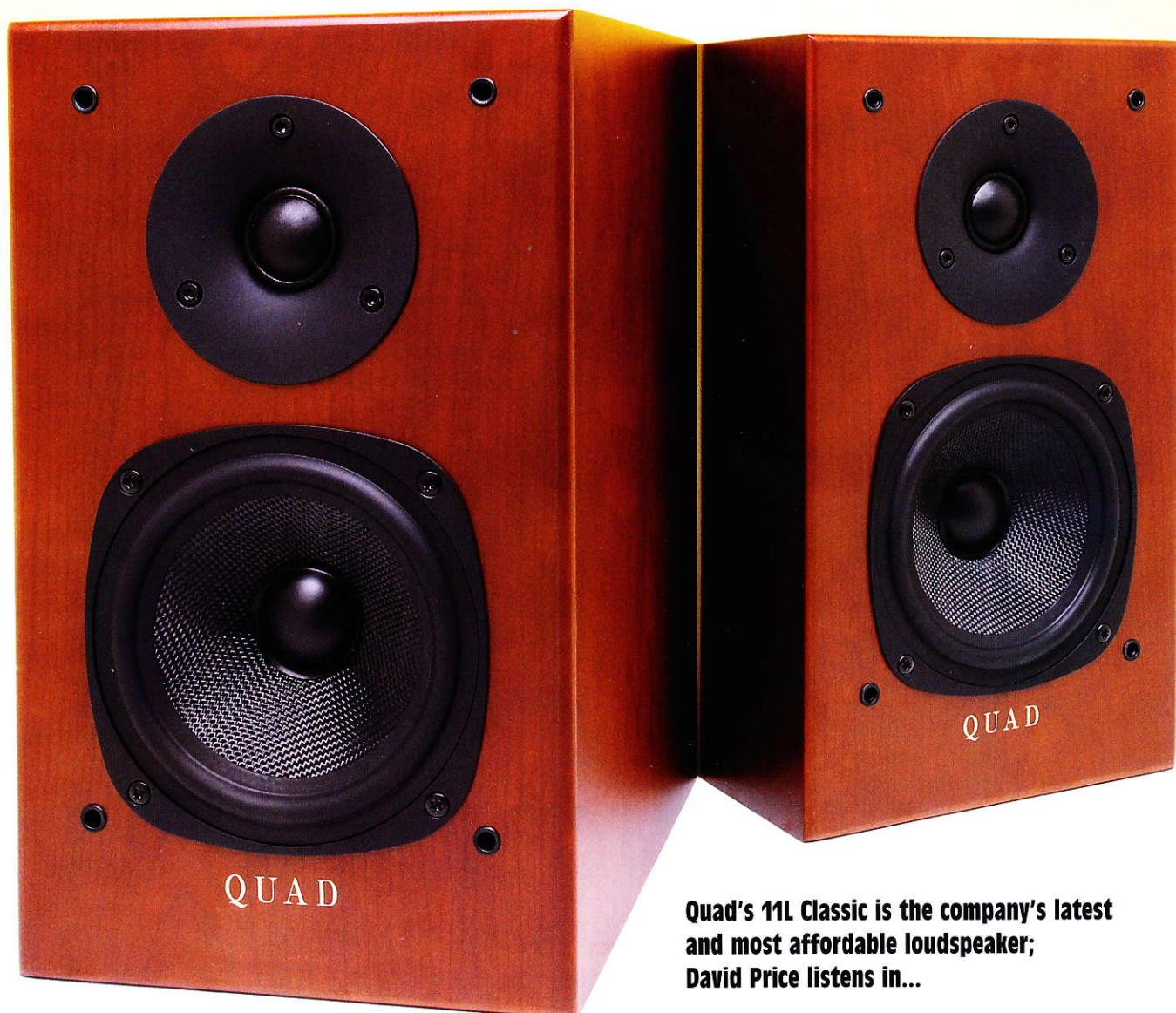




Quad's 11L Classic is the company's latest and most affordable loudspeaker; David Price listens in...

Four Real

The original Quad 11L loudspeaker was radical; not in itself, but as a concept for the company. At the time of its launch in 2002, the phrase 'Quads' was virtually synonymous with electrostatic loudspeakers (the ESL-57, 63 or 988/989). If you had Quad speakers, well you had large panel shaped objects that plugged into the mains! For the company to put its name to an utterly conventional box that owed absolutely nothing to previous loudspeakers was a bold gambit, and I'm sure a few diehard Quad traditionalists privately did not wish it to succeed...

Well, the rest as they say is

history; the speaker made its very own niche as a quality pair of £350 standmounters, being distinctive for both its clean, open and largely viceless sound and, unexpectedly, its superlative finish. Here was a budget speaker that was finished to a standard you'd expect of a product at least ten times its price; its piano lacquer black was sublime.

Reviewed here is the newest, third generation of the 11L. It follows the 11L2 which in turn was a tweaked version of the original, and has identical cabinet dimensions of 310x190x243mm (giving a volume of 11 litres, geddit?) but brings a wider variety of finishes including a cheaper

non-lacquered cherry or rosewood veneer (tested here) for £330, making it £50 less than the cherry or piano black lacquered veneer. The company says it's been extensively revised on the inside, too...

