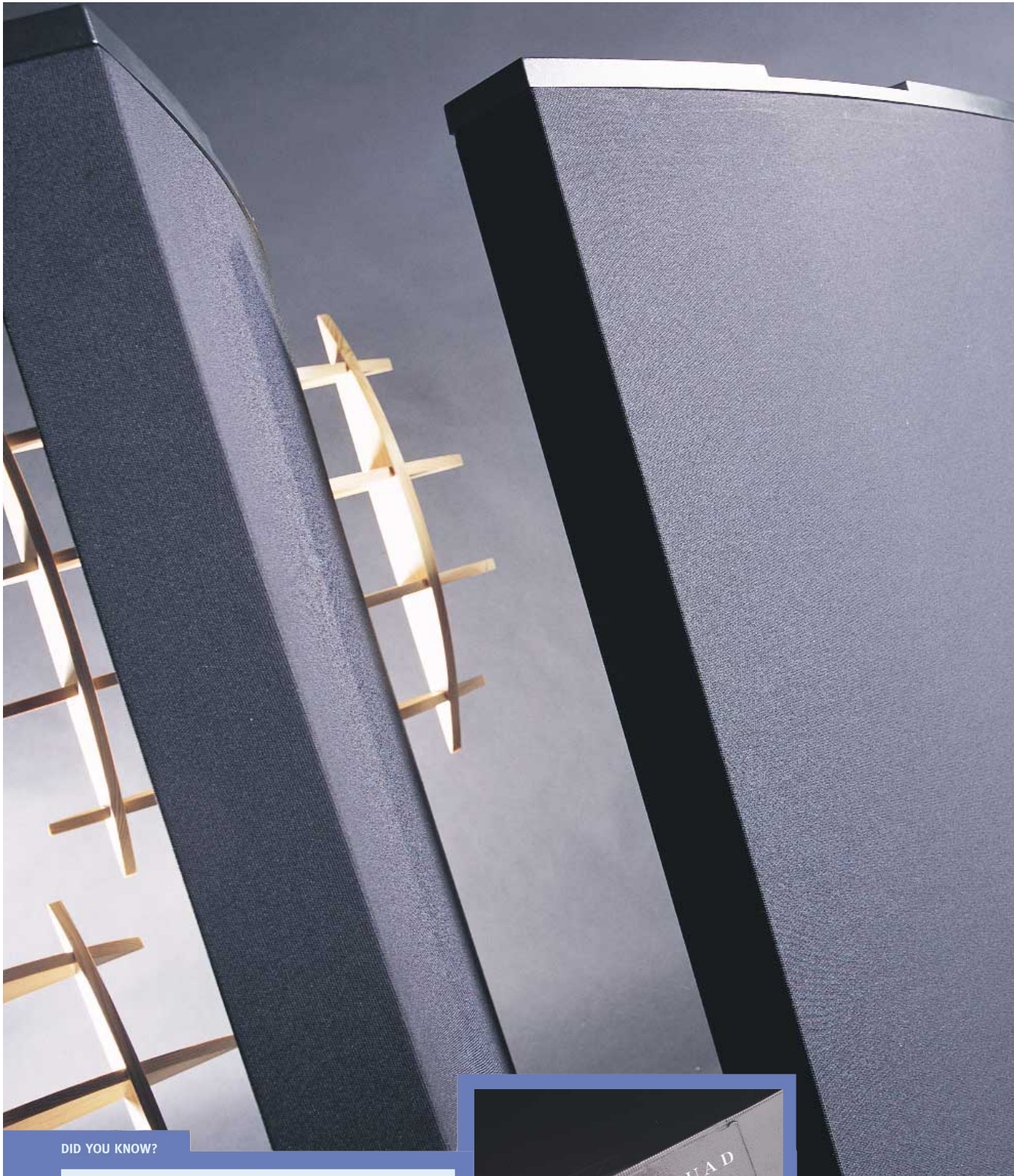


QUAD

WHAT HI-FI? – DECEMBER 2000

REVIEW • ESL 988



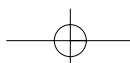
DID YOU KNOW?

