QLN Prestige Five Gen 2

Fifty years after its foundation, QLN appears not to have altered its mission by a single degree: Scandinavian technology in the service of music.

The history of Scandinavian high fidelity is remarkably intricate. Over the past fifty years, countless companies have emerged, entrepreneurs and designers have moved from one firm to another, and major loudspeaker, driver and electronics brands have risen to prominence or gradually disappeared from the scene, amid a continuous flow of innovations and products across every market segment.
One need only consider the many companies that originated from the core group of driver designers behind the first Vifa, together with its Danish connections (B&O, Peerless and Scan-Speak) and Norwegian counterparts (Seas), not to mention later American involvement through Tymphany. Or the common roots shared by Dynaudio and Morel. Or again the network of interrelated companies that currently populate the hi-fi landscape, from Dali to Lyngdorf and Purifi. Supported by a highly developed educational and research infrastructure, centred around institutions such as the Universities of Gothenburg and Copenhagen, and by a long-standing engineering tradition that provided both theoretical and practical foundations, the Scandinavian school has fostered an exceptional level of dynamism among the most influential figures in electroacoustics. Take, for example, Mats Andersen. In 1977 he contributed to the foundation and development of the Swedish company QLN, whose name is "almost" an acronym derived from those of its founders, Lars Quicklund and Nils Liljeroth. From 1979 onward he also collaborated with DLS, a company widely known in the car audio sector, for which he developed both dedicated automotive loudspeaker lines and the Flatbox series of ultra-shallow domestic loudspeakers, including matching subwoofers. Within the car audio field he also developed a special damping material, a viscoelastic adhesive that found its way into numerous subsequent projects but achieved its greatest success in sheet form for application to vehicle doors and body panels to reduce vibrations. Marketed under the Noise Killer brand - and instantly recognisable by its distinctive blue colour - it became extremely popular among enthusiasts.

Indeed, through collaborations with companies such as Scan-Speak, stakes in various businesses, and work as a consultant, designer or investor - including Dynavoice, Strandberg Audio and Ground Zero, to name but a few - Mats Andersen can claim involvement in the design or development of well over one hundred products.
In 2013 he returned to QLN as part of the ownership group and immediately developed a new reference loudspeaker, appropriately named One. In this design he incorporated many of his core convictions, beginning with the inclina-

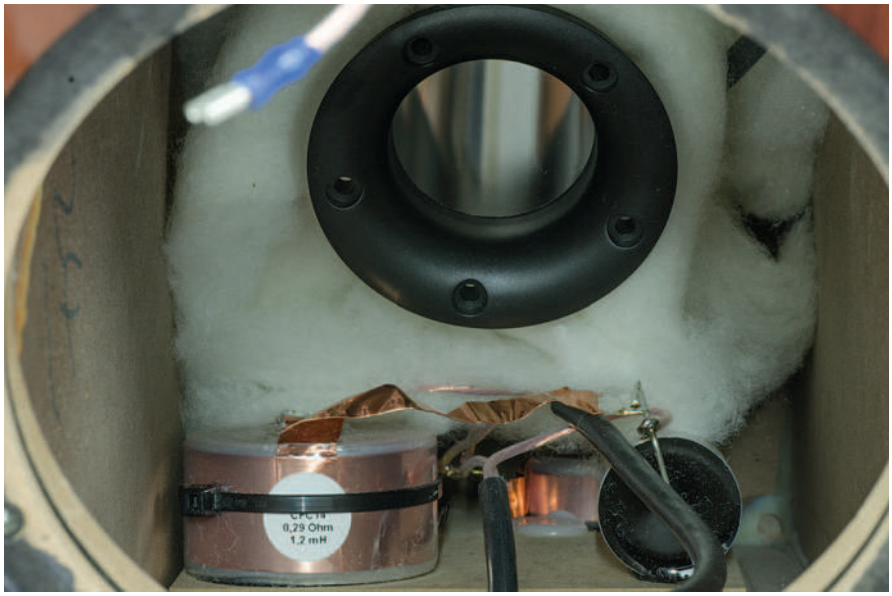
QLN Prestige Five Gen 2
2.5-way floorstanding loudspeaker system

Italian distributor: Hi-Fi Di Prinzio, Via Benedetto Croce 437, 66100 Chieti Scalo (CH). Tel. 0871 562198 - ww.hifidiprinzio.it info@hifidiprinzio.it
Retail price: €19,500.00 per pair, Walnut Matte finish; €21,400.00 per pair, Walnut Dark Piano finish (VAT included)

MANUFACTURER'S SPECIFICATIONS

Nominal impedance: 4 ohms. **Recommended amplifier power:** 50-250 watts RMS. **Sensitivity:** 90 dB SPL (1 watt/1 m). **Low-frequency extension:** 26 Hz (-3 dB). **Cabinet construction:** Dual-layer Qboard®. **Dimensions (H×W×D):** 1,000×210×600 mm.**Weight:** 41 kg

tion of the front baffle to achieve time alignment of the drive units. This is why the QLN One, a standmount two-way loudspeaker now in its seventh generation, features its distinctive pyramidal shape, a concept later echoed by the similarly styled Signature model.
Without diminishing either his curiosity or his involvement in other ventures, Andersen subsequently expanded the QLN catalogue with additional models, starting with the Reference, a 2.5-way floorstanding design in which the concept of time-aligned acoustic output led to a pronounced rearward tilt of the front baffle. The same design principles are also evident throughout the Prestige series: the Prestige One, once again closely related to the original One, and two further floorstanding models whose second generation has recently been introduced - the two-way Prestige Three and the 2.5-way Prestige Five. It is precisely this updated version of the Prestige Five, recently introduced to the Italian market, that caught our attention. Let us take a closer look.



