

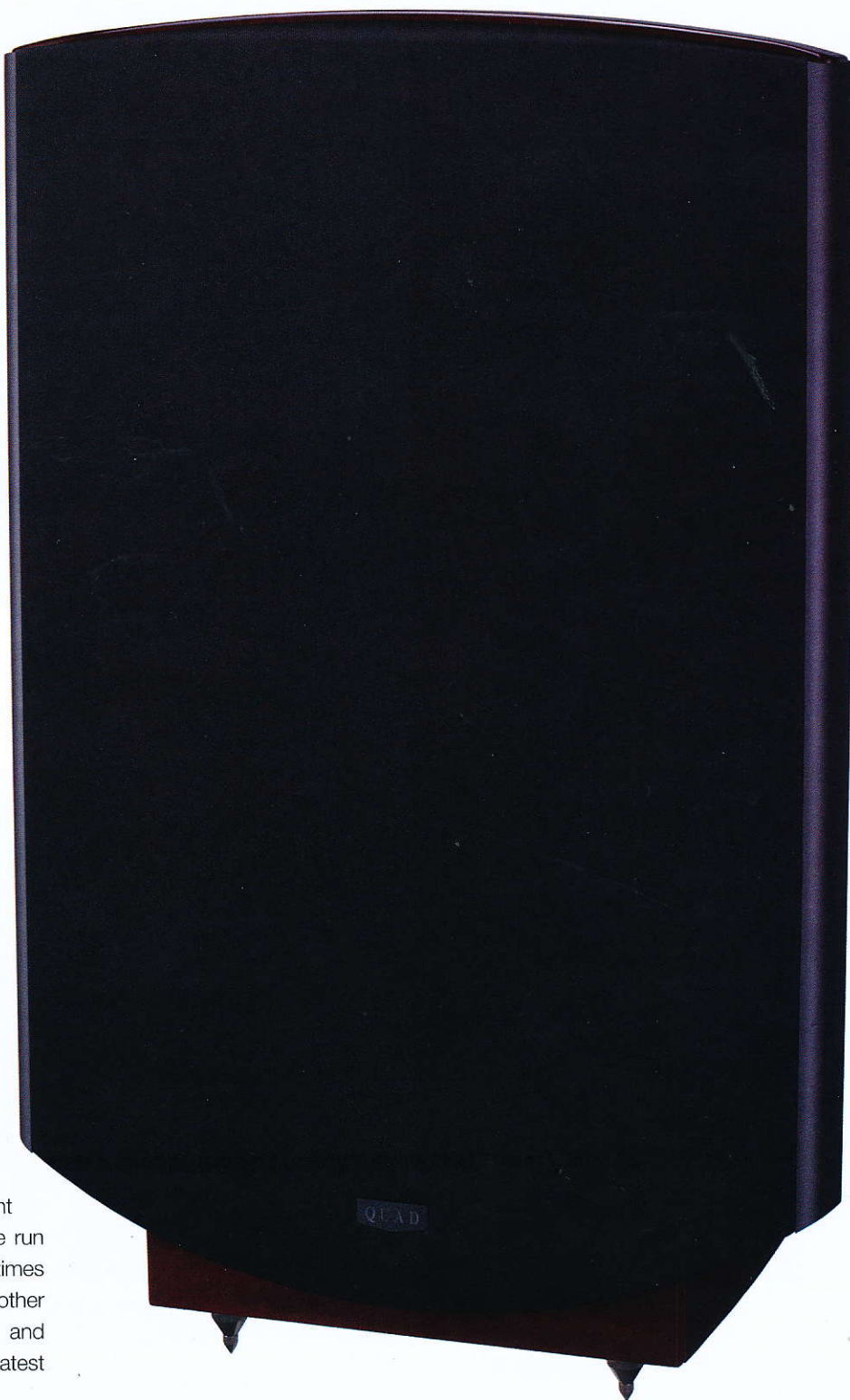
EQUIPMENT REVIEW

QUAD ESL 2812

by Chris Thomas

After much dropping of hints I was offered the chance to spend a couple of months living with the latest Quad Electrostatic speaker, the 2812. Many years ago I owned three different pairs of the original ESL 57s over a relatively short period of time. I kept buying them, selling them and missing them before repeating the cycle. In those days I was driving them either by Quad or Naim amplification and I have nothing but the warmest memories of my time spent in their company. When it came time to finally move on I did, but often with a fond look over my shoulder at what I had lost. The stream of conventional speakers that followed never offered across the board improvements, although I hardly missed the invisible bass or the irritating beaming of the high frequencies that meant only one person could ever really enjoy their full musical picture. Back then it was the sheer insight through clarity that hooked me.

