

Quad Platinum DMP/Mono(s)

Quad's Platinum Series promises a genuine high-end experience with the Mono power amplifiers and the DMP (Digital Media Player), containing CD player, DAC and preamp

Review: **Ken Kessler** Lab: **Paul Miller**

For those who crave more power than that of the Elite QSP, Quad has delivered the Platinum Mono power amp. Concurrent with its release is the DMP, the initials standing for Digital Media Player, and it's a logical progression for those of us who have long-enjoyed the earlier 99 Series digital preamp/CD player, the CDP-2.

Crucially, the DMP updates the CDP-2's role as a digital control unit by adding a USB input. This, however, does not mean an increase in the number of points of digital ingress, which remain at six. But where the 99 had three Toslink and three coaxial, the DMP sacrifices one of the latter for the USB.

LINE PREAMP ON ITS WAY

Outputs are the greatest area of departure because the number of digital sources with bi-directional usage has increased, especially in multi-room systems. The total absence, too, of analogue inputs means that those with analogue sources will feed them into a conventional line-level preamp; the Platinum Pre is in the works to fill that role. To make the DMP as flexible as a digital media player can be, digital outputs include one each of Toslink, coaxial, BNC and AES/EBU via XLR.

Both the Monos and the DMP acknowledge current high-end practice by providing balanced connection via XLRs for the main line-level output from the preamp and input to the power amps – preferred by many of us. Other connections on the DMP include two pairs of conventional single-ended outputs through RCA connectors, 'System Link' via Ethernet cables rather than the earlier 15-pin QuadLink, two 12V trigger outputs (cables are provided and I used them to switch on the amps) and an IEC mains socket.

As a concept, the DMP is now a fairly common component, in which a CD player's DAC has been accessed and turned

into a digital preamp by the addition of a level control. What has changed is the need to accept not just the sort of digital signals that have been around for decades, but feeds from a computer, typically via USB. For those using PCs, then, special drivers are required and Quad supplies

a fat manual to walk you through this. For those with Macs, synergy is instant: my Air was feeding iTunes into the DMP within 17 seconds of inserting the USB cable into both. As it turns out, the sound was so lame that I reverted to other sources

– the problem lies with my use of iTunes, not the DMP – so my findings refer mostly to CD playback and downloaded content.

For its CD section, the DMP contains a transport constructed from die-cast aluminium and ABS compound, with a tray supported by steel rods running through

sintered bronze bearings. Quad says this construction 'reduces noise and vibration through critical damping of the mechanical components, allowing the laser to read the disc with unerring accuracy'. Suffice it to say, it performed on a par with the excellent Denon DVD-2900 universal player

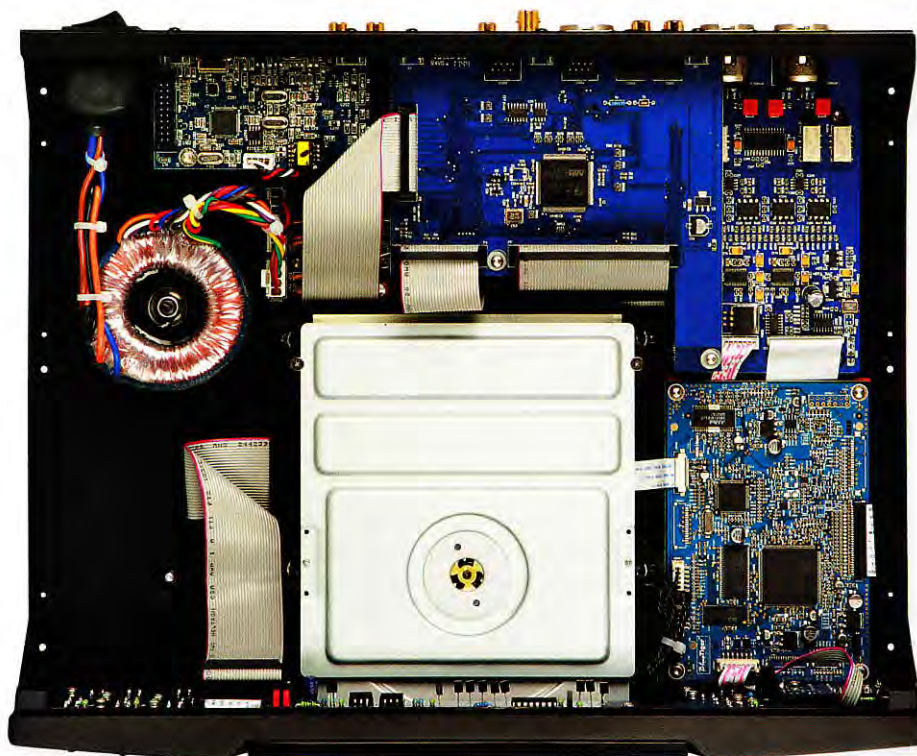
for CDs, while the DAC itself managed to exploit the still amazing Marantz CD-12 transport.