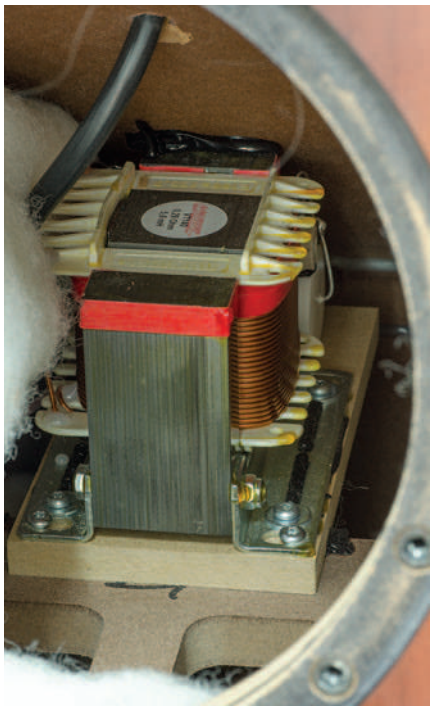
Looking through the midwoofer aperture reveals the crossover's point-to-point construction and the exceptional quality of the components employed, including copper-foil inductors and oil-impregnated capacitors. The driver rebate in the front baffle also reveals the sandwich construction of the cabinet panel, comprising two HDF layers bonded by an intermediate viscoelastic material.

Prestige Five: Sound Above All

The first thing that immediately stands out about the Prestige Five is its cabinet architecture. Viewed from the side, it is tilted markedly backwards, forming an almost parallelogram-shaped profile. Seen from the front, however, it appears far more conventional, with straight cabinet walls up to the point where the tweeter begins to exert its influence, at which stage the front baffle gradually narrows towards the top. A plan view reveals yet another distinctive feature: the cabinet is unusually deep, with parallel side panels.
Many words to describe what becomes instantly apparent from the photographs. And, naturally, there is a purpose behind every design choice.
The rearward inclination of the front baffle is employed to align the acoustic centres of the drive units, while the tapered upper section of the baffle helps minimise edge diffraction effects, particularly detrimental at mid and high frequencies. Likewise, careful optimisation of the internal bracing layout reduces standing-wave effects and the cabinet resonances that may result from them. Speaking of resonances, Mats Andersen has effectively "connected the dots" by constructing the loudspeaker from QBoard panels - a sandwich structure consisting of two HDF layers bonded together by the same viscoelastic adhesive technology previously employed in the highly successful Noise Killer damping material.
The viscoelastic layer serves to dissipate residual panel vibrations by converting vibrational energy into heat. Combined with the cabinet's mass, geometry and strategically positioned internal bracing, this approach contributes significantly to reducing distortion generated by cabinet-borne vibrations. Completing the package is a level of craftsmanship worthy of a premium loudspeaker. The Prestige Five is available in two elegant real-wood veneer finishes: Walnut Matte and Walnut Dark Piano.

Construction

With the Gen 2 series, QLN has updated several aspects of the Prestige Five, always pursuing performance improvements aimed at an even more faithful reproduction of music. One of the areas that has evolved most significantly compared with the first-generation Prestige Five is undoubtedly the cabinet, whose structure and internal bracing have been revised while retaining the original dimensions.
The loudspeaker's fundamental concept, however, remains unchanged. We are still looking at a floorstanding design employing three drive units: two cones of identical diameter but differing in function and diaphragm material, together with a dome tweeter mounted within a felt-covered baffle section.
Each of the two bass drivers is provided with its own dedicated enclosure volume and its own reflex port. These flared ports, identical in diameter and rounded at both ends, vent through the rear panel. Also located on the rear panel, near the base of the cabinet, is the connector plate fitted with a pair of exceptionally well-engineered binding posts from WBT's Nextgen series. There are only two terminals, however, as the Prestige Five does not provide for bi-wiring or bi-amping. Stability, mechanical grounding and vibration control are entrusted to feet capable of accommodating either rubber damping elements or spike terminations. All the drive units are supplied by Scan-Speak, which comes as little surprise given Mats Andersen's long-standing relationship with the Danish manufacturer. The woofer is the Scan-Speak 18WU/8487T00, a catalogue model belonging to the company's Illuminator range. It is an 18 cm driver featuring the

