

# Family fortunes

Classic hi-fi brand, Quad hasn't forgotten how to innovate as **Ed Selley** discovers from this luxury set of components

I'm not much of a gambler but I'd be willing to bet that for some readers a Quad *Beautiful System* should have a pair of electrostatic speakers fronted by something valve based. After all, this is what the company is best known for. With these products casting a long shadow, it can be easy to forget there's more to it than traditional hi-fi tech, but the system you see here should be enough to remind you that it is still making landmark products. At first glance, this system seems free of the normal Quad calling cards, but look a little closer and you quickly begin

to see that the DNA of the brand is still very much present.

Take the Artera components that undertake decoding and horsepower duties. Outwardly, the Artera Play looks relatively conventional. At the front you'll find a slot-loading CD mechanism partnered with a wide spread of digital inputs – one USB-B, 2x coaxial and 2x optical. You then get matching coaxial and optical outputs should you want to simply use it as a head unit. All of these connections make use of an ESS Sabre 9018 DAC – the first Quad product to do so. So far, so conventional, as plenty of CD-based



sources have broadened their horizons to satisfy the needs of modern digital.

Where a degree of intriguing difference creeps in is when you start to consider the other connections that grace the rear panel. As well as that healthy spread of digital connections, you'll find a pair of analogue inputs alongside RCA and XLR outputs that are variable to allow it to work as a fully functional preamp. Far from being a CD player with ambition, the Play is in fact half an audio system shrunk down into an elegant box.

The other half takes the form of the more conventional but no less lovely ►



#### COMPONENTS

##### **QUAD ARTERA PLAY £1,400**

An intriguing combination of digital source, analogue and digital inputs and fully functioned preamp, the Play is a compact but exceptionally capable little box of tricks.

##### **QUAD ARTERA STEREO £1,500**

This compact and discrete-looking power amplifier partners the Play and gives a healthy 140W output into 8ohm (claimed) combined with impressive current delivery.

##### **QUAD Z-4 £3,200**

The flagship of the Z Series range is a hefty floorstanding loudspeaker that's well over a metre in height. As well as woven carbon fibre drivers it incorporates a bespoke ribbon tweeter.

## BEAUTIFUL SYSTEM QUAD



Artera Stereo. This is a simpler device in that it's a power amplifier and a hefty one at that. You get 140W into 8ohm and negligible rated distortion while it does so, which should be enough for all but the most intractable loads. As befits components designed as a family, there's a matching pair of XLR inputs for optimal connection which can be connected via a trigger cable so they wake up at the same time.

### Running in the family

Next to the delightfully compact Artera units, the Z-4 floorstander is a little more imposing. The largest box speaker that Quad makes, it stands an imposing 1.2m tall and houses five drivers. This might appear a more conventional offering than the legendary electrostatic, but there are some clever features in its construction. The ribbon tweeter is designed in a unique way that incorporates the ribbon and the drive motor in a single assembly, resulting in a driver that is more robust than a traditional ribbon.

This tops off a speaker that wears its size with commendable elegance. Like most products built by IAG, the Z-4 is exceptionally well finished. The rosewood veneer is immaculate and

complimented by the trim and driver surround brightwork. There is a sense of proportion that helps it sit in a room regardless of the space around it.

If anything, the Artera duo is an even more engaging piece of design. At first glance, it seems subtle to the point of appearing a bit dull, but look closer and the details are gorgeous.

### It's easy to be taken aback by the genuine scale and impact the system is capable of

The vertical strake, which incorporates the power light on the amplifier, sits in contrast to the horizontal CD aperture and the almost total lack of other physical adornment draws the eye to them. The glass inserts that sit in the top of the units breaks up any sense of them being slab sided while the external heat sink arrangements (probably not as necessary on the Play as for the amplifier) ensures they convey a sense of robustness and efficiency. Their compact footprint should ensure they are easy to accommodate too.

**Above left:** Quad's bespoke ribbon offers space and sweetness

**Above centre:** The Artera casework is minimalist and extremely elegant

**Above right:** Everything on the system is finished to an exceptional standard

Looking at the raw ingredients of 140W of power and a pair of hefty floorstanding speakers, you might get the impression that the Quad is a bit of a powerhouse. While this is not a setup that will ever leave you thinking it lacks power or authority, this isn't where it excels. Instead, it uses its size and power to major on the sense of scale and positioning that makes plenty of other – often more expensive – components sound rather constrained and two dimensional.

### Time to show off

Revisiting a misspent youth and listening to a 16/44.1 rip of The Beloved's *X*, shows this off to excellent effect. The opening track *Deliver Me*, is an attempt to produce a number that is epic in scope – the ingredients are there, but it rarely manages to escape the recording studio. Here, the Quads grip and unpack it into the sprawling big hitter that it's clearly always wanted to be. Jon Marsh's vocals front the string section and are wonderfully distinct, but above all the track sounds vast and even larger in scale than I imagined the Z-4 floorstanders would ever have sounded.



Even when the material is small scale, there's a sense that it has all the right proportions and it draws you in and makes you want to hear more. *Mr King* by Nerina Pallot on CD is effortlessly lovely. Pallot's buttery vocals are a tangible presence and the pared-back instrumentation that supports her is laden with detail and three dimensionality. Struck piano notes form and decay with compelling realism. What is important is that the limited size of the piece isn't lost or blown out of proportion. It still sounds like a small recording, just one comprised of life-sized performers.

### Open all hours

Importantly, it also knows how to have a bit of fun. The 16/44.1 rip of Moby's *James Bond Theme* is punchy and possessed of that same openness and cohesion but it additionally pounds along with energy and bounce that has you nodding and mouthing: "No Mr Bond, I expect you to die!" at the appropriate moment because you're no longer a spectator to the music, but an involved and enthusiastic party to it.

The move to bigger basslines and higher tempos starts to show the role



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of the components in a clearer light. The hefty power output of the amplifier is more about ensuring that those sizeable bass drivers are kept under control. The decoding of the Artera Play is a textbook example of modern digital in action. It finds everything in

### The system uses its size and power to major on the sense of scale and positioning

the recording and ensures that you perceive it as a whole and that the already talented Z series speaker is going to work on the best possible feed it can create.

And make no mistake, the Z-4 is a supremely talented speaker. I often have a slight concern when I'm confronted with this many drivers in a loudspeaker design that what I'll hear is the drivers working independently rather than as a team. The Z-4 dispenses with any such concerns within a few minutes and is an impressively benign speaker that will do extraordinary things if you fulfil its very basic requirements – a good

quality input with enough power to allow it to strut its stuff. In part because it is so understated, you can be taken aback at times by the genuine scale and impact this system is capable of because it comes with such a refined presentation.

### Brand loyalty

What is entirely likeable is the sense of the Quad brand that starts to emanate from this system as you spend a little time with it. Everything feels sensible without ever being dull and there is the perception that everything about this trio of components is about accessing your music in a straightforward but entirely flexible way. From there it's a matter of hoovering up every last detail from whatever you happen to be listening to and then delivering it in such a way as to ensure that the software is the story and not the hardware. For some people, I daresay that this self-effacing desire to get on with the job without making a big song and dance will seem a little anti-climactic. For a company that trades under "The closest approach to the original sound", it is very much a mission accomplished ●