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AUDIO REVIEWS

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ROAD TOUR Exit 3 WITH MICHAEL LAVORGNA

REVISITED!

Owner: Robin W.

Analog: Garrard 401 turntable with custom plinth; Triplanar tonearm/ZYX Universe SB and NOS Dynavector DV505/(Decca) London Reference (body by Avid); Loricraft PSU45 240v power supply, Garrard runs at 240V; Bastin idler wheel; Ring Mat

Digital: Harmonix Reimyo CD-777 Player, Alesis Masterlink ML9600 pro CDR/hard drive

Tuner: REL 646 Precedent FM broadcast tuner rebuilt by Charlie King with built-in custom King FM multiplexer

Tape: Stellavox SP-7 professional 15ips reel-to-reel tape recorder rebuilt by Charlie King

Phono Stage: ASR Basic Exclusive Phono stage with two separate inputs, one for the London, the other balanced for the ZYX - with battery power supply

Integrated Amp: ASR Basic MK I Exclusive Blue with balanced in and extra sub out, AC power supply for output section, battery power supply for input section

Speakers: Rebuilt Quads Unlimited Quad 57s

Cables: Stealth Indra interconnects throughout, Stealth Hybrid MLT speaker cable

Tweaks: Symposium Rollerblocks Series II under CD player, Symposium Svelte Shelf under turntable

Power: 2 x 20A lines from service panel to equipment; Bob Young Bylux AC filter for Quad 57s; Reimyo ALS-777 line conditioner and XDC Studio Master WattGate power cords for the Reimyo CD-777

Room size: 16' X 23' long wall setup

Listener: Michael Lavorgna



Exit 3 Revisited

I don't know about you but I hate going back the same way I came. I'd much rather vary my route even if it means going a few extra miles. There's something luxurious about a different return trip. Flying in the face of time. I'd like to see another choice on MapQuest beyond *Reverse Route*. Something along the lines of *show me something new*.

Today we've looped back and find ourselves at the home of audio dealer and currency trader Robin W. for the first-ever Road Tour *Revisited*. Yes, we're talking a nearly brand-spankin' new (though mostly old) from-the-ground-up system. And what was the impetus for such a drastic change? After all, the previous 'big rig' consisting of Hørning, Air Tight and Brinkman was no chopped liver. Just what has Robin been up to in the intervening months since we last rang his bell?



Quad ESLs

Ulysses, King Arthur, Bluebeard, Rimbaud, Knut Rockne and Quads. The Quad ESLs are the stuff of legend. Officially born mono in 1957 to Peter J. Walker, the Quad ESLs (originally dubbed "Walker's little wonders") remained in production until 1982. The Quad Electrostatic Speaker as its full name suggests is an electrostatic speaker using treated sheets of DuPont Mylar as drivers. While electrostatic technology wasn't a new concept for use in audio in 1957, Peter Walker worked magic some believe has yet to be rivaled. Walker's own stab at an improvement -- the Quad-63s -- have not gained universal acceptance as such.

"One liked music and one liked a challenge to make things sound better. I still like audio because it is a good technical challenge and it has this aesthetic appeal at the end: you've got the music. This is the reward for all the work done; it has the right balance of science and art. But if you were making nails, there's no great satisfaction about sticking a nail into the wall. After you've done it, it hasn't got this aesthetic appeal that music has at the end of it all." - Peter Walker from an interview in *Audio Amateur* 1978

In the mid 1980s, Robin and his dad drove to the original Quad factory to drop his Quad 405 amplifier off for repair. For the 2nd time. When Peter Walker heard that Robin's amp was back again, he took Robin and his ailing amp up onto the roof of the Quad building where he proceeded to toss Robin's amp off the roof. For Peter Walker, the balance between art, science and reliability left little room for failure

and nothing that a little gravity couldn't fix. Robin left Peter Walker and the Quad factory with a brand new amp and a great story.



