

Quad 99 CD-P

A superb sub-£1000 CD player, with the option of building a fine one-make system

PRICE	£999
SUPPLIER	Quad
CONTACT	0845 458 0011

It's time to admit, in light of the arrival of SACD and DVD-A, that CD playback hasn't been all that bad for the last, oh, decade and a bit. Who can possibly fault the sounds made by pedigreed players from CAL, Mark Levinson, Meridian, Theta, Wadia and the like? Ever since the arrival of late-1980s milestones such as the Marantz CD-12/DA-12 at the high end, and the Ken Ishiwata-tweaked Marantz at the other end, there have been CD players at nearly every price point delivering sound quality which is, at the very worst, acceptable.

Yes, it's still the case that vinyl massacres CD on every level bar convenience, but the LP's role in audio has been, for 15 years at least, akin to that of Morgan in the world of sports cars: best left to a hardier breed.

If you accept then that CD is the status quo (whether vinyl addicts like it or not), that halfway decent CD players are a dime a dozen, and that the landscape is about to change anyway thanks to two new formats, then what is the potential for a new CD player at the £999 mark? That it has a Quad badge on it isn't quite the same magnet as it was in, say, 1959 — when there were fewer competitors or alternatives. That it sounds terrific, offers nifty features or looks cool — any one of these isn't enough on its own either. But imagine if all those qualities were contained in one compact chassis. If possible then, hey presto, you have the same kind of appeal that allowed the Quad 33 pre-amp to sell well over 100,000 units.

Called the 99 CD-P to distinguish it from the 'normal' Quad 99 compact disc player [*HFN* Sept '99], costing £649, this new player has little in common with the less expensive model beyond the cast aluminium case. For openers, the 99 CD-P has an onboard power supply and both variable and fixed line-level outputs, which allow it to serve as a true stand-alone player; the



plain vanilla 99 works only with the 99 system and feeds its output through the Quadlink connection. Moreover, the 99 uses an 18-bit Delta Sigma DAC and a single laser transport.

For the 99 CD-P, the ante has been upped with the latest 24/192 upsampling Crystal DAC and a Philips three-laser transport for better all-round performance. On top of that, designer Jan Ertner cooked up proprietary filtering for the 99 CD-P too. So, before we go any further, note that the extra £350 gets you more than just the 'party-trick' of full pre-amplifier functionality.

Did you catch that? These tiny 80x32x130mm (HWD) dimensions contain a CD player *and* a digital pre-amp accepting six digital sources via three co-axial and three TOSLINK optical inputs. Thus, the 99 CD-P has a very busy back panel indeed. Reading from left to right across the

back, there's an IEC mains input, main power on/off via a rocker, phonos for fixed or variable output (these also enabling use as a pre-amp into any power amp), connectors for full accessibility to an all-Quad system, the digital inputs, and a TOSLINK optical digital output.

As it was not Quad's intention to make an alternative to the 99 Pre-Amplifier [see box below: The Quad System], the 99 CD-P lacks any analogue inputs. Be glad they left them off: this would have increased the burden in terms of both cost and real estate, thus robbing the 99 CD-P of its chic demeanour and bargain pricing.

At the front, the CD-P's left half is filled by the CD tray, while the right half contains four buttons for Power On from Stand-by, Next/Previous Tracks, Play/Stop and Open/Close, and a display reading track number, time in various forms and

information for programming. All of this is accomplished through the 31-button remote, which also provides Source, Volume and Mute for the pre-amp functions and Display Off for those who prefer an absence of flickering digits.

My only operational complaint was the need to switch the unit out of standby with the remote's power button; I'm used to players that leave standby just by pressing play.

