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Sound Lab Majestic 845PX Electrostatic Speaker

The heart of a music system that should last you forever.

Review By Jules Coleman

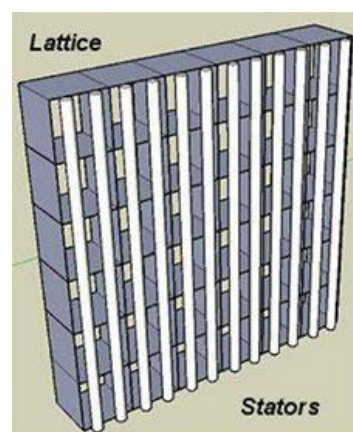


It Begins With The Quad ESL 57

It is hard to believe that 2014 marks the 57th anniversary of the venerable Quad ESL 57. The speaker may not have been responsible for introducing the concept of 'audiophile,' but it certainly narrowed the gap between music lover and audiophile. The ESL 57 displayed the ways in which nuance, micro dynamics, transparency and resolution could serve musical ends. This is less often the case nowadays than it should be, as ever increasing technical knowledge and skill has been deployed to cater to audiophile expectations at the expense of musical persuasiveness. Only in high-end audio can being characterized as appealing to 'music lovers' constitute damning with faint praise.

The Quad ESL 57 is a true audiophile product in spite of being substantially compromised: limited top and bottom end and a restricted dynamic range. But oh what a midrange! The Quad was able to reproduce just enough extension above and below the midrange to create a balanced, coherent and ultimately seductive musical experience. From the outset, Quads were matched with super tweeters in an attempt to extend its reach into the higher frequencies and with bass units designed to increase its capacity to plumb musical depths. Designers have been building add-ons to the Quad ESL 57 for the past 57 years, and I don't expect that to change anytime soon. These efforts have been understandable. If the 57 could sound so terrific given its limitations, one can only imagine how much better the experience would be were it possible to overcome them.

Nor has Quad wavered in its own efforts to improve upon the ESL 57: first with the Quad ESL 63 then with the United States version of it, and then with model after model since. At best, Quad has produced different sounding speakers, some of which were pretty good, but none better and most much worse sounding than the original. Agree with me or not, there is no denying that Quad has never produced a speaker that has captured the imagination of music lovers in anything like the way the ESL 57 has.



The reason is simple to state though harder to understand. The Quad ESL 57 has a magic that is unaffected by its limitations. We can disagree about whether its magic is somehow the result of its limitations. It may well be that aiming to reproduce less of the frequency range makes it easier to do a better job at reproducing a more limited part of the musical spectrum. Whatever the truth may be, the fact is that extending the bass and upper register reach of the speaker changes the speaker. The Quad 57 is the best speaker it can be, but that is perfectly compatible with it being made into some other speaker that covers more ground, if somewhat less successfully. The truth is that you can either have a Quad 57 with its limitations or you can have some other speaker that lacks its magic and coherence. The speaker you put together may well have a Quad 57 in the middle, but that's about it. It is not as if one cannot possibly improve an original Quad 57 ESL. You can replace various original parts with upgrades, and a healthy business has grown up restoring Quads 57s. I owned a pair of PK restorations and have a new pair from on order. I will report on them in due course.

The more general point is one that I have long argued: a compromised or limited speaker, just like a compromised or limited system can be more musically convincing than a more 'complete' or 'technically perfect' one. Too many designers, audiophiles and critics forget that ultimately music is a form of communication. Like other forms of communication, it can be technically proficient all the while remaining unmoving and ineffective. Take email for example. Communication by email fails so often because it lacks a moral vector. It's emotionally flat, in much the same way that many technically perfect audio systems are. They fail to communicate. For all its limitations, no one could reasonably charge the Quad with failing to communicate.

