

Versatile Vena

Quad has launched its first amplifier with music streaming support – and it's a bit of a cracker. Jon Myles welcomes the arrival of the Vena.

In case you hadn't noticed, the traditional integrated amplifier is rapidly becoming an endangered species.

Back in CD's boom days, when even phono inputs were disappearing – all a mid-market amplifier needed was a set of line-level connections, selector buttons, a volume control and (hopefully) a decent sonic signature.

Fast forward to 2014, however, and such a set of specifications is now starting to look decidedly Spartan.

Instead, with the rise of computer-based audio, customers are now demanding their amplifiers come equipped with DACs, USB connectivity, digital inputs, Bluetooth – and in some cases streaming capability to read a NAS drive.

If you're in any doubt about the shift then just take a look at the Vena from Quad – perhaps the most traditional and revered of British hi-fi manufacturers.

Yes, at its heart it's a 45 Watt per channel integrated amplifier – but its connectivity options go farther than any previous piece of equipment from Quad at the £599 price-point.

It has two analogue inputs, two optical and one coaxial digital input and both Type A and B USB sockets. The former allows the

connection and charging of Apple iPods, iPads and iPhones while the former facilitates connection to your computer-based music collection.

In addition music can be streamed from computers and portable devices via Bluetooth with AptX codec support.

Completing the feature set are optical and coaxial digital outputs and stereo analogue outputs for connecting to an off-board power amplifier.

All this can be controlled by the compact but functional and easy-to-use remote control.

Inside, a linear power supply is built around a decent toroidal transformer while digital-to-analogue duties are handled by a Cirrus Logic CS4398 DAC. That's the same one used in Quad's Platinum DMP CD player and capable of accepting files up to 24bit/192kHz.

All this is housed in a relatively-compact aluminium case measuring just 313mm x 93.5mm x 302mm (W/H/D) and weighing in at 6.1kg.

Indeed, there's more than a hint about Quad's first ever solid-state amplifiers in its looks – just updated for the 21st century.

Aside from the remote, a row of discrete push buttons of the fascia control input selection while the large rotary volume is well-weighted

and reassuringly responsive.

It comes in Quad's traditional Lancaster Grey finish with premium gloss black and white, as well as a wooden rosewood-enclosed model due later in the year for an extra £100.

All in all, it's a good-looking and well-engineered package in true Quad fashion with a feeling of quality that belies the £600 price-tag.

SOUND QUALITY

I'll make no apologies for saying I'm a big fan of Quad electronics. Recent amplifiers – like the much more expensive QMP monoblocks we use as a reference at Hi-Fi World Towers – have a supreme musicality and ease-of-delivery that few rivals can match.

Fortunately, the Vena is cut from a similar cloth.

Obviously, it doesn't have the sheer grunt of its bigger brother but as £600 amplifiers go it is impressively sophisticated.

Driving a pair of Acoustic Energy 103 floorstanders (watch out for our forthcoming review!) and fed a CD of Lady Gaga's 'Fame Monster' collection and the little Vena brought a real sense of energy to the sound.

Drum cracks were firm and solid while bass stayed firm and controlled. There was also a good sense of detail



with good instrumental separation enabling me to hear into the dense mixes with ease.

Indeed, the Vena is adept at revealing details that some other amplifiers around this price can miss. Take Joy Division's 'She's Lost Control' – a 24/96 file played into the USB input via a MacBook Pro. On this the Quad lets you know producer Martin Hannett has multi-tracked singer Ian Curtis's vocals to get the desired edgy effect of the song – whereas on lesser amplifiers it comes over as more of an echo.

Push up the volume and the Vena sounded subjectively more powerful than its 45 Watts specification would suggest. There was little sense of strain as the music grew louder and the 'speakers were struggling before the Quad showed any sense of difficulty or harshness.

Not that the Vena ever does sound harsh. If anything there's a slight sense of warmth to the overall presentation that means it sounds smooth and easy on the ear at all times.

Don't take that to mean laid back though, because feed it some uptempo music and it can rock along with the best. Led Zeppelin's 'Black Dog' thundered out with exhilarating drive and verve.

Similarly, The Turtle Creek Chorale's recording of John Rutter's 'Requiem' captured all the atmosphere of the venue with a deep acoustic space surrounding the voices and instruments.

