

Quad 12L Classic (£580)

Quad's 12L Classic marks 15 years of the Huntingdon-based firm producing box-type loudspeakers. Would Peter Walker finally forgive them? An ESL lover finds out
Review: **Ken Kessler** Lab: **Keith Howard**

For a company that spent its first 60 years producing electrostatic speakers, Quad's atypical, small two-way boxes have been terrific products. The first of the line, the Sponder-designed/built 10L, was long a favourite of this reviewer, and those that followed have maintained a family sound: they're voiced to ape the ESLs.

Quad's speaker designer Peter Comeau (who wisely gave up reviewing hi-fi for something more respectable) has been upgrading the models with a series of refinements, the 11L and 12L now earning the 'Classic' suffix. The floorstanding 22L will emerge soon as the 23L Classic, thanks to an enlarged cabinet.

What the 12L Classic provides over the 11L Classic without resorting to too much extra cabinetry is a larger woofer, 165mm rather than 125mm. Quad's stated specifications do not show any change to the lower end of the frequency range, with 48Hz as the $\pm 3\text{dB}$ point, but there's an extra 1kHz at the top, raising the 12L Classic's stated upper limit to 23kHz.

DISCRETE CROSSOVERS

With those changes, the 12L should sound 'easier' than the 11L, though the rest of the specifications don't seem to differ too much either. For practical purposes, it's worth noting that both have a nominal impedance of 6ohms and sensitivity of 87dB/1W [see Lab Report, p33]. While a brief burst with the NAD C315 BEE showed that the speaker can work well with budget designs, the 12L Classic seemed more comfortable with beefier amplifiers.

As for the woofer, made in-house by Quad, it's a long-throw, woven Kevlar driver, the material described by the manufacturer as 'made from a self-damping resin-impregnated fibre form of the material.' Quad weaves it into a lattice that provides the necessary stiffness, strength and weight for speed, control and extension. The resultant cone is mounted on a butyl rubber surround. It crosses over at 2.4kHz to a 25mm tweeter with a double hand-wound voice coil, on an

aluminium alloy carrier. Quad uses separate PCBs for the treble and bass sections of the crossover, said to avoid interaction between the components that can often cause unwanted coloration. High-quality components including 'silicon iron' and air-cored inductors and polypropylene capacitors make up the minimalist crossover, which terminates in nicely-made, gold-plated binding posts. (Whoever had the speakers before me had conveniently dug out the red and black plugs that fill the holes suitable for banana plugs, according to some daft CE edict.)

Although I succumbed to the allure of bi-wiring for many years, I'm no longer convinced of any inherent superiority. Still, for those who believe that separate wires for the bass and treble drivers improve the sound, the 12L Classic has two pairs of binding posts to allow this, connected by large, flat links.

All of this is fitted to a cabinet made of multi-layer construction, reinforced with additional internal bracing, thus employing the traditional method of reducing cabinet coloration and resonance. The 12L Classic is also damped internally with long fibre wadding to deal with internal reflections and help prevent standing waves from forming in the enclosure. The resultant item is a solidly-made, unobtrusive speaker with a grille reminiscent of the very first Quad two-way

RIGHT: Slightly larger than the 11L Classic, the 12L uses a 6.5in Kevlar woofer instead of the 11's 5in; both employ the same 1in soft dome tweeter

box. The visual enhancement is solely down to the choice of finish.

Amazingly, the speaker retails at only £500 per pair for the standard cherry or rosewood veneers. The hand-polished, multi-layered, high-gloss piano lacquered cherry or black options are £580 per pair. To put this into context, the 10L cost £600 per pair back in 1995-6. That's just over a grand in today's money, and the VAT is higher, too.

It's worth noting that, while the finishes are purely aesthetic, they are part of the appeal of small two-way monitors [see



boxout]. So it was with some head-scratching that I read in one downmarket mag that the extra £80 was held against the 12L Classic. That's pretty rich coming from geeks who think nothing of spending £39 for plastic covers for their iPads!

If perceived value alone was enough to win hearts, then the 12L Classic is a charmer, as British in its discretion as a Sonus faber is Latin in its sexiness. Think of it as Huntsman versus Valentino.

