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Quad Vena

Quad's entry into the ultra-contemporary world of all-singing-all-dancing digital-embracing integrated amplifiers, the chic Vena, offers more than a whiff of retro
 Review: **Ken Kessler** Lab: **Paul Miller**

No-one has yet named a sub-genre that has been gestating for, oh, the last five or so years. Integrated amps with built-in DACs are nothing new, but the double-whammy need to accommodate 1) wireless connectivity and 2) the pervasive growth of streaming means an increase in the number of digital inputs sharing space with legacy analogue line inputs.

Quad's new Vena, a bargain at £599, name-checks the iPod while, tellingly, the first input on the left is Bluetooth. This sub-genre also has to address a lifestyle market made up of those unwilling to suffer setup inconvenience. While satisfying modern needs, the Vena also assuages doubts among the audiophiles, if drawing short of adding phono. Its competition includes similar all-in-ones from Musical Fidelity, Project, the big Japanese brands, and anyone else who wants to capture those ready to move on from B&W Zeppelins and the like.

A RETRO LOOK

This is emblematic 21st century hi-fi-without-the-tears: remote control and a Bluetooth aerial sticking out of the back are *de rigueur*. Where Quad got clever is through a juggling act. Instead of bland modernism (that is, copying the look of Apple-ware), it presents this little 313mm-wide beauty in a quasi-vintage housing. It will enthrall those familiar with the brand and who can't live without the round-corner'd, 'Lancaster Grey' look, a shape with roots back in the Quad II of the 1950s.

For those with no grasp whatsoever of Quad's heritage, it's merely a cool grey box. It will satisfy today's default position in hi-fi purchases thanks to the digital hospitality, a remote that does all it should and a decent headphone amp – albeit one with a high-end-headphone-friendly 6.35mm socket instead of the 3.5mm norm. Its front panel, with rotary volume

control, on/off button and eight sources in a row of illuminating pushbuttons, is self-explanatory. Aside from determining the Bluetooth handshaking procedure, you won't need to look at the owner's manual.

Around the back, it's a smorgasbord of socketry, the only thing missing being any phono input and the less popular digital types such as BNC, XLR and AT&T optical – and when's the last time anyone asked for *that*? Two analogue auxiliary line inputs mean you can connect an external phono amp or other component, a legacy FM tuner or a tape deck.

What you're left with leaves nothing to be desired for digital sources: the back contains a screw socket for the aerial to talk to the aptX-supporting Bluetooth; two optical inputs and one coaxial; and

both USB B-type and USB A-type, the latter Apple-compatible. (The manual contains a detailed list of iPhones, iPods and iPads.) Digital outputs include one each for coaxial and optical egress.

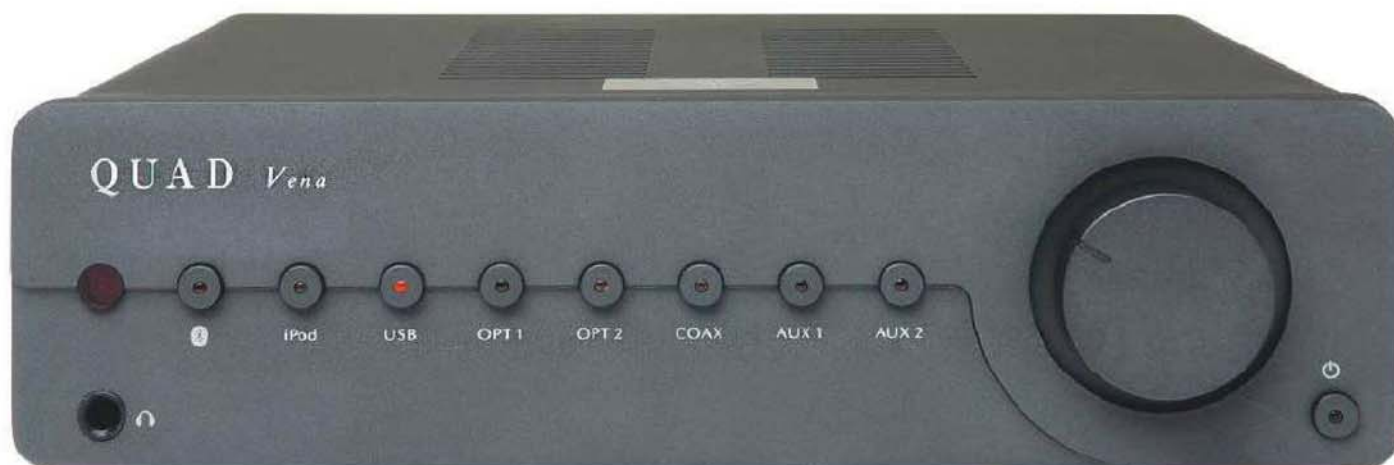
The Vena doesn't just resemble a Quad preamp: it can *serve* as one. In addition to the line inputs 'Aux 1' and 'Aux 2' there is a preamp output, should you ever wish to by-pass the built in 45W/ch amplifier for something more powerful. The speaker terminals, though, deserve special mention: they are multi-way and even accepted the spade lugs fitted to my Crystal Ultra cables through side slots.