Inside are twin Cirrus Logic 24-bit/192kHz Delta-Sigma D/A converters used in

a double differential mode. The upsampling to 24-bit/192kHz complemented the sources I fed it, particularly the feed from BBC Radios 3 and 4 via the iPlayer.

After the DAC, a fully differential signal path feeds the balanced XLR outputs, and the DMP allows the user to configure the

'The Platinum Monos made me think of the 90s on steroids'



RIGHT: Quad hasn't scrimped on the power supply, and the increase in volume over the CDP 99-2 allows for better isolation of subsections; daughter boards make servicing easier



ABOVE: Comprehensive remote features a cool 'foot' to raise it to an angle

LEFT: Power amps have only on/off button (rarely used if triggers are employed); DMP groups inputs to upper left, with CD controls lower left and to right of tray

XLR and RCA outputs independently for variable or fixed level operation (for when not used as a preamp but as a standalone digital source). I used it both as a system controller, with the volume operated by the slick remote, as well as through my main system of Audio Research REF 5SE preamp feeding a REF 75 power amp [HFN Nov '12] into Wilson Sophia 3s. As these were used throughout the sessions, it says much for the Monos, at a few pence shy of £5000 for the pair, that they never balked at driving the Wilsons even up to hooligan levels [see Ken's system at www.hifinews.co.uk/news/article/meet-the-team;-ken-kessler/9827].

Each Mono is rated at 180W into 8ohm [see Lab Report, p33], courtesy of its substantial output devices. Quad claims the specification of 'top quality, audiophile-grade components, from the large power supply capacitors to the circuitry that controls the amplifier open loop gain' as 'carefully chosen for their combined sound quality, and dynamic performance.'

After trying both items on their own – you'd be surprised how well the Monos sing with the REF 5SE providing the drive –

I settled into the Platinum package driving the Wilsons, with YTER wiring throughout.

MIX 'N MATCH?

Either the DMP or a pair of Monos as solo purchases for use with, respectively, other power amps or other front-ends, would certainly present attractive solutions. The DMP is more than a competent CD-player-with-accessible DAC, while the Monos made me think of 909s on steroids. But one suspects, given Quad's history, that its devotees wouldn't dream of mixing and matching with other brands... even nearly a half-century after the 33/303 arrived.

If you leave aside the CD player aspect of the DMP, it is a superlative DAC-with-volume-control. The Marantz CD-12 sounded a touch gentler through the Quad than through its own KI-modified DAC, as if a slight roll-off had been applied. This was certainly noticeable, even beneficial with The Cardinals' 'The Door Is Still Open', from the CD of the same name [Collectables COL-CD-9977], valve-y mono from 1958 but with just enough edge to excite certain systems. Through the DMP's CD drive, the sound recessed a few inches, providing

PLATINUM EVOLUTION

Quad's Platinum separates are not an entirely new invention, for a CD and pre/power combo of the same name was previewed, albeit quietly, at the International CES way back in January 2007. Quad traditionally has one range of solid-state electronics at any given time – currently it's the Elite Series, which replaced the 99 Series. However, for some time, Quad has been monitoring demand for a more upmarket range of solid-state electronics to run alongside the Elite Series (and the existing valve amp range, of course). So while Platinum has existed in prototype form for a several years, the designs have gradually evolved until the time was deemed right for a full commercial launch. Though typically innovative, Quad has never been a company that is prepared to rush!