A BIG SOUND

And so it was to a complete Quad system that I turned

for auditioning the 12L Classics: 99 CDP II, 99 preamp, 909 power amp and a spin with the Quad II Classic Integrated. Wires were YTER, stands were 24in Foundations – and they do justify the best supports you can muster. I tried them on shelves too, close to walls. Trust me: they're not just

"The Quads allow you to listen in on delicate layering and dazzle with "height"

classic in name. Rather, they are classic in their behaviour, operating exactly as you'd expect of small, British, two-ways that need to 'breathe'. Those rear-firing ports do *not* respond well to nearby surfaces. The reward, if you position them with a touch of toe-in and away from side and back walls, will be sublime: pin-point imaging, vast stage depth and smooth, extended

bass. These are tiny thoroughbreds.

Used both on my desk and stand-mounted 10ft from the listening seat, the 12L Classics always sounded larger than their dimensions

suggested. It was the dispersion, the Byrds' 'I'll Feel A Whole Lot Better' – one of Gene Clark's greatest moments – spreading across the room, with Jim McGuinn's guitar to the far right. Clark's tambourine centred, both calling up images of *Hullabaloo* appearances. Whatever they

A UK TRADITION

Quad deserves an award for sheer chutzpah for the repeated references to the LS3/5A in the 12L Classic brochure: this is no LS3/5A. Moreover, I recall Peter Walker as not being duly impressed by the BBC milestone, while Quad's connection to that design is tenuous at best – Spendor was responsible for the 10L, Quad's first conventional loudspeaker. But what better conceit could Quad use to highlight the continued appeal of the compact, quality, two-way monitor? Its continued charm in this country is almost self-explanatory: 1) the UK is cursed with smallish rooms, 2) British consumers are, by necessity, ultra-cost-conscious, and 3) the Wife Acceptance Factor remains a powerful weapon. No-one can argue that a small speaker is 'better' than a large speaker. But the challenge of designing a superb small speaker is far greater than getting wonderful sound out of a size-no-object design. And British designers can squeeze more sound out of a lesser speaker than anyone else on the planet.



fed that tweeter, it thrives on Rickenbacker treble. The guitar chimed: sweet, liquid, with just the right touch of metallic timbre. As the group's entire debut shares that sound, it was worth contrasting the sonic texture with *The Ballad Of Easy Rider*, made four years later. The strings on the title track showed a complete departure from the jingle-jangle morning of the debut, sophistication increasing on every level. And yet the least serious track on the LP proved the most revealing.

REAL HEIGHT

'Fido' arrives at a fascinating, low-key, yet vivid drum solo by Gene Parsons (no relation to Gram). It appears that the underrated Terry Melcher had learned much since he produced their debut. The Quads allowed you to listen in on delicate layering, and they dazzled me with an effect I first heard 43 years ago: the opening of 'Armstrong, Aldrin And Collins', with its Cape Canaveral rocket launch, appears to rise skyward – my first irrefutable taste of image height in a properly set-up system.

Anyone who fell in love with Zooey Deschanel as an actress has a huge treat ☺

RIGHT: Two tuned ports augment the bass below 68Hz. Bi-wiring facility is offered by removing Quad's gold-plated links

in store; she sings up a storm. On the new Buddy Holly tribute, *Listen To Me*, she performs an unplugged 'It's So Easy', sounding a little like Linda Ronstadt who covered it decades ago, but with lean backing, and a gorgeous chorus arranged in an arc behind her. The *a cappella* section that makes up the ending, with an acoustic guitar coda, exploits the Quads' delicacy and subtlety. 'Delicious' barely describes it.

LIKE THE ESL 57

But the killer for me was Stevie Nicks' 'Not Fade Away', fashioned from hand-claps, a vocal backing, bongós, a lone guitar. As the track builds up, you savour various textures, then eventually reaching a searing fuzz guitar. With surgical precision, the 12L Classic gave each sound its own real estate, yet the overall sensation was one of total coherence.

In this respect, it's an audiophile's dream, both *le gâteau* and *le fait de manger*. You can sit back and let it wash over you, or zoom in on specific instruments with ease. At no time does the sound fragment, and yet one is constantly aware that there's an openness bordering on the cavernous. And that was best served by Simon and Garfunkel.

Having watched the wonderful *Bridge Over Troubled Water* documentary in the three-disc pack and on the BBC's *Imagine*, I had the tools to appreciate the sonic landscape Roy Halee created for the duo, the Quads encouraging the album to expand into the cathedral-worthy space it deserves. The voices meshed as only theirs and The Everly Brothers can, with a silkiness that reminded me, yes, of the ESL 57. I know that's heresy, but this virtue is present in the 12L.