Set-up and the learning curve were brief and painless: quite simply, everything worked, and the owner's manual was written by someone who didn't assume that every customer understands MS-DOS. I tried the 99 CD-P from both its fixed and variable outputs with the Musical Fidelity Tri-Vista 300 driving Wilson WATT Puppy System 6 and via the variable outputs into the Quad 909 power amplifier,

THE QUAD SYSTEM

Ordinarily, as CD players are line-level output devices, manufacturers deliver the players on their own for review. They assume that the reviewer will drop it into a reference set-up, regardless of make, and leave it at that. This time, however, it played out differently because the 99 CD-P contains what is effectively a *true* on-board pre-amp, with Volume, Mute and Source Select via remote. However, as Quad has a matching pre-amp to sell, the company quite cannily does not feature any analogue line-level inputs on this product so it cannot serve as a full-function pre-amp if you have any analogue sources. But that's neither here nor there: the CD-P will be purchased first and foremost as a stand-alone CD player, not a pre-amp. Its six digital inputs are bonuses.

As Quad's Dave Patching told us, 'We are simply adhering to Quad philosophy — we wanted to create, for those who appreciate the gains, the shortest signal path possible. So we took the 99 pre-amplifier's potentiometer and segued it into the CD-P, taking the opportunity to add the convenience of six digital inputs. In turn, this allows the CD-P to serve as an outboard DAC for customers with other digital sources. And they are on the increase' — think DAB, MiniDisc, satellite TV, whatever emanates from a PC or Mac sound card, PlayStations, Xboxes and more.

To show the ability of the 99 CD-P in an all-Quad system, the company provided the now-familiar 909 power amplifier (*HFN* Sept 99) and the new 12L loudspeaker. To say that the combination dazzled me is a bit of an understatement. The amplifier itself is one of hi-fi's best-kept secrets, a gift at £899 for a robust and bombproof 140W/channel stereo unit. Why, I don't know, but it reminded me more of the classic 303 than any of the company's later models: ridiculously powerful



for its size, impeccably mannered, and built like a vault, but styled to raise a smile. It's both subtle and funky, able to deal with delicate acoustic works or to rock hard when fed the likes of Nickelback. Could I forsake all others and live with it? No sweat — just as I used a 303 daily for six years without suffering withdrawal symptoms.

But the real surprise were the 12Ls. Those of long memory know that I loved the 10L, Quad's first-ever box-type loudspeaker, a Sendor-made quasi-LS3/5A challenger of wondrous ability. The Steve Hewlett-designed 12L is even better: easier to drive, more forceful, bigger sounding. (Hewlett is, of course, the genius responsible for the Wharfedale Diamond 8.1.) Hell, it's even less expensive at £499 and much prettier looking, with a veneer so rich that it recalls the kind of furniture I could never afford. And it simply adores the 909.

A two-way design, it contains a 25mm cloth dome tweeter and a 6.5in Kevlar woofer crossing over at 2.2kHz, in an enclosure measuring 345x205x253mm (HWD). Impedance is a safe 6 ohms, and the power rating is 30-140W — obvious 909 territory.

This speaker sings. It stated its purpose within five seconds of hearing 'Honky Tonk Women' off the Rolling Stones' *40 Licks*, confirmed its greatness with Alison Krauss, and won my heart with two complete plays in a row of Elvis' *30 hits*. The amplifier served it to perfection, never clipping, never relinquishing its hold on the bass, and never aggravating the tweeter. Clearly, Quad's design team puts total compatibility high on its list of priorities. In this case, one might suspect that more 12Ls would be driven by the less costly, less powerful 99 stereo amplifier, but trust me, the added benefits of the 909 are exploited to the fullest.

No, I'm not going to tell you that this package — 99 CD-P, 909 and 12L — is the very best way to spend £2400. But the system *is* a no-brainer in terms of its being able to make, straight out of the box, the sort of sounds that would be impossible to fault in a situation where diminutive components are preferred, where ease of use is one of the customer's top 10 requirements, and where reliability, longevity and assured synergy are *not* to be regarded as afterthoughts. And, unbelievably, all of this from a system made entirely in China.

If for no other reason than nostalgia — this system is the closest Quad has come since Peter Walker's retirement to a return to the very values which made the company the UK's most important-ever brand — I just love it.

