Quad ESL-988 Loudspeaker: Peter Walker's Masterpiece Redivivus

It would be a shame if the typical audiophile assumption that "bigger is louder is better" were to keep the Quad ESL-988 speaker in the shadow of its bigger, newer brother, the ESL-989. Overall, the smaller speaker is just as good, better in a couple of key areas (decisively in one), not in others. In the flurry of outrage in last issue's letters column over Robert E. Greene's highly critical reception to the 989, our correspondents launched spirited defenses of Peter Walker, apparently forgetting one crucial fact: Whatever its virtues, the 989 is *not* a Peter Walker design. It is *based on* a Peter Walker design.

But the 988, ah, that's a different story. For some readers this can be a one-sentence review: Peter Walker's masterpiece, the ESL-63, returns in the 988 in all its legendary glory. In some respects, it is improved. REG informs me that he cannot find measurable evidence of the tiny 3 to 4 kHz peak that gave the 63 a little pizzazz in the upper midrange/lower highs; nor can my ears, which also tell me that bass response may go a few cycles lower. Like the 989, the 988 benefits not only from stronger, more rigid construction but also from superior internal wiring, Mylar, transformers, and other parts and materials (see my 989 review, Issue 126). Walker seems to have believed it was enough for parts to meet specification and be durable. When asked what special qualities he looked for in wire, he is said to have replied that it is desirable if it passes current. Heresy these days when a pair of interconnects can cost more than a budget system.

We should recall, however, that for all the alleged flimsiness of the 63's construction and its often routine parts, it achieved a level of sample-to-sample uniformity that was extraordinary and still has not been equaled by any other speaker manufactured in large quantities. No doubt a completely hand-made, hand-tested speaker could achieve equal uniformity; but Walker's company did it day after month after year, thousands of times.

Inasmuch as the 63 has been an industry reference-standard since its introduction 20 years ago, I see no reason to describe the sound of 988 in detail. Throughout its usable range and within its limits, the 988 is the lowest distorting, lowest coloration, most neutral, most open, most linear, and most coherent loudspeaker made. It is also among the most transparent, best-imaging, highest-resolution, most accurate, and most detailed. When reproducing music, it does a disappearing act that still leaves the competition envious. Moreover, the 63 was one of those rare speakers (the ESL-57 and the Spendor BC-1 and SP1/2 are among the few others) that people kept once they bought them, not just for a long time, but apparently for good. And not just audiophiles; I've heard about industry professionals, including other manufacturers, keeping Quads in the back room (or using them at home), just to remind themselves of what is possible in loudspeaker performance. The same may well become true of the 988 once it becomes widely known.

The limitations consist mainly in deep-bass response of limited amplitude and an inability to play extremely loud. Notice that I said deep bass of limited amplitude. In fact, using warble tones, I can get the 988s, like the 63s before them, to produce audible bass down into the upper 20s, and sometimes they will do so to room-filling, though not room-shaking, levels. The same is true with piano, organ, double-basses, and all sorts of percussion both common and exotic.

The 988s will also play, in my moderately large room (8 x 15 x 22.5), cleanly and with more than enough volume to satisfy all but a tiny fraction of my LPs and CDs, mostly the ridiculous stuff, like Reference Recordings's preposterous *Pomp and Pipes*. (Believe it or not, they will rattle the windows a little at the opening of *Dark Side of the Moon*.) Fortunately, the art of powered subwoofers has so advanced since the 63 was introduced that these limitations are easily solved, and not at prohibitive cost.

Nor does the 988 lack warmth, provided the speakers are used as Walker intended. This means *on the floor*. When the 63 first appeared, many audiophiles in the US complained about a lack of image height.[1] I even remember a TAS writer – whom I'll not name – declaring with a pomposity bordering on radiance something to the effect of "on the floor they sound like hell, off the floor they look like hell." Complete rubbish. Nonetheless, Walker capitulated to the American marketplace and made a stand that raised them about a foot off the floor. The trouble was that this resulted in a number of floor cancellations that sucked out the warmth region (80-200 Hz), which in turn saddled the 63 with an undeserved reputation for sounding thin. The people now at Quad have done their best to prevent this from happening again by outfitting the 988 with a base that will not accept any stand made for the 63, including Quad's own. Instead, small feet screw into the bottom plate to keep the speaker from sitting directly on the floor and allow for an adjustable degree of tilt to facilitate set-up and alignment. Remove the cap, loosen the grill sock from the Velcro, pull it down, and set up the listening triangle so that from the sweet spot you can see your head reflected in the in-most ring of concentric anodes in each speaker.