The (Extended) Family

The Quad 57 is an electrostatic speaker, not the only one and at the end of the day, not the best either. Among the many others that followed suit were Acoustat, Audiostatic, Martin Logan and Sound Lab. Each has had its share of followers. The Martin Logan CLS in particular (in spite of being an amplifier killer) secured a significant following among the audio press, largely in virtue of its remarkable transparency. I, for one, was never much taken by the speaker. There is no denying its transparency, a near see-through quality. That see-through quality was precisely what I found unpersuasive about the Martin Logan. Images had a feathery quality and tonally I found the speaker a bit brittle and metallic. Not my cup of tea, but mine was almost certainly a minority opinion. The Audiostatic designs (ES 300 and ES 500) were more to my liking and though I had limited experience with them, I thought the Acoustat showed considerable promise, and though they managed to secure a loyal following, they never managed to catch on. I briefly owned KLH 9s and Koss Model 1A electrostatics both of which were remarkable in their own ways, but not viable financially.

The most captivating, if in the end, failed efforts to capture the possibilities inherent in an electrostatic design were all full-range models. To varying degrees all full range electrostatics shared common virtues and flaws. Among the positives: transparency, resolution, speed, precision, and subtlety, a musical way with micro dynamic shadings and overall coherence and wholeness. Among the negatives: limited macro dynamics, limited bottom end extension, extreme directionality and the relative absence of heft or musical weight. Nor should we forget how amplifier unfriendly a load the average electrostatic speaker is; and did I mention size or aesthetics! More often than not electrostatic loudspeakers are a pair of floor standing headphones the size of a refrigerator capable of bringing most any amplifier to its knees while forcing a massive redesign of one's living quarters. Indeed, any audiophile who brought a pair home stood a reasonable chance of not merely redesigning his or her living quarters but having to look for new ones and a new mate. Having the average pair of electrostatics in one's system was pretty much a sure fire way to remain without a life partner; and given their extreme directionality, they pretty much insured that one would remain without friends—unless one stacked one's friends in a row, one behind the other and in groups no larger than three.

In virtually every way imaginable, the standard full range electrostatic loudspeaker was the ultimately anti-social machine; it could kill everything from home design, to amplifiers, to friendships, to the opportunity to find a life-partner—or even someone willing to stay for a few months. This is not a rosy picture. If you are puzzled as to what the fascination with electrostatics could possibly be given all their many shortcomings, I would understand. But it probably means that you were too young to have heard the Quad ESL 57 in its infancy heyday when they were unchallenged king of musical magic—in spite of their obvious limitations—or you have never heard any of the very best Sound Lab full range loudspeakers—which I am here to attest—are virtually free of any limitations whatsoever.

In fact, the Sound Lab Majestic 845 is not just as wonderful an electrostatic speaker as I have listened to in the past four decades, it is among less than a handful of the best loudspeakers I have ever listened to—at any price, under any circumstances. The big Sound Labs—and I do mean big—are the speakers the Quads could only dream one day of becoming! They are not just Quads grown up to full size: adult Quads so to speak. They are everything the Quad 57s are and more—much more. They are the speaker everyone was trying to turn the Quad into by adding woofers, tweeters, stands, rails, power supplies and what have you. If the original Quad displayed the magic that electrostatics were capable of, then the Sound Labs have realized that capacity.

The Sound Lab Story

Co-founded by Drs. Roger West and Dale Ream in 1978, Sound Lab was formed as a research and development firm rather than as a manufacturing firm. This means that although it creates products -- its many speaker systems—it engages primarily in researching a set of problems that leads to securing patents and other forms of intellectual property. Its research agenda is largely driven by the set of issues associated with electrostatic transducers. By my reading, the research has two related aspects: basic research in the physics, materials and mechanics of the components of the electrostatic strategy for reproducing music as well as their interaction with one another and problem solving research aimed at identifying and overcoming specific issues associated with electrostatic transducers. The two aspects of the research are connected in that the basic research has led to approaches that overcome shortcomings that have plagued previous electrostatic designs.

