

QUAD ESL 2905

A classic reinvented and better than ever

The new Quad electrostatic speakers are finally on sale, and Andrew Everard is smitten



Aerodynamically-shaped brace is tensioned to maximise the rigidity of the main panel

Regrets? I've had a few – among them never learning to play the piano, never starting that book my mother is convinced I have in me, and never buying a pair of Quad electrostatic speakers. That last one hits particularly hard: I've lost track of the number of times I've seen vintage pairs for sale and become decidedly wistful.

I'd go so far as to say that one of my dreams is to find a pair of original Quad ESLs lurking at the back of a garage sale, with a sign on them saying "Offers?" Ideally, they'd have been stored there by a long-gone relative of a seller whose only question is not "Are they worth a bit, then?" but "Why do you want those electric radiators? They don't work..."

With all that in mind, I've enjoyed previous generations of Quads whenever I've heard them, from a pair being used for monitoring by Tony Faulkner during a recording session at Snape Maltings to countless examples in shows around the world, with and without the underpinnings of one or more subwoofers. So being shown, strictly on the QT, a pre-production pair of the new ESLs when I visited the IAG factory in China in Summer 2005 was quite an experience. In fact, the only regret was that they weren't in a listenable form back then.

Over a year later they're on sale, and Quad is making both the £6000-a-pair ESL 2905 we have here and the smaller ESL 2805, trading bass extension for a £1500 price cut.

The last Quad electrostatic speakers, the 988 and 989 were clearly derived from the classic ESL 63, and will remain on sale. At prices from £3500 for the smaller 988s and about £1100 more for the 989s, they're usefully more affordable than the new models. But to put that in context, an original pair of ESLs, when Peter Walker's company first put them on sale in 1956, would have cost you £104. Or more correctly one speaker – as that's how they were

bought in those days – was £52. Amazingly, 'Walker's Wonder', as the ESL was nicknamed, remained in production until 1981, when the ESL 63 – so called because Quad said that's when the company started work on its design – appeared on the market.

So if the ESL2805/2905 aren't designed to replace the existing models, clearly they must offer something special, enabling them to appeal to an even higher sector of the market. And they do: these speakers are not upgrades, but a complete reinvention of the classic design, rebuilt

from the ground up, and with only the basic electrostatic principles retained.

In fact there's so much new about the ESL 2805/2905 that it would take many pages to cover the entire design and development story: suffice it to say here that there are new materials and a complete re-engineering, the most obvious features of which are the exposed aluminium side-panels and the aerofoil-shaped brace behind the speaker panel, which is tensioned up to



Piano black detailing on the top of the electrostatic panel, and base

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A total of six panel sections are used within, giving the ESL 2905 its amazing extension

ensure rigidity as the very last part of the set-up procedure. The main assembly leans back very slightly, and a hefty base contains the electronics and prevents the speaker from tipping.

The ESL 2905 uses no fewer than six panel elements, and being a dipole or doublet speaker radiates sound equally front and back. That means corner placement is to be avoided, and the speakers should be at least 60cm from rear walls and 5cm or more from the sides, but that

aside the unique dispersion characteristics make positioning relatively fuss-free. The speakers can be anything from 2.5m to 5m apart, and with a toe-in toward the listener of 5-20°, but beyond that it's a matter of listening and moving little by little to get the best sound.

Neither are they hugely power-hungry: in fact Quad suggests 40-100W will do nicely, saying there's no benefit in using anything more powerful. In fact monster amps may well trigger the speakers' protection circuitry at high levels, and if you're daft enough to keep pushing things you might just blow the multifuse. Provided as a last line of defence, this is replaceable only by a service engineer.

PERFORMANCE

Each speaker needs a mains supply to energise it, but apart from this IEC connection there's just a pair of speaker terminals under a cover to the rear of the speaker, plus a single rotary control. Some tweaky tuning aid? Not at all: it merely adjusts the brightness of the illuminated Quad logo on the front of the speaker or, when turned anti-clockwise until it clicks, turns it off completely. Anyone more aware of all the mythology of the Quad ESL than the reality of living with a pair is likely to be disappointed by the ease with which these speakers can be set up. Well, once you get over the fact that they weigh 41.6kg apiece, that is!

But there's nothing disappointing about the sound of the 2905s: straight from the box they impress with the sheer bass extension of which they're capable, going right down to 28Hz – so you can forget that subwoofer – and having that beautifully liquid, free-breathing and wide-open midrange and treble for which Quad's electrostatics have long been celebrated. Yes, the speakers need a bit of use to be heard at their best – even a factory-fresh pair will have spent quite a while on the slow boat from China since they were run in and tested at the end of the manufacturing process – but after a few days they were already raising eyebrows among Quad enthusiasts and electrostatic neophytes alike.

I tried the speakers with a variety of amplifiers, and while they were happiest on

the end of Quad's own 909 power amplifier, fed from the 99CD-P player/preamplifier they worked well with a Bryston pre/power combination, and even sounded rather good when hooked up to the Marantz SA7001 SACD/CD player and a little Rotel RA-05 integrated amp. £6000 of speakers running with less than £800 of electronics – interesting...

These are speakers built to delight, and while their sound is so different from that of conventional 'cone and box' designs, the way they play music is totally addictive, and having set them up in one of our listening rooms at the office, I found myself driving home far too late on more than one occasion. "The Quads again?" my wife would say when I finally got home, leading to a slightly shameful nod of the head. I'm even told by some of my colleagues that they sounded good when driven by a valve-amplified iPod dock – I think I'll take their word for that one.

These are remarkable speakers on any terms. They're big and imposing, and do the "bass you feel as much as hear" thing amazingly well, along with that wide-open sound and superb stereo imaging. In fact, I'm hoping somewhere, some day a long time from now, I'll find a dusty pair of these, plus a 99CD P/909, for sale for a song. As they say, dream on. 

QUAD ESL 2905

Type Full-range floorstanding electrostatic loudspeaker

Price £6000/pr

Drive units Six electrostatic drive membranes using ultra low mass tensioned film, with time delay via progressive concentric rings

Speaker construction Dipole with 3° rearward tilt

Frequency response 32Hz-21kHz (-6db), 28Hz-21kHz usable

Sensitivity 86dB/2.83V/1m

Nominal impedance 8ohms

Recommended amplifier power 40-100W

Dimensions (HxWxD) 143x69.5x38.5cm

Made by Quad Electroacoustics Ltd, IAG House, Sovereign Court, Ermine Business Park, Huntingdon PE29 6XU

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