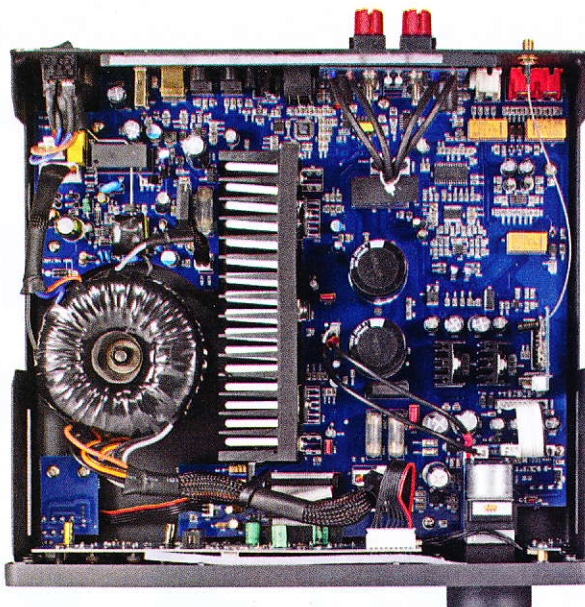
Switching from the Acoustic Energy 'speakers to a pair of big Tannoy Kensingtons (see review this issue) really showed how good the Quad can be. Costing some £10,000 the Tannoys probably don't often get paired with £600 amplifiers – but the Quad didn't disgrace itself.

The Allegri String Quartet's 'Beethoven Quartets Opus 18' was clean, clear and well-placed – the strings having just the right amount of bite and timbre to bring the music to life.

Yes, something like the Quad QMPs will give you more atmosphere and tonal accuracy but they'll also empty your pockets by another £1,800! And nor will they have the handy Bluetooth connectivity. Some hi-fi diehards might decry this feature but there's something undeniably handy about streaming music to the Vena from your mobile device in this way when you walk in the house.

The quality is also better than

you might expect. Played this way The Smiths' 'Rusholme Ruffians' had real bounce and enough definition to reveal all of Johnny Marr's studio trickery. Yes, it lacked some detail but it is eminently listenable



A substantial toroidal-based power supply is allied to the latest digital technology.

CONCLUSION

This is an extremely impressive piece of equipment from Quad. Too often, with manufacturers cramming more and more connections and digital electronics into boxes the sound can

take a back seat. Not here. One feels Quad have concentrated on building a great-sounding amplifier first and then carefully worked out how to fit the various input options around it. They've succeeded superbly.

MEASURED PERFORMANCE

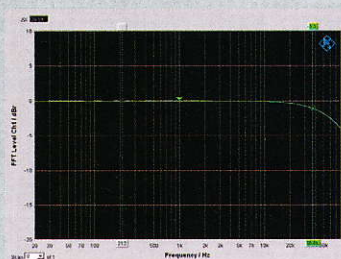
The Vena uses a well developed analogue amplifier that provides 55 Watts into 8 Ohms and 72 Watts into 4 Ohms, changing its distortion pattern little as power increases from low to high, one of our standard checks, made at 1kHz and 10kHz. It is 10kHz that counts since this is where open loop gain is falling and distortion increasing in transistor amps, explaining their less than pleasant treble, but the Vena produced little treble distortion,

0.04% at 1 Watt, and the harmonic structure did not change with level. Add in treble that rolls off above 20kHz and you have a classic Quad amplifier, smooth and easy on the ear.

The Coax electrical S/PDIF digital input accepted sample rates up to 192kHz, and the TOSLINK optical receivers managed this as well (many reach 96kHz maximum). The USB input also accepted 192kHz data from a MacBook Pro, where again 96kHz is a common maximum. Frequency response through S/PDIF rolled off slowly and smoothly above 26kHz, USB having a little more bandwidth. Distortion was very low with 24bit resolution data, at -60dB measuring just 0.06%. EIAJ Dynamic Range via S/PDIF was high at 111dB but the USB receiver was noisier than some, limiting this input to 104dB EIAJ Dynamic Range.

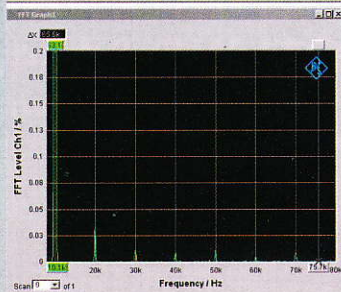
The Vena measured well all round, with the exception of USB where the receiver adds a little noise. **NK**

FREQUENCY RESPONSE



DISTORTION

THD at 1%	Level RMS	Frequency
0.0427 %	2.0341 V	10.000 kHz
OFF	OFF	OFF



Power	55watts
Aux 1	
Frequency response	5Hz-37kHz
Separation	92dB
Noise	-97dB
Distortion	0.04%
Sensitivity	530mV
Digital (S/PDIF, Coax)	
Frequency response (192k)	5Hz-26kHz
Distortion (24bit,-60dB)	0.06%
Dynamic range	111dB

**QUAD VENA
AMPLIFIER/DAC/
BLUETOOTH
STREAMER £599**



OUTSTANDING - amongst the best

VALUE - keenly priced

VERDICT

A cracking all-inclusive product from Quad at a bargain price. Capable of forming the heart of a very good hi-fi system

FOR

- connectivity
- smooth, detailed sound
- Bluetooth compatible

AGAINST

- nothing at the price

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