

Quad ESL-2805

Addictive

Jim Hannon

Have you ever had a reference component in your system for years and sold it because you felt that something else just had to be better? Perhaps my biggest audio regret is selling my Crosby-modified Quad ESL-63s with their matching stands. The major Crosby modifications to the stock ESL-63—designed by Richard Lees and implemented by Jerry Crosby—included a much stiffer frame, far better internal wire, parts, and connectors, a thinner dust cover, a more transparent grille, and other improvements. Crosby's beautiful wood-finished floor-to-speaker stand raised the speaker about 18 inches off the floor, so the panels were at ear level, and the stands could be mass loaded with sand or shot. The full Crosby modifications vaulted the very good performance of the stock 63s to reference quality. Sure, I've lived with speakers since then that have moved

more air or were better in certain specific areas like macrodynamics, frequency response at both extremes, and bass authority, but in each case I sacrificed some of the musicality, coherence, transparency, and realism I had grown accustomed to with the Crosby Quads. Within their limits, both that speaker, as well as my latest pair of original (recently refurbished) Quads have given me more moments when I thought I was listening to the real thing than any other speakers I have owned . . . and perhaps that I have heard. Many thought the Crosby modifications were able to wring the last ounce of performance out of Peter Walker's brilliant design, but now comes a new version from Quad itself, the ESL-2805, that may very well execute the "old man's" design even better. To be sure, the ESL-2805 is far more than just a welcome cosmetic upgrade to the already excellent (and still available) ESL-988.



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One of the pleasant surprises offered by the ESL-2805 is that it reduces the already low distortion of the ESL-63, yielding even better transparency, coherence, soundstaging, and transient quickness. Instruments and voices sound even more natural and lifelike. For example, the timbre and inner detail of the cello is absolutely striking on the Bach Suites for Unaccompanied Cello [Mercury/Speakers Corner], performed by Janos Starker. The cello is a very telling instrument for loudspeaker evaluation, and on the 2805, as Starker traverses its range, you'll notice there are none of the crossover distortions, suck-outs, or discontinuities between drivers that plague virtually all multi-driver designs to some degree. With this new Quad, the cello sounds like the real thing and so do guitars, trombones, voices, and pianos. You won't hear aberrations in timbre between drivers, or, in the Quad's case, between panels—just a stunning musical naturalness and realism.

While I did expect the 2805 to excel in the acknowledged areas of Quad's strengths, I was unprepared for the improvements in dynamic range, bass extension, control, and weight. The cello sounded even better on these speakers than on my beloved Crosbys, without any upper-bass leanness but with a natural richness one associates with that instrument. Stand-up bass on a wonderful jazz recording like Basie Jam [Pablo/Analogue Productions] is spot-on—full-sounding yet without any bloat or sluggishness. The low end of the piano benefits from added power and weight, providing a better foundation for that instrument, but one can still cause the panels to occasionally lose their composure on a fortissimo from something like the Beethoven

Paul Seydor comments

Not long ago while evaluating another speaker, I deliberately didn't listen to my long-standing references, Quad 988s, for almost a month. When I hooked them back up, it took maybe about ten seconds of listening before I thought, "Man, this is really low coloration." That may help explain why I greet with apprehension, if not dread, any attempt to improve upon what I have elsewhere called Peter Walker's masterpiece—the ESL-63, of which the 988 is the direct, though much better built and thus superior, descendent. Can't they just leave well enough alone?

No, they couldn't, and I'm glad they didn't. In my opinion, the 2805 is the best Quad speaker ever made—this from somebody who owns, loves, and all but genuflects before the 63/988 and the 57. My principal worry proved groundless: the overall tonal balance—that is, the 63/988's neutrality and vanishingly low coloration—remain unchanged, as do its transparency and that legendary disappearing act. Indeed, the new model is even more transparent—subtly cleaner, clearer, and purer. (Quad's Dave Patching claims a reduction by half of the distortion from the 988, which already boasts a figures more typical of amplifiers than speakers, i.e., 0.1%.) So what is different? Jim Hannon—with whose evaluation I concur in almost every particular—has already described how much heavier, more rigid, and more substantial the housing is. The sonic consequence is a noise floor lower than that of the 988, which itself

has one of the lowest around. Inasmuch as no speaker makes a sound if no signal is present, how can it have a noise floor as such? Because all speakers are made from materials that have resonant characteristics and other vibrational properties that once excited—in other words, every time the speaker attempts to reproduce a signal—muddy or otherwise contribute to the reproduction, usually to its detriment. This is why good designers pay so much attention to materials, cabinets, bracing, and mounting.

