

Quad ESL 989 Electrostatic Loudspeaker

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Rip Van Winkle would have owned Quad loudspeakers. Awakening after a 20 year nap, he would find that while much has changed some things have not. He would not be shopping for new Quads since the ones he went to sleep with are still the current models. Has there ever been a speaker manufacturer who in its more than 40 year history has introduced, until now, only two models? Think back to the late 50s (some of us were alive then) and the introduction of the first Quad speaker which came to be known as the ESL-57. At a stroke, every other loudspeaker on the market sounded hopelessly coloured and distorted (only a slight exaggeration). I remember my first jaw-dropping listening experience to this strange looking panel and though I could not afford a pair, I knew that one day they would be my speakers of choice. And once you have owned Quads, though you may move on to other speakers, there is always a lingering fondness, a lacuna in one's listening experiences that no other speaker can always adequately fill. Some people are still so pleased with that original ESL-57 that there is still a small but persistent demand for it (and it's being manufactured in limited quantities by, I believe, a German company).

Now there is a group (rather large, I think, and including our esteemed editor) who have never been particularly attracted to electrostatics. For this group, they do a few things very well, but their flaws and shortcomings put them out of court as speakers to live with long term. The original ESL-57 was so good for its time that it forced dynamic speaker manufacturers to play catch up, which they have done in the intervening 40 years with a great deal of success. I would argue that their success is shown in how much more closely they approach the sound of a good panel speaker than their hoary ancestors.

In fact, it wasn't until 1981 that Quad announced a new and improved speaker, the ESL-63. There are a few reactionary Quadaphiles who insisted that the '63 was in fact inferior to the '57, having sacrificed the "purity" of the '57 to the commercial pressures to produce an electrostatic that was not so prone to breakdown. The truth was that in almost every way the new '63 (much the shape of the old one) was a better speaker than the original model. Again, this proved to be long-lived and was my speaker of choice (with Gradient subwoofer) for many years.

The original company has in the last few years been sold (more than once I believe) and finally was acquired by a British company (IAG) who promised new and improved Quad speakers. This has not proved an easy task, apparently, and I (and others) had given up hope of seeing another Quad in our lifetime. Then came an announcement of not one but two new speakers including a larger Quad with greater bass extension. And then nothing - amid rumours that IAG was in financial trouble, couldn't produce the speaker, etc, etc.

At long last, the two new speakers, designated the 988 and (larger) 989 appeared, and as the registered Quad nut at AIG, I insisted on reviewing them (in this case only the bigger 989). The 988

looks much like the '63 while the 989 looks like a stretched '63 with added height, the latter to address the problem- inherent in this design- of bass extension. For the last decade I have been more or less happily living with the '63 and Gradient subwoofer. I say more or less, since while the sub definitely added something (bass punch), something was also lost, the lower midrange upper bass purity being somewhat compromised. Still, I could live with this arrangement, although from time to time I would unhook the Gradients and listen to the Quads full range. As above, something gained, something lost. Anyone adding a subwoofer to ESL's has to be extremely careful, since matching a lightning fast thin diaphragm to a comparatively ponderous dynamic driver could be a recipe for disaster.

Even the Gradient, which was expressly designed for the '63, had problems. It took two 12" drivers in each enclosure operating, like the Quads, in a dipole fashion, which necessitated tremendous EQing of the drivers with attendant electronics, cabling, amplifiers and so on. All that wasn't ideal, because what I really wanted was a larger full range, crossover-less Quad. (I could, of course, have bought large Sound Labs or other large panels, but that was for me, not an option).

I will not dwell on the shortcomings of previous Quad models, except to say that while some problems have been overcome, some have not. The manufacturer claims that "more than 90% of the internal components have been re-designed, upgraded, or modified." "I have no way to verify this, since only a lunatic would open the speaker to have a look inside, and as we know there are no lunatic audiophiles. (Oh, no, of course not!! Ed)

The new 989 is certainly not a small speaker, measuring 1335mm X 670mm X 185mm. (approx. 53" X 26" X 7"). It is not what I would describe as a particularly attractive looking speaker, with a large expanse of black grille cloth staring you in the face. I am not particularly bothered by this, but some dynamic speakers, with their superb wood working are undeniably more attractive. This is unavoidable, since we are dealing with a large panel that must be covered by a grille cloth (lunatics again).

Though the 989 has two more bass panels than the 988 it is still a crossover-less design. This is desirable since there is no crossover that does not introduce some problems, however slight. Here as elsewhere in the audio chain, simplicity is to be preferred. If it's not there it can't cause problems. All electronics have sonic signature and in many cases introduce deleterious effects in the signal path. In fact, most tweaks, especially ones that work by magic and cannot be explained, are in fact degrading the signal. Since the Quads are doublets or dipole in their radiation patterns they are somewhat easier to place in a room than dynamic speakers, since they energize the room in a much more uniform pattern. Also, since the dispersion is that of a figure 8 there is a null point at the sides of the speaker allowing it to be sited close to side walls, or as the booklet so elegantly puts it, "Close proximity to the side walls is not detrimental to performance. Simple geometry will show that if the ESL loudspeaker is placed at an angle to the side wall, there will be no audible reflection at the listening position."