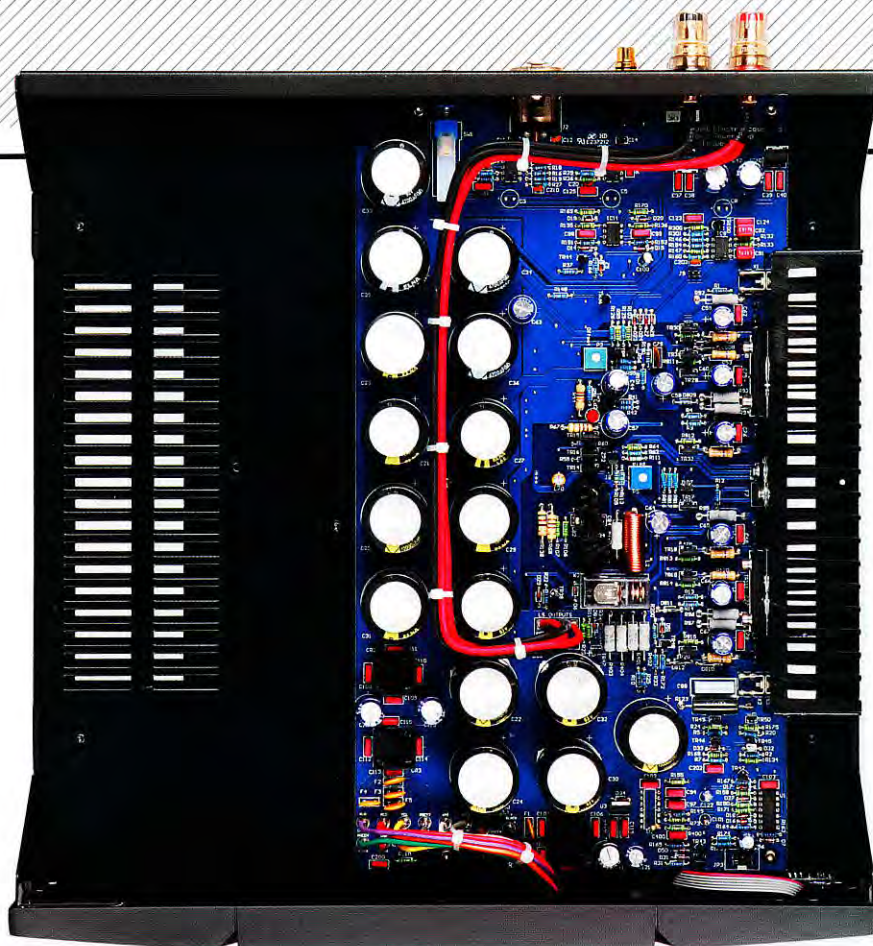
CUSTOMER CHOICE

HFN spoke to IAG's Director of Acoustic Design, Peter Comeau, to justify the Platinum system in light of Quad's long-held tradition – which began with Peter Walker – of focusing on the middle sector. After all, Walker held a deep aversion to what was called 'high-end audio' as defined by the community in the 1970s, particularly the pricing.

Peter said, 'The Platinum separates are a response to customer demand for higher-end solid-state gear, as a step up from the Elite Series. Physical media is still highly relevant for a company like Quad. Our customers have large collections of CDs and/or vinyl records, and our job is to deliver the best possible way for them to enjoy their collections at home.'

'Clearly, though, no manufacturer of audio electronics can ignore the fact that the way we consume music is changing. That's why the DMP is not just a CD player: we've added a range of digital inputs, so virtual media stored on a computer can benefit from the DMP's DAC and output circuitry.'

As for Wi-Fi Peter said, 'Right now, we draw the line at wireless signal transmission – whichever technology is used, it remains relatively unreliable and sonically inferior to a correctly-engineered wired connection, and cannot currently deliver the operational simplicity or performance we demand. But we are always researching new technologies, so in future, it might be possible.'



ABOVE: Lots of space within ensures cool running for the Platinum Mono. The main board is packed with good-quality components and an extensive PSU reservoir bank (transformer below)

the illusion of greater depth (this is mono, remember), but marginally less immediacy when the sax solo pops occur.