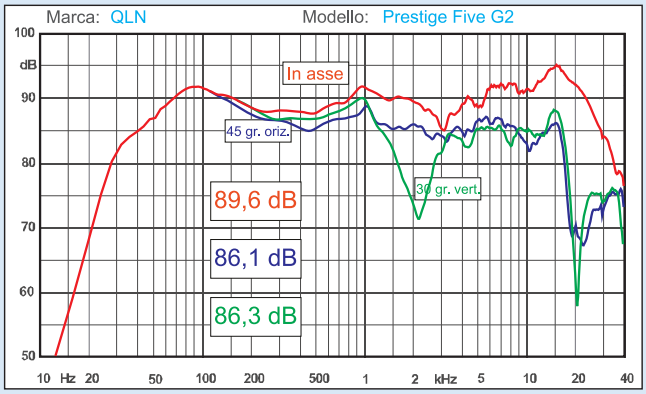


The magnificent Mundorf VT140-series inductor is firmly mounted to one of the cabinet's internal braces. It employs an E-core constructed from Feron laminations and heavy-gauge copper windings, allowing the woofer low-pass filter to operate with minimal series resistance.

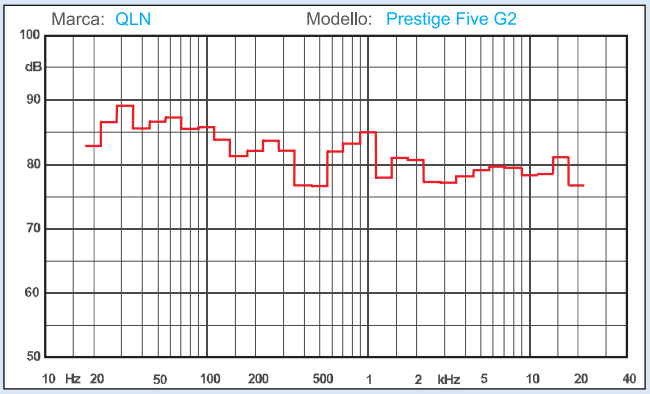
Loudspeaker system **QLN Prestige Five Gen 2**

MEASURED PERFORMANCE

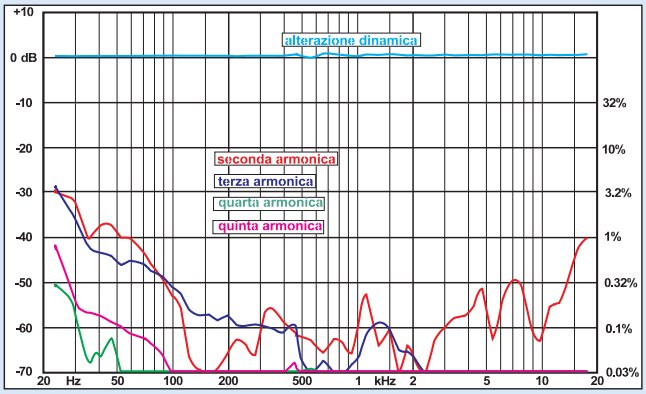
Frequency Response at 2.83 V / 1 m



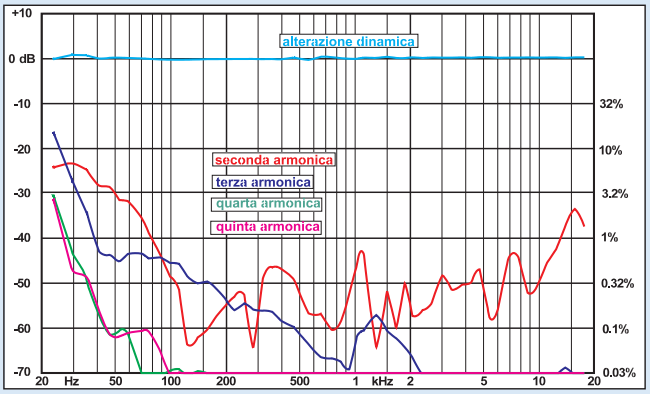
In-Room Frequency Response



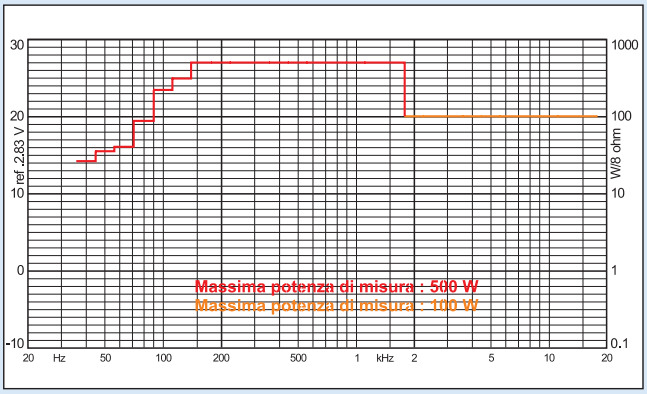
2nd, 3rd, 4th, 5th Harmonic Distortion and Dynamic Deviation at 90 dB SPL (average)