Robin also owned a few pairs of ESLs in the past, 57s and 63s, and always thought of the 57s as one of the best speakers, period. A friend of Robin's was looking to build a new system and Robin didn't hesitate to recommend the original Quad ESLs as the starting point. So Robin's friend picked up a mint pair, Robin heard 'em and immediately thought, "why the hell don't I have a pair?" The rest is this system's story.

For the skinny on the Quads, there are a bunch of excellent internet resources. I'd start with [Art Dudley's article](#) in Stereophile for a nice intro; [Gary Krakow](#) at MSNBC chronicling his ongoing Quad love affair; and a thorough reading of the QuadESL.org [site](#). Let me summarize for you here and say the Quad ESL is known as one of the finickiest, frequently fouled up *and* finest speakers you can own. Period.

Quads Unlimited to the Rescue

If you're also inclined to throwing broken things off roofs, you may want to buy yourself a fully refurbished pair of Quads. Time, temperament and treatment may not have been particularly kind to ageing ESLs. If you've read Art Dudley's excellent Quad restoration articles, tackling a ground-up rehab is no mean feat. Even if you are a handy person, you may need to buy yourself some new panels. Luckily there are a few resources and Quads Unlimited is one of them.

Wayne Piquett *is* Quads Unlimited and arguably one of the finest Quad restorers around. Wayne's interest got piqued (sorry) by a seeming lack of factory-spec rebuilders. So he spent nearly two years perfecting his trade. Tensioning and the nylon coating on those Mylar panels are per original spec. Some believe this is crucial to getting that original ESL flavor. There are a host of other tricks and treats up Wayne's sleeves but let's chalk them up to trade better kept secret.

A pair of fully reconditioned Quads Unlimited ESL-57s runs \$2000 if you supply the Quads, or \$3500 for a Quads Unlimited-supplied pair. There are a number of options and upgrades available, including treble clamp board protection circuits, Quads Unlimited-designed stands and stacked versions using two or three pairs. Robin opted for a single pair using the original stands and more important for our music, he had Wayne leave the jute mat off the back of his Quads. This configuration is only recommended for people who will have their ESLs more than a few feet from the rear wall. Otherwise you'll get smearing caused by rear-wall reflections.



Judging from Robin's pair, Wayne does exceptional work. These are, for all intents and purposes, brand new speakers. And if you consider the fact that \$3500 will get you a fully refurbished Quads Unlimited factory-fresh pair, we're talking in my estimation a ridiculously sound bargain if ever there was one. If the Quads have an Achilles heel -- and what speaker doesn't? -- the most painful is, what the hell are you going to drive them with? Sure they can make do with a SET or PP tube amp. Or an OTL or solid-state muscle amp. Did someone say digital? By most accounts, a large dose of feedback is preferable when driving Quads but most accounts I've heard point to different amplifiers. There's always some conjecture relating to getting (or not getting) the most from your Quads. Well, Robin and a few golden-eared friends (trust me on this, I'm not joking) spent some serious time playing musical chairs with a host of potential suitors.

Over two dozen amplifiers went through the Quad paces at chez W.: Accuphase A30, Air Tight ATM 211s, ASR Emitter I, ASR Emitter I Exclusive Blue, Audio Research V70, Bedini 25/25, Berning ZH270, Burgess SV811 SET, Dynaco ST-35, Heathkit (?), JC Morrison 6B4G monos, Leben CS300x, Madison Sound monos, Marantz Class A PM4, Music Reference RM 10 MKI, Music Reference RM 10 MkII, Net Audio Quad 303 upgrade, Quad 22s, Quad 303, Quad 50E monos, Quad QII classic monos, Rogue Audio Custom Atlas, Sugden, Transcendent T-8 OTL, VTL Tiny Triodes and Wright Sound mono 25s. I had the pleasure of hearing a bunch of these amps over the course of a few months. And the winner is...