It made me think of a now-forgotten control once seen on 1950s and 1960s systems labelled 'Presence': the Marantz-via-DMP was more forceful, the CD-via-Quad more subdued. One could alter the performance merely by changing cables, let alone speakers, so this must fall under the heading of 'subtle'.

CATCHING UP

Playing the same material via my Mac was an object lesson in why I believe iTunes sucks. I transfer music to my iPod with the least compression, but 'red book' CD showed just how much is lost through all that computer jiggery-pokery. Which tells you that it's not just the standard ear-buds that make iPods worthwhile *only* for travel. What is undeniable, though, is the ease with which I was able to feed the BBC iPlayer and other 'catch-up' sites to my main system. This, however, is a privilege of diminishing worth, now that Sky has added the BBC and others to its 'On Demand' section. To his end, if you're using a Sky HD+ box through the DMP, you can bypass your computer, whether PC or Mac.

If CD seems the best way to exploit the DMP, that's to ignore the virtues of the DAC for other sources. For a chuckle, I fed a Nagra voice recorder though the Quad and it revealed just what a fine recording was captured by a hand-held device onto an SD card; and the use of the Quad with a couple of sub-£100 iPod docks (one of these under £30) merely reinforced the convenience of the DMP if not its full potential.

GRUNT TO SPARE

Probably the best sound I managed to eke out of the DMP was with the Marantz CD12 via coaxial, while the amps

have grunt to spare. It was nothing short of revelatory for a combination costing £2500 per unit (I know that's a lot of money, but in relative terms, the Platinums are not priced in the manner of the precious metal that gave them their name).

2011's spectacular Buddy Holly tribute, *Listen To Me* [WrasseWRASS295], is a CD that almost made our 'Twelve Discs For Xmas' [see p18-23] because it contains 15 phenomenal covers (plus a risible piece of drivel from Eric Idle), a number of them possessing sonics of the to-die-for variety. Stevie Nicks' scarily rocking 'Not Fade Away' places her distinctive, slightly nasal

'Some of the tracks on Listen To Me have sonics to die for'

QUAD PLATINUM DMP/MONO(s)

The DMP clips at volume '82' with a 0dBFS input (CD, S/PDIF or USB) and so all measurements were run at volume '80' (2.59V via the 115ohm balanced outputs). Distortion is a moderate 0.001% at this level across all frequencies, falling to a mere 0.00005% at -10dBFS and 0.0002% at -30dBFS through the midrange with 24-bit digital inputs [see Graph 1, below]. Quad has opted for a digital filter with minimum phase characteristics, offering less pre- than post-event ringing in the time domain and encouraging a very gentle treble roll-off, amounting to -0.6dB/20kHz (44.1/48kFs), -4.0dB/45kHz (96kFs) and -10.6dB/90kHz (192kFs). Digital jitter is lowest with CD at the 16-bit level of 115psec and slightly higher at 160/190psec with 24-bit inputs at 48/96kFs, respectively.

The partnering Platinum Monos easily best their 170W/8ohm rating at 200W/8ohm and 340W/4ohm and go on to deliver 250W, 470W, 820W and 1.34kW into 8, 4, 2 and 1ohm loads under dynamic conditions [see Graph 2, below]. These surprisingly cool-running boxes pack plenty of muscle. Distortion is low too, rising gently from 0.0006% at 1W/8ohm to 0.001%/10W and 0.003% at 100W through the midrange. At the frequency extremes - high treble and very deep bass - distortion increases quite quickly, reaching 0.015% at 20kHz/10W and 0.05% at 5Hz/10W. The response has a gentle treble roll-out although it's more extended than the DMP at -0.15dB/20kHz to -2.0dB/100kHz. As the output impedance increases from 0.088ohm above 10kHz to 0.5ohm at 100kHz (in line with the increase in THD), the amp's HF response also rolls away quicker into lower impedance speaker loads. PM



ABOVE: All units are clearly labelled and fitted with good-quality connectors. Note balanced XLR connection for pre-to-power, and four types of digital outputs and six digital inputs, including USB, on the back of the DMP. The Monos facilitate bi-wiring

voice in front of lean percussion and an array of backing vocals. When joined by subtle electric guitar, the sound coalesces into a liquid whole despite the contrasting textures, the amplifiers providing the requisite dynamic swings. And then, in slices some vicious fuzztone, sandwiched between acoustic guitars - a bouillabaisse of sounds both amplified and unplugged. The Quads deftly gave none of them too much emphasis. The result was an irresistible rhythmic experience, especially when the song reverts to naught but hand-clapping, that just oozes atmosphere. I don't wish to belabour this point, but switching from CD to iTunes and back reinforces the groundswell revival of interest in CD as a format that didn't deserve to be dissed so recklessly.

