



Smooth Operator



Germany's Quadral is back in the UK and, says **Paul Messenger**, the Altan VIII is a bright star from its high-end range

We actually reviewed a couple of Quadral loudspeakers a few years back, but at the time UK distribution was sporadic. The good news is that this high-end German company is back, via a subsidiary operation based in Stafford and covering Britain and Ireland.

Aurum actually operates as the high-performance upmarket sub-brand of the main Quadral operation and is only sold through specialist dealers. There's just one (decidedly extensive) range of ten loudspeakers (plus a handful of high-end amplifiers and CD players), of which the Altan VIII is one of the smaller models. It's a simple two-way standmount, albeit with quite a number of luxury touches.

Solid and substantial

Let's start with the enclosure. It's a medium-sized standmount, port-loaded at the rear and with an internal volume estimated between 10 and 15 litres. Port-blocking foam bungs are supplied should this give better results in conjunction with the

specific room characteristics. Judging by the weight, build is very substantial and the shape is unusual, too. The front and top edges of the sides are heavily chamfered and deeper at the bottom than the top (overhanging the back panel here). The speaker also has a separate base (presumably for cosmetic reasons).

The standard version of the Altan VIII comes in a choice of three real-wood veneers at £1,280 per pair; in piano high-gloss white or black for £1,380 per pair; or in a choice of lacquer colours for £1,570 per pair. Our example came in a slightly-brighter-than-pillar-box red and certainly looks the business.

The drive units are Quadral's own developments, with a 170mm main bass/mid driver that uses an alloy of aluminium, titanium and magnesium (known as Altima) for its 115mm cone. Claimed to be both stiff and light, it's driven from a powerful motor.

Ribbons rule?

The VIII in the name refers to the eighth generation of Quadral's ribbon-type tweeter. Indeed, few

DETAILS

PRODUCT: Quadral Aurum Altan VIII
ORIGIN: Germany
TYPE: Standmount two-way loudspeaker
WEIGHT: 12.6kg
DIMENSIONS: (WxHxD) 222x405x346mm
FEATURES:
 • Reflex bass loading via large rear port
 • 22x49mm ribbon/planar tweeter
 • 1x170mm bass/mid driver, with 115mm metal alloy cone
 • Two pairs of chunky multi-way terminals
 • Choice of real wood or high-gloss painted finishes
DISTRIBUTOR: Quadral GB and Ireland
TELEPHONE: 01785 748446
WEBSITE: quadral.com



PRICED BETWEEN £1,280 and £1,570 per pair, the Aurum Altan VIII goes head-to-head on price with a number of rather tasty floorstanders. These high-quality floorstanders include, in no particular order, the £1,699 DALI IKON 7 Mk2, the PMC GB1i (£1,525), the Dynaudio M3/7 (£1,299), the Bowers & Wilkins CM8 (£1,250), the Rega RS7 (£1,685), the ProAc Studio 140 Mk2 (£1,690) and the Audiovector Ki3 Signature (£1,890). The standmount competition includes the Spondor SP2/3R2 (£2,295) which is significantly more costly, the Spondor SA1 (£1,295) and PMC DB1i (£985), both worthy of note, but very small. So the Quadral Aurum Altan VIII would seem to make good sense for anyone seeking a high-quality decent-sized standmount.

companies have done more to proselytise an 'alternative' approach to tweeters than Quadral. One consequence of the diaphragm shape is a tendency to beam the highest frequencies in the vertical plane. Reducing any ceiling reflections should help focus the stereo image at some expense in terms of airiness.

Twin high-quality multi-way terminals are fixed directly through an alloy plate, using wire for the optional links. Internal wiring from French operation Real Cable uses bi-metal (BM-series) audiophile cable, combining copper (for bass) and silver for treble. The network proper uses metal-layer resistors and high-quality polypropylene film capacitors. An optional grille is supplied and is probably better removed, though this does leave unsightly visible mounting lugs.

"Delivers a rich and warm sonic character normally associated with larger models."

Setting up for optimum results took a little time. It's important to be as close as possible to the vertical axis of the ribbon tweeter diaphragm and in our case, at least, this involved adjusting the spikes of our 600mm stands to tilt backwards a few degrees. Exactly what is required here will, of course, depend on individual circumstances: Getting the right angle will depend on how high your ears are in relation to the height of the tweeter and how far away you like to sit.

Next there's the siting and the foam bungs to consider. The Altan VIII has a large and active port and it's tuned to around 52Hz, which unfortunately coincides with a major reinforcement mode in our listening room (and indeed many others). Inevitably there's some excess around 50Hz when the port is active, even with the speakers located well clear of walls, though in practice this proved only a minor drawback and actually helped to compensate for a slight tendency to forwardness in the upper midband.

However, when using swept sinewaves at a fairly high level, in order to establish the best configuration and positioning, the 20Hz starting frequency generated clearly audible harmonic distortion through the port. (The distortion completely disappeared when the bungs were inserted.) It should be added, however, that it was never noticeable even when playing music loud.