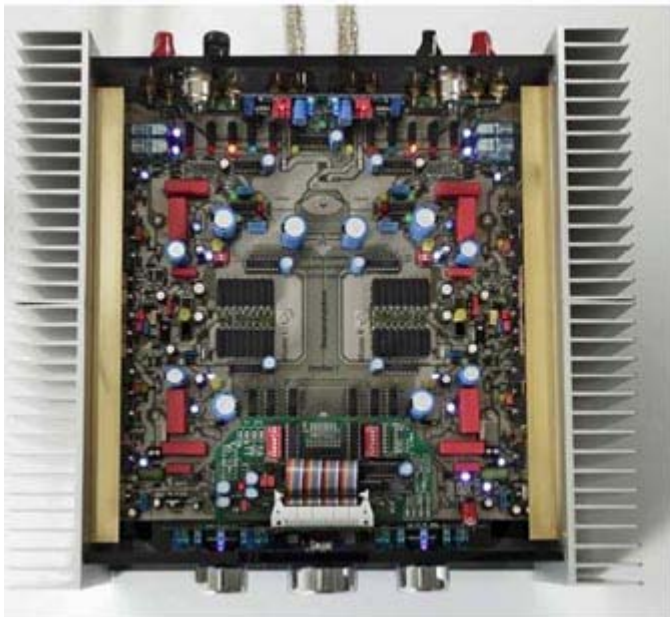


ASR

Audiosysteme Friedrich Schaefer (ASR) is a small German company with a few products that garner near-ecstatic raves whenever touched by reviewers' ears. "This amp is so far beyond the usual that I call it "revolutionary" ... essential elements of its performance defy the usual descriptives ..." - from "HP's Workshop" in October/November 2005 issue of *The Absolute Sound*

Founded in 1980, ASR has four main products; two integrated amplifiers -- the ASR Emitter I and Emitter II -- and two phono stages called the Basis and Mini Basis. The Emitters are MOSFET-based integrated amplifiers and have been in production since 1980! Over the years they've been tweaked, tuned and upgraded but remain Emitters in name and MOSFET in driver and output stage. Not a tube to be found anywhere inside or out and they show off the glory of those solid-state guts through a smoked acrylic case. The Emitters are available in regular guise or Exclusive which adds a military ceramic input IC AD 843 SQ; buffering capacitors with a total 886.000uF; a balanced input for CD with switchable input impedance; feet made from massive brass for the amplifier unit available in chrome or gold; two power supplies with improved equipment for higher performance, with the 2x 3PM transformers equipped with higher magnetic flux kernel-sheet metal; and rectification with 56 Schottky rectifiers. A battery power supply for the input stage with 400.000uF additional buffering is available as an option.

The Emitter I Exclusive puts out 160 class A/B watts into 8 ohms (290w into 4 ohms) and pricing starts at \$15,500. The Emitter II Exclusive puts out 280 watts into 8 ohms and starts at \$22,000. There are a number of options including battery power for the input stage, phono board, XLR inputs and a pair of variable RCA outputs. There are also a number of cosmetic options including a 'Blue' version which means you'll have all blue lights glowing on the inside, a 'clear' version which removes the smoking from the acrylic case for a clear picture of the insides and chrome, black or gold heat sinks.



The unit at Robin's is an Emitter I Exclusive Blue with the battery-powered input stage option, XLR inputs and variable RCA outputs. Both AC and DC power supplies reside in their own separate boxes that include a massive no-nonsense connector manufactured by Harting in Germany. There's a remote control that controls not only the usual functions but adds niceties like input level balancing and dimming the front panel readout or having it turn off completely 10 seconds after an adjustment.

The ASR Basis Exclusive (\$6200) is a dedicated phono stage which also houses its power supply in a separate chassis. Input capacity and gain are user adjustable from 100pF to 320pF and +32dB to +64dB respectively. There are balanced and single-ended inputs and Robin makes use of both with his twin-armed turntable. As with the Emitters, the smoked acrylic case allows for an angled glance at the insides and they are a type-A's dream boat - symmetrical, logical and orderly. I suspect if Mr. Schaefer caught a glimpse of the insides of something like the Supratek Cabernet Dual with its abstract expressionist wiring scheme, he might just spasm.