Net result? There is no downside, as LS3/5As cannot be found for £500. That isn't simply being

generous. No LS3/5A offers the bass of the Quads, yet neither can the 12L Classic deliver the precise magic – in terms of authentic vocals – that makes the LS3/5A 'the Greatest Small Speaker Ever'.

With Howard Tate's 'Ain't Nobody Home', the sheer power of his voice, the range, the texture, simply sounded more convincing, more angry via the BBC's baby, Howard Tate, who died on the 2nd of Dec 2011, could challenge any speaker, so that's certainly no condemnation. LS3/5A aside, the 12L Classic is right up there with the very best of the two-way genre. **L**

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

As one who used 10Ls for years, I have no issues with Quad making box-type speakers. Why? Because they've been uniformly good. The 12L Classic does everything right for a speaker costing even £200 more, while looking deceptively expensive if attired with the gloss finish. They love the Quad II Classic integrated, sound blindingly coherent at soft levels and behave well when hammered. **What's not to like?**

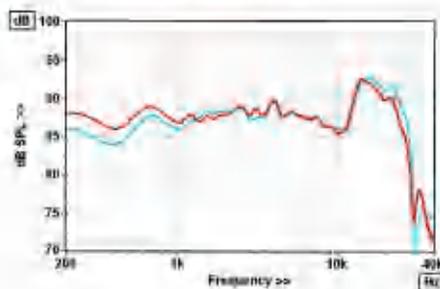
Sound Quality: 82%



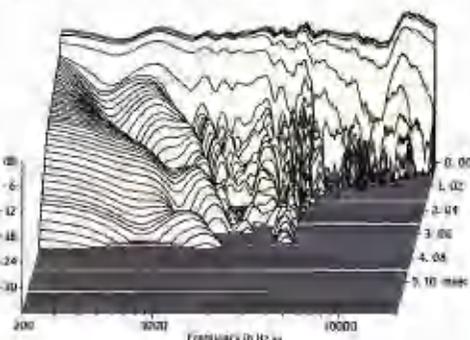
QUAD 12L CLASSIC (£580)

It's unusual for a loudspeaker manufacturer to understate the sensitivity of its product but our measured pink noise figure of 88.1dB suggests that Quad is being notably conservative in claiming 87dB sensitivity for the 12L Classic. Moreover, it has clearly gone to considerable trouble not to achieve this figure through low impedance. The 6.6ohm minimum modulus indicates that Quad could have specified a nominal impedance of 8ohm rather than 6ohm, and the unusually low impedance phase angles mean that the minimum EPDR (equivalent peak dissipation resistance) is a high 4.7ohm at 140Hz. In other words, the 12L Classic is an exceptionally easy load to drive.

High sensitivity, high impedance, small box: what inevitably suffers is the bass extension, our diffraction-corrected near-field measurement showing that the response is 6dB down at a high 74Hz (re. 200Hz) – but boundary interactions will improve this in-room. Although the on-axis frequency response errors of ± 3.6 dB and ± 4.4 dB are by no means excessive, they hide a more complex story (see Graph 1, below). Much of the error is due to excessive tweeter output in the octave above 10kHz – an excess that may well not trouble older listeners. Ignoring this, the responses met tight ± 2.0 dB limits – or would have done had one of the review pair not demonstrated below-par sensitivity in its bass-mid driver, which accounts for much of the high-ish ± 1.8 dB pair matching error. Above 20kHz the response falls away rapidly to be -6dB before 30kHz (re. 10kHz). The cumulative spectral decay waterfall (Graph 2) shows fast initial energy decay across the spectrum but there is evidence of bass-mid driver cone breakup at around 3kHz. KH



ABOVE: Uniform response up to 10kHz, above which there's a 6-7dB boost in very high treble



ABOVE: There's evidence of breakup in the bass/mid cone at ~3kHz but cabinet energy is well damped

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Sensitivity (SPL/1m) 2.83Vrms – Mean/IEC/Music	89.6dB/88.1dB/86.0dB
Impedance modulus min/max (20Hz–20kHz)	6.6ohm @ 20kHz 13.4ohm @ 4.5kHz
Impedance phase min/max (20Hz–20kHz)	-23° @ 127Hz 18° @ 1.1kHz
Pair matching (300Hz–20kHz)	± 1.8 dB
LF/HF extension (-6dB ref 200Hz/10kHz)	74Hz / 29.7kHz/39.9kHz
THD 100Hz/1kHz/10kHz (for 90dB SPL/1m)	0.3% / 0.6% / 0.4%
Dimensions (HWD)	340x205x279mm