Peter Walker started Quad in 1936 under the title of 'Acoustical Manufacturing Company'. It was set up to produce public address systems.

The ESL 63 speaker, released in 1983, was so called because work on the design started way back in 1963. Quad is the only hi-fi company to have been awarded the Queen's Award for Technological Achievement – in 1978 for 'current dumping' technology in its 405 amp.



The Quads aren't great lookers, it's true, but the sound that emerges from those great, black, plastic oblongs is sublime, with a resolution, neutrality and subtlety that few can approach



# Flat is back

## Quad ESL 988 Loudspeakers

**For** Resolution, transparency and sound staging; seamless sonic presentation and a level of detail that simply has to be heard to be believed

**Against** Positioning needs care; demands top quality electronics; still cannot quite produce the bass depth of some conventional speakers

**Verdict** Quad has done it again: the 988s are world class – the single driver presents a fabulously together sound that's tough to match at any price

Remarkably, given that Quad's first electrostatic speakers were launched in 1957, the new ESL-988s are only the third generation of this technology. And while the newcomers may look very like the ESL63 they replace, 90% of the components have been replaced or upgraded. There are even physical differences, though you'd have to be a real Quad fan to notice: the speakers are more rigid, and are tilted back five degrees on their bases to improve dispersion.

The 988s use a single driver: a thin sheet of Mylar, about a tenth of the thickness of a human hair, negatively charged and placed between two high-voltage electrodes. The tiny differences in charge between these, created in response to the incoming music signal, cause the lightweight diaphragm to move, thus producing sound. It's worth noting that, as well as conventional cables, each speaker will also need a mains supply to feed those high-voltage electrodes.

But the design here is unique even among electrostatics in that it uses a series of concentric anode rings, fed by delay lines. Incoming signals first affect the centre of the diaphragm then, at split-second intervals, ripple outwards like the surface of a pond when a pebble is thrown in. This brings the Quads closer to the ideal of a point source with the engaging imaging and sound-staging that results.

The lack of a conventional cabinet removes colorations, but it does allow the speakers to fire as much sound backwards as forwards. This means it's essential that the Quads are positioned well away from the rear wall, lest reflections of the sound being radiated rearwards confuse the forward radiation. Absorbent material on the rear wall, such as heavy curtains, can make crucial improvements, while you should also experiment with toe-in – the speakers tend to need quite a severe angle. Get all this right, however, and you'll be amply rewarded: with an immaculate recording such as Opus 3's *Live At Vatnaj-kull*, the Quads deliver the scale and position of the church organ faultlessly, while uncovering layers of subtle detail that most rivals ignore.

Quads have historically fallen short when it comes to bass power and weight. That's an area the company has worked hard to address, though it's worth noting that if the 988s still don't do the low-end thing well enough for you, the bigger 989s add a couple of extra panels to drive the bass. An alternative

favoured by some owners of the old ESL63s was the addition of a subwoofer, though care must be taken with choice and set-up if the bass gains aren't to be at the expense of the speakers' fluency and airiness.

But the 988s's low-end still impresses. The bassline Eminem's *The Way I Am* retains much of its power, and is reproduced with fabulous precision, while even the most complicated bass figures remain fast, taut and easy to follow. Remember though, that despite 86dB/W/m sensitivity and 8ohm nominal impedance, plenty of current is needed to get these speakers working at their best.

Any other business? Well, the build quality is good rather than great: the top and bottom sections of the speaker are made of moulded plastic and, while they do their job well enough, the quality expected at this price was lacking, on the – admittedly early – samples we had. Quad claims that it aims to rectify this by providing wood finishes in the near future, but at the moment the company's factory in Bradford is struggling to keep up with demand.

It's not hard to see why. The new Quads have resolution, neutrality and subtlety few rivals can challenge at this sort of money. If you value these qualities over sheer low-end grunt, we can't recommend these speakers too highly.

WHAT HI-FI?	says
sound	★★★★★
build	★★★★☆
compatibility	★★★☆☆
verdict	★★★★★