CHEERFUL, NOT CHEAP

Inside is a 24-bit/192kHz chipset as used in the company's Platinum CD player,



RIGHT: A single toroidal transformer (with multiple taps) feeds independently-regulated supplies for the (integrated) Class A/B power amp and DAC section. Note motorised volume



while the Class A/B power amp sounded fine through an ageing pair of Spondor's 11ohm LS3/5As. A quartet of modern headphones met with ample power from the front panel socket, the list including Audeze LCD-XC and LCD-X, B&W P7 and oBravo HAMT-1 [see p66].

A nice touch is a slick remote covering source selection, level, muting and power on/off. It's not much larger than a credit card and is fitted with a metal back, so it doesn't feel cheap – just cheerful.

Just before this test began, a second Vena press release arrived, reinforcing the company's wise decision to address a larger market. If Quad's Lancaster Grey is too militaristic for your tastes, an extra £100 will secure a luxury finish to ensure that 'the amp slips neatly into a range of environments'. I love the grey, but left-wing hipsters and poseurs may be more at ease with Piano Black, Piano White or Rosewood.

Let me save you some heartache, even if you are wedded to music via a computer or a digital player with USB connectivity.

While not as unpleasant as Bluetooth, USB is proving to be just an unpleasant detour in the hi-fi highway. I'm not saying that it's a detriment unique to the Vena, merely that it's not as satisfactory as either the line inputs or the other 'proper' digital inputs.

To wring the neck of this wee amp, I fed it from an iMac and a MacBook Air with iTunes and Fidelia front-ends, CDs via Musical Fidelity's M1 CDT transport (which sounded nicest with the digital feed played through the coaxial input),

and with analogue/line level feeds from an iPod Classic, an iPhone 5C, an early Pono player and a first-generation Astell & Kern. The players were connected with either their own or – in the case of the Pono – with special cables made for Pono by Cardas.

'The Quad Vena may sell for just £600, but it acts like £2000'

HARVEST TIME (AND AGAIN) Musical formats ran the gamut from CD to various compressed computer codecs, as well as high-res downloads up to 192kHz/24-bit. But not wishing to get too far ahead of myself – I must stress that the

ABOVE: Absolute clarity and nothing superfluous: a row of eight pushbuttons for sources, volume control, a headphone socket and power-on, each button bearing illumination

Pono I'm testing is an early one – the most impressive all-digital recording I used was the 192kHz/24-bit FLAC version of Neil Young's *Harvest* pre-loaded in the player, and which will be available as a download from the Pono music store.

Suffice it to say, the sound – especially the lower registers – was dazzling. I can't count how many times I played the whole of *Harvest* on repeat, the opening seconds serving the dual purpose of showing how smooth, clean and detailed is the sound of the Vena, while increasing my optimism for the Pono. I've known this album for 40 years-plus, and I was hearing stuff that had eluded me before.

