

OLD vs NEW SYSTEM

BATTLE OF THE QUADS

1956 vs 2006

2006

NOW...

AMPLIFIERS:

- QC-twentyfour pre-amp
- Quad II-forty power amps

ANCILLARIES:

- Yter speaker cable and interconnects
- GM Accessori equipment rack
- Audio Tappeto carpet



Ever wondered how components for sale in the shops today compare to hi-fi's stars of yesteryear? Advances in construction methods, technology and materials available have born fruits in pricing, reliability and finish, but what about sound quality? Here Ken Kessler compares current equipment from Quad with that available half a century ago

It was a dream assignment, and it took great control not to kiss Editor Fairclough for coming up with the idea. 'KK,' He mused, 'how would you feel about comparing a system from 1956 with one available in the shops today, like-with-like? Just to see if there's been any progress since Eisenhower was your president?'

Yes, please, sir!

It took us, oh, a millisecond to realise that such a showdown would consist of Quad gear, and that I just happened to have all of the equipment in my 'museum'. But there were two caveats.

First of all, I couldn't face using the Quad 22 pre-amp because 1) 50-year-old pre-amps are usually too noisy to use, and 2) it's absolutely slaughtered by the new QC-twentyfour. Also, I wanted

a common 'control' between the two systems, which to me meant a single source and pre-amp. It just made more sense to me to limit the 'test' to amp-and-speakers against amp-and-speakers.

IDEAL SOLUTION

So it took another millisecond to appreciate that the ideal solution would be the Quad 99 CD-P, which combines a terrific CD player with a pre-amp, providing both fixed and variable outputs. I love this unit, which is my circa £1000 reference CD player; it's like getting a digital pre-amp thrown in for free. And it works beautifully with valve and solid-state power amps.

Speakers formed the second caveat. I already owned 'run-in' ESL-63s and didn't want the hassle of securing some 988s. So I checked with Quad's Dave

Patching, who ▶▶



...AND THEN

AMPLIFIERS:

- Quad 22 pre-amp
- Quad 11 power amps

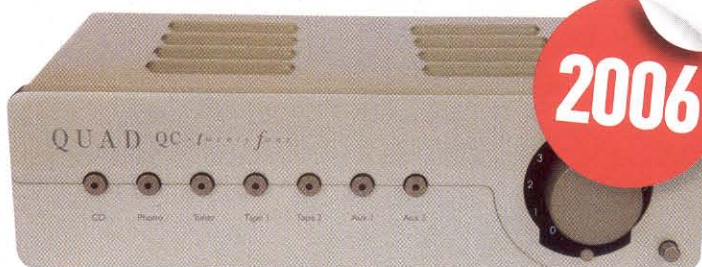
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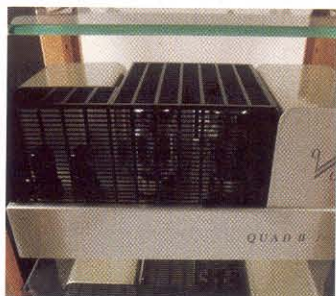
OLD vs NEW SYSTEM



1956



2006



'Which decade would win? The findings would prove to be both amusing and – yes – a bit surprising'

or sloppy journalism. Whatever way you cut it, we're stuck with it. But if you need proof that the ESL was available when Miles Henslow launched *Hi-Fi News*, grab a copy of the 1956 *Hi-Fi Yearbook*. It's on the front cover.

ABOVE: The Quad 22 pre-amp – or control unit in Quad parlance – offered inputs for 'Discs', 'Radio', 'Tape' and 'Microphone'; the QC twenty-four on the other hand offers five straight line-ins

gave it his blessing: Quad maintains that the 988 is simply a better-built, more dependable ESL-63, with negligible sonic differences. Besides, I would be 'mixing it up' by swapping the amps and speakers to find out

which decade was the winner. The findings would prove to be both amusing and – yes – a bit surprising.