For some reason ESL speakers have gained a reputation as being very finicky and difficult to place. In fact, quite the opposite is true. They are easier to position than dynamic speakers, provided one cardinal rule is followed: they must be at a minimum 2 feet (3 or more is better) from the rear wall of the listening room. Obviously putting them in corners (as they are in one picture in the brochure) or behind furniture is to be avoided. However, as with any speaker, experimentation is in order.

Finally, what do they sound like? In a word - superb. The bass extension over the '63 is noticeable and very welcome, and the bass is more coherent, focused and integrated, with excellent pitch definition. There is still, however, little very deep bass, and this is simply to some extent a function of the size of the panels. 20kHz bass may be attainable by a huge Sound Lab ESL for example, but that introduces problems of its own, not the least of which is the necessity for a huge room. It is the purity of the Quad bass that is remarkable, its speed and quick transient response giving it a distinct edge over most dynamic drivers. Once heard, the 989 bass never sounds lean or thin, and only

someone who loves thumpy one-note bass would be disappointed. Since there is no crossover, there is no discontinuity between bass and higher frequencies. I am perfectly happy with the bass on offer here (as I was not with the '63) and would not consider a subwoofer.

One of the surprising attributes of the new Quad was the quite evident extension in the upper frequencies, as well as the bass. The treble (one of the ESL's strong points) seems to reach higher with the same smoothness one has become accustomed to. Lightning fast transients against a black silent background are almost spooky in their realism. Tiny details within the fabric of the recording are more noticeable, and along with the improved bass, recordings seem more of a piece, more integrated and hence more realistic. This has partly to do with another unexpected improvement, that of dynamic gradations. The specificity of sounds from very faint to very loud is dramatically improved, with each instrument properly sited within the context of the orchestral panoply, thus separating instruments more clearly one from another. This is something that very few loudspeakers get right, but once heard becomes addictive. Loudspeakers that only blare or whisper (and there are many of those) are simply in the long run, tiring to listen to. This means of course that the 989 will play loud - plenty loud (again, head-bangers look elsewhere). This does not mean using a mega watt mega buck amplifier. The speaker will only accept an input voltage up to about 40V before shutting itself down. This translates into approximately 150 Watts per channel. So if you own a 200 watt amp the electronic circuits in the speaker will trip before the amp's full output is used. I used a Bryston 3B-ST with excellent results: there is a fine balancing act here between loudspeaker efficiency (down slightly on the '63) and amp output that allows the Quads to sound dynamically alive.

As with the '63, the 989 uses a system of concentric rings fed by a series of delay lines (all that wire) to more adequately represent the desirable point source radiation. While imaging is good, there are many dynamic speakers that do this trick better. Imaging, however comes well down on my list of priorities. I have some small inexpensive speakers that image fantastically- So what! A french horn still doesn't sound like a french horn. I don't mean to suggest that imaging is unimportant and the Quad soundstage is vague and directionless. They image as well as most speakers, but I would not describe it as one of the Quad's main strengths. Spaciousness, here as in the concert hall, is what is to be desired (imaging in the concert hall is entirely dependent on where you sit), and suffice it to say that Quads have as large and spacious a presentation as any speaker I have heard. Partly this is due to the dipole nature of the speaker with images appearing to begin slightly behind the plane of the speaker and extending far back (one reason not to crowd the Quads at the rear).

Quads in the past have had a somewhat spotty record as far as reliability goes, and for most people this is not a minor point. The manufacturer asserts that new speakers are far more rugged and less likely to break down than past models. The new speaker appears to have more structural integrity, but only time will tell.

As to price, there is little to say except that they have become quite expensive, in excess of \$13,000. You can buy a cheap car for that amount. But what would you rather have - great speakers or a nasty little car? Keep in mind also that these are single wire speakers - no bi-amping or bi-wiring is possible. This will save a considerable amount of cash as well as will the desirability of using a good moderately priced amplifier. In this context, the price does not appear so onerous.

Finally, to sum up. What we have is a new Quad speaker with a whole host of minor improvements and one major improvement: the bass. Hopefully it's more reliable but, then, it's also more expensive. If you like the Quad sound (not everyone does) you will agree that, while still bearing the family sonic resemblance, the 989s are the best speakers ever manufactured by this venerable company.

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www.audio-ideas.com/reviews/loudspeakers/quad989.html