Garrard 401



Garrard and Quads. Tea and crumpets. The 401 is the overshadowed younger brother of the infamous 301 (kind of like the Quad 63s). Robin's NOS Garrard 401 was first sent to Loricraft for servicing before taking up residence in a custom Robin-designed plinth which suspends the maple motor board over the base with ¼" Audiopoint brass points. This plinth accommodates two tone arms; a Triplanar which holds a ZYX Universe SB cartridge; and a Dynavector DV505 housing a (Decca) London Reference. The Triplanar is suspended above the motor board while the Dynavector is attached directly to it. Since the Garrard runs on 240V, there's also a Loricraft PSU45 in use.





Harmonix Reimyo CD Player

One of the few remnants of systems past is the Reimyo CD player. Coming in at a hair under \$15,500, the Reimyo has been called the best RedBook CD player around. Since our last visit, the Harmonix Reimyo ALS-777 line conditioner (\$5,195) has been added to the digital chain along with XDC Studio Master WattGate power cords. Robin hears a distinct loss of edge with the power conditioner in place as well as other improvements. I must say we listened to a bunch of CDs and I had no complaints. Smooth sailing.

Stellavox

The Swiss-made Stellavox SP-7 is a portable 15ips reel-to-reel tape recorder originally produced in 1973 (or so I believe - information on the Stellavox line is rather scarce online). Charlie King has completely refurbished Robin's player and anyone lucky enough to have heard Charlie's demo at the VTV Show in NJ last year also caught a glimpse of this player. The professional 15ips tape recorder was mainly used to record in the field. According to Sound Designer Frank Serafin, "back in the pre-digital day, when I recorded sound effects for Star Trek and Tron and other films, everything was captured in the field to analog tape on battery-operated Nagra and

Stellavox 1/4-inch machines running at 15 ips [inches per second]. Amazing analog recordings, the best of the best." And anyone who's seen the film *Diva* will have an idea of the potential for high quality field recording using magnetic tape and the ensuing love affair that can develop between man and tape recorder.

Robin plans to take his Stellavox on the road to places like the wilds of CES for on-the-fly playback demos using master tapes as source.



REL 646

The Radio Engineering Laboratory (REL) 646 Precedent tuner is another living legend from the 1950s. The Precedent was the only consumer product manufactured by REL as they were suppliers of commercial and military radio equipment. This particular tuner was modified by Charlie King and includes a built-in FM Multiplexer and stereo outputs. This may be the only such REL Precedent in existence (modifications are reversible). You will see RELs come up on eBay and Audiogon from time to time and they sell for somewhere in the neighborhood of \$3000. I've read there were only a few hundred made because they cost more to make than what REL sold them for. I also learned from the excellent Tuner Information Center [website](#) that the Precedent was the inspiration for the Marantz 10B according to Dick Sequerra. I could find only one word in my vocabulary to describe the REL Precedent tuner - *gorgeous*.



Stealth

Everything is wired up with Stealth Indra interconnects and Stealth Hybrid MLT Speaker cable. I'm not so sure I have anything more to add on that note.



The Greatest Hi-Fi Product Ever Produced?

What does a direct copy of the master tape of Miles Davis' *Kind of Blue* sound like played on a Stellavox feeding the ASR Emitter I Exclusive through a pair of Quad ESLs? All wired up with Stealth Indra cable? Give up? It sounds really *really* good. First things first - the Quads let go of the music like no other speakers I've ever heard. They don't throw it out into your room or gently nudge it away or shout it out. They completely distance themselves from having anything to do with the music they make. And they accomplish this musical Houdini routine effortlessly. You don't even have to close your eyes to get it. And you don't have to crank up the volume. Just listen. I'd suggest that anyone really digging the Open Baffle sound should hear some Quads as well.