The mid/bass unit gets an uprated motor system for its 125mm Kevlar cone; this material is a favourite of many modern manufacturers for its relative lightness and stiffness. Partnering this is the uprated 25mm fabric dome tweeter, with a shallow horn or 'waveguide' housing to control dispersion. The crossover, which does the business at 2.2kHz, has also been upgraded with superior component mounting. Quad

say, with each section placed on its own printed circuit board within the speaker cabinet. Top-quality components are used throughout, including precision-wound inductors, laminated silicon-iron cores for the bass coils and polypropylene capacitors in the signal path.

The cabinet uses a combination of two different wood materials to reduce resonance; high density chipboard and fibre board are laminated together. Inside, specially chosen long-hair acoustic absorbent lining goes on the interior cabinet walls. Twin reflex ports round the back are used, giving more benevolent load characteristics ideal for the sort of system (and room) these are likely to be used in; sensitivity is quoted at 87dB/m [see MEASURED PERFORMANCE]. The wood veneers outside are said to be specially chosen for their grain structure, then laid and polished by hand, and then lacquered as applicable.

SOUND QUALITY

Having spent far more time than is healthy with high end speakers of late, it was fascinating to hear the Quads. I remember the originals, and their successors, and the active versions too, very well – and can report that relatively little is different. It's not as if the company has radically reworked their entry level mini-monitor, but there is certainly a subtle smoothing out of the IIL, and on the whole it comes over as being more polished; impressive given that it was famous for its polish all along. Saint Etienne's 'Hug My Soul' is a bouncy slice of nineties electropop, but it can sound quite poorly recorded on lesser loudspeakers. I was impressed that the Quads gave it a serious airing; they came over as more animated than I remember their predecessors, although they're not exactly party blasters. But allied to this was a refinement simply not expected from a £300 speaker, which is in so very many instances a symphony of booms and squawks and crashes.

I found the bass to be surprisingly tuneful; there's little sense of plodding or one-noting; it's not the world's most extended as you'd expect but it's not been engineered to boom or boof around 90Hz, as per so many classic small Mission designs for example, to add weight and give the illusion of being something bigger than it really is. As such, it follows bass notes going up and down the scale faithfully, letting you concentrate on the tune just as much as the rhythm. It's good at the latter too; stopping and starting as well as can be expected from a budget open box design. The result is a firm and faithful underpinning of what goes on further up the scale.

Although in absolute terms

of omission rather than addition; you get a soft, feathery hi hat sound that doesn't stand out or ever descend into spikiness, yet it's fairly open and atmospheric too. It's nicely balanced into the smoothish midband, and whilst it doesn't quite extend up to where the angels live, the IIL gives the sense that it's 'all of a piece'; you're not listening to the sound of two drive units fighting it out for the right to call the cabinet their own. Again, in ultimate terms the treble lacks low level detail and atmosphere, but it's plenty good enough to signpost difference between the silky cymbal work on 'Reaper' and the harder, more metallic strains of 'New Gold Dream' by Simple Minds.

Classical music is of course the great leveller of any loudspeaker and the Quad took Pamela Thorby's soprano recorder on Linn Records' 'Venice Collection' (The Palladian Ensemble) surprisingly easily in its stride. Recorders are naturally bright and thus sometimes unlistenable even on some fairly pricey loudspeakers, but the IIL sounded composed. It managed to convey the instrument's natural resonances, without exacerbating them. Ditto its reproduction of cello, which was most satisfying

"there was a refinement simply not expected from a £300 loudspeaker..."

a little nasal and opaque, by the standards of the price point the Quad IIL has an excellent midband. Again, it's clean and open, with more resolution of lower level detail than you'd expect; that means the timbre of instruments comes out more than it otherwise might. 808 State's 'Azura' is a powerful techno track with a massive thumping analogue bass synth; as well as giving a deep and powerful rendition it also carried its characteristic sound, dripping with harmonics, in a way I hadn't expected. Ditto its rendering of singer Louise Rhodes' voice, which was icily clear and subtle in its inflection; there was no hint of peakiness or rough edges to spoil my enjoyment of the track. The speaker images well too; I wouldn't quite put it in Eclipse TD712 territory I grant you, but it projected images confidently and managed to give a great 'out of the box' experience.

Blue Oyster Cult's 'Don't Fear the Reaper' showed the Quad's rather lovely (for a budget design) treble. Its tweeter commits the sins

tonally, sounding vibrant and full bodied. The track flowed gracefully, the Quads being capable carriers of rhythm, if not necessarily born to rock! Overall this loudspeaker came across with only very few weaknesses, and certainly there were no flaws at the price which isn't something that can be said of every sub £400 speaker.



DP: Who were you designing the Quad 11L Classics for?

PC: The customer will be after a realistic sound that reveals the exact portrayal of instruments and vocals and allows them to dig deep into the performance. For this Classic edition we felt we could go further by re-evaluating the 11L design to tweak the sound and make this a classic mini-monitor in the LS3/5A tradition. Accordingly the bass performance and presence of the midrange were balanced to enable great insight into the music. This speaker draws you in to the musical performance rather than throwing it at you.

