



System addict

System Audio has hard-bitten audiophiles in its sights, but can wireless speakers hit the spot? **David Vivian** reckons this one might

What is it to be an audiophile? The emergence of System Audio's Legend 5.2 Silverback digital wireless streaming system once again poses a seemingly innocent but actually rather intimate question. Do you find deep satisfaction in the audible alchemy of putting together and incrementally modifying a separates hi-fi system – the open-ended, ever-evolving, never-ending process often referred to as 'the journey'?

And what if 'the journey' could end right here? According to SA's founder and boss, Ole Withthøft, it could, indeed should for the truly 'modern

audiophile'. The 'future-fi', streamer-centric proposition posited by SA and other wireless, active speaker proponents such as KEF, Dynaudio, Kii and Buchardt among others is hard to rationally refute. The pitch goes like this: what matters most – the very *raison d'être* of owning a hi-fi system – is high fidelity itself. And if something approaching an end-game standard can be achieved with just two active speakers, two mains cables, possibly a small, plainly styled stereo wireless control hub that can be hidden away in a cupboard (SA's preference) and a smartphone or tablet, surely that makes messing around with multiple components, cables, dedicated

equipment racks and a whole lot of what-not a superfluous legacy activity and debilitating waste of time.

Brutal and, frankly, an affront to those of us who regard messing around as a calling. But I get it. Not every music lover is a die-hard, old school audiophile and the idea of short-circuiting the 'never-ending process' by shrinking component clutter and moving straight to the pay-off undoubtedly has legs. In SA's case, this comprises hub-based WiSA wireless connectivity, an evolving suite of downloadable DSP-implemented speaker voicings to tailor personal preference and room type plus a room acoustic correction app to use with your iPhone.

The company launched its Silverback range of active designs (retro-fittable for owners of passive Legend line speakers) in 2018 with the latest 'digital upgrades' introduced in January this year, along with an aluminium casing for the remote to replace the previous plastic affair.

With its HQ and factory in Roskilde – once Denmark's capital, but still the country's main music city according to Ole – SA has spent the last 37 years

It delivers a melding of bandwidth, resolution and attack that beggars belief

moving towards its current portfolio of passive and active speakers. Ole says that a great digital speaker begins as a great analogue one and, unsurprisingly, nominates the well-established passive Legend 5 that forms the basis for the active Legend Silverback 5.2 we're looking at here.

A two-way rear-ported speaker, it has a 114mm long-throw mid/bass driver, crossed over in DSP to a 25mm soft-dome tweeter. Each driver has its own DAC and dedicated Class D amplifier using the same digital tech as Steinway Lyngdorf, with a total of 150W a side. As well as performing crossover duties, DSP is used to smooth the amplitude and phase characteristics, extend bass response and adjust dynamic equalisation so the bass doesn't fade away at low listening levels.

The main driver's unusually long voice coil is claimed to allow excursions 40 percent greater than those of a similarly sized woofer, for greater bass output. The cone is made from woven carbon fibre claimed to provide high internal damping and the rubber surround has

built-in resonance-control rings for smoother response.

The tweeter's coated silk dome is surrounded by a DXT acoustic lens which, according to SA, results in smoother off-axis response, a wider sweet spot, better integration with the mid/bass driver's output and eliminates off-cabinet diffraction effects. Talking of which, the enclosure has gently curved side panels and a thick (29mm) baffle separated from the rest of the enclosure by a 5mm groove inlaid with walnut. It's the only aesthetic flourish, but – like the rest of the speaker – is beautifully finished in a choice of black or white satin.

Using appropriately long interconnect cables, the speakers can be hooked-up directly to a preamp or DAC/preamp equipped with analogue XLR sockets, though if you go fully wireless with the WiSA preamp/transmitter stereo hub you can add analogue and digital sources such as a turntable and CD player physically. The hub's resolution ceiling via coaxial, optical and USB is 24-bit/192kHz. Built-in Bluetooth is joined by Chromecast (accessed via Google Home), Apple AirPlay (streaming limited to 16-bit/44.1kHz) and Spotify Connect.