I'd love it even more if Quad issued the 99 CD-P and the 909 in a limited edition champagne gold colour like the original 303.



feeding the Quad 12L speakers. Wires came from Chord, DiMarzio, Kimber and Transparent, the 99 CD-P being especially partial to a pair of Transparent cables, which cost more — alas — than the player itself.

I could detect no qualitative difference between the fixed and variable outputs, so I would suggest that the potentiometer is of very high quality. In other words, you mustn't feel that using the 99 CD-P's pre-amp capability is a compromise. If anything, its 'short path' nature [again, see the sidebar on page 45] more than compensates for the presence of an on-board volume control.

Because this is being written during the months leading up to Christmas (which nowadays means anytime after August 31), I have been wallowing in the season's 'best ofs', with the Rolling Stones' *40 Licks* and Elvis Presley's *30 No. 1 Hits*, both of which I heartily recommend even if you own everything on them. The mastering seems to be of a higher standard than that which has gone before, which may be one of the reasons why I'm loosening up about CD in general. (This is not the place to debate the 'burning' issues of SACD and DVD-A.)

Every component inserted into a pre-existing system exhibits some characteristic to distinguish it from whatever preceded it (unless it's so neutral and therefore perfect that it has

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no signature). The Quad 99 CD-P is no exception. Blessedly, as the 99 CD-P was something I *wanted* to like just because it's so compact and beautifully finished, the initial burst was a positive one. Hands down, its most distinguishable quality — one which remained constant throughout changes of system, cables and software — was its openness.

With classic Elvis, on either side of his time with Uncle Sam in the Fatherland, the sound exhibited the very same sense of atmosphere so prized in the vinyl versions. This was, after all, RCA at its very best, using the finest producers in the world. The sound has a silky sheen and yields an impression of space which defies even speakers of mean dispersion to contain them.

Take, for example, 'Are You Lonesome Tonight?' from one of the King's schmaltzier affairs. Elvis stands in the centre (okay, I almost

wrote 'dead centre' but resisted), an acoustic guitar to the left, the Jordanares to the right. Now I have no idea where they were standing in the studio or how many takes made up this version — for all I know, it's either a real-time, one-take masterpiece or an early example of studio surgery. But whichever is the truth, it's still a studio recording. Through the 99 CD-P, it sounded 'in the room', with real walls, a floor, and a ceiling. And no minor digital nasties distinguished it from the vinyl.

Ditto my all-time fave, 'Can't Help Falling In Love' — similar layout, similar textures. But the

way the Quad handles the Hawaiian guitar... Liquidity? You bet your stylus balance. The space around the piano, the mesh of the Jordanares' voices — the Quad sounds as lush and fluid as it needs to be. And by that, I mean that there's no added, tube-ish warmth, however much I love the lie that implies. The 99 CD-P manages to be clean and analytical while dealing with warmth and emotion, such that the former doesn't negate the latter. Even the tambourine on 'Wooden Heart' has no more splash than necessary. The accordion is reedy, the oom-pahs feel just right, and old El's German accent wasn't all that bad, either.

