to do so. Their stability brings weight and meaning to the more

dynamic range and integrity? It's too enticing a prospect to pass over, so I'll be ringing the changes and reporting back as I do.

The other question that springs to mind is just how the Square Five stacks up against a speaker like the Living Voice Avatar IBX-RW? Roughly the same size and price, the two could not be much more different -- except in the most important sense, their ability to deliver a musically complete and satisfying performance. The Living Voice trades bass extension for sensitivity, a simpler driver lineup for an easier load. The result is a speaker that is perfectly at home with a mere 10 watts of well-engineered tube power doing the driving -- as was demonstrated in .

If the Square Five is all about the sense of scale and the musical whole (irrespective of how big -- or small -- the event) the Avatar IBX-RW is about immediacy, texture and technique, how the music is being played as much as what is being played. In many respects they offer two different but equally valid perspectives on the same event. But what the two speakers share is that sense of almost preternatural balance. The Living Voice delivers just enough bandwidth and bass weight to be musically and rhythmically convincing, not so much that it gets into trouble. It makes it a versatile design that will work really well in a wide variety of rooms. In contrast, the bandwidth and sheer weight and substance available from the Wilson Benesch makes it more demanding of the listening room and precise placement, while its seamless integration and even-handed dynamics and power delivery across the range mean that it is never slowed or embarrassed by its bottom end.

In the end, one puts you up close and personal while the other has a more distant, holistic viewpoint. That and nature of your system and preferred driving electronics will likely make the decision for you. But what is interesting about both of these individually excellent and very different speakers is the part that balancing their virtues plays in the success of their design. With so many products that seek to attract attention by doing one thing exceptionally well, both of these speakers offer an object lesson in the value of unobtrusive excellence and long-term listening satisfaction -- and just how to achieve it.

- Roy Gregory



measured passages, but as the score speeds up and the players respond, there's no sense of inhibition or lag -- and no lack of bite or energy either. Side-by-side comparison with a quicker, more efficient speaker may show the Square Five's limitations, but short of such direct intervention, I seriously doubt you'll be troubled by any shortcomings. There's a completeness and balance to the performance -- both of the speaker and the musicians -- that has the happy knack of leaving you satisfied.

While it's hard to fault Hilary Hahn's technique, poise and virtuosity, her instrumental voice, when compared to the likes of a Janine Jansen, is undeniably small. It can ill afford any further thinning or shrinkage of the sort that so many recordings, systems and speakers apply, in search of that elusive impression of greater clarity or definition. As each stage in the process applies what it considers a deft or subtle trimming of the sound, the gross effect becomes all too obvious, emasculating instruments of tonal body, depth and identity. Listening to Hahn playing the Higdon Violin Concerto (with Vasily Petrenko and the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic [DGG 477 8777]) through the Square Fives is a revelation. What I had down as a typically thin modern recording is suddenly reinstated. The woman is no Heifetz when it comes to power and intensity, no Issac Stern when it comes to the richness of her tone, but the Wilson Benesch

speakers deliver every last ounce of the energy and body she squeezes from her instrument -- and they do it without impeding her sheer

agility and dexterity. Nor do they impede Petrenko's authoritative instrumental contrasts and dramatic dynamic swings. The sheer orchestral weight and power generated from such comparatively compact cabinets is as surprising as it is impressive. As a result, this first-ever recording of the Higdon reveals quite a different work to the one I thought it was: fuller of color, broader of palette than I'd suspected, at once thoughtful yet exhilarating.

The coupling on this disc (the Tchaikovsky D Major Violin Concerto) also serves to underline the fact that the bass integration so apparent on the Beethoven extends into the temporal as well as the spatial domain. Hahn's performance of the Tchaikovsky sensibly avoids any overly romantic flourishes, leaving those to Petrenko and the orchestra. Instead she thrives on the contrast between her solo instrument and the orchestra, working with tempo as well as intensity, an opportunity offered by the use of the original, uncut score. The longer violin passages allow her to stretch out the time signatures, transitioning

from a restrained, measured tread to the helter-skelter sprays of notes with which we are all so familiar. It makes for a very different reading of a work in which I thought I knew every nook and cranny. The contrast





True lies -- the ones we should stop telling ourselves

within the pace of the solo parts creates a far more thoughtful and nuanced piece, the Square Fives mastering the change from fast to slow with grace and confidence that reassure you that the hesitations and almost pauses in those slower passages really are meant to be there. The slower phrases are slow enough to give you pause, yet the switch to lightning-fast occurs without hesitation and almost without warning. Hahn plays the slower parts that much slower, the faster sections with such attack and agility that in places the tempi stray far enough from the norm (and your subconscious expectations) that any failure to track and balance them precisely will rob the music of all shape or forward momentum. But just as the Cure are projected with enough energy to propel the listener straight over a cliff, the Tchaikovsky never, ever falters, the combination of Hahn's poise and Petrenko's control establishing a natural sense of flow and musical line. It's this ability to make present the core, to encompass the rhythm and soul of the music, that makes this speaker so special and so rewarding -- whether that core is all about restraint and delicacy, or sheer, unbridled enthusiasm.

Having spent so long lauding the capabilities and flexibility of the Tactic drivers -- and then describing their not-inconsiderable and collective impact on the Square Five's musical performance, it's tempting to throw a few sidelong glances in the direction of that "rather ordinary" ScanSpeak tweeter. After all, those corners have to be cut somewhere, no? Except that not only do Wilson Benesch have considerable experience with this unit, that experience was gained in the C60 (amongst other models), one of the company's most popular products. Despite the plethora of exotic dome materials now available, as well as the recent reemergence of ribbon designs, soft domes still have plenty to offer. A few years back it seemed like you were nobody if you weren't using a diamond or beryllium tweeter, but now the silk dome is back, carving its own niche (once again) as designers rediscover its merits. In fairness, the ScanSpeak unit doesn't have the air or textural qualities that the Hemisphere used in the Cardinal possesses, but it's no slouch, and even if it does gloss over some of the finer shadings and upper-instrumental harmonics, it more than makes up for that by integrating so seamlessly with the upper-midrange driver, settling back comfortably into the speaker's midhall perspective.

