



Total Eclipse

The AirPlay speaker system that's out of this world

Head master

Oppo's class-leading headphone amplifier



Hi-Fi Choice

PASSION FOR SOUND

Issue No. 390

November 2014

Plug'n'play

Why VPI's all-in-one deck is the perfect package

WIN
CHORD
HUGO DAC
worth
£1,400!

32

PRODUCTS ON TEST:

AudioQuest,
Custom Design
Quad & Teac

BEAUTIFUL SYSTEM

Heed Audio & PMC unite for the perfect combo

Come together

The Nottingham-based community Record shop putting locals first



Marantz SACD

The Super Audio SA8005 disc spinner with built-in DAC and DSD playback

GROUP TEST

Desktop amps

Six compact amps with wireless connectivity go head to head

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Quad Vena **£600**



Meet Quad's most affordable and user-friendly amp ever – but can it retain the company's high-end magic?

DETAILS

- PRODUCT**
Quad Vena
- ORIGIN**
UK/China
- TYPE**
Integrated amplifier with USB DAC and Bluetooth
- WEIGHT**
6.1kg
- DIMENSIONS**
(WxHxD)
313 x 94 x 302mm
- FEATURES**
 - Quoted power: 45W RMS per channel (8ohms)
 - 2x RCA line inputs; asynchronous USB; USB for docking; 2x optical; 1x coaxial digital inputs
 - AptX Bluetooth
 - 6.3mm headphone input
- DISTRIBUTOR**
IAG Group Ltd
- TELEPHONE**
01480 452561
- WEBSITE**
quad-hifi.co.uk

In its new Lancaster Grey finish, the Quad looks odd – but not in a bad way. The styling of the whole range is tastefully retro, but the grey paint job gives it a harder, more purposeful edge. Indeed, there's a touch of the Quad 33/303 about it to my eyes, which is a great thing, albeit possibly not the most universally appealing to your average buyer of this sort of product. Still, by the time you read this, you should be able to specify your Vena in more exotic gloss finishes for a £100 price premium.

It feels a real quality item; the slightly vague and cheap feeling volume knob lets it down a bit, but this aside it comes across as quite solid with some nice, crisp-acting switchgear. There are few features to speak off – certainly not fripperies, anyway – aside from the built-in DAC (the same Cirrus Logic CS4398 used in the Quad Platinum CD players) and, of course, the aptX Bluetooth. Otherwise, you're looking at a choice of two RCA line inputs. The Class AB power amp section is claimed to put

out 45W RMS per channel, and there is no reason for us to doubt it.

Sound quality

Via its analogue line inputs the Quad sounds clean, crisp and musical. Despite not using the same circuitry as more traditional, larger and more expensive Quad amplifiers there is still a lot of the house sound to be heard. It's musically informative and engaging, with a pleasingly detailed presentation. You would certainly never call it boring, but then again it is never harsh or searing; Quad has struck exactly the right balance meaning it's a civilised performer that you can listen to for long periods.

Switch to the built-in DAC section, and the same high standards continue; once again you hear a civilised but animated performance that really gets the speakers bouncing with Malcolm McLaren's *Waltz Darling*. Tonally the Quad is pretty even and neutral; never warm yet not hard, it sits in a well-judged position in the middle. There's a touch of dryness and a slightly well lit feel to

WIRELESS TECH

The Quad's only wireless interface is via aptX Bluetooth, and this works very well. It pairs easily with my tablet, proves robust in use with no drop outs and gives a very acceptable musical performance. For example, an MP3 of Daft Punk's *Get Lucky* sounds tonally fulsome and rhythmically believable, and a good bit less grainy than some other amps in the test when streaming over Bluetooth. Bass is surprisingly powerful, with a detailed, well etched midband and smoothish treble – although in absolute terms it does sound slightly splashy. Apart from sounding opaque, the main cost to sound quality using this input is an obvious thinning out and narrowing of the soundstage. Generally then, the Quad has a very good implementation of aptX Bluetooth and is reliable and stable.

the upper midband, but this never descends into something that has you wanting to switch off. Indeed the Vena proves one of the most able performers in the group across all inputs, because it doesn't obviously sound like a compact audio product.

Bass isn't particularly grippy, but is still lithe enough to make the Caravan track enjoyable to follow. The rhythms shuffle along with real conviction, and the Quad has me enjoying its musical gait. Dynamics are decent too, and the Vena puts its power out in a positive way with no obvious sense of strain. In absolute terms, its biggest issue is the slightly two-dimensional feel to the stereo mix, but again no other amp in the group does better. Indeed, the Quad Vena is completely relaxed in a normal hi-fi environment and doesn't require any concessions for its lowly price point (for the brand) or wireless functionality ●



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

- SOUND QUALITY**
★★★★★ **LIKE:** Styling and packaging; powerful, detailed, animated sound
- VALUE FOR MONEY**
★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Plasticky volume knob
- BUILD QUALITY**
★★★★★ **WESAY:** Excellent, versatile, modern integrated amplifier
- FEATURES**
★★★★★

OVERALL



Group test verdict

The verdicts are all in and checked and it's down to **David Price** to reveal the final results of this month's compact integrated amplifiers test

CONSIDERING THESE SIX amplifiers are purposed to do very similar things, it is surprising how diverse they proved. First, it's important to point out that none of them, with the exception of the Quad, can step into the shoes of a high-quality conventional integrated amplifier. That said, considering their great functionality, connectivity and small size, none of these baby amps did badly. Use them for small spaces, study/bedrooms and kitchens, and you'll be delighted by what they do.

The Pro-Ject was least impressive; it's a nice little thing and some are

going to love the MM phono stage, but it just didn't sound grown up enough to really cut the mustard in what is a pretty competitive group. Next was the NAD; it has a fulsome tonality and is nice enough to listen to, but it just couldn't match some of the rival (and cheaper) designs here.

This is where the rankings get tough, because standards begin to get high. The Monitor Audio A100 is awarded fourth place; in sonic terms it would be higher, but as a package – taking into account build, style and ease of use it's just not as universally attractive as its three rivals.

The Cambridge Audio Minx Xi is ranked third. In every respect apart from ergonomics, it does superbly well at the price and provides really tough competition for the top two. I particularly liked its sound as a network music player, but it performed well across the board.

In second place is the Teac. This amp just shouldn't be this good at the price. Despite being a Class D model it sounds really good and is a whisker ahead of the excellent Cambridge Audio. The Teac's all-round packing is also better and performs brilliantly here.



WINNER

The Quad Vena takes the gong. True, it's not quite as small or even as sophisticated as some here, but it offers you real hi-fi sound in a small box, which sports a fine-sounding DAC built in, and implements aptX Bluetooth well. It's an innately enjoyable and detailed performer.

						
Make/model	Cambridge Audio Minx Xi	Monitor Audio A100	NAD D 7050	Pro-Ject MaiA	Quad Vena	Teac AI-301DA

Price	£400	£400	£700	£400	£600	£400
Sound	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Value	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Build	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Features	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Overall	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
	Fine sounding integrated that's highly versatile and great value	Serious performer with its own unique style and versatile placement options	Rich sound and lots of wireless options for playback from all your home devices	Versatile little amp, but sonically rather bland – MM input is a real plus, though	Powerful, detailed hi-fi sound via all inputs makes this a very worthy winner	Superbly packaged, wonderfully finished and nice natured sonic performance

Key features

Class AB	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	No
Class D	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Phono stage	No	No	No	Yes	No	No
AirPlay	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	No
aptX Bluetooth	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

TRY WITH THESE

CD TRANSPORT: Cyrus CDt £599 HFC 360

If you want a good CD transport that's small and unimposing, you've just found it. The Cyrus outputs a very good digital audio stream to any of these DAC-equipped amps. It's diminutive design means that it will fit perfectly with your mini system.



FLOORSTANDING LOUDSPEAKER: Monitor Audio Silver 8 £1,295 HFC 387

Expensive yes, but these speakers will get the best out of any of the amps, especially the Quad. With a quoted sensitivity of 90dB they're easier to drive for the lower powered members of this group than the smaller stand mounts, and have a clean, detailed sound with plenty of punch and polish.



STANDMOUNT LOUDSPEAKER: Q Acoustics Concept 20 £350 HFC 372

Anyone looking for a pair of small bookshelf (or stand mounting) speakers to partner these small amps will find much to love in the Concept 20s. They're very sweet sounding for a budget box, meaning they won't show up the amp or digital source. The lovely gloss finish should fit in, too.

