

LOUDSPEAKERS

QUAD ESL-2905

Music made real - REALLY!

The Quad electrostatic loudspeaker, also known by its 'ESL' acronym, has played a key role in pushing the boundaries of the audio experience. When Quad founder Peter Walker launched the ESL-57 – a strange loudspeaker with a panel-like shape and no apparent box – in 1957, it created a sensation.

The reason was simple: the ESL-57, and its even more illustrious ESL-63 successor, were able to create a huge, open and ultimately convincing soundstage, with an almost linear tonal delivery and a quite astounding sense of depth.

The ESL has remained a perennial hi-fi favourite ever since. Even by today's standards, a good pair of ESL-63s is hard to beat. Quad remains very much alive and well, and although under new ownership, has continued the ESL legacy.

The ESL-2905 is the most recent iteration of the Quad electrostatic concept. It is also the largest ESL model ever produced, and the reason is clear: for once, the UK company wanted to prove that an electrostatic speaker can deliver real bass response, too.

Low-frequency response has been the Achilles heel of the ESL for as long as it has been around. To its aficionados, the lack of ultimate bass slam was always accepted, and off-set by the speaker's considerable virtues, not least of which were its ability to stage with almost holographic accuracy, and to resolve texture and detail with breathtaking clarity.

But the lack of bottom-end punch has been an ongoing weakness. In the heyday of the ESL-63, a popular upgrade was the addition of a pair of subwoofers to look after very low notes. But many felt that the mod, although successful in adding foundation and substance to the lower bass frequencies, also robbed the sound of some of its open, almost ethereal magic.

After Quad's take-over by the Verity Group in 1995, the company produced a new line-up of ESLs, with the 989 offering a larger panel to improve bass delivery. While the speaker was a sonic success, its stated objective to finally address the low-frequency shortcomings was only partly met.

So, enter the ESL-2905 – the ESL that Quad hopes will finally lay the bass ghost to rest. It uses six electrostatic panels, of which the inner two employ the concentric rings of anodes that create the sonic image.

It's an imposing beast, this ESL, made of aluminium and steel, with the piano black lacquer trim adding some relief from the

industrial-strength chassis. The reason, of course, is to ensure stability and rigidity, allowing the speaker to deliver its sonic wares as efficiently as possible.

The ESL still uses dipolar design employing ultra-thin, tensioned mylar film suspended between perforated metal plates. The mylar is charged with several thousand volts, while the audio signal, also stepped up, is applied to the metal plates. The movement of the film relative to the incoming signal on the plates induces it to move, and thus to produce sound.

The 2905s were sited in AVSA's new listening room, and powered by a Valve Audio Predator integrated amp: Quads don't need a lot of power, but they do demand amplifiers with grunt and loads of current, which the Predator does deliver.

In fairness, the room isn't big enough for the 2905s, as much as it is an acoustically sound environment. Big electrostatics demand and deserve expansive spaces, where they can exercise their considerable talent to the fullest extent. I fear our listening room was just that little bit too restrictive.

Even so, it wasn't enough to mask the ESL-205's very real capabilities. And I can tell you from the outset that this electrostatic doesn't fall short in the bass stakes. Or, let me put it a different way: it reaches down lower, and more incisively, than any other ESL thus far.

But that's really only a small part of this Quad's wares: what really matters is just how open, how accessible, how utterly captivating these speakers sound. For all their imposing physical presence, they completely disappear as point sources – the ESL-2905s are utterly transparent.

Listening to the music is to believe you could get up and take a stroll through the orchestra aisles, rub shoulders with the jazz quartet's bass player, or squeeze through the ranks of the choir. There is such tangibility, a physical presence to the music, that realism is given a new meaning in the sonic context.

Of course, the ESLs also manage to recreate the scale and ambience of a performance so vividly that the AVSA listening room sounded much more capacious than its physical boundaries. And they do so



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VERDICT

Huge presence, limitless staging and quite astounding clarity from the largest Quad electrostatics yet. More bass than ever, too – but still without ultimate slam. Need lots of room to show off their best, though.

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without sounding overblown or ponderous: these Quads are quick, light-footed, athletic speakers with lightning-fast reactions and snappy dynamics.

Tonally, the famed ESL neutrality is true of the 2905s: they're neither attacking nor woolly, the mids neither too rich or too lean. Given that what you're providing as source signal is good, the Quads reciprocate by accurately delivering that signal to the listener.

And the bass? Well, the ESL-2905s can reach down very low: Quad claims a useable frequency response of 28 Hz to 23 kHz. But if you're hoping they will provide the kind of bass slam that hits you in the chest and bowls you over, then you'll be disappointed. The bass has presence, but it isn't brutal or violent. A double bass will resonate in your bones,

but it won't break them ...

Nor will the ESL-2905 ever be a party speaker. It's not a loud loudspeaker. It plays at levels that are ample to experience scale, presence and ambience, but you won't get it to crack windows or annoy the neighbours. They may want to join you, though – because these speakers do get under your skin.

The Quad ESL-2905 is a worthy torch bearer for Peter Walker's electrostatic loudspeaker

legacy. It is the biggest yet, and arguably the best manufactured, too: it exudes a reassuringly robust character that is a far cry from the comparatively flimsy old designs.

It's also one of the reasons why it sounds so superb, why the sense of outright accuracy, transparency, resolution and pace is in sharper focus here than achieved by the ESL-63, or even the ESL-989. And yes, for bass fans, there is more of that too, although not perhaps in the way the ESL's critics had hoped for.

Most of all, the Quad ESL magic is not only retained, but extended. You don't get too many speakers that sound more musical, more engaging – more real – than this. If you have the room, the wallet, and the time to really enjoy this investment, don't hesitate ...

Deon Schoeman

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