DP: What sort of drivers were used, and why?

PC: As per the last generation, a self-damping impregnated Kevlar lattice weave is used for the bass-midrange unit and a fine polyester woven fabric dome for the treble. However the motor system of the bass driver was redesigned to lower distortion whilst the dust cap and surround were modified to improve clarity in the midband and smooth the response through the crossover region. For the treble unit we designed a new waveguide which improves the upper midrange output and optimises its dispersion to marry with the bass unit through the crossover region.

DP: What type of crossover was employed?

PC: Linkwitz-Riley electrical filters were chosen for the crossover which was extensively evaluated through iteration between measurement, crossover simulation and listening tests. We went through thirty two variations before we were satisfied! In terms of construction we use high performance Polypropylene capacitors in the signal path and low loss laminated silicon-iron core inductors for the bass section. The crossover itself is split into two PCBs to remove interaction between the bass and treble components

and to allow an optimal component layout. Bi-wiring really benefits this speaker. We design and make our own internal cables for the 11L from high purity copper.

DP: How did you arrive at the cabinet design?

PC: Box construction was evaluated carefully to reduce panel resonance. The final choice was a combination of MDF and particle board, the relative thicknesses chosen to lower the audibility of panel resonance as well as block the transmission of the sound from the inside of the cabinet. The walls were optimally braced to control flexure at low frequencies. It is always difficult to get a quart out of a pint pot. Thankfully, these days we can simulate the speaker and crossover performance using advanced software and this allows us to optimise the physical and electrical characteristics to achieve a desired result in a way that would normally take years. Similarly we constructed a virtual crossover which allowed us to balance the requirements of minimum phase and a smooth transition between the drive units as well as ensure a good off-axis response. This gave us a good starting point from which we only needed to fine tune using extensive listening tests.

DP: Is there any one aspect of the design you're particularly pleased with?

PC: The design of the speaker should be viewed as a whole; the components work together to produce a sum greater than the performance of any one part. But I am particularly pleased that the 11L Classic sounds much bigger than its size would lead you to believe. It fits the Quad tradition of an accurate, natural and realistic sounding transducer. In addition it is musically dynamic and revealing, seducing the listener with its performance and creating that all important emotional connection with the music and the performers. It's a speaker to admire the longer you listen to it.



Quad's Peter Comeau

REFERENCE SYSTEM:

Marantz TT-1000 turntable
Whest PS.30 RDT SE phono stage
Musical Fidelity AMS35i integrated amplifier
Yamaha NS1000M loudspeakers
Q Acoustics 2010 loudspeakers

CONCLUSION

It's a strange conundrum; on one hand the Quad brand was often derided as 'pipe and slippers hi-fi', purveyors of reassuringly well made, solid and dependable quality audio equipment for the middle classes; on the other the electrostatics were – and still are – some of the most radical loudspeakers ever made. In the 11L we see more of the former than the latter; if you want left-field from Quad then it's the high end speakers you have to buy. These small boxes are meticulously well engineered to give a neutral, smooth sound via utterly conventional means.

They sound excellent, albeit in a way that might not actually chime so well with their intended market. At this price, people often want a bit of character, a speaker with 'attitude', but the 11Ls are all about getting the job done without drawing attention to themselves. For me, that's precisely what a good budget speaker should do, so it can be kept as people upgrade the rest of their ancillaries, showing each step up without getting in the way. But that won't be everyone's idea of a good time at £300 which is a shame because it's not for loudspeakers to have character, it's the musicians that play through them. A great, grown up loudspeaker at a very teenage price!

VERDICT

Refinement and poise beyond their price allied to superb finish, and there's nothing more you could reasonably ask of these speakers.

QUAD 11L CLASSIC £329.95

Quad Electroacoustics

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www.quad-hifi.co.uk

FOR

- gentle, sophisticated sound
- pleasingly musical
- compact size
- superb finish

AGAINST

- headbangers don't apply!

MEASURED PERFORMANCE

Our frequency response analysis clearly shows the Quad 11L Classic is unusually smooth and flat in frequency response. This means it will sound both tonally balanced and free from colour. Such loudspeakers are also low on 'character' though; a neutral performer as this will disappear acoustically and not make itself known. The sharp treble peak diminishes off axis and with the Quads facing straight down a room they measure flat in the listening position, around 30 degrees off axis.

Bass rolls down below 150Hz then descends sharply at 70Hz. However, the ports provide strong output around 55Hz and our impedance trace show they provide good bass unit damping too, so the little Quad is likely to have quite obvious and well controlled bass.

Sensitivity was high at 87.5dB, considering the small cabinet size. Impedance measured 6 Ohms with pink noise – a music like signal – but the bass unit is 4 Ohms and minima are 4 Ohms as a result. The load is fairly resistive, a good sign as amplifier matching goes.

The small Quad 11L Classics

are supremely accurate and well engineered. This is a loudspeaker for those who want the unembellished truth, a classic Quad quality. NK

FREQUENCY RESPONSE



Green - driver output

Red - port output

IMPEDANCE