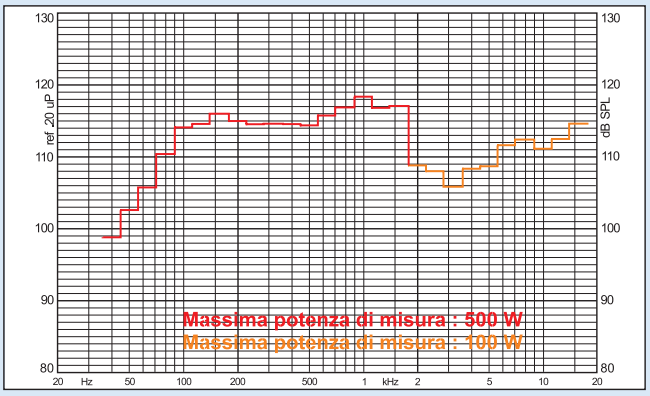
2nd, 3rd, 4th, 5th Harmonic Distortion and Dynamic Deviation at 100 dB SPL (average)



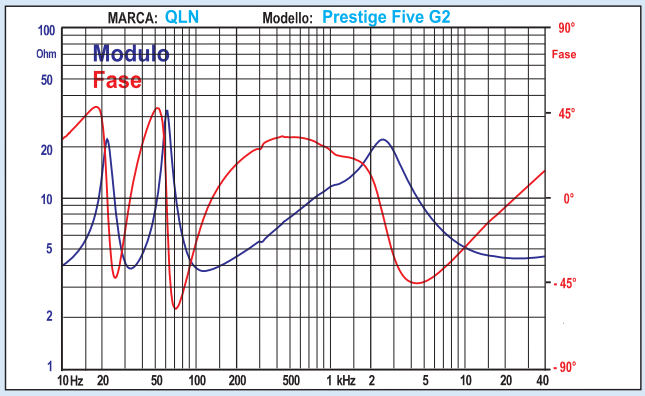
MIL – Maximum Input Level
(for total intermodulation distortion not exceeding 5%)



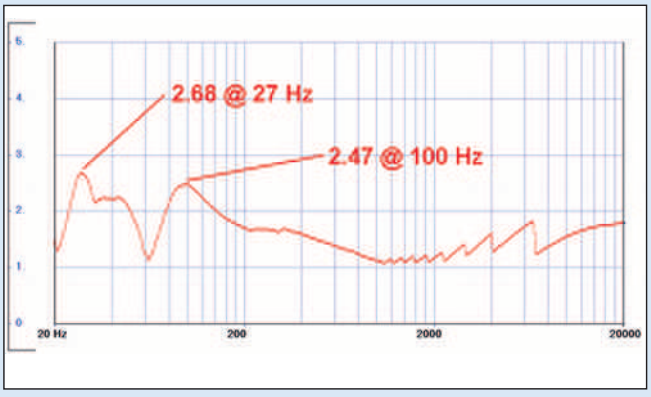
MOL – Maximum Output Level
(for total intermodulation distortion not exceeding 5%)



Impedance Magnitude and Phase

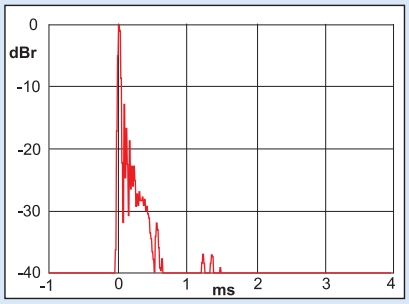


Excess Current Coefficient
(maximum current required relative to an 8-ohm resistor)

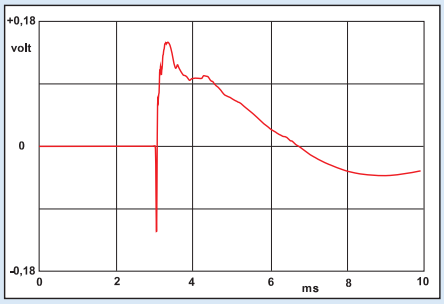


distinctive and highly sophisticated basket design characteristic of the series. Manufactured from die-cast metal, the basket exhibits unusual depth, while its three slender, aerodynamically profiled spokes convey an impression of remarkable rigidity despite their elegant appearance. Halfway down the structure is a large spider assembly, leaving the voice-coil former exposed and ventilated through openings designed to ensure proper air-

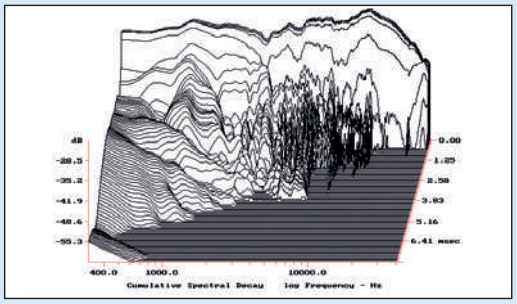
Time Response – ETC (Energy Time Curve)



