

review |

# THIS IMMO

Quad has sprung a pleasant surprise on us all with their first, modern in-house designed moving coil loudspeaker, the Quad 11L. Simon Pope reveals all.

Here's a little word equation for you: Quad + loudspeaker = electrostatic. I don't think anyone well immersed in the art of audiophile discussion would argue much with this. It's due to Peter Walker's ground breaking design that Quad made its name with electrostatics, a tradition it maintains with two latest generation models.

But a few diehards out there may well recall that not so long ago (1997 to be precise) there was a Quad 10L. Whilst bearing the name Quad, this moving coil 'square' cabinet 'speaker' was made for the company by Spondor. It was in production for only two years. Although overshadowed by its bigger electrostatic brother, the 'speaker' had a small cult following. Since then, the company, even under its new Chinese ownership has stuck resolutely to its roots with a small range of electrostatic 'speakers' and a valve pre and power combination that could be transported back to the sixties where it would fit in just fine. Not that there's anything wrong with this - the industry needs a bit of retro appeal.

With the universal success of the new Diamond range from Quad's sister company, Wharfedale, it would seem a wasted opportunity not to carry some of the expertise at hand over into the more 'sophisticated' brand of Quad. After all, Wharfedale have perhaps done more than most

to prove that something manufactured and developed in the Peoples Republic of China needn't be tosh. The engineers and R&D depts. are in place in their 700 employee factory in Shenzhen, as is the money, so it only seemed fair to let the Quad brand have a go.

## HOUSE STYLE

Enter the brand new Quad 11L - the company's first in-house designed moving coil loudspeaker and a 'clean sheet' design. If looks are anything to go by it's a winner the moment you take it out of the box and slip off the classy little draw string bag. You're greeted with a superbly finished product that oozes class, confirmed by a gentle stroke of the silky smooth cabinet. It's a loudspeaker very much in the traditional mould: there's no

sci-fi metal additions to the box or bizarre and funky colours, for example. However, a piano laquer finish like this doesn't usually come cheap. A retail price in the UK of a grand (if you pardon the pun), minimum would be typical. The 11Ls, however, are £380 a pair for all finishes. Options available are Piano Black, Piano Rosewood, Piano Maple and Piano Bird's Eye (nothing to do with fish fingers, incidentally). An expert in gloss finishes was hired from a piano manufacturing company to oversee this production stage - it's not just hi-fi companies that look to the East for production! The result is a finish that would do justice to a Bosendorfer - it's that good.

The cabinet appears to be a real labour of love for Quad, and remember labour is a lot cheaper in



# DORTAL COIL

China so 'labour intensive' work needn't result in a mortgage crippling product. It's constructed using 18mm veneered MDF sheets. When veneered, the 'speaker moves to the lacquering process for the piano finish. Once applied, it's left to dry before being polished. An impressive six coats are applied over a week long period for the desired luxurious look. The cabinet alone is worth the price, but as a bonus the company decided to put drive units in it!

## DRIVE TIME

The drive units in the IIL are also designed and manufactured in-house. The 135mm long throw bass driver uses a resin impregnated Kevlar diaphragm. Resin is used for stiffening to create good pistonic motion. The intrinsic self-damping properties of Kevlar helps keep resonance to a minimum. A phase plug sits in the centre of the unit. Whilst this bears more than a passing resemblance to the Kevlar unit used in Wharfedale's Diamond range, Quad emphasise that there are differences. Attention has been paid to the suspension system of the unit to allow for control under extremes of power and it sits in a special die-cast aluminium alloy chassis. It also features a dual wound voice coil, hand wound on an aluminium alloy former to remove heat from the coil area.

Last but not least, the bass driver incorporates a high-gauss magnet assembly. This is an expensive, very fine grain, powder magnet designed to provide a high density of magnetic field lines around the voice coil. The result apparently improves timing and rhythm due to better magnetic control over the coil and diaphragm.

A 25mm fabric dome treble unit



ferrofluid cooled voice coil and claims to have the ability to produce information up to 37kHz, achieved by reducing weight in the diaphragm and coil assembly.

At the rear of the 'speaker are two narrow ports, used to reduce distortion in the upper bass region. Placement slightly away from a rear wall is recommended.

Also on the rear are two pairs of decent quality binding posts for bi-wiring should you wish.

A personal favourite small bookshelf 'speaker of mine is the £600 Royal Menuet from Dali. This petite Danish beauty has much in common with the IIL in that it has a beautifully finished cabinet (although not up there with the IIL) and a sophisticated and sweet sound that's also neutral thanks to a thick, dead cabinet. The Quad easily matches the Meneut's impressive performance for just over half the price. There is an unmistakable 'high-end' sweetness to the sound that marks it out as a Quad, as opposed to a Wharfedale.

This is surely intended, as the company are at pains to point out the IIL isn't merely a Wharfedale Diamond in shiny boots! And it isn't; there's much more to it than that. So much so that I started to treat it as a £1,000-plus model and became increasingly - and perhaps unfairly - critical.