Preferring an alternative approach to tweeters, the Altan VIII includes the company's eighth-generation ribbon-type tweeter

FEATURES



- 1 Various surface-finish options include a large range of high-gloss automotive colours
- 2 Ribbon-type tweeter has a 22x49mm diaphragm, the conductive element etched onto heat-resistant Kapton film
- 3 Large reflex bass-loading port on the rear may be blocked by supplied foam bungs, if preferred
- 4 Construction is very solid and chunky, with several clever styling embellishments
- 5 Bass/mid drive unit has a diaphragm fashioned from an aluminium, titanium and magnesium alloy
- 6 Separate plinth appears to be substantially cosmetic

The bunged-up option

The alternative approach is to use the speakers with the bungs inserted to block the ports. This too worked well, though it was necessary to position the speaker quite close to a wall in order to provide some bass boost. Leaving a gap of 20cm seemed to work best, though the upper-mid prominence was a little more obvious in this arrangement, so the speaker could start to become a little too aggressive when it was used with the volume turned up high.

Indeed, although the differences were quite subtle, free space

siting with ports left open was considered marginally the best all-round compromise, especially when playing music loud.

However, voice band articulation is somewhat enhanced, especially when listening at low levels, when the speaker is close to a wall with the bungs inserted. There isn't a right or a wrong here: both approaches work well and the differences will be largely a matter of personal taste and the specific room acoustics.

Whichever version of bass alignment and positioning is chosen, a fundamental strength of this speaker lies in its impressive



TALKING POINT
THE VIII IN ALTAN means that this is the eighth iteration of Quadral's longstanding ribbon-type tweeters.

In the classic ribbon transducer – arguably more common amongst microphones than tweeters – a pleated metal ribbon is held within a powerful magnetic field. The signal-conducting ribbon and the diaphragm are one and the same, which is an obvious and major bonus, but the low impedance of a ribbon conductor normally requires an impedance-matching transformer.

This is avoided in the Quadral ribbon, where the conductive element is etched onto heat-resistant Kapton film. Powerful neodymium/iron/boron magnets energise the stator, and because the 22x49mm diaphragm is much larger than a conventional 25mm dome, ample headroom and sensitivity is available.

dynamic range. This is partly due to the minimal low-frequency coloration generated by a very 'quiet' enclosure and it's also a typical characteristic of a metal-alloy main driver diaphragm, though the latter probably contributes to a touch of upper-mid hardness and congestion.

Many compact speakers tend to sound a little cold and clinical, due to a lack of energy in the upper bass and lower midband. When used with its ports open, the Altan VIII entirely avoids this problem and instead it delivers the sort of rich and warm sonic character that is normally associated with significantly larger models.

Smooth and laid-back

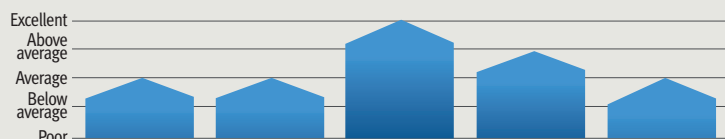
Although there was an occasional hint of chestiness on male speech, the warm character is both unusual and very welcome, though it does result in a slightly 'laid back' overall character that tends to underplay expressiveness further up the band. This speaker doesn't have the most dynamic or vigorous sound around, but instead delivers very easy-on-the-ears long-term listening.

The top end is notably smooth, evenhanded and very well judged, and the crossover integration is effectively seamless, ensuring a very coherent overall sound. Stereo images are very well focused across a finely drawn lateral soundstage, but both depth perspectives and transparency seem a trifle constrained.

While it's true that the Altan VIII lacks a little ultimate bass weight, in several ways it combines the best characteristics of floorstanders and standmounts, delivering a scale of sound that belies its compact dimensions, with good agility and generally well-controlled coloration. ●

TECH LABS

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



- SENSITIVITY:** Rated at just 87dB, the figure looks quite conservative against the circa 90dB that our far-field in-room regime indicates
- BASS EXTENSION:** The 52Hz port limits bass to 30Hz, but blocking the ports increases this to 24Hz under in-room far-field conditions
- EASE OF DRIVE:** Decent sensitivity is combined with a fairly easy amp load that stays above five ohms, a combination that should suit any amplifier
- FREQUENCY BALANCE:** Despite some limitations, the overall frequency balance is rather good, holding within +/-4dB above 60Hz
- RESPONSE SMOOTHNESS:** The response is reasonably well-controlled through the bass region, depending on the porting and placement

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OUR VERDICT

- SOUND QUALITY** ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Wide dynamic range and fine coherence; sweet and smooth top end
- VALUE FOR MONEY** ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Quite costly for a two-way standmount, especially in some finishes
- BUILD QUALITY** ★★★★★ **WE SAY:** Though not the cheapest, this speaker has a warmth that belies its size, and a laid-back character
- EASE OF DRIVE** ★★★★★

OVERALL