Time Response – Step



Time Response – Waterfall



The anechoic frequency response of the QLN appears relatively lively at first glance. However, if we draw an imaginary reference line through the average sensitivity value of 89.6 dB - which is rather high - it becomes evident that the deviations remain within only a few decibels across a very wide bandwidth, roughly from 50 Hz to 13 kHz. Measuring the low-frequency response required more attention than usual because of the separate reflex volumes assigned to the two cone drivers. In practice, both enclosures proved to be tuned to virtually the same frequency (32 Hz). To obtain the final result, several MIB (Microphone In Box) measurements were acquired and subsequently summed vectorially. The design objective becomes immediately apparent: to achieve a full-bodied response extending to very low frequencies by accepting a degree of overdamping that would later be compensated by room gain. Indeed, listening-room measurements confirm that the bass is both extended and substantial, and this characteristic is certainly not confined to the graphs. Its fullness and weight are among the most readily perceived qualities regardless of musical genre. Vertical dispersion is entirely consistent with what would be expected from a loudspeaker of this type, while horizontal dispersion becomes somewhat more restricted from the midrange upwards. Dynamic harmonic distortion is exceptionally low. At a sound pressure level of 90 dB, performance ranks among the best dynamic loudspeaker systems we have measured. Even at 100 dB SPL, behaviour remains remarkably well controlled, with second-harmonic components predominating and a notable resistance to the generation of higher-order harmonics. Once again, these measurements correlate closely with the listening impressions. Given these premises, it is hardly surprising that both MIL and MOL deliver more than satisfactory results. A maximum output capability approaching 99 dB at 40 Hz, rising monotonically to stabilise at approximately 115 dB, already suggests the possibility of enjoyable listening even at substantial playback levels. Time-domain performance is equally commendable. The ETC effectively decays to silence within 0.7 milliseconds, an excellent result. The waterfall plot exhibits very rapid decay throughout the upper-midrange and treble regions, becoming only slightly slower at lower frequencies while still maintaining excellent control of resonant behaviour. Even the step response appears more coherent and better integrated than is usually observed in floorstanding loudspeakers. The electrical impedance represents a demanding but by no means extreme load. The minimum value is 3.8 ohms at 120 Hz - a region where musical signals typically contain considerable energy - while the extra-current coefficient reaches 2.47 at 100 Hz. As a consequence, an amplifier rated at 200 watts into 8 ohms may be required to deliver peak currents of up to 17.5 amperes.

Fabrizio Montanucci

flow around the moving assembly. The driver has a nominal impedance of 8 ohms, a minimum impedance of 7.3 ohms and a DC resistance (Re) of 5.6 ohms. The motor system employs a neodymium magnet assembly of particularly original design which, despite its compact dimensions, generates a substantial force factor (a specified 7.4 T·m). The motor is configured according to an underhung voice-coil topology, whereby the voice coil remains entirely within the magnetic field generated by an appropriately tall gap. This arrangement minimises distortion because the BxL factor remains virtually constant throughout the driver's excursion range. Despite this design approach, cone excursion remains considerable, with a specified linear travel of ±9 mm. This is supported by the behaviour of the diaphragm itself, which is necessarily rigid - being made from black anodised aluminium - in order to maintain optimal pistonic operation at low frequencies.

The midwoofer employed in the Prestige Five is closely related to the woofer. Also part of Scan-Speak's Illuminator family, it is nevertheless a custom-built unit manufactured to QLN specifications. Mats Andersen has always believed in the central importance of the midwoofer - and more generally of the midrange region - and this conviction is reflected in the attention devoted to this particular driver. The basic architecture follows that of the 18 cm Illuminator midwoofers and woofers, including the neodymium motor system, underhung voice-coil configuration and highly open basket design. The diaphragm, however, is different, being constructed from Kevlar. Light and well damped, it is capable of integrating effectively with the woofer while simultaneously extending cleanly towards the crossover region with the tweeter. As with the woofer, copper rings are incorporated within the motor structure to control voice-coil inductance at higher frequencies, thereby improving midrange dynamics and reducing intermodulation distortion.

The tweeter employs a highly distinctive motor assembly, consisting of six neodymium magnet segments whose arrangement creates a small acoustic chamber, visible through the semi-transparent cover and filled with damping material.

The tweeter, designated D3004/660000, also belongs to Scan-Speak's Illuminator series. It employs the company's AirCirc motor system, consisting of six small neodymium magnets arranged around pole structures that concentrate magnetic flux within the gap. This configuration creates a usable central cavity that functions as an acoustic chamber, clearly visible through the transparent

rear cover of the motor assembly. Featuring a 26 mm voice coil and an equally sized textile dome surrounded by a large surround, the tweeter is capable of maintaining linear behaviour up to 30 kHz while also offering excellent off-axis dispersion. The tweeter is mounted to a die-cast front flange that supports the entire structure, although this is concealed beneath the felt-covered sound-absorbing front panel treatment. It is interesting to note how closely related the woofer and midwoofer are in their overall design philosophy. Their similar resonance frequencies (see the parameter table) explain their shared operation in the lower frequency range. The principal difference lies in the parameters governing damping behaviour. The higher mechanical Q of the midwoofer indicates a less heavily damped driver and consequently a more responsive behaviour at higher frequencies. Another area updated in the Gen 2 series is the