Now some of you are thinking, 'Is Kessler dyslexic? Did he not say "1956"? So isn't the original Quad ESL therefore a year too young?' Here, for the umpteenth and final time, is the explanation:

As for the Quad 'ESL-57' being available when this

magazine was born, please note that the misnomer 'ESL-57' is collector's shorthand to distinguish it from the ESL-63. To Quad, it is simply the Quad Electrostatic. Unfortunately, some innumerate idiot dubbed it the 'ESL-57' and the name stuck; bowing to the inevitable, now it's even called that on Quad's official website. Blame the rapid spread of this misinformation on the internet,

CABLES

Armed with all the necessary gear, I set up the Quad 99 CD-P II with Yter interconnects, resting on the GM Accessori glass-and-perspex-and-aluminium tables. Yter speaker cables (ditto) took the signals from amps to speakers. With CDs from Keb' Mo, Art Garfunkel, the Judds, Fleetwood Mac (blues era), Dean Martin and Green Day, I listened first to the all-1956 system of Quad IIs

THE 1956 SYSTEM

Quad made audio history with the '57 – the world's first production electrostatic loudspeaker. The design uses stretched sheets of mylar for its drive units that are coated with an electrically-conductive paste

Following the development of stereo records in 1958 Quad released its 22 pre-amp. It was designed to be used with a pair of Quad II mono amplifiers and featured tone controls

The 15 watt mono Quad II power amplifier remained in production until 1970. Even today it is a covetable classic with a reworked version, called the Quad-II Classic, currently available. (See 'The Inside Track On...' above right.)



1956

THE INSIDE TRACK ON...

OLD-OLD VS NEW-OLD? QUAD'S II-CLASSIC

In preparing this feature, we discovered something that complicated the project ... but in a good way: Quad offered what few other brands could, which was a current version of something available in 1956 – the Quad II-Classic monoblock power amplifier.

Aside from Klipsch's immortal Klipschorn, I am hard-pressed to name another 50-year-old audio product that's either never gone out of production, or that has been revived as a near-replica and is currently in the stores.

McIntosh's sublime MC275 is a bit too young for the 1956 cut-off date, and I don't think that any of the current Tannoys or Lowthers qualify as exact replicas of their 1956 offerings.

Narrowing the field only to products available in the UK in 1956 (and, yes, the Klipschorn was on sale here), another candidate would be Ortofon's SPU cartridge. That, however, would have been mono and the comparison here is in stereo because current products are, well, generally accepted to be stereo. After all, unlike primary source components from 1956, amplifiers and loudspeakers can be set up in pairs to qualify as such.

Where the Quad II-Classic differs from the original is that no Quad II ever

left Huntingdon with the fit, finish and build quality of the II-Classic. And even though I have every confidence that my Quad-serviced, original IIs are fine examples of the breed, only access to a time machine would ensure that my originals vs II-Classics was fair in terms of their performance being absolutely up to specification.

We were conscious of one thing throughout the listening sessions: we simply cannot deny the effects of the passage of time on any hardware from the 1950s. Nor would the hardcore deny that the modern KT66s are direct equivalents of the KT66s of the 1950s. So each generation of Quad II had an advantage and a disadvantage: the originals bore what may be better tubes, but aged innards. The II-Classics were brand-new, but with KT66s that might not have been equal to the UK glassware of a half-century ago.

Keeping that in mind, I have to state, with no small measure of anachrophilic anguish, that the II-Classic is so much more rewarding a product than even a mint original that I almost feel like a heretic, or a traitor. Unclean. A disgrace to the Saturday Morning Sad Bastards Club. On the other hand, as Quad's Dave Patching comforted me, 'This is no act of

disrespect to Peter Walker. Instead, look at it as an affirmation of his greatness: the circuit is absolutely unchanged in the II-Classic!'