For structural strength and integrity, the housing of the 988 represented a welcome and substantial improvement over both previous Quad ESLs; that of the 2805 is by an order of magnitude superior still; reproduced sounds now emerge from a background of almost digital-like silence and blackness. I am not exaggerating. Almost every experienced listener, including the most jaded and cynical, who has heard these new speakers in my listening room has remarked upon this effect in one form or another with absolutely no urging from me.

Two other aspects of the 63/988 are also improved: bass response and ultimate loudness capability. The 2805 still cannot overwhelm a room with the kind of pressurized bass you get from woofers—no dipole planar can—but there is a noticeable increase in both bass extension and power that while not dramatic is not subtle, either. As for loudness, no, the 2805 is still not for headbangers, but if you've been tempted though never quite persuaded by past Quads

because they play almost loud enough, then you owe yourself an audition of this new one.

If you own and love the 63 or 988, let me reassure you that yours are still among the small handful of the finest loudspeakers ever made for home use, so I'm not about to suggest you replace them with this one: On most music the differences are quite small, the changeover cost large, even allowing for Quads' high resale value. But on an initial purchase—the 988 remains in the Quad lineup—go for the 2805 if you can at all manage the additional \$2350/pair.

To give you some idea of how special this speaker really is, one evening I put on *Belafonte at Carnegie Hall*. I've listened to cuts on this albums dozens, perhaps hundreds of times to check some aspect or other of equipment performance, but that night I wound up doing something I had not done in over fifteen or twenty years: listening to it all the way through for the sheer pleasure of it. And so it went with favorite CD after treasured LP.

Inasmuch as no one can truly say he or she has heard every product, even every plausible product, the phrase "the best" should be used strictly subjectively, as rhetorical strategy rather than literal claim. In that spirit, then, let me conclude by stating that for my money—no idle phrase here, as there is no way the 2805s are being returned—the best speaker of the twentieth century is now the best speaker of the twenty-first. These are henceforth my reference monitors.

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Design Elements

The inspiration for the 2805 came from several visits by Quad's David Patching to the legendary listening room of SME founder, the late Alistair Robertson-Aikman (also see last issue's Industry News), where two sets of nude ESL-63s were set up at right angles, their panels rigidly mounted on high-mass custom frames, and topped off by hundred-pound weights. (For more on this fascinating set up, see Ken Kessler's excellent ode to Quad, *Quad: The Closest Approach*.) Hearing what the panels were capable of when manufacturing constraints were removed, Patching asked the Quad engineers to come as close as possible to the structural integrity Aikman had achieved, but in a product that could be manufactured. The Quad team-effort significantly increased the mass of the frame and base, while adding a damped connecting brace from the top of the speaker to the base to tighten up and triangulate the structure. These changes not only keep the speaker from rocking back and forth, but also improve bass response and dynamic range while reducing distortion and smearing. Additionally, the mounting of the panels within the frame has been reinforced, a brace has been

added to the metal grille, and the grille apertures have been widened to reduce rear reflections from the back grille. Besides the rear brace, the most obvious external change is the speaker's new and greatly improved cosmetic appeal.

Quad has continued to improve the quality of its ESLs by bringing most of the component manufacturing and production in-house. For example, the delay lines used to be outsourced to a third party, but are now manufactured by Quad, improving reliability and preventing arcing of the panels. The panels themselves are now capable of higher excursions and sound pressure levels, and are now used in the 2805 and 2905, as well as in the latest versions of the 988 and 989.

Because the Quads are dipoles, you'll need to spend some additional time with placement and perhaps room treatment to realize the full potential of this speaker. I preferred the heavy-duty floor-coupling system, with its massive spiked feet that ground the speaker securely to the floor, to the flat feet that Quad also includes. You can also use the spiked feet to change the rake of the speaker to raise the height of the image. JH

Appassionata sonata [Harmonia Mundi], but at somewhat higher volume levels than with the 63 or Crosby. Microdynamics on these speakers are first-rate.