Marco Cicogna's Listening Notes

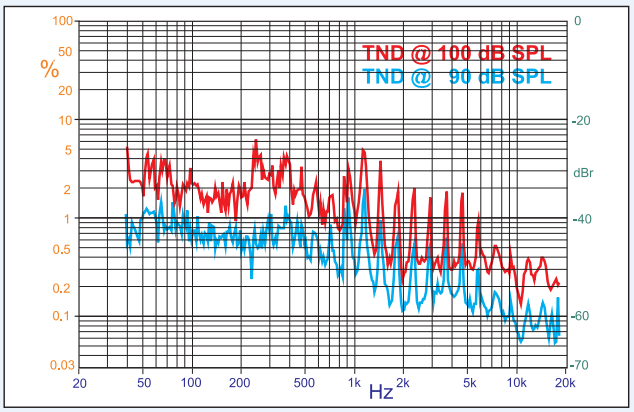
There are many paths towards achieving optimum sound reproduction within a domestic listening environment. Every enthusiast has his or her own recipe in a hobby that transforms a collection of technological objects into a source of genuine enjoyment. A relentless pursuit of perfection often disturbs the sleep of audiophiles, who endlessly seek improvements through cables, connectors, isolation devices and assorted magical accessories intended to refine this elusive acoustic reference. More often, however, the evolutionary path passes through the careful selection of the key components in the playback chain, beginning with the source, continuing through amplification and ultimately arriving at the loudspeakers. The loudspeaker system represents the decisive stage which, together with the recording itself, exerts the greatest influence on the final result. It is within the loudspeaker that the electrical signal is transformed once again into air vibrations perceptible to our senses. In this respect it is the transducer upon which the decisive tonal character of reproduction is imprinted, further shaped by interactions with the listening environment. The second-generation QLN Prestige Five (although in practice this is the only version we have experienced) arrived in our listening room as a substantial floor-standing system that quickly found a comfortable home within the editorial reference setup. Listening tests were conducted using our usual Magnat UDP 900 server/DAC, this time partnered with the Unison Research preamplifier and power amplifier reviewed elsewhere in this issue. The first impression is that of a loudspeaker considerably larger than its dimensions would suggest. The impressive low-frequency extension, and even more so the solid presence throughout the upper bass and lower midrange, would seem to originate from drivers far larger than the two 18 cm units employed in each cabinet. hese are clearly drivers of high quality, because reaching their limits required the full output capability of the Italian power amplifier while reproducing the formidable bass drum passages contained in Holst's Suite for Military Band from the now-classic Telarc recording conducted by Frederick Fennell - should you wish to try it for yourself. The overall tonal balance leans towards warm and autumnal colours. Reassuring at all times, the Prestige Five approaches a wide variety of musical programmes with generous weight and substance throughout the upper bass and low-frequency regions. This welcome solidity nevertheless leaves the midrange and treble reasonably transparent. Detail is never lacking, and instruments positioned in secondary layers of the soundstage remain clearly focused. The tonal colour of the lower string sections acquires a slightly darker hue than usual, while the contribution of instruments operating in the deepest registers is emphasised within a distinctly tangible and physical interpretation of the musical event. One advantage of the loudspeaker's strong foundation in the first few octaves is that reproduction remains complete and convincing even at modest listening levels. Several benchmark organ recordings from my reference collection, particularly releases from MDG and Reference Recordings, benefited greatly from this quality, producing pedal notes of impressive depth and authority - something rarely encountered from loudspeakers of this size and without the assistance of high-performance subwoofers. The reproduction of the midrange is particularly well judged, as demonstrated by numerous recordings of Baroque music performed on period instruments and characterised by the lively interpretative style currently in vogue. Channel Classics releases and, perhaps even more so, the outstanding recordings from Alpha provided excellent material for evaluation. In this repertoire it is essential to preserve the timbral identity of individual instruments, the internal dialogue between voices and the subtle yet meaningful dynamic nuances. Such performances require speed, precision and natural decay characteristics. With the finest recordings, the Prestige Five delivers a broad, well-layered and airy soundstage while maintaining convincing weight on the fundamental tones. Do not assume, however, that this is a loudspeaker suited only to gentle musical genres - and in any case, well-performed eighteenth-century instrumental music is anything but gentle. No audio demonstration of mine would be complete without demanding symphonic repertoire featuring large orchestral forces and wide dynamic swings. Even the dense orchestral fabric of Strauss's Ein Heldenleben or the more dramatic climaxes of the finale of Rimsky-Korsakov's Scheherazade are reproduced with polish and authority. The smaller percussion instruments are particularly impressive. The triangle, unusually clear and almost sparkling in character, emerges beautifully, while the brass section is finely rendered and maintains convincing authority even in the lower registers of the trombones. Equally interesting is the almost perfectly judged tonal character of the strings during quieter passages. There is a refined grain structure within the highly sensitive lower-midrange area that allows the noble voice of the cello to remain clearly distinct from the more nasal and shadowed timbre of the viola. When you can easily follow the viola lines within a large symphonic score, you are already very close to the finish line. I therefore find considerable merit in the loudspeaker's homogeneous and transparent sonic character, one that does not renounce a certain graceful - and perhaps slightly seductive - pleasantness in the difficult region between the upper treble and the highest frequencies. This quality is clearly demonstrated by a solo piano recording such as Liszt's Transcendental Études in the SACD edition produced by Velut Luna. The energy of the lower octaves balances the rest of the keyboard with admirable refinement. Individual notes possess substance and body, and when required they can sound rough-edged and percussive without sacrificing the expressive dimension of this fine performance. Even in its conventional stereo version, this is a demanding recording that once again demonstrates how much energy a piano requires if it is to be reproduced convincingly. The robust Italian electronics combination currently in our listening room drives the QLNs with confidence and authority, producing a presentation that proves particularly convincing with orchestral repertoire. String phrasing remains accurate and pleasantly supple, accompanied by finely resolved treble that never becomes harsh or fatiguing. The brass section is luminous and clearly defined within the soundstage, although the image itself is not particularly tall. Only at very high playback levels does a slight congestion become noticeable in the upper-midrange crossover region. With Beethoven's Piano Sonatas in the Pentatone recordings by Mari Kodama, the QLNs follow the score faithfully, reproducing dynamic nuances with accuracy, transparency throughout the central range of the instrument and solid structural support in the lower octaves. There is no sense of discontinuity between the drive units. Instead, the sound flows naturally and coherently, a quality that clearly reflects careful engineering. Power handling is substantial and, because the sound never becomes aggressive or excessive, the listener is continually tempted to increase the volume without concern. Each of us possesses our own musical references and established listening habits, yet any attention you choose to devote to these Swedish loudspeakers will be richly rewarded. Their sound remains enjoyable even with the most demanding programme material - enveloping, deep and capable of imparting a compelling sense of realism to the musical experience.