Inevitably, CE rules and the need to appeal to a modern mindset meant the addition of decent speaker terminals, a phono socket for input, a cage over the valves and an IEC three-pin mains socket with on/off switch – all of which are welcomed by everyone bar masochists and Opus Dei members. The colour is more in line with current Quad production, too. But the Quad II-Classic has more in common with its 1956 counterpart than differences. I love it to pieces.

So, yes, a pair of II-Classics is worth every penny of the £2000 price tag because they really are Quad IIs for the 21st Century. Let's put it another way. The II-Classics drove, to (late night) listenable levels, the Wilson Duette. The originals didn't.

Not even factoring in that the II-Classics are brand-new, and less likely to fail, that they feature sensible socketry and valve cages, they're prettier, *ad nauseum*, I have to say that the Quad II-Classic is the audio equivalent of Lamborghini reintroducing the Miura. KK

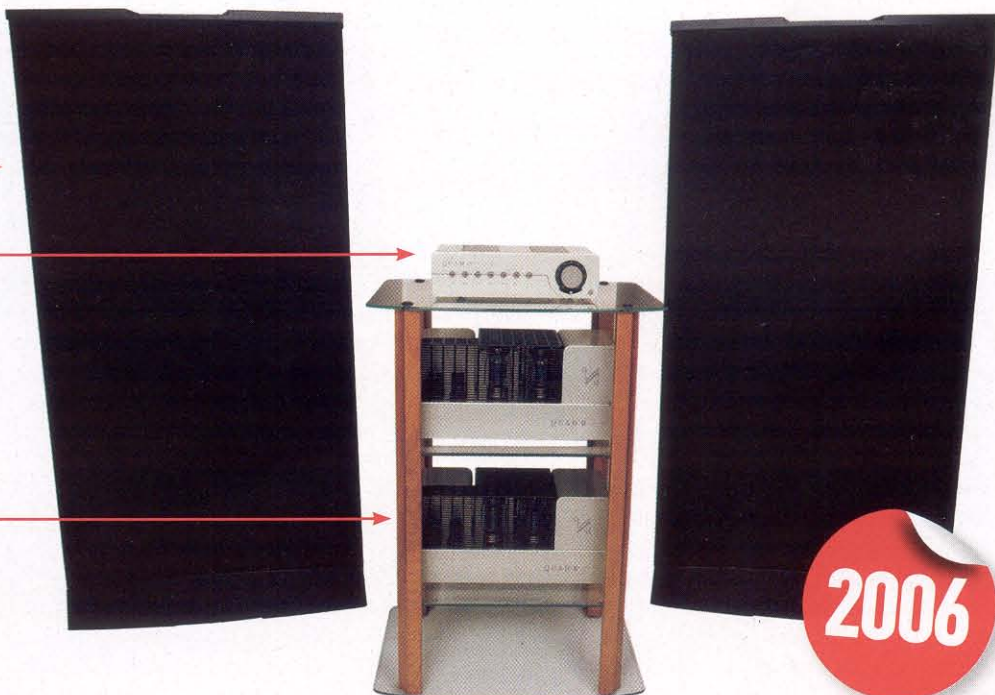


THE 2006 SYSTEM

The Quad ESL-988 replaced the much loved ESL-63 and is of similar size and proportions. Compared with its 50-year old predecessor, the '57, it has a new power supply, improved diaphragms, a strong strong heavyweight moulded base and new grille assemblies →

QC-twentyfour pre-amp employs a single military spec 6111 WA twin tube. It sports two sets of main outputs, two complete tape loops, and five high-level inputs, with the one marked 'phono' being for the connection of an outboard phono stage →

Quad II-forty power amp monoblock offers 40W per channel output from a pair of KT88s valves. The input and rectifier tubes are military spec, which the company claims assures longevity →



and original ESLs, followed by the '63s driven by the 909, then the II-forty, followed by the new II-Classic.

Then, to confirm any findings, I swapped the amp regimen. I tried the original Quad IIs with the ESL-63s, and fed my cherished original ESLs with the three modern amplifiers. But first, old vs new.

