

QUAD ESL-2805 LOUDSPEAKER

THE ABSOLUTE SOUND

Jim Hannon Nov 22nd, 2008



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 macro dynamics, 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.

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, sound staging, 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 Appassionato sonata [Harmonia Mundi], but at somewhat higher volume levels than with the 63 or Crosby. Micro dynamics 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 macro dynamics 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 Lyrita recordings. The images are rock-solid and particularly on the Lyritas, 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 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 head banger, 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.