While Quads of all stripes get massed strings and voices right, an added bonus with the 2805 is that full orchestras sound not only richer but also

more powerful. Admittedly, a large horn system or great dynamic speaker like the Eben X-3 is even better at reproducing hard transients and macrodynamics than the 2805, but listening to Giulini conduct the "Dies Irae" of Verdi's Requiem [EMI] on the Quad is still quite thrilling, even if the sound is a bit dynamically compressed. The



welcomed higher dynamic ceiling of the 2805 makes it more suitable for a wider range of music beyond small-scale classical and jazz. I found myself pulling out rock albums that I typically keep in their jackets when I'm listening to Quads. Eric Clapton's guitar soared through the Quads on Cream's *Wheels of Fire* [Polydor/Simply Vinyl], and the 2805s even acquitted themselves quite well on electronica selections from the Barcode Brothers' *Swipe Me* [Universal], where the lightning-quick impact of the kick drum and percussion propel the music forward.

Image focus is another improvement over the

63, and it may even better the fine performance of the Crosby. Most large panels flap in the breeze a bit, which causes images to smear, reducing clarity and focus. The 2805 has a rear brace and stiffer frame that keep the panel firmly in its place (see sidebar). Just listen to the new reissue of the Shostakovich Symphony No. 9 [Everest/Classic Records], or many of the Lyrta recordings. The images are rock-solid and particularly on the Lyrta, the soundstages are breathtaking. This, too, is first-rate performance.

The most likely question for Quad aficionados is how the ESL-2805's midrange compares with

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that of the original Quad (57). In many respects the ESL-57 is similar to an excellent SET amplifier, possessing phenomenal transparency and clarity in the midrange, but with limitations elsewhere. In terms of midrange performance alone, the stock ESL-63 was somewhat veiled compared with the stunningly beautiful and open ESL-57, whereas the Crosby Quad, particularly on its matching stand, was the original's equal. While the 2805 is superior to the ESL-57 in many other areas, it falls slightly short of the original's "reach-out-and-touch-you" midrange magic. Mind you, it's only in comparison with two of its brethren that the 2805 suffers, as it also has a wonderful midrange, and perhaps, without its grille cloth and raised on floor-to-speaker stands, like the Crosby, it would be their equal in the midrange. However, those hooked by the ESL-57's midrange may be

unwilling to give it up—even though the 2805 is a better overall speaker.

Perhaps the biggest compliment I can give any speaker is that the ESL-2805 made me lose track of time again and again. It sounds so "right" that I found myself drawn to the music, to the artistry of the performer, and to the essence of the composition. The natural timbre, coherence, clarity, and subtle details that one hears in a live performance kept me transfixed until my reverie was interrupted by the sound of the cartridge hitting the end of the record. Admittedly, if you are a headbanger, or must hear the deepest notes of a pipe organ or synth, or like to have your speaker system move so much air that it flaps the legs of your trousers, you should look elsewhere, or try the larger ESL-2905. Yes, you could add a subwoofer or two, but I was never completely successful doing this with the Crosby or the original, as even the very good subs I tried impinged on the Quad's purity.

The Quad ESL-2805 is a superior execution of Peter Walker's ground-breaking design and vaults the performance of the Quad even higher up in the reference category. The addition of mass, rigidity, and bracing to the frame, better parts, as well as improvements in the manufacture of the panels produce a result that is one of the most musically satisfying in high-end audio at any price. The dynamic ceiling and bass-performance envelope have been extended, so that the Quad may be a viable alternative to people who listen to more than small-scale works. Moreover, the 2805 produces music with a realism and naturalness that are compelling and addictive. Prepare to get sucked into the music—and into the soul of the performance. *tas*

SPECS & PRICING

Type: Full-range electrostatic loudspeaker

Frequency Response: 37Hz-21KHz (-6dB)

Impedance Variation: 8 ohms nominal (range: 4-15 ohms)

Sensitivity: 86dB

Dimensions: 27.36" x 40.94" x 15.16"

Weight: 76.6 lbs.

Price: \$9000/pr.

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