ALL IN THE FAMILY

Dear, dear Peter Walker must be smiling up there in hi-fi heaven, where his comfy chair has 'Closest Approach To the Original Sound' embroidered across its back. Aside from the obvious differences in bass extension and maximum attainable sound pressure levels, the family resemblance is as genetically solid as that between Ingrid Bergman and Isabella Rossellini. Using an SPL meter to ensure that I wasn't hammering the older kit – I settled on circa 85-90dB at 2m – I was overjoyed to hear that the performance in the

909 and the II-forty power amps, with their greater power output. Additionally, the noise floor was so much lower – because of the aforementioned greater dynamic range as well as the fact that the newer units are intrinsically quieter – that the newer set-up exhibited greater retrieval of minute detail.

Conversely, the older system sounded sweeter, more romantic, more lush – by-products of both the amps

sound and usable power. The surprise, however, was the little 15W II-Classic (see panel, p45). This absolute treasure more than made up for its lack of sheer grunt with such finesse and coherence and downright politesse that it reminded me of Peter Walker's oft-repeated belief, paraphrased as: you don't have to listen at ear-shattering levels, or to stomach-churning bass to enjoy even truly majestic works. Backing off the SPLs by a few dB resulted in the most satisfy sound of all four amplifiers, and into both sets of speakers. In every case, voices

II-Classics (or, for that matter, the II-forty) produced better lower-octave performance than most listeners – the estimable Quad devotee Dave Chesky excepted – would dare to expect.

THE STING

But here's the sting: the 1950s ESL, in some ways, is more revealing than its younger, taller descendant. It was far better at exposing the differences between the amplifiers' sonic character than the ESL 63. And at times, it proved hard to choose between the II-Classic and the II-forty when power

'Conversely, the older system sounded sweeter, more romantic, more lush – by-products of both the amps and the speakers'

'The modern equipment offers greater headroom. It's faster for transient attack and decay, the dynamic contrasts are wider'

midband was close enough from system-to-system to bypass all but the most careful of listeners. Which is where reviewer practice comes in to play.

Once past the initial impressions, if levels and bass are not drawn in to play as determinants, there is no denying that the modern equipment offers greater headroom. It's faster for transient attack and decay, the dynamic contrasts are wider and the bottom registers are tighter and more controlled. This was to be expected especially of the

and the speakers. If you want sound that caresses you more than it informs you, the 1950s system is the one for you. It reeks of analogue and valve virtues. It is the difference between an automobile that takes you on an adventure, like a 1978 Lancia Fulvia, and a car that turns reality into a video game, eg anything made in Germany after 2005.

Of the modern systems, the 909-driven set-up had more punch and impact than the rest, but the II-forty was the best compromise between valve

was not an issue. So here's my verdict on the 50-year gap:

If you told me I could only own one system, it would be the original Quad ESLs with a pair of II-Classics. If you insisted that I fill a larger room than my 12 x 18ft studio, or that I must embrace level and bass, I would drive the ESL 63/988 with the II-forty. But even the 'least magnificent' permutation – the 909 driving the original ESLs – was still, well, magnificent.

For me, it means that Quad is one of the only companies in the world

of audio that has – like Patek Philippe, Ferrari, Ronnie Isley, BB King and Philip José Farmer – not just matched its output of 1956... in many ways, it's gotten better. ■

• Ken Kessler is the author of *Quad – The Closest Approach*, the definitive and authorised history of the brand. It is available from the Hi-Fi News Accessories Club (see p137), 01234 741152.



ABOVE: A Quad advertisement from the July 1956 issue of *Hi-Fi-News* (left) and a current Quad ad, where the emphasis is on detail and subtlety

revealed more of the relative qualities than anything else, but I didn't neglect neither imaging nor bass nor attach. The fat but tight lower registers of the backing to Keb' Mo's take of 'For What It's Worth' favoured the 2006 system, but the original ESLs driven by the Quad