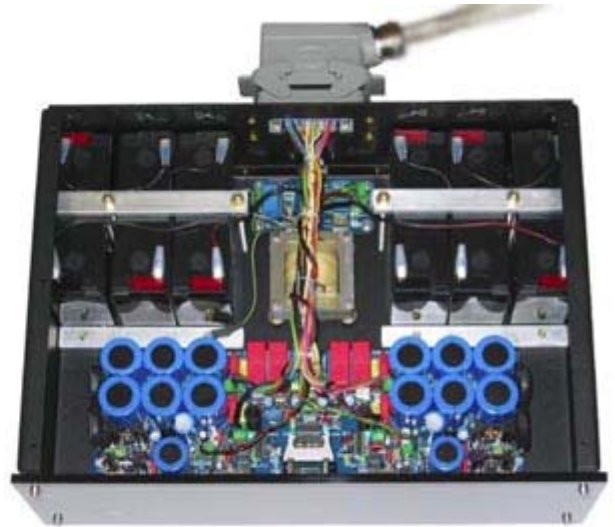
I will also say this organic mass of sound source was at its most fluid from the ESLs with the ASR Emitter I in action. The Wright Sound Mono 25s gave the ESLs a nice warm ball of sound glow and something like Ricky Lee Jones felt like an embrace. The custom Rogue Atlas, the 2nd favorite amp of the lot, evened things out and drove the Quads with more authority. The added power of the Rogue seemed to coax the music more effectively out to fill up the room. What the ASR adds, beyond a much larger dent in your check book, is clarity, resolution and dynamic snap that goes the last mile to provide some of most satisfying music I've had the pleasure to be pleasantly surprised by. Over and over again. As the old joke sorta goes - that musical stage sure is wide. Deep too. Every recording takes up residence in your room according to its own recorded logic. In other words, the reproduced stage is only limited by the recording. Something like one of the amazing single-miked Chesky disks are just head-shakingly, shockingly good on the Quads. Think layers over layers of sound washing your thoughts of Hifi away and in their wake nothing but music remains.



I know I'm focusing on the Quads but as Robin said, "they are limitless in their ability to improve with the associated equipment". And I'll be damned if that's not exactly what I heard through multiple amplifiers, two phono stages, two tonearm/cartridge combinations, CD, hard drive and tape as source. The ASR Emitter was the clear winner for amplification and Robin was so taken with his original ASR that he traded up to the most recent version and added the ASR Basis phono stage to boot.

Perhaps more than many other loudspeakers, the Quads make it difficult to generalize about amplifier performance outside of ESL-

land. So take this for what it is – an informal listening session(s) of a complete system. And this system just happens to have a crew of classics - Garrard 401, REL Precedent, Stellavox SP-7 and some newcomer contenders. As is always the case at Robin's, I was treated to a wide variety of great tunes on vinyl, CD, tuner and tape. In terms of sheer musical enjoyment, this ASR/Quad rig pegged my pleasure meter like very few others have. And if the Quads have shortcomings, I didn't hear the old standards: "The Quads don't do bass." Well they do with the ASR Emitter I and the Rogue Atlas and there's no sense of dynamic drivel. Are they "the greatest hi-fi product of all time" as HiFi News anointed them? I don't know and don't really care. What I do care about is that I heard the near 50-year old Quad ESL design with amplification costing from roughly \$600 to \$16,000 and they consistently made some of the most engrossing and utterly captivating music I've ever heard in a home.



In the first installment of this Road Tour, Robin spoke of a Desert Island system. The one system he'd take to that imagined land of milk and honey. And for our last visit, those honors were not bestowed on the big rig. Well, all that's changed. It's as if that oasis just popped up in the middle of Robin's listening room thanks to Peter J. Walker. Sometimes you just have to go back to find your way to somewhere with music at the end of it all.



Michael Lavorgna

Robin W.s [website](#)

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