Table 1 - Thiele-Small Parameters

Parameter Model	Midwoofer (meas.) 18WU/8746T01	Woofer (spec.) 18WU/8747T00
Effective diam. (mm)	140	140
Radiating area (cm²)	154	154
Re (ohm)	6,4	5,8
Fs (Hz)	38,6	36
Qms	9,2	3,72
Qes	0,55	0,43
Qts	0,52	0,38
Bxl (T x m)	7,18	7,4
Vas (l)	33,8	36,2
Mms (g)	18,3	18
Cms (mm/N)	0,94	1,1

Thiele-Small parameters measured for the midwoofer and specified by the manufacturer for the woofer.

Total Noise Distortion Measurement



Although several interband peaks can be observed between 900 Hz and 6 kHz, the Total Noise Distortion measured at a sound pressure level of 90 dB remains low on average. Particularly noteworthy is the behaviour at lower frequencies, where distortion remains almost consistently below the one-percent threshold. A similar pattern emerges from the test conducted at an average sound pressure level of 100 dB. The residual distortion increases essentially in proportion to the applied power, yet without reaching excessive values, even at the peaks, while remaining well controlled in terms of its average level. The measurements therefore suggest a listening experience capable of preserving fine detail even at elevated playback levels and with programme material rich in low-frequency content.

Rocco Patriarca

crossover network. Here again the designer has adhered to his long-established philosophy, prioritising the inherent linearity of the drive units and the geometry of their acoustic centres in order to employ the simplest crossover network possible. This explains why the loudspeaker is specified as a 2.5-way design, a characteristic clearly visible in the electrical response graph, which shows that the midwoofer is not high-pass filtered at low frequencies and therefore overlaps significantly with the woofer's operating range. A distinctive feature of the crossover is its point-to-point construction. Rather than being assembled on a conventional circuit board, the components are mounted directly within the cabinet structure, literally glued or screwed into place at various locations, making them difficult to isolate and inspect as a single assembly.

The components themselves represent some of the finest currently available from Mundorf. These include non-inductive capacitors in the tweeter section, oil-impregnated capacitors for the woofer network, flat-wire inductors and the substantial Mundorf VT140 inductor with Feron core employed in the woofer low-pass filter. The inductors are also oven-treated to compact the windings, reducing the possibility of vibration-induced distortion.

Setup and Listening

The substantial QLN loudspeakers took their place in our listening room, initially positioned in our usual reference location, the result of countless listening sessions. It is that position which, by a combination of experience, logic and a fair amount of educated guesswork, should - and I emphasise the conditional - represent the "right" starting point for evaluating a loudspeaker. After all, one has to begin somewhere.

It soon became apparent, however, that the Prestige Five preferred a position considerably farther back than our standard placement, approximately one metre from the rear wall and about fifty centimetres from the side wall. As I often repeat, loudspeaker positioning within a listening environment - especially in a room that is both familiar and constantly used for evaluations - should never be treated lightly. Moreover, the placement that proves optimal in our particularly absorbent room is valid only for... our room.