So positioned, you will hear the most nearly flat frequency-response from about 50 Hz through 10 kHz you are likely to experience this side of correction via DSP devices such as the Sigtech, and there will be no lack of warmth. The response above 10 kHz narrows and slopes a little, but in a way that is musically natural while sacrific-

1 Nothing images better than Quads, but on the floor, the 988, like the 63, does not project singers to life proportions. I don't care much about this, and I don't care about it at all in the presence of reproduction of this purity. But if you do, you are duly advised.

ing almost nothing of accuracy.

Are the 988s, like the 63s before them, dynamic-range limited? For audio-cowboys, perhaps, but not for real music lovers. I grant they will not play as loud in absolute terms as many other speakers. But they have two crucial attributes those speakers lack. One is the ability to play really quietly with virtually no tonal drop-out. Nothing will prepare you for how softly these speakers can play, retaining their unparalleled presence, detail, liveliness, and emotional impact. Almost nothing is in their league when it comes to micro-dynamics: the ability to hear deep into a recording, all those felicitous little details of portamento, intakes of breath, sudden swells and diminuendos, the delicate shimmer of cymbals, tiny inflections of bowing, the lightest of touches on the keyboard, sometimes the very air around instruments.

Then there is their dynamic linearity. The 988s (and the 989s and 63s) have a wonderful ability to go from a quiet passage with all of its subtleties and nuances to a moderate, then to a loud passage with little or no strain or discontinuity; the dynamic contrasts not only close to those in a live venue, but with the character of the sound remaining unchanged apart from the level. Contrast this with dynamic speakers, where distortion increases with level. This means that changes in level don't just sound louder or softer, the musicians themselves sound slightly different (on bad speakers, sometimes markedly so) from one level to another. Not so with Quads, where distortion remains constant until the speakers come close to their limit, at which point they simply stop. Push them further and their protection circuit shuts them down until you reduce the input. (Quad's distortion figures are at the level of those for amplifiers, around a tenth of one percent!)

I've long suspected that many audiophiles associate a certain amount of distortion, however subtle, with high volumes, and that when that distortion isn't there, the music doesn't sound properly loud to them. It's precisely this ability of Quads to play as loud as they do cleanly that, I believe, tempts the head-banging brigade to crank them even louder, which in turn gives them the reputation for not being able to play loud enough. Measure levels at the next orchestral concert you attend (a Radio Shack meter will be sufficient); then locate a pair of Quads, play them loud, and note the readings you get. You'll be surprised how close they come to reproducing natural, unamplified relative levels.[2]

In the meantime, let me reassure all music lovers who may be tempted by these speakers: They will reproduce the timbre and dynamics of an orchestra at natural levels with greater fidelity than just about any speaker I know. If your tastes are mostly from the Baroque through the early Romantics, you will not even need a subwoofer. If your tastes run to large-scale opera and symphonic repertoire from the mid-Romantic period through the Twentieth Century, with its augmented percussion, then a subwoofer will increase your enjoyment (this is true also of most so-called full-range speakers).

I would like to conclude by calling your attention to the Quad's freedom from coloration and its neutrality. This is the one area where they supersede all other speakers known to me, including even the 989s (with their projection in the 5-kHz range). The 988's coloration is so low it's almost creepy. Pity the speaker that you audition after you've been living with a pair of these for a while. Peter Walker himself used the phrase, "Garbage in, garbage out," referring to the ruthless accuracy of his designs. But my experience does not quite jibe with that. I find that I enjoy all of my recordings better over Quads than over more colored, less accurate speakers.

Why? First, I suspect that the frequency-response aberrations in most recordings are not all that difficult to live with so long as they are not exacerbated by corresponding aberrations in speakers and other components. Second, every recording differs in its deviations from neutrality, so we don't get the same colorations all the time. But a speaker's colorations are unchanging and omnipresent, overlaid upon every recording, so there's no escaping them.

With the 988, there's nothing to escape from. The lack of coloration, I believe, is the principal reason people keep their Quads. Though we talk about imaging, soundstaging, transparency, detailing, dynamic range, loudness capability, the whole litany of audiophile categories, in reality most of the time we tire of a speaker (or any other component) because of its colorations, its deviations from neutrality, its overall tonal balance. No nicety of imaging, no dynamic crunch, no bass slam, no amount of detailing can keep such a

2 Another reason Quads have a reputation for not being able to play loud is the way they propagate low-bass frequencies. Being a dipole, they velocity-load a room rather than pressurize it. This yields a bass response more natural but less potent.

speaker from becoming unsatisfying over the long haul, not if live music-making is your reference and you attend concerts with some regularity.

