

Quad II Classic Integrated (£4500)

Quad's first integrated valve amp does what Peter Walker should have done 50 years ago: marry a Quad 2 preamplifier and a pair of Quad II amps – for a dream result
 Review: **Ken Kessler** Lab: **Paul Miller**

As far as expressions go, a novelist would describe it as 'eyes agog': that's the look that crossed my face in January 2009, at the Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas. It wasn't even an actual piece of hardware that grabbed me. It was a preliminary product sheet, a flyer for the forthcoming Quad II Classic Integrated. Talk about a well-kept secret: even the normally voluble Tim de Paravicini, who designed it, let out nary a peep [see p110].

You didn't have to see the real thing to know that this would be a product worth waiting for, eliciting anticipation such as a jaded old audiophile might not have experienced in a decade. Any familiarity either with vintage Quads or recent models in the Classic range would tell you that they got it as 'right' as Fiat did with the new 500. It was so unmistakably 'Quad', and so clearly an integrated amp, that you'd like to think it grew organically. I implored, begged, cajoled: could I please, please, please have one to review. And ten months later, it arrived.

It is what it is, just what the product sheet promised: a pair of Quad II Classics merged with a preamplifier. Tim de Paravicini managed not only to fit it all into a compact box, a stylish package owing its looks to nothing else on the planet, he also upped the power.

Tim told me that 'the amp section had to be more powerful,' his eyes and ears aware of like-priced all-valve competition, 'and it had to be compact enough and user-friendly enough to attract new customers.'

'So, the output valves are run more conservatively, yet it produces a genuine 25W/ch. It goes loud without going to pieces. It had to kick arse. The HT is increased but the critical voltage-to-screen-grid is lowered to enhance

reliability.' Tim has had enough of amplifiers (and valves) made in China that suffer poor reliability. He wanted this to be unbreakable.

AFTER A WARM UP

Given that the amp oozed robustness, I had no qualms about connecting it to the sort of speakers not normally attached to a mere £4500's worth of amplification: Wilson Sophia 2s. With Kimber alternating with Yter wires in-between, and with Musical Fidelity's kW DM25 CD transport/converter and the SME 30 with Series V arm and Ortofon 2M Blue, the system was up-and-running in ten minutes, exactly as Quad (and Tim) wanted. But – being a man with astonishing willpower when needed – I left it playing for an entire day before listening to it.

If patience is a virtue, I learned it doubly with the Quad II Classic

Integrated. The initial burst, the remastered soundtrack to *The King and I*, was chosen for a huge dose of orchestral majesty, followed by some broad stereo, and a feast of massed voices. You'll have to forgive my current obsession with Broadway musicals, but I just read George Gershwin's 1956 biography by David Ewen, and I'm in thrall of him, Cole Porter, Jerome Kern, Rodgers and

Hammerstein, Lerner and Loewe, *et al.* And from an audiophile standpoint, goodness me, did those 1950s soundtracks enjoy the best recording technology of the day.

But this is 2010, and the Quad is

emphatically *not* an exercise in retro, whatever the styling and the origins of the circuits suggest. While this may provoke many of you to cries of 'Heretic!', you have to approach this product not as a mutated Quad 2-plus-11s, even though you want to in your

'Like his personality, Tim's designs tend to grab you by the collar'



RIGHT: Aside from some solid-state circuitry in the phono section, for quietness, this baby is all-tube: maintaining its purity, the new Quad uses four KT66s, fed by four ECC88s and two ECC83s



Quad-loving heart. Rather, for the sake of sanity and blood pressure, you have to do what all those Mini purists had to do when BMW 're-imagined' Issigonis' masterpiece... and believe me, the parallel is absolutely perfect.

Exactly as with the new Mini the Quad II Classic Integrated is more powerful, more cleanly styled, better-assembled and more 'grown up' than the products that inspired it. You soon learn that you need to approach it without any reservations based on nostalgia or prejudice: you are not nursing a 50-year-old amp, nor a near-replica like the Quad II Classic monoblock. What you are interacting with is a thoroughly modern product that happens to look like something Doc Savage would have had in his 86th floor, New York lair in 1939.

Having waited to hear what the Quad would do, but already knowing that the Wilsons presented no problems, I dug out some treasured vinyl, including the

primordial alt.country of Great Speckled Bird. The group was composed of the astonishing Ian and Sylvia, plus rock journeyman N D Smart II, and it featured the kind of music that, four decades on, would power the likes of Wilco.

Here the Quad showed not so much what it could do for sheer gutsiness, but for finesse, dealing with those country-ham-honey-hominy harmonies with a coherence that reminded me of... yup, the original Quad ESL57.

POP TO POMP

How on earth Tim de Paranicini has managed to voice this amplifier to deliver such silkiness I cannot imagine. It's as if he wanted an amp to sound like a speaker I know he regards as one of the best of all time. To my ears, Tim's own amplifiers have a signature sound, the largest part of it being hyper-detail and rock-solid, robust lower registers. Like his personality, Tim's designs tend

to grab you by the collar, an Amarone to everyone else's Beaujolais.

Not so the sound Tim has dialled into the Quad Integrated: if Tim has a Jekyll side to his Hyde, then he reached down deep in his psyche to portray, in the sound of this integrated amplifier, his alter ego. But that quality, that poise, contradicts what will invariably turn out to be the Quad's biggest selling point as regards its performance (rather than its intrinsic form as a cool-looking amp regardless of how it sounds). This amplifier is so deceptively powerful that – psychologically rather than through the loudspeakers – it almost counters its own delicacy, sophistication and poise.

It's as if Fred Astaire and a sumo wrestler inhabited the same body. In practice, it means that this amplifier is blissfully free from the constraints of favouring a single genre. It rocks, it glides. It shimmies, it pounds...

Does it not excite you to think that you can feed an amplifier, first, a CD of remastered Led Zeppelin, followed by an LP of vintage Streisand, then a glossy C&W epic from George Strait, and all will sound delightful? One minute the Foo Fighters, the next, Leonard Cohen. Quad (and Tim) may have only planned for this unit to be abnormally versatile in operational terms – hence three line inputs, full tape monitoring and a proper phono section – but the Classic Integrated certainly has no problems whatsoever in optimising the playback of everything from pop to pomp. It was the vinyl reproduction, though, ☺

1950 MEETS 2010

While developing Quad's first-ever integrated, the overall priority was to produce a practical, commercially-sensible, user-friendly integrated amp that did everything a Quad 2/II combination might have done had it been combined before