Quad's little Vena perfectly reproduced the various textures of electric bass, dry percussion, harmonic, slide and – crucially – Young's distinctive voice. He's rarely sounded better than on 'Out On The Weekend' while the rolling, almost jaunty title track rang with realistic piano, arid snare and – oh, that pedal steel! As for the LSO on 'A Man Needs A Maid' – all of the sweeping majesty was evident through both speakers or cans, and this speaks volumes too about the quality of the headphone output.

Then came 'Heart of Gold'. Percussion with impact but no excess, chiming pedal steel, rich acoustic guitars, harmonica dead centre – the sound coalesced without any single instrument sacrificing a shred of its pomp nor its individuality. It is the ultimate audio conundrum: how can a piece sound 'of a whole' while each of its constituent parts remains distinct and separate? I can only liken it to a bowl of rice, in which each grain is separate, yet it's still a bowl of rice (though not in the Japanese fashion). ☺

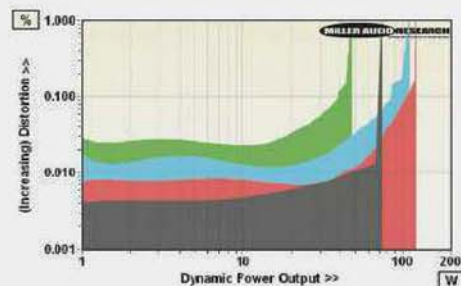
THE QUAD TRADITION

As Quad nears its 80th Anniversary, one can only marvel at the changes but also at how the brand respects tradition. Perhaps the most extreme example of how things have evolved is the realisation that Quad circa 2015 is exercising prolificacy that never would have been countenanced by Peter Walker. Not just new models but whole ranges have been appearing these past few years. Gone are the days when Quad's catalogue contained a mere four or five items. The Vena, although as contemporary as can be, represents a continuation of the Quad tradition: the identity has been maintained, even if primarily through aesthetics. The minimalism is new (Peter Walker loved his tilt and balance controls) but the plethora of inputs isn't. Quad preamps always accommodated a full system's worth of sources. The Vena certainly foreshadows the next model to come, the PA-One; this valve headphone amp/digital preamplifier features the unmistakable looks, and mixes valves with an array of digital inputs [see p17].

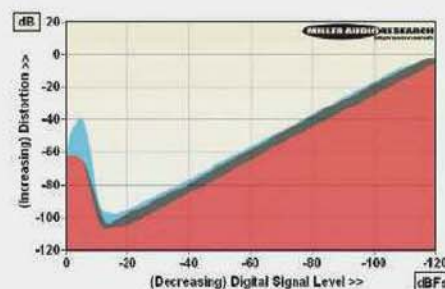
QUAD VENA

This is a modestly powerful little amp. Rated at 2x45W it achieves closer to 50W/8ohm and 60W/4ohm with 70W/8ohm and a full 120W/4ohm under dynamic conditions, the load for which the Vena has clearly been optimised [see Graph 1, below]. Distortion was a little higher on the left (0.01% at 1kHz/10W) than right channel (0.003%) in our sample; THD in both channels increasing with frequency (0.08% and 0.04%, respectively). Quad has engineered a gentle HF roll-off amounting to -0.7dB/20kHz to -8.4dB/100kHz while the 0.089-0.125ohm source impedance may result in a further, minor variation depending on choice of speaker. The 88.8dB A-wtd S/N ratio is slightly above average for an amp in this class.

While the Vena *can* be used as an outboard DAC via its pre outs, I'd not recommend it as the amp stage is still in circuit. Hence even at a 'standard' 2V line out (0dBfs/1kHz) distortion climbs to 0.05%, falling to 0.0002% at -10dBfs and 0.0004% at -30dBfs [see Graph 2]. Quad uses the same CS4398 DAC as Marantz in its NA8005 [p54] but jitter is far higher in the Vena, amounting to ~1500psec via S/PDIF and a huge ~20,000psec via USB (principally sub-20Hz). The 108dB A-wtd S/N via S/PDIF falls back to a ~16-bit 96dB via USB. (We've seen this before with some early USB driver implementations.) Quad has selected the DAC's slow roll-off mode, so its response reaches -0.5dB/20kHz with 44.1/48kHz media, -2.5dB/45kHz with 96kHz files and -9.1dB/90kHz with 192kHz files. Readers may download full QC Suite test reports for the analogue and digital performance of Quad's Vena amplifier by navigating to www.hifinews.co.uk and clicking on the red 'download' button. PM



