

# QUAD ESL 2805

*Beefing up Quad's classic electrostatic speaker has considerably boosted its performance*

**PRICE** £4,500 per stereo pair **CONTACT** Quad, IAG House, Sovereign Court, Ermine Business Park, Huntingdon PE29 6XU ☎ 01480 447700 🌐 www.quad-hifi.co.uk

In 1957, Quad stunned the hi-fi world by introducing the first full-range electrostatic speaker. Coloration was so low and neutrality so high, many felt it made conventional speakers redundant, and it took the competition at least a decade to start catching up. Its replacement, the ESL-63, appeared in 1981 and remains the basis for this new £4,500 ESL 2805.

'Remains the basis' is very much the phrase here, as the 2805 follows a similar principle of operation to the ESL-63, but has been substantially modified in a number of respects, both to conform with changes in safety standards, as well as to improve the sound quality.

Exceptionally slim from the side, like any panel speaker, it's also very bulky from the front, standing just over a metre tall and more than two thirds of a metre wide. Apart from the silver sides and a curved, gloss-black top, most of what you see is black grille cloth, creating a rather sombre effect.

An old advertisement stressed that the electrostatic's thin film diaphragm was lighter than a feather. However, the mass of the

diaphragm matters less than the much heavier mass of air in intimate contact with it. That is why beefing up the structure substantially improves the sound, and the 2805 now has a substantial steel and alloy frame, steel bases fitted with 8kg mass-loading, and a hefty strut bracing the top of the frame against the back of the base.

Electrostatic loudspeakers generate sound from a large panel of plastic film stretched between high voltage charged plates. This panel radiates sound equally forwards and backwards, but the radiation towards the sides

and delicacy. There's also an inherent sweetness here that results from a splendid freedom from any exaggeration or hype, and a wonderful coherence that brings remarkable realism to human voices. Piano and woodwind reproduction stand out as startlingly realistic, though brass can sometimes get a little edgy.

Because there's no box, the sound is free from any midband boxiness, and because the diaphragm is large, and therefore makes only tiny movements, linearity is high and distortion very low.

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is cancelled out, and bass extension is determined by the width of the panel. A clever technique developed by Quad avoids the 'beaming' often found with large panel diaphragms: the stator has eight concentric rings connected through delay lines that progressively delay the feed to the larger, outer rings, so the relatively small central portion gives adequate treble dispersion.

Because it operates on an entirely different principle, this unique speaker changes all the usual sonic rules, giving a totally different set of compromises. In some respects it sets a new performance benchmark that even the most costly regular speakers don't approach.

It has the most stunningly gorgeous midband you're ever likely to hear, combining remarkable neutrality with great expression

However, it also has obvious limitations in both loudness capability and low bass reproduction. Loudness is restricted by both low sensitivity, of around 84dB, and relatively modest power handling, although sophisticated electronic protection ensures that accidental overload won't cause any damage. Bass extension, which is defined by the width of the speaker, is limited to around 50Hz, and while it's crisp and clean, with no overhang, it could be more even.

The sheer transparency of this speaker makes it very sensitive to components further up the chain. Valve amps proved a good match, and experimenting with different speaker cables is well worthwhile.

Stereo imaging is exceptionally precise, partly because of the fine transparency and superior phase accuracy, but also because it has a much higher direct-to-reflected sound ratio than box loudspeakers. In other words, you hear more of the actual recording, and less of your listening room. There's still some high frequency beaming, so you'll obtain the best results when seated directly on the forward axes.

While this is clearly not the ideal speaker for those who like their rock music loud and dirty, its performance is utterly entrancing on acoustic material and, as such, it represents exceptional value for money, albeit within acknowledged loudness constraints. With the right kind of music in the right kind of system, there's little to touch it. 🎧

*Paul Messenger*

*See the May 2007 edition of Hi-Fi Choice for the original review of this product*