You will hear what the Square Five doesn't do when referenced against the six-times the price Cardinal, but you not only won't be aware of the shortfall, you won't miss it either. Not missing what you don't notice might seem obvious, but it is remarkable how the editorial aspects of system performance (sins of omission as opposed to commission) can become subliminally intrusive, unsettling the listener without his ever quite understanding why. The wholesome solidity and substance, the coherence and integrity of the Square Five is a refreshing change to the pared-away, almost skeletal sound of some modern speakers. It keeps things present and sufficiently correct that you'll spend far more time enjoying what is there rather than what isn't. Yes, in an ideal world, I'd like that little bit of extra air, I'd like extension down to 20Hz, and I'd love to sit that little bit closer to the stage -- but then in that ideal world I'd be able to afford the Cardinal and house it too.

In the real world, the Square Five represents an astonishingly accomplished achievement and satisfying balance of virtues. As with any speaker, its performance will depend on the system context and the driving amplifier. The latter will need to be chosen with care, although it need not be especially expensive, at least in the context of the speakers. This is not one of those products that is affordable to own but extortionate to actually use (various Apogee speakers spring to mind), and it really does deliver the sort of complete musical performance that we've only come to expect from far more expensive speakers and systems.

One way of describing the Square Five is as a speaker that has enough. It has enough bandwidth, enough weight, enough dynamic range and is neutral enough to be really convincing. It's an accurate but far from flattering observation -- because what we crave is excellence. Enough sounds distinctly second best. But in practice what makes the Square Five so successful, so enjoyable, so engaging and so satisfying is not just what it does but the way it does it. It's not about the dynamic range or integration, the bandwidth or the tonal palette, the rhythmic integrity or the spatial coherence -- it's about all of those things in combination. Nearly all loudspeakers have that thing they do, that special



thing, that thing that sets them apart. In some respects the same can be said of the Wilson Benesch Square Five -- except that its thing is integration -- the way it binds everything else into a single, natural, unexaggerated whole. It's the antithesis of "look at me" spectacular. It makes the speaker understated and unintrusive. In fact, it's exactly what makes the speaker so impressive. By stepping back it pushes the music forward to such an extent that you really don't notice the speakers' contribution. It makes it a purchase for the long haul, a speaker for music lovers rather than equipment geeks, a product to live with long-term rather than one for a brief affair.

In some respects that might stand against it, at least in terms of commercial success; so many audiophiles are more trend-conscious than fashionistas, so easily

seduced by the latest, greatest thing that inevitably promises the earth, that a product as prosaic, as plain and as downright sensible as the Square Five might easily be dismissed as a wallflower, the smart girl that never gets asked to dance. Except that its performance is so beautifully balanced, so unusually natural and expressive that even one listen should reveal its superiority. This is a product that is musically, rather than sonically spectacular. It really does deliver on the promise of trickle-down technology, standing head and shoulders above most of the competition.

I'm not saying that one listen and you'll fall in love; it's more like one listen and you'll feel like you've just come home -- and there're not many speakers about which you can say that, irrespective of price.

Price: £8995 per pair.

Warranty: Five years parts and labor.

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Associated Equipment

Analog: VPI Classic 4 turntable with SDS; VPI JMW 12.7 and Tri-Planar Mk VII Ull tonearms; Lyra Titan i, Scala, Dorian and Dorian Mono cartridges; Clearaudio Goldfinger Statement cartridge; van den Hul Condor cartridge; Allnic Puritas and Puritas Mono cartridges; Nordost Odin tonearm lead; Connoisseur 4.2PLE phono stage.

Digital: CEC TL-3N CD transport, Wadia S7i CD player, dCS Paganini and Vivaldi transports, Wadax Pre 1 digital control unit.

Preamps: Aesthetix Janus, Connoisseur 4.2.

Power amp: Aesthetix Atlas Stereo, Audionet Amp 1 v2.

Integrated amp: Jeff Rowland Continuum 2.

Interconnects and speaker cables: Complete looms of Nordost Odin, Crystal Cable Absolute Dream or Ultra from AC socket to speaker terminals. Power distribution was via Quantum QRT QB8s or Crystal Cable Power Strip Diamonds, with a mix of Quantum Qx2 and Qx4 power purifiers and Qv2 AC harmonizers.

Supports: Racks are Hutter Racktime or Quadraspire SVT Bamboo. These are used with Nordost SortKone equipment couplers throughout. Cables are elevated on Ayre myrtle-wood blocks or HECC Panda Feet.

Acoustic treatments: As well as the broadband absorption placed behind the listening seat, I employ a combination of the LeadingEdge D Panel and Flat Panel microperforated acoustic devices. These remarkably simple yet incredibly effective acoustic panels have become absolutely indispensable when it comes to hearing what the system is actually doing.

Accessories: Essential accessories include the Feickert protractor, a USB microscope and Aesthetix cartridge demagnetizer, a precision spirit level and laser, a really long tape measure and plenty of masking tape. I also make extensive use of the Furutech anti-static and demagnetizing devices and the VPI Typhoon record-cleaning machine. The Dr Feickert PlatterSpeed app has to be the best ever case of digital aiding analog.