

Quad 11L

Small speakers from a famous British name

The idea of them may not please the Quad purists, but Tony Williams says these new speakers are an interesting listen

Think Quad and the chances are a number of images spring to mind: compact hi-fi components with unusual tone controls; a pedigree going back into the mists of time, with personal service to match; and of course those 'radiator' type electrostatic loudspeakers.

What you probably don't expect are conventional speakers carrying the Quad name, but that's exactly what the £380-a-pair 11Ls are. Yes, the company has been down this route before, with the 10L speakers it launched to accompany its 77 Series – indeed, the new speakers' full model number is 77-11L, according to the little plaque on the rear of each enclosure. The 10L speakers tended to get overlooked – pretty expensive by the standards of the market at the time, but they were still rather nice-sounding speakers, if a little warm and soft.

Things have changed a lot at Quad. It has passed through the hands of then Mission parent company Verity, and now finds itself alongside Wharfedale in the International Audio Group stable. Some engineering and manufacturing may now take place in China, but the new owners haven't underestimated the importance and heritage of what they have. The service department still lurches after products from way back in the company's history, and those who expected to find the Quad brand on anything from mini-systems to toasters – well, it happened when some other British brands went East! – have been disappointed.

At the heart of the current Quad line-up is the 99 Series of audio components and the amazing ESL-988 and 989 speakers, developed from the 20-year-old ESL-63s since the IAG takeover. People at Quad like to take their time: it took 25 years to go from the ESL-57 speakers to ESL-63s – or FRED (for Full Range Electrostatic Doublet), as the design was originally known – and almost 20 years from ESL-63 to the 988 and 989. There's also an

eye kept firmly on the past: among the latest products is a pre/power amplifier combination: the valve-driven 24 preamp are derived from the 22 of the 1950s, and the II-40 monobloc power amps are based on a 1953 design.

It's getting on for ten years since the 10L speakers appeared, and only now do we have a replacement model. For Quad fans without the space for a pair of ESL-988s – and the electrostatics need space, thanks to their sheer size and spherical dispersion pattern – the 11Ls, which are part of a new four-strong range, should be of great interest. Moreover, their combination of performance, style and build quality, coupled with a realistic price, should ensure them an appeal beyond loyal Quad owners looking to complete a system.

The 11L is a fairly conventional design: it's a 32.5cm tall two-way biwireable loudspeaker with twin rear ports. The mid/bass unit has a 12.5cm woven cone, while the tweeter is a 25mm soft dome: Quad claims a frequency range of 45Hz-24kHz when the speakers are used between 20 and 30cm from the rear wall.

However, impressive though that claim may be, what is most likely to grab the attention when

the speakers are unboxed and slipped from their protective cloth bags is the quality of the finish, made possible by the fact the speakers are now made in China. The 77-11Ls come in black or maple, with a glorious piano lacquer applied over the top, making them look much more expensive than they are. However, there is a certain liveliness to the panels, as is evident when the cabinet sides or top are rapped with the knuckles, suggesting some under-damping of the enclosure, which might thus be expected to sing along with the drive units rather more than is entirely desirable.

Performance

The 11Ls are more demanding than some rival designs, thanks to 86dB/W/m sensitivity and 6ohm impedance, but most amplifiers above the entry level should have few problems with them. I used them with the Rotel RA-02 also reviewed this month, and also on the end of a pair of Musical Fidelity M250 monoblocs, and while the extra power certainly paid dividends in sheer dynamics, the smaller integrated amplifier had no problems.

Indeed, the Rotel RCD-02/RA-02/Quad 11L system sounded rather good, especially with the speakers mounted on a heavy sandfilled pair of Atacama SE24 stands. Connections were made using Chord Company Odyssey speaker cable, the same brand's Chorus interconnects linking player and amplifier.

With a slight toe-in to firm up the stereo image, the 11Ls presented a sonic picture that was certainly big and three-dimensional when required, and suitably intimate when the music demanded it, but the balance wasn't perfect. Yes, the bass on offer was prodigious, allowing a fine impression of orchestral weight to be delivered, and voices had good intelligibility and presence, but there was a decided thickness in the upper midband and treble that tended to give solo violins and sopranos a nasal quality.

The speakers also change very quickly according to the height at which they're mounted. The manual suggests keeping the tweeters at ear level when seated in your listening position, but I found having them slightly lower helped to

open up the treble. Placing them too high, as you might should you shelf-mount them, gave by far the thickest balance unless the speakers were inverted, which doesn't look too good.

As a rough guide I'd suggest budgeting at least another £100 for suitable supports for the speakers, even though little feet on their bases suggest they could just be plonked on shelves. Far from it – the speakers do need setting up with care if they're not to sound strange. They also should be biwired if at all possible, as this makes them breathe more easily.

For all that, the little Quads are powerful-sounding speakers, if a long way from the wide-open balance of the big electrostatics. They certainly never sound thin or insubstantial, and for the majority of listeners they'll deliver a presentation that's supremely easy to listen to, while at the same time musically fulfilling rather than so hi-fi that every little flaw of a recording is ruthlessly exposed. They're also good value at £380 given the quality of finish – the maple is particularly gorgeous – and will appeal to those who find so many speakers just plain ugly. With a few notes of caution, they are recommended. ☺

QUAD 77-11L

Type Two-way standmount speakers

Price £380/pr

Drive units 12.5cm mid/bass, 25mm tweeter

Recommended amp power 30-150W

Impedance 6ohm

Sensitivity 86dB/W/m

Frequency response 45Hz-24kHz

Finishes Maple or black, both with piano lacquer

Dimensions (H x W x D) 325 x 190 x 243mm

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Quad's 11Ls aren't the company's first attempt at the conventional box speaker market, but they are stylish with a warm, smooth sound