ABOVE: Dynamic power versus distortion into 8ohm (black trace), 4ohm (red), 2ohm (cyan) and 1ohm (green) speaker loads. Maximum current is 7.4A



ABOVE: THD vs digital level over a 120dB range via line out (S/PDIF 1kHz, red; USB 1kHz, black & 20kHz, blue)

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Power output (<1% THD, 8/4ohm)	51W / 62W
Dynamic power (<1% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)	72W / 122W / 111W / 48W
Output impedance (20Hz-20kHz)	0.089-0.125ohm
Frequency response (20Hz-100kHz)	-0.07dB to -8.4dB
Input sensitivity (for 0dBW/45W)	67mV / 459mV
A-wtd S/N ratio (Analogue/Digital)	88.8dB (0dBW) / 108.0dB (0dBfs)
Distortion (20Hz-20kHz, An/Dig)	0.0020-0.045% / 0.0002-0.002%
Power consumption (Idle/Rated o/p)	15W / 166W (1W standby)
Dimensions (WHD) / Weight	313x94x302mm / 6.1kg



ABOVE: Three S/PDIF ins and two outs, asynchronous USB-B, Bluetooth and an iDevice-ready USB-A input. Two RCA line ins, one pre out and 4mm speaker terminals

The following observations are about the Vena's overall character. I suspect for any *HFN* reader who is contemplating a Vena (ideal for the seasoned audiophile wanting a second system), the quality inputs will be your defaults.

CSNY 1974 [Rhino R2-541729] is three discs' worth of beautifully-recorded live material, remastered to perfection and possessing a sense of space that will transport you to the gigs proper. This small Quad delivered it with scale that even belied my adored LS3/5As, the sound encircling the transducers with such breadth and depth that I was reminded in some ways of the Vena's speaker forebear: the Quad ESL.

ALWAYS A CONSISTENCY

The warmth and smoothness of the Vena's Class A/B output stage rendered the atmosphere of those concerts with a seamless openness redolent of an outside venue. You could hear PA artefacts, small echoes and a crowd that did not sound like a certain popular cereal fronted by three elves.

Rather, the Vena welcomed CSNY's close harmonies – not that it's difficult to separate C from S from N from Y with such readily identifiable voices. What the Vena did was allow them to weave their communal magic while also allowing you to home in on a single voice.

It only got better, but, as the sound improved due to a mix of warm-up times and familiarity with the Vena's character, I grew slightly befuddled. How could a kitchen-

sink product like this, which crams so much into such a small package, and for so little outlay, perform so consistently well? It may sell for £600, but it acts like £2000.

Whether using ancient material from George Formby or last year's Adele, or two Neil Young albums recorded 42 years apart, the Vena exhibited the kind of consistency that goes a long way toward obscuring any deficiencies. There's no doubt that it errs on the warm side of neutral, almost doing an impression of a small valve amp.

Even streaming Radio 1 through a MacBook Air was acceptable, although too long with 'BBC Radio 1's Teen Awards 2014' was enough to make me less hostile to the Grim Reaper and ecstatic that I was 14 in 1966. Tens of thousands of teens screaming at The Vamps? Just gimme The Beatles...

Which I did. The Japanese box set via the Musical Fidelity M1 CDT and coaxial truly sparkled. I banished any thoughts of compromise or corner-cutting due to price or size. The Vena is simply the quintessential hassle-free, amp-plus-DAC, single-box solution for the 2010s. ☺

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

Quad chose not to compromise its 'lifestyle' contender, so the Vena may be the best of both worlds. It looks and acts like something an Apple-worshipping fashion victim could handle, yet its build, facilities and sound quality will satisfy any purist, USB notwithstanding. At £599, it's great value. Anyone desiring a superb amp/DAC combination with only £600 to spare will feel as if the audio gods are smiling.

Sound Quality: 85%