## MUSIC TIME

Starting the listening off with Paul Weller's Stanley Road I was immersed straight into the music. With such a good recording, the Quads showed that they have a true monitor-like appeal in the best sense of the word. One thing that the cute little IIL has inherited from its radiator like electrostatic brother is lucidity. There's oodles of intricate detail to be found in the fast and wonderfully neutral sound. Cymbals, for example, are smooth yet very natural and acoustic guitar tracks, intended as accompanying detail, become easily discernable as an essential part of the mix.

Vocals are warm and forward, but don't take your head off.

The presentation was big and spread out, in total contrast to the IIL's humble dimensions. Imaging was executed with professional monitor-like precision and there was good depth to the sound stage too. Of course, a good recording helps but the IILs aren't as fussy as some other high quality 'speakers out there. A whole host of rock recordings were tried out, with only the overtly compressed ones bringing out a slightly edgy upper midrange response.

And one more thing: the Quads can be caned. A session of the Foo Fighters and the first, in yer face Oasis album 'Definitely Maybe' showed that the IILs can actually take some pounding - although brandishing the Quad label, they're



tough little things.

A trawl through my jazz collection saw the Quad's comfortably at home with both Miles Davis and Chet Baker on vinyl. The sheer intimacy of small ensemble brings out a very musical and communicative sound in the Quads. 'Kind Of Blue' was a revelation when price is considered. Phrases were

beautifully rendered and there's an overall sense of presence and immediacy that's almost addictive. Again, if pushed, the IILs will take it, but a slight edge creeps into the midrange. Overall, though, they have an accurate and precise sound that will bring hours of involving listening.

The IILs can be easily summarised - they're a bargain! Detail, speed and presence is up there with the best bookshelf designs of at least twice the price. The competition's good at this price point but the IILs are in a different ball park. Nothing I can think of comes near to them when it comes to sheer quality of build - in this respect you could say they are underpriced.

The likes of Mission's 780 have a similar neutrality and speed but the Quads have that extra touch of monitor-like finesse that brings them out of the midprice bracket and into the upper echelons of audiophilia, just as the Wharfedale Diamonds belie their humble price tag. I'd go one step further and say that the IILs beat the Diamonds in terms of value for money.

As for downsides, it's difficult to find any. When fed with duff rock recordings, the midrange could become a tad shouty, especially when pushed, but this is about all. They are also fairly hungry when it comes to power, needing a good 60W per channel or thereabouts. Such comments are a bit churlish, though. Put the IILs in front of any experienced listener, with a good recording (or a bad one for that matter), and ask them to put a price to both the sound and the finish and I would guarantee even the most parsimonious would guess at least £300 over top.

The IILs will be joined later in the year by a larger standmount, plus two floorstanders and a centre speaker, so all bodes well for a cracking range. That battalion of cabinet polishers in China will be busy for some time to come I suspect. ■ ▲

Quad IIL £380

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## MEASURED PERFORMANCE

Nice smooth, even reproduction of a pink noise test signal suggested the IILs would measure well - and they did. The Kevlar drive unit of this 'speaker has a controlled, resonance free output that makes for a smooth response, up to the point where it meets the tweeter. The two match up seamlessly, with no trace of a crossover dip to soften the sound or remove detail. The soft dome tweeter continues smoothly up to 20kHz.

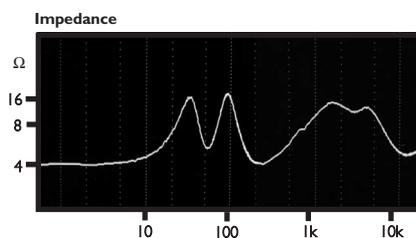
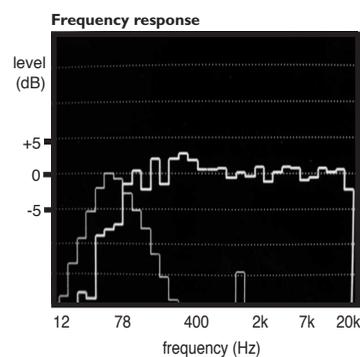
With few peaks or dips and an almost ruler flat trace right across the audio band Quad's IIL is certainly an accurate loudspeaker. Subjectively it may sound a little light or bright in general balance, except in a well furnished room. It will also sound detailed and coloration free.

At low frequencies the IIL rolls down smoothly, suggesting it is best placed close to a rear wall. The two rear ports are tuned to 51Hz, which is quite high. Bass will likely sound firm and fast, rather than big or low.

As a load, the Quads measure out at 6ohms overall. With a four ohm bass driver and eight ohm tweeter this is expected and in line with current design convention. Sensitivity was good at 87dB SPL from a nominal watt of input (i.e. 2.8V) and there was little reactance in the load to upset amplifier feedback.

The Quads measured well in all areas. They are a very well executed piece of design work, but the balance will be on the light/fast side

of things. **NK**



## World Verdict

Pretty much sets a new standard at the price. The gorgeous looking 11L is also a sophisticated and neutral sounding winner. A bit of a bargain.