So where does the 988 stand with respect to the 989? Since the 988 is practically identical to the 63 and I compared the 63 and 989 at length in Issue 126, I have little to add on that subject. My suspicion is that many audiophiles will prefer the 989 for its bigger, more authoritative and detailed presentation, its deeper bass penetration, and its ability to play somewhat louder. A record producer friend, a seriously well-trained classical musician who makes some of the most beautiful sounding recordings around, purchased a pair for her home studio. I think this was the right decision. The more analytical high end of the 989 lets her hear what is on her recordings more readily, and her large listening room (twice the size of mine and far better damped) accommodates the 989's response characteristics more sympathetically, allowing the speakers be positioned about eight feet from the back wall and the listener another fifteen feet from the speakers. The reproduction in this room is among the best I have heard.

For myself, I still find that the 989 dominates my smaller room too much in the physical/visual sense. And since this room also mandates listening closer (6-10 feet), I prefer the slightly greater neutrality and lower coloration of the 988. A small aspect of this preference may have to do with the ESL-63's having been my reference for eight years, which means that the even better 988 has the effect of making me feel as if I've come back home again. Both the 989 and the 988 are magnificent achievements. But when I return the 988s it will be in a package much too small for the speakers, but just large enough to carry a check for their remittance.

PAUL SEYDOR

IMPORTER INFORMATION

IAG America

180 Kerry Place, Norwood, Massachusetts 02062
Phone: (877) 440-0888; fax: (781) 440-0333
iagamerica.com
Source: Importer loan
Price: $5,999/pair

SPECS

Sensitivity: 86 dB/2.83V rms
Maximum program input: 40V (peak input: 55V)
Dimensions: 3.7'H x 2.6'W x 1.24'D (at base, including terminals)
Weight: approx. 44 pounds

ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

Electronics by Quad and Marsh; digital by Sony (including SACD), Musical Design, Meridian, BAT, Pioneer (96/24); SME Model 10 table/arm and Sumiko Celebration cartridge; interconnects and cables by Kimber, Musical Design, Hovland

REG COMMENTS

I concur completely with PS's assessment that the Quad 988 is the near reincarnation of the Quad ESL-63. And that means the Quad 988 is a very excellent speaker, indeed. Since I used the 63s as my reference for more than a decade, I could hardly think anything else, given the similarity of the 988 to the classic 63. Actually, the 988 seems to be an improvement in the upper mids, having both measurably and audibly (if memory serves) less "glare" in this region. A slight prominence in the 3-kHz area was almost the 63s' only deviation from neutrality from about 200 Hz to 10 kHz, and with this prominence reduced in the 988, something very like complete tonal correctness is obtained in this broad frequency range.

Defects or problems? The "on-axis" top octave measured with a microphone is a bit irregular, but in listening terms, the controlled "room sound" smoothes this out. Still, the 988 favors the gentle recording. Like the 63s, the 988s are not ideal bass transducers. (The 988s' bass is a bit more prominent and also slightly more resonant, according to my recollection of the 63s. But memory is fallible and I did not have 63s on hand for direct comparison.) I would use a subwoofer, as I did with the 63s. Also, care is needed in set-up to keep the sound from being too lean above subwoofer range. The speakers themselves, as PS says, need to be on the floor to avoid a hole in the 100-200 Hz octave. And in my room, I too needed to be seated on the floor to get the truly flat in-room response of which the speakers are capable. In PS's room, at a greater distance from the speakers, a low couch does the job. The Quad 988s are not huge "room-fillers." Fairly close listening in a room of moderate size will give best results.

But enough caveats: Set up right, these speakers produce, above the deep bass, an uncannily accurate representation of what is on the recording. (The in-room response as I measured it, for instance, was so smooth that the curve over the midrange, broadly conceived, almost looked drawn with a ruler.) After my first serious listening in my own system, my comment to myself was, "Old friends." And so they are, with, as noted, even some improvement, although also with the old restrictions. I once wrote that the 63s plus Gradient subwoofers were one of the finest speaker systems available that was remotely suitable for domestic use. The 988s are similar enough that the Gradient SW-63s probably would work with them, though I hope Gradient will produce a dedicated crossover, at least. In any case, time marches on, but properly subwoofered Quad 988s are still one of the world's best speakers. Readers who were disconcerted by my reaction to the 989s can be assured that it was not some disaffection with Quad in general. In the 988s, the spirit of Quad lives on, and long may it do so.