The China-based firm International Audio Group acquired Quad in 1997 and (thankfully) continued the development of the ESL. Each new version seems aimed at better mitigating the traditional shortcomings of the brilliant original design. It is clear that there have been few loudspeakers that polarise opinions in quite the same way as the Quads. After a solid eight weeks with the 2812, my reactions have run the gamut from finding the speakers at times less impressive than I expected, but at other moments sitting for a listening session and thinking the 2812s are one of the greatest speakers I have ever heard. ►



► The power supply has undergone big advances with improved quality components as have the panels themselves. There are four panels in the 2812 and six in the 2912, and the two inner panels that handle the high frequencies comprise of concentric circles of electrodes, arranged in rings that give these modern Quads far better HF dispersion. The electronics incorporate a delay circuit that enables the speaker to produce an almost perfectly phase-coherent, quasi-spherical wavefront.

The whole physical integrity of the speaker has been upgraded considerably. Structurally the panels are located within a set of aluminium frames and these are coupled to steel supporting units and braced by an adjustable tension rod to the base. Although I never had the opportunity to listen to the 2812's immediate predecessors I am told that these structural and electronic upgrades have made a significant improvement and added more consistency to their performance.

The 2812 is, by common consent and along with its larger brother 2912, certainly the best Quad electrostatic to date. It still offers the same magnifying glass to the rest of the system, particularly the driving amplifier, and it remains somewhat tricky to accommodate unless space is not an issue. That said, I do think it is easy to overstate its installation demands in comparison to other high-end designs, all of which require specific attention to individual installation. Every review always cites them as being great, but somehow difficult to live with and compromised. They have always been a kind of niche product really, a speaker for the very few whose requirements perfectly dovetail with the Quads strengths. I totally get that though. They do have amazing qualities that are eminently desirable, but do their shortcomings limit their suitability to the relatively few? The few would be those that have the room for them, the equipment to drive them, don't listen at high levels, enjoy small scale acoustic music almost exclusively, and don't want much in the way of bass. Well, yes, I can see certainly see that there is some truth in these points, but it also seems to me that they have been exaggerated somewhat with the Quads becoming marginalised as a result. After having lived with them for a while I have grown to think of them quite differently and would again point out that just about every speaker has its own limitations.

These days there are many amplifiers that can quite happily deal with the driving aspect though if ever there was a case for a home demonstration, these Quads make it with some force. I used the 25 Wpc Vitus SIA-025 class A integrated amplifier (an amp some might find marginal for the low-to-medium sensitivity Quads, but that was fine for me), plus the David Berning Pre One and Quadrature Z power amplifiers. These OTL devices proved absolutely stunning with the Quads and are probably close to the ideal amplifier as the transformer that one finds conventionally at the output of most tube amplifiers is located in the Quads themselves. To be able to experience the Bernings in full voice with this configuration was truly memorable. You want musical tension and real eloquence of expression? Check this combination out!

The thing about the Quads is that they sound so very, very different to any moving-coil speaker you will have heard and it takes a period of readjustment to get used to that. This is not so much in their pure musical abilities but rather in the way they actually make the sound. The shape of the instrumentation is quite, quite different. Down through the bass there is no tight, pistonic driving

"The 2812 is, by common consent and along with its larger brother 2912, certainly the best Quad electrostatic to date. It still offers the same magnifying glass to the rest of the system, particularly the driving amplifier, and it remains somewhat tricky to accommodate unless space is not an issue."

of the air over a relatively small surface like that of a conventional bass driver. The Quads can make even the best speakers sound compressed at the leading edges of low-frequency notes. Presumably because the Mylar membrane is so incredibly light, the bass just seems to happen with no aural message of its impending arrival and no trace after it has gone. The way that acoustic instruments (especially) start and stop through the Quads is also very different and can be quite beautiful once you have got used to it. The texture, rise time, note shape, and pure impact clarity of a piano, for instance, is only enhanced by the ease with which they can swing and control a transient without drama or any detectable squeezing or compressive side-effects. They hardly sacrifice tonality either although the lack of colouration can leave them sounding somewhat cool and even dry to anyone not used to them. They never sound harsh. But you soon get used to that, as you grow more and more comfortable with the way the music is presented. Even very expensive and highly regarded speaker designs can seem artificial at the leading edges of notes as they compress the natural envelopes of the instruments being reproduced. Similarly, the ►

► squeezed and slightly sour harmonics of conventional speakers are thrown into sharp relief by the Quads seeming unflappability when the playing energies grow.