The Sound Lab approach means that the company is always engaged in research and that new products are part of an iterative process that is responsive to discoveries at the level of basic research and its applications to particular problems. This means that the product line emerges as a result of new findings and the ability to implement them. This means that the products are not only based on the best available relevant science, but that they should be seen as embodiments at a particular moment of time of what is possible—at various price points—in electrostatic transducers. This approach expresses both confidence and modesty: confidence that any implemented design represents the very best of what is possible in an electrostatic design (at a given price point); and modesty in that the speaker is the best given the current state of the relevant sciences and the ability to implement the science in an actual acoustical product.

On the other hand, because the products are constantly evolving as the underlying science does, existing products run the risk of becoming outdated—or at least no longer representing state of the art. This is less of a concern than it might otherwise be—for several reasons. First, Sound Lab is now a very mature company—over 35 years old—and has over the years developed a basic approach to the design of its speakers so that the basic foundation of every speaker is pretty much set. Second, by this point, almost all the changes are refinements at the margins. The basic and most glaring problems in electrostatic designs have been addressed. These refinements, however, can certainly make a sonic difference. In fact, they wouldn't be introduced into a product if they didn't. So Sound Lab provides its customers with the opportunity to have their speaker system upgraded to the current state of the art at a relatively modest cost. Someone who owns a Sound Lab speaker system can in principle upgrade it indefinitely to keep it abreast of whatever new insights the basic research uncovers.

Sound Lab not only names the company, it describes it. (That is both true and insider reference for philosophers.) It is first and foremost a lab; it is a sound lab; and it is a producer of two products—speakers and intellectual property. And it treats its customers in effect as lab partners. You buy a pair of Sound Lab speakers and you make an investment in the lab's research at the same time you see and hear what the research has produced at a given moment in time. For your commitment, you secure the return commitment from the company to allow you to continually upgrade as new research in the lab uncovers additional ways to solve vexing problems.



Sound Lab Majestic 845PX

Sonically speaking, I have always been drawn to three kinds of speakers: planars, electrostatics and horns. I have nothing against standard dynamic loudspeakers, having owned my share and having enjoyed many of them. In fact, when I think about the systems I have owned over the past forty years, among the handful that have been most compelling and enjoyable is one that included an MFA Magus C preamplifier, a Musical Reference EL34 amp and a pair of EHS Soprano loudspeakers. Though undeniably veiled the EHS Soprano loudspeakers (the originals and not the fraudulent copies) were among the most musically convincing loudspeakers ever made. They were introduced into the US by Hart Hutchins (if any of you are old enough to remember who he is) and most widely distributed by Bruce Jacobs who for many years owned the much missed Salon One Audio in Wisconsin.

(Just a side note for those of you who enjoy being reminded from time to time how aspects of this industry have changed over the years: Bruce used to send out virtually any item from his store to a potential customer to try out for free for an extended period of time, relying on virtually nothing beyond trust as collateral. He was also passionate about the music, the people in the industry and provided customer service that was in its own way at its time the equivalent of Apple's. Fortunately, Bruce has remained active in the industry.)

Why planars, electrostatics and horns? Aren't horns the antithesis of planars and electrostatics? Well, that depends on which aspects of musical reproduction you are interested in. To be sure, the designs are very different, but there are important similarities in the ways they present music. And it may surprise some readers to know that at least some electrostatic speaker designers—including Roger West—are similarly drawn to horns. For my part, a music system's success depends in large part on visceral aspects of it, especially, for lack of a better term, it's 'presence.' To engage me, I have to experience the reproduction as unfiltered, immediate. This presence can sometimes be achieved by a kind of dynamic realism that some horn loudspeakers are capable of in ways other speakers are not. Other times it can be achieved by a sense of wholeness or what I think of as resolution that the very best planars and electrostatics can achieve.