A CAPPELLA FEAST

Although the tracks on this CD are recent, Linda Ronstadt's 1976 classic emerges half-way through and, damn if it doesn't still sparkle, with astonishing transient elements and rich lower octaves. Again, it's the way the DMP handles such a melange of textures, especially duelling, piercing guitars and one of rock music's clearest voices, with equal assurance.

All of this is arrayed across a wide stage allowing the most curious of listeners to zoom in with Zeiss-ian focus on specific musical details.

But it's the leanest track that made me fall in love with this system. Zoëy Deschanel, the multi-talented actress, has a rich voice that to my ears renders her almost a Cher Mini-Me. Her mainly-unplugged version of 'It's So Easy', with a simply beautiful choral group behind her, is as valuable for the silences as for the vocal sounds themselves. When the track turns into a near-Gregorian feast of a *cappella*, you really won't want it to end.

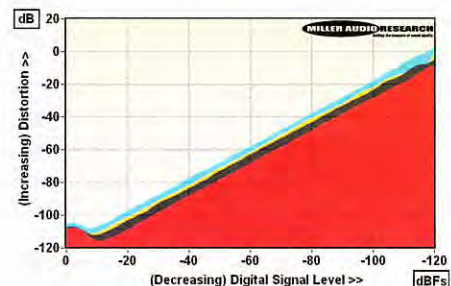
As for Natalie Merchant's 'Learning The Game', just strings and piano, well, it proved the system is capable of such finesse that I could only imagine the 303 had been reincarnated as a six-times-the-power great-grandson. ☺

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

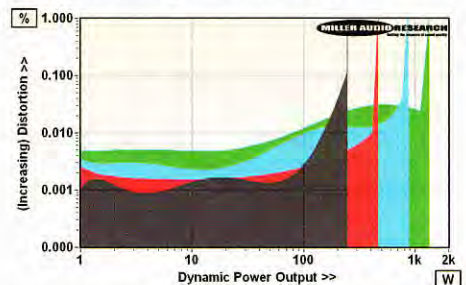
By virtue of the Monos' ease with the Sophias, and the lack of drama with the DMP's faultless segue from CD to iTunes to iPlayer, and with prices nowhere near the high-end norm, the Platinum pairing is a marvel. As separates, the DMP has rivals from Cambridge, Naim, *et al*, the Monos have rivals from everyone, but as a coherent system, it's manna for those who still love British hi-fi's most revered name.

Sound Quality: 84%

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ABOVE: Distortion vs. decreasing digital level (1kHz at 24-bit/48kHz via S/PDIF = red, via USB = black and 1kHz via CD = orange, 20kHz = blue)



ABOVE: Dynamic power output versus distortion into 8ohm (black trace), 4ohm (red), 2ohm (blue) and 1ohm (green) speaker loads

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Power output (<1% THD, 8/4ohm)	200W / 340W
Dynamic power (<1% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)	250W / 470W / 820W / 1.34kW
Output impedance (20Hz-20kHz)	0.087-0.16ohm (115ohm, DMP)
Freq. resp. (20Hz-20kHz, DMP/Mono)	+0.0 to -0.58dB / +0.0 to -0.15dB
A-wtd S/N ratio (DMP/Mono)	110.3dB (0dBFS) / 86.9dB (0dBW)
Distortion (20Hz-20kHz, DMP/Mono)	0.0003-0.0008% / 0.0006-0.015%
Digital jitter (CD/48kHz/96kHz)	115psec / 160psec / 190psec
Power consumption (DMP/Mono)	10W/280W (25W idle)
Dimensions (WHD DMP/Mono)	380x100x315mm/380x135x410mm