The latest version of the Legend 5 Silverback, the 5.2 has extended bass response down to a claimed 25Hz at moderate listening levels, updated protection and a lower crossover point with adjusted slope. "We've corrected the delay of the drive units at various frequencies and basically cleaned up the midrange and high-frequency performance," explains Ole. And all accomplished with an update of the internal DSP parameters, now free to download for owners of pre-January Legend 5 Silverbacks. "The DSP is a much more accurate tool than a passive crossover," Ole continues. "Without any loss of quality or problems with phase, delay etc, we can shape the speakers' response at any given volume." Working with the DSP settings and new digital tools, Ole and his team went further and developed SA's so-called RAM tweaks – downloaded DSP implemented 'sound optimisations' for people with acoustically challenged rooms (overly live or dull) or who simply want to change up the sound of their system.

There's also SA Room Service, the remarkably easy app that cunningly uses your iPhone as a measuring device. Generating a pink noise feed from the speakers, it maps the acoustics of your room as you walk



Despite looking unassuming, the finish is superb



Also hailing from Denmark, Buchardt's A500 standmount closely matches the Silverback's active wireless approach. And, like the SA, it has downloadable DSP settings. But it is significantly more expensive. Closer in price are KEF's LS50 Wireless II and Dynaudio's Xeo 20 (HFC 444), both of which offer unquestionable advantages in specific areas attributable to the active driver tech. But neither can quite get on terms with the outstanding Silverback sonically.

around it, scanning from floor to ceiling. That done, it then displays a graph with the peaks and troughs corrected and the option to implement the corrections or, indeed, toggle between before and after.

Sound quality

It turns out my smaller listening room doesn't need much correction, but the changes are still subtly audible and appear to work. Much bigger differences arise trying out the five RAM tweaks, perhaps most markedly going from the fully-lit RT300 ("analytical sound and extended bass for rooms with controlled acoustics") to the calmer, darker and more nuanced presentation of RT200x that Legend 5.2 Silverback now ships with.

The upshot is a re-writing of the rules, not simply highlighting the ability to enact digitally acute contrasts between the two RAM voicings, but for the nonchalant way that in either guise the Silverback appears to be trolling far bigger and more costly passive high-end speakers by daring to do a better job.

Streaming in MQA from Tidal, Yello's *The Vanishing Of Peter Strong* delivers a melding of bandwidth, resolution and attack that, coming from such modestly dimensioned boxes, frankly beggars belief. Yet key standmount strengths are also exploited to telling effect, manifested as pin-point timing, an expansive, 3D soundstage, superb separation and the kind of intelligibility and articulation that renders every detail, intonation and microdynamic shift as clear as Perrier in a cut-crystal glass. It's all so effortlessly easy to hear and

understand – tactile, full of texture, colour and energy. Visceral intensity is one thing. *Quality Of Mercy* sung by Michelle Shocked on CD oozes heart-felt attitude and beautifully finessed fragility in equal measure, the midrange and higher octaves fabulously smooth and transparent, lending instruments a delicious sense of timbral integrity and harmonic richness, loading the vocal with potent plaintive angst.

Conclusion

This is a new paradigm that shatters the notion you need a strapping floorstander trailing big-bore speaker cables for deep, powerful bass while, at the same time, ordaining strategically flavoured and contoured versions of high-end sound quality that, in all but ultimate scale and power, are as coherent, palpable, tonally true and rhythmically compelling as the very best available at multiples of the Legend 5.2 Silverback's price ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★
EASE OF DRIVE ★★★★★

LIKE: Clutter-free ease of use; build and design; sublime sound; RAM DSP profiles
DISLIKE: Trad system tweakers will have to look to their laurels
WE SAY: If you want terrific sound without the shenanigans, look no further

OVERALL
★★★★★