Let me pause for a second to explain what I mean by resolution. The concept I have in mind is best illustrated by paintings, or novels. Part of what distinguishes exceptional works of art from the rest is that the works are resolved. They are complete, finished, integrated works. They can be read, seen and understood. An unfinished symphony is not just a symphony with some parts left out; it is incomplete. It is not a whole; until it is finished, it is a series of parts. Adding parts to something does not make it whole. Stopping the process of adding parts does not make it complete. It only ends it. The term 'finished' is ambiguous between 'ended' and 'complete.' A work that is resolved has not merely ended; it is completed. A complete work need not be the last word on a topic any more than a resolved painting need not be the last work of an artist. But it is a statement. Unresolved work is incomplete in that the statement it makes or expresses is. Some works can of course be intentionally incomplete and if they succeed at making that statement then they are fully resolved, complete and finished.

I resist entirely the idea that resolution should be identified with the fine-graininess of the details. To be sure fine-grained detail can serve a musical role in creating a fully resolved piece of music or musical experience, but its value is instrumental. It is not an intrinsically valuable aspect of music reproduction in the way in which resolution in the sense in which I am employing the term is.

In my experience a fully developed and present musical experience gives one the sense that the performance is unhurried or unrushed. One can experience this as matters of tempo or time, but I experience it as akin to the way an athlete sometimes can feel 'in the zone.' The game slows down; nothing has to be rushed. Nothing has to move any faster than necessary or is called for. The music comes across as musically energetic but not frenetic (unless of course the recording is of an intentionally frenetic performance). There is no barrage, no sensory overload. All the contributors to musical content—tone, timbre, weight, attack, harmonic development, decay—are in plain sight, not rushing by but taking their time to impress themselves upon you, the listener. Other listeners and critics may identify the same phenomenon as 'naturalness,' but I conceive of it as akin to the Shaker expression 'everything has a place and everything in its place'—but with feeling.

Similarly, presence requires a reproduction that is continuous and uninterrupted—especially by distractions. The space between the notes has the same character as the notes themselves; the air has weight. It is not a darkness against which the music is cast. It is not a screen, but part of the performance itself.

Presence for me then is a complex phenomenon and I am sure that this discussion of it does no justice to its complexity. But I did not want to leave the mistaken impression that presence is a superficial notion like personal charisma. Indeed, many audio systems are charismatic, but the charisma is a front hiding an empty core. They are all energy, life, detail, 'imaging'—just enough to capture one's attention, but never one's loyalty. They are the political candidates of the audio world. Clever, poised, they never fail to make a good impression, but it is only an impression. All they have to teach you can be realized the first or second time through. They rarely repay an extended stay. The extent of their musical knowledge and their ability to convey it can be represented on a Wikipedia entry.

Right now while I am writing this review I am listening to Bryan Janis' Mercury Recording of *Pictures at an Exhibition*. I find it hard to keep my mind focused on the writing. To see the speakers I would have to lift my head and turn to the left, but I don't for if I don't look I prevent my eyes from hindering my aural experience. The music is so gloriously presented though the Sound Lab speakers why ruin the illusion. For all my eyes could do would be to remind me that what I am listening to is a reproduction and not the real thing. Otherwise I could easily allow myself the conceit that I am in the presence of music and not its reproduction.

People say things like that all the time. Heck, I've said versions of it several times myself, but it was not until I heard music through the Sound Lab Majestic 845 did I have any idea what I was talking about. Only now have I even come close to realizing just how difficult it is for reproduced music to sound like real music. I am not foolish enough to claim that through this system the two are indistinguishable. Of course they can be distinguished, but not because there is something musically off about the reproduction. The tone, timbre, timing, space, weight, plus the emotional and cognitive content of the piece are all before me. The music is fully present and I am fully immersed in it. I am not in the concert hall nor is the concert hall in my family room. But I feel connected to the performance in my family room in what feels very much like the same way I would be connected to the performance in the concert hall. I am in the same space as the music. I am not 'watching' or 'listening' to an event from some vantage point or given a particular perspective. I am part of the event, occupying its space. This is the way in which the Sound Lab speakers 'charge' my room. They turn my room into an event space.