The Quads don't have the broad range of dynamic expression that some conventional speakers do, and they simply cannot compete when it comes to sheer air-moving power and strength. Where they are also less engaging is in the way they portray the front-to-back depth of the recording where they sound a little too self-contained and they rarely produce soundstages whose breadth extends beyond the outer edges of the speakers. This can be down to placement, though, and there are a number of dos and don'ts that I discovered when I installed them in my 'smaller than ideal' listening room.

The 2812s come with solid spiked feet that still leave the speakers quite close to the floor and I was constantly bothered by a bass reflection that gave the speakers a rather irritating bloom at certain frequencies. I experimented with different footings that I had, and found that a set of Stillpoints Ultra SS screwed directly into the base of the Quads with an adaptive thread fixing certainly cleaned things up. But, as an experiment, I sat each speaker on an individual shelf level from an Atacama bamboo rack. This raised them a further few inches from the floor. Now, I don't claim this is a particularly attractive way to mount the speakers but it really does help clean that bass up and gives it a much better shape, particularly on any instrumentation with a fast, sharp leading edge. If I owned a pair of Quads I would design a method to lift them away from that first reflection. You may not cure the problem, but reducing it helps with the shape of the bass quite a lot and this is felt throughout the bandwidth. ►



Then there is the actual positioning and there is much to be both gained and lost here. Put simply, listeners will want to give the Quads as much free air as they can. Remember that the Quads generate as much energy from their rear as they do their front and that this is out of phase too. Rear walls, unless you have a huge room, are going to be a serious consideration and will make or break the ultimate success of the installation. I could only really manage a metre between the back wall and the speaker and even after experimenting with actual placement (easy on a wooden floor with the Ultras fitted) I could hear music generated from the rear bouncing about in the corner, blurring tempos and rhythms way too much. Listening to the energy levels happening back there was pretty scary. The close reflection of the wall was pushing the inverse phase signal back into the room and biting hard into the clarity of the music and taking a serious toll on articulation as well.

I decided that I needed some rear absorption and tried everything I had to hand that could provide some, with varying degrees of success. I settled on some sound panels usually used to calm listening room airflow. But what a worthwhile difference they made. With these in place the Quads moved into cleaner focus and the articulation became quite stunning, by any standards. With the clarity came dynamic freedom and the noise levels just fell away. Now there was much more focussed musical tension and a real sense of anticipation in the music and the Quad's really dramatic qualities just poured out of them in a beautifully integrated and seamless flow of rich, vivid musical detail. Unless you have plenty of room behind the speakers, if you love what the Quads do, you are going to need to address their rear wave reflections. I would suggest you start with some cushions to get a feel for how rear wave absorption affects the sound and then take it from there.

So, if it takes time to feel at home with the Quads, the rewards are certainly there waiting. Give them an acoustic instrument to deal with and a good recording to get their teeth into and I can guarantee they will show you a new way of looking at recorded sound. The leading edge detail is, as I said, quite amazing, but what really captures the imagination is the way the whole harmonic structure of each instrument is laid so bare. A solo piano, although a mighty difficult instrument to reproduce in a listening room, has a scale and a structure that is only enhanced by the beautiful relationship between the notes. Chords struck with finesse or venom are shown with not only sweet clarity but also with superb shape and separation. On small-scale classical works, such as string quartets the Quads are in their element and let you follow every individual instrument and musical thread with great ease. Likewise with vocals. What they don't have is the ability to throw the voice into the room and to hold it isolated in space before your face in the way that a speaker like the recently-reviewed Estelon XC (Issue 110) does. Both speakers tell the same story, but in very different ways.

Whoever said that the Quads are like having a giant set of headphones in the room with you is essentially right. It is impossible not to be mightily impressed with so many aspects of their performance and I have little doubt that most people will have several musical revelations during their time with them. There are so many things they can show you about an instrument that are wonderful. There are also times when they can seem rather flat and



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Floor standing Electrostatic panel loudspeaker

Panels: Four in each

Sensitivity: 86dB

Max. Power: 200 watts

Impedance: 8 ohms nominal

Dimensions: 107x69x38cm (HxWxD)

Price: £6499 a pair

Manufacturer: IAG, China

UK Sales URL: Quad-hifi.co.uk

UK Sales Tel: 01480 452561

uninspiring and never quite "let go" like a quality conventional speaker can and in this sense they are quite conservative (though this conservative quality is also part of their appeal). I think every audiophile should try a pair of electrostatics on their musical journey. Some will stop at that station, as the Quads, once heard, may spoil listeners for conventional speakers ever afterward.

Quad electrostatics have always been so different and so musically intriguing that they must be experienced – a tradition that continues with the 2812. Given their upsides and build quality, I must say these speakers are also very reasonably priced. +