The low-frequency balance prompted further experimentation, moving the speakers a few inches farther away from the rear wall, while the search for the best stereo image led us to toe them in by a few degrees towards the centre of the sofa. Through successive refinements we eventually arrived at a position not far removed from this arrangement, one that offered an excellent overall balance. By this point several - indeed many - tracks had already been played, and our Unico 150 had reached its ideal operating temperature. One of the first aspects that struck me during this preliminary phase was the speaker's healthy sensitivity, which allows the amplifier's available power to be exploited effectively, achieving satisfying listening levels with ease. For reasons I cannot entirely explain, while browsing through the high-resolution files stored on the server my attention fell on the PFM folder and I felt an irresistible urge to revisit Impressioni di Settembre. The file was only 44.1 kHz/16-bit, yet the presentation was immediately captivat-

The midwoofer shares the same basket and motor-system architecture as the woofer, including identical dimensions, but differs in its parameters and, most importantly, in its diaphragm material, which in this case is made from impregnated Kevlar fibre.

ing. The vocal sat firmly at centre stage, carrying precisely the slightly microphone-coloured character I remembered, while the guitar emerged beautifully defined, clear and brilliant, with that unmistakable Seventies tonal flavour. The bass was controlled and precise. Very precise indeed. There is a particular quality to the handling of the sounds on this recording that becomes evident even in its most delicate passages. The low-frequency performance proved especially intriguing. To explore it further I switched to an acoustic recording, Ti Troverò by the Nada Trio. Ferruccio Spinetti's double bass emerged with solidity and authority, every aspect of its performance - attack, body and extension - rendered with remarkable clarity. A genuine pleasure to listen to.

Nada's voice is commanding, placed prominently at the front of the soundstage and retaining its authority even during the more intense passages where her vocalisations approach a shout. The QLNs follow the evolution of the track with complete assurance, losing neither detail nor composure. Not content with that, I continued searching for recordings featuring combinations of bass and guitar, moving from the fusion stylings of Spyro Gyra to more forceful rock material such as AC/DC. The control exhibited in the lower registers repeatedly drew attention to itself, not merely because of its ability to reproduce the tonal character of different instruments, but because of its capacity to reveal subtle distinctions within their individual sounds: the skins of bass drums and timpani, the string and resonant body of a double bass, or the harmonic structure of wind instruments ranging from contrabassoon to trombone. The presentation is energetic yet entirely free of exaggeration, combining impact with precision. The same precision is evident throughout the midrange and upper bass. Once again, it is the piano that best demonstrates the Prestige Five's ability to track the musical signal faithfully. The dynamic contrasts contained within demanding recordings - from the finest classical piano performances of Arturo Benedetti Michelangeli to Keith Jarrett's The Köln Concert and the work of Chick Corea - are reproduced with outstanding vitality and authority. Particularly noteworthy is the loudspeaker's ability to capture every nuance of the human voice, reproducing it with truly exceptional realism. Provided the recording itself is of reference quality, the results can be extraordinary: virtually flawless with Fabrizio De André's voice in Ottocento, rich and profound with Gianmaria Testa in Polvere di Gesso, where once again the tonal beauty and precision of the guitar become apparent.

Then there is the incomparable Mina, the ever-elegant Ornella Vanoni on the excellent Live at Blue Note, and the intensely expressive Petra Magoni in Canzone dei Vecchi Amanti. In the latter recording, the generous use of vocal reverberation is judged to perfection, and its reproduction by the Prestige Five is both technically impeccable and utterly delightful. In this setup, the soundstage does not appear exceptionally wide, but it offers convincing depth and excellent image focus, maintaining precise localisation even with highly complex material, including large-scale orchestral works. A few additional words are deserved for the midrange and treble. There is an abundance of air, precision, extension and brilliance, but never excess. Once again, instruments are reproduced with impressive accuracy.

The overall tonal character is strongly reminiscent of the Scandinavian transducer tradition, while at the same time recalling certain aspects of the Italian school, albeit with a more energetic and assertive personality. As often happens, I found myself carried away by the music. Over the course of two days of listening I explored virtually every genre. The QLNs consistently demonstrated an impressive combination of energy and precision, effortlessly - and often elegantly - following even the most demanding musical passages. Above all, they possess one defining quality: an ability to convey the truth of the recording, whether the programme consists of a full orchestra or a solo performer, instruments or voices. And underpinning everything is a remarkable sense of control under all circumstances.

The superb Scan-Speak Illuminator-series woofer. Instantly recognisable is the distinctive neodymium motor assembly, to which the die-cast basket is attached. The diaphragm is made of black anodised aluminium.

The rear panel reveals the two flared reflex ports associated with the dedicated enclosure volumes of the woofer and midwoofer. At the bottom are the high-quality single-wire connection terminals.

Conclusions

With their distinctive profile, dramatically rearward-tilted stance, unique styling and beautifully executed finishes, the QLN Prestige Five Gen 2 are loudspeakers that immediately stand apart from the crowd. Behind their appearance lies a thoroughly mature design, meticulous construction and a level of component quality that is nothing short of impressive. Most importantly, however, they have proven themselves to be loudspeakers built with a single purpose in mind: to reproduce music. Easy to drive and blessed with generous sensitivity, they tend to highlight the sonic qualities of the electronics partnered with them rather than placing demands on their current-delivery capabilities.

Their tonal balance is engaging and highly appealing, yet at the same time remarkably accurate, never crossing the line into coldness or excessive analytical scrutiny. QLN? A genuinely pleasant surprise.

Rocco Patriarca