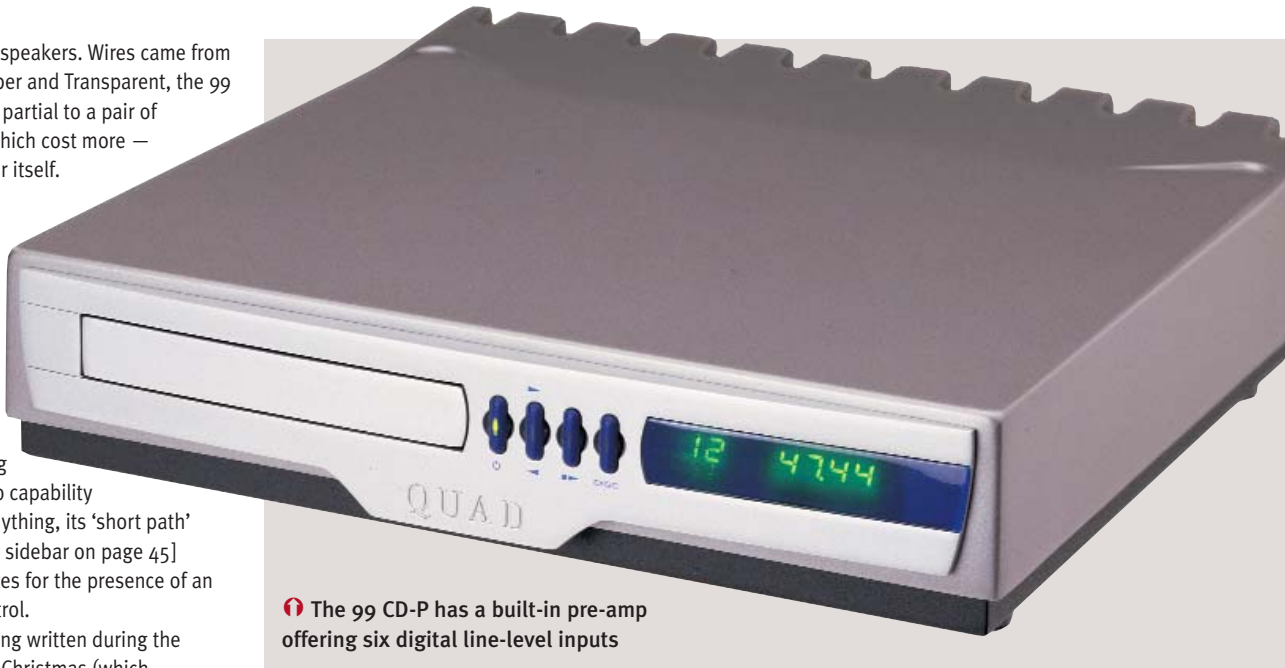
In less abstract areas, the Quad really pushes my buttons. Its bass is simply prodigious: fast, controlled, tight, but never overdamped, as exemplified by the openings to both Elvis' 'Good Luck Charm' and the Rolling Stones' 'Honky Tonk

Women'. If you're of the temperament (and I most certainly am) which considers most digital bass to be so unnaturally constipated that it makes your ears ache, you will find blessed relief in the wee Quad. It never oppresses. Instead, it swings, it flows, it's deliriously full and juicy, but it never gets loose or sloppy. If it were part of someone's anatomy, then it would be Nigella Lawson's butt. Check out Elvis' loping 'She's Not You' and (again) 'Good Luck Charm' to hear this to best effect. While you're there, wallow as well in the backing vocals. Using these tracks as evidence, there ain't a whole helluva lot happened sonically in the 40 years since he laid down these tracks.

This player can do 'trashy' (the drum sound on 'Jailhouse Rock'), classy (Ella's orchestral backing on 'Manhattan'), 'sweet' (Alison Krauss, no matter what she sings), grandiose (J Geils Band's 'I Can't Believe You'). It is immune to genre, it will let you hear the difference between silver and gold CDs, and lets you listen to five or six discs in a row without fatigue. It's a gem!

Okay, so I won't be dumping the Marantz CD-12, which still has greater 'command' and an even larger soundstage, but that player is a *rara avis* of no fixed price and availability. High-end oddities aside, Quad's latest is the *best-sounding* sub-£1000 player I've heard since the Musical Fidelity X-Ray. And that's a player I use every day without complaint. In the wings is Unison Research's tube-hybrid Unico CD player, which, if it matches the genius of the Unico integrated amp, might give the 99 CD-P a run for its money. But the 99 CD-P's ace up the sleeve — a six-input digital pre-amp — makes Quad's offering unique. It's a long way away, but this is my nomination for best CD player, 2003/04.

WORDS_KEN KESSLER



➔ The 99 CD-P has a built-in pre-amp offering six digital line-level inputs