Imagine yourself in a concert hall. In the best of such halls the sound is a whole; it is one. Of course, you can focus on the strings or the choir if you like; or you could target your ears to pick up on the brass if you like. But the music doesn't come to you that way. You can hear it that way if you like. This is exactly what it is like to listen to music through the Majestic 845. They present the music as a unified whole. Of course you can pick out anything you like and follow it throughout a recording, for the speakers are as refined, nuanced and revealing as any I have ever heard. But they don't present the music in its parts. They present the whole in the most coherent and integrated form that I have ever heard.

Presence; presence; presence: unfiltered, unhurried, fully resolved and integrated music. But not just that. These speakers create a musical space in which the performance and the listener are separated only by the distance between them. By comparison every other listening experience I have had in my room is to varying degrees less immediate and integrated.

Some Technical And Audiophile Details

The Majestic 845PX comes in at nearly 8' high and 200 pounds per side. At roughly 40" wide and 9" deep (26" deep at the bass with the massive power supply attached), the speaker is a space eater and dominated my family room—which is itself 30' long, 14' wide and 9' tall. It dwarfed the baby grand piano that nestled between the speakers and blocked out whatever sunshine we occasionally experience during Connecticut winters. Only the largest Horning horns occupied nearly as much space. The Sound Labs would be a challenging aesthetic addition to virtually any living space. This is not to pass judgment on their aesthetic quality. Both my wife and I found them a commanding but beautiful addition to our room—nearly sculptural in appearance and aesthetic demeanor. Even in our quite large family room they were an overwhelming presence.

Though the Sound Labs remain an aesthetic challenge, they are no longer present the challenging load to amplifiers that they once did. In fact, the speaker is relatively sensitive at 89Db/W/m and presents amplifiers with a very benign 8ohm load. The company claims that the speaker requires only 60 Watts to perform to its high standards, though my experience sheds some doubt on the usefulness of this figure. The Pass Labs A-250 Class A amplifier, which was otherwise a tonally wonderful match for the speaker, was unable to control the speaker's bottom end satisfactorily. In this regard, the Merrill VERITAS mono-bloc amplifiers at 400/watts a side proved far more to the speaker's liking.

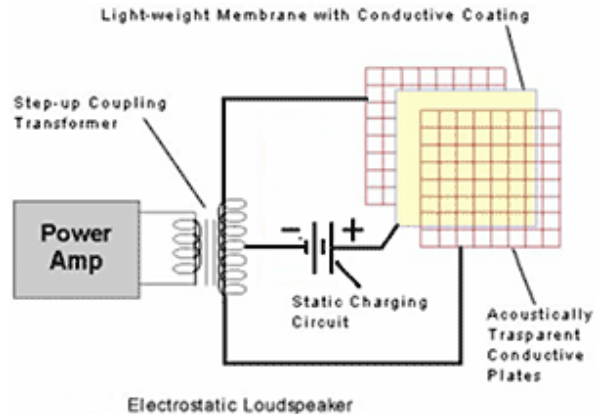
The speaker is not unusually challenging. It does not present amplifiers with the basically dead short that some of the Apogee ribbons did or that the Martin Logan CLS did. It's nowhere near as demanding a load as were previous iterations of the Sound Labs themselves. If anything, the speaker demands no more of an amplifier than do large Magnepans like the 3.7 and the 20.7. Manageable, if not easy. But then again no one would ever confuse an electrostatic with a horn; 2A3 based tube amplifiers need not apply. Unlike the Quad 57s, that for all their magic are compromised at the frequency extremes, the Sound Labs are rated from 26 Hz to ultrasonic and are thus completely uncompromised in terms of their ability to faithfully reproduce the frequency extremes. I made no effort to validate these claims. The speakers are bi-wireable and benefit from being bi-wired. I made no effort to determine whether they benefitted from bi-amp'ing, however. The speakers allow for individual adjustments in the high, mid and lower frequencies, which I found extremely helpful. My room, which is in general very flattering, nevertheless presents a challenge reproducing the bottom octave. I adjusted the bass control and kept the mid and treble controls in their neutral settings. This produced a fully balanced sound to my ear.

Let it be said that the speaker required very little bass adjustment with Merrill's VERITAS amplifier, certainly in contrast with the PASS A-250 amplifier that was never able fully to control the bass or to otherwise energize it. On the other hand, when driven by the Pass Labs amplifier, the Sound Lab produced a weightier, fuller, denser and harmonically richer sound from the upper bass/lower midrange all the way to the highest registers my ears could make out. More on this below.

Electrostatics: Problems And Sound Lab Solutions

One of the standard advantages of electrostatic speakers is that they minimize unwanted room interactions. In large part, this is the result of their being extremely directional. Their extreme directionality makes set up in a room challenging and listening off axis less than fully enjoyable. The net effect of the latter problem is that electrostatic speakers are not ideal for group listening. In fact, they are optimized for individual listeners: thus the quip that they are expensive, floor standing headphones. I have found the conventional wisdom to be accurate with every electrostatic I have ever listened to with the exception of the Sound Lab 845s. While they largely eliminate unwanted room interactions, they manage nevertheless to energize my rather large listening room, if not quite to the extent that various horn loudspeakers have. More importantly, they are least directional electrostatic loudspeaker I have ever listened to. I regularly listen to them off axis while sitting on my sofa answering emails and catching up on editorial work.

Another virtue of full range electrostatic loudspeakers is that the sound does not typically get artificially louder the closer you get to the speaker. This is a function of their being line-sources. The problem is that with most electrostatics as you move towards one of the speakers you lose the output from the other thus requiring that you listen on axis. This does not mirror one's experience in a concert hall or music venue. If it did, there would be precious few seats worth purchasing. The Sound Lab do not suffer from this shortcoming of conventional electrostatic design. The perspective on the overall sound changes as you move around the room just as it would in a concert hall, but the character of the sound remains constant and full. This is a remarkable achievement. Together, these two features of the Sound Lab make it even more social than the vast majority of conventional loudspeakers!



Music And The Absolute Truth

A full range electrostatic speaker is either enormous or a misnomer. Enormous because the only way it can produce real bass is to devote many square inches of panel to moving enough air to do so. If it doesn't do so, it is not full range, thus the expression 'full range' is inapt: a misnomer. Many manufacturers of electrostatics solve this problem by creating hybrid designs. In the typical hybrid design, the lower registers are handled by a conventional cone woofer. Even Sound Lab produces a hybrid speaker. There are many advantages of such designs. Most importantly, they reduce the size of the speaker considerably, thus reducing the aesthetic demands one faces once having chosen to go the electrostatic route. The second advantage is that a conventional woofer is capable of greater dynamics than is a full range electrostatic.

There is no question that a hybrid design is a space saver. The matter of dynamics is more complicated. I am not persuaded that the dynamics one achieves from a hybrid design is worth the cost in overall coherence. In addition, the Sound Lab 845s are remarkably dynamic for a full range electrostatic. Even so, it is the one area in which the speaker's performance falls just a bit short of the musical ideal. Though the dynamics surprise and do not disappoint, the speaker is not really made to rock and roll. This is a double-edged sword. On the positive side, the speaker is able to maintain a dynamic consistency throughout the frequency range that is natural and addictive. It's just that every once in a while when you are anticipating the big gut-busting slam, you will find yourself disappointed. It's not going to happen.

Part of the price one pays for going with a full range electrostatic speaker is somewhat constrained dynamics—especially when compared with horns. One of the great virtues of a properly designed horn loaded woofer is its incredible speed and slam. There is just no way an electrostatic speaker is going to equal that performance—and the Sound Lab is no exception. On the other hand, the Sound Lab dynamics are very good and consistent—top to bottom. In every other musically significant dimension, the Sound Lab is equal to or exceeds the performance of every other speaker I have owned or listened to extensively. The upper bass/lower midrange is weighty and warm, rich and robust. The midrange is simply glorious and the upper registers are silky smooth and extended.

The speaker displays an absolutely unparalleled wholeness. You can hear everything—individually if that is your cup of tea—or as a complete whole. If you are inclined to follow the bass line, go ahead, it is all there, never muffled or lost. Want to follow the various ways in different instruments introduce the melody, go ahead. The Sound Labs have an uncanny ability to take the music apart and put it all together again—simultaneously. The parts never distract from the whole and the whole never prevents the listener from attending to the parts. Everything is present; every musical value realized. All this, without the speaker calling the slightest bit of attention to itself. And that is quite a feat, given how large the speaker is.

Nothing Is Flawless

But for the somewhat constrained macro-dynamics the Sound Lab 845 is as musically flawless a speaker as I have experienced. That doesn't mean there isn't a problem. In fact there is one problem, and it is not trivial, though it is unusual. The culprit is the packing. My first pair of Sound Lab's arrived nearly a year ago. The panels came in two particle board constructed crates and the quite heavy and substantial power supplies arrived in separate cardboard boxes. All told shipping weight was just south of half a ton! Difficult to get into my home and even more difficult to unload—a three man job at the least—the speakers while easy enough to set up failed to produce sound from one of the speakers. The power supply had been destroyed in the travel. After returning the power supply to Sound Lab, Roger West and his team turned it around in a reasonable time. One month later, the new power supply was set up, only to discover that the speaker had been damaged in the original move. It was arcing. Of course I couldn't discover this originally since without the power supply I heard nothing from the speaker first go round. So it was time to send the speaker back and wait for a replacement. This set me back over two months. The problem was that I had a number of other components in for review and I was falling way behind schedule on my reviews of those products. Lots of emails and phone calls later—and thanks to some very generous and understanding manufacturers—I had bought myself a great deal of time. I was now six months behind schedule and not in the least bit happy. The Sound Lab 845 speakers are beautifully constructed works of musical and visual art—though their commanding presence will not suit every décor or aesthetic vision. They created a visual as well as a sonic stir in my home—with my very understanding wife!

But they deserve far better packaging than they receive. The crates are thin particle board and they were trashed, dented and bruised by the time they reached my home. This is not a trivial problem. It is not as if Sound Lab has an extensive dealer network so that any time a problem with the speaker arises you can simply have your neighborhood dealer pick it up in his truck and take it back to the shop for repair. I am supposing that virtually all repairs must be made at the home base in Utah. That's a lot of travel and the crates should be made to withstand not only the travel but the likely mistreatment they will receive from time to time. They are simply not up to the task. When I discussed this with Roger, he indicated that he had never had any trouble with damage owing to transportation before. I have no reason to doubt him but I also have no way of confirming his claim. I do know that given the construction of the crates if Sound Lab has so far escaped damage in transportation more than a bit of good luck has been involved.

The Sound Lab Majestic 845 is one of the truly great speakers extant. While it is revealing of upstream components, it never fails to be musically persuasive. It is the kind of speaker that any reviewer would want to own because it is revealing without being microscopic. It never substitutes scientific inquiry for musical pleasure. It is a brilliant design. It works with high powered tube amps including OTLs. It works with the wonderful Merrill VERITAS class D amps. In fact, that was a glorious and reasonably priced match. If you choose to go in that direction, my suggestion is that you look for a preamp with just a bit more tonal warmth. It worked in most respects with the Pass Labs A-250 failing only in that the bottom octave lacked the last bit of control and energy. It is thus revealing but never at the expense of musical enjoyment. I recommend the speaker to any reviewer with a room large enough to handle them. You simply won't find a more honest speaker anywhere; nearly flawless. It is also reasonably priced at a tad over \$35,000.00 For that money you get a technical marvel that creates a musical experience on a par with the best available at any price. What you don't get is a speaker that physically disappears into your living space. And to be honest, what you don't get is a speaker that is packed for shipment with anything like the care that goes into its design and construction. The crating is a paradigmatic case of being a penny wise and several thousand dollar foolish.

If you buy the speakers and I cannot say enough about why doing so would make sense, pay the extra money to have them properly crated and delivered. They are not fragile once out of the box. They are fragile being transported in the box. Get them to your home in one piece and you will have speakers that will serve you and the music for as long as you live. I have many friends who own electrostatics. Most of them own restored Quads. The list includes David Chesky, Robin Wyatt, Gary Krakow and Kent McCoullough. As far as I know there isn't a one of them who doesn't long for the Sound Labs. It is the only electrostatic loudspeaker that makes sense to abandon the Quads for.

Add me to the list. I have been a horn guy—as many of you know—for twenty years. Before then I owned Quads. I even owned PK Quads somewhere along the line while owning horns. I am about to receive another pair of Quads from Kent in the next few months. It's not as if the Quads are 80% of the Sound Labs. They are not. They are just different speakers. The Quads are dynamically challenged and are basically headphones on feet. The Sound Labs create an orchestral presence in all its musical dimensions. Quads are great, but they are not Sound Labs. There are only three things that prevent the Sound Labs from being the greatest speaker on earth. They are humongous; they are shipped poorly; and they have somewhat restrictive dynamics. There is nothing to be done about the size and probably very little that can be done about the dynamics. There is a good deal that can be done about the shipping, and to be honest—something that means a lot to me—they owe it to their customers to do *a lot* better on the shipping front.

Get a pair of Sound Lab 845 to your home in one piece and you have the heart of a music system that should last you forever. I would have been happy to call them my own. Problem is I have reached the stage of downsizing and reassessing the place of various important aspects of my life. I leave with one imploration: Roger, fix the packaging; and with one exhortation: listen to these speakers. Noting quite compares. And one bit of advice that I am sure will anger many. Whatever you do, don't listen to them through TACT electronics or room correction devices. I don't think I have ever heard a less musical series of components. Am not sure that I have heard the speaker at its best yet and thus would be interested in hearing what other matches audiophiles and music lovers have found particular persuasive. I don't recall a more painful moment realizing that I had to give a pair of speakers back to the manufacturer. But one of the joys of reviewing is that there is always something new and promising to listen to. A reviewer's life is a charmed one. The Sound Lab 845 reminded me just how charmed that life can be.

Till next time...

Manufacturer Reply

In reply to Dr. Coleman's review of our Majestic 845 speakers, I feel that he has accomplished something that the audiophile world, in general, will benefit from. I'm referring to reviewing done in a manner that is reminiscent of the early days of High-end Audio when reviews were typically adorned with touches of warmth and humor in addition to unbridled truth. We at Sound Lab appreciate objective comments from an august reviewer, which is the case with Dr. Coleman. It is not possible for a small company such as ours to "see" their product and operation through the eyes of a large consensus of audiophiles. However, through the implementation of critical suggestions offered by competent reviewers, one's products can be further optimized. For this, we thank Dr. Coleman. We greatly appreciate the effort expended by him in reviewing our speakers and we urge him to continue to shine the wisdom of his experience through further reviews in the audiophile world.

Thank you for your great work,

Roger West
Sound Lab, Inc.

Specifications

Type: Electrostatic speaker
Frequency Response: 26 Hz to ultrasonic
Audio Power: 50 minimum, 600 watts maximum
Radiating Area: 2758 square inches
Horizontal Dispersion: 45 degrees (full spectrum)
Vertical Dispersion: Projected field of panel height
Impedance: 8 Ohms
Sensitivity: 89dB/W/m
Controls: High frequency, mid frequency, bass level and D.C. bias
Dimensions: 94" x 39.75" x 8.25 (HxWxD)
Weight: 198 lbs.
Finishes: Medium oak is standard, with other finishes available
Price: \$35,840 per pair o

Company Information

Bo Sound Lab
P.O. Box 409
Gunnison, UT 84634

Voice: (435) 528-7218
Fax: (435) 528-7219
E-mail: SoundLab@burgoyne.com
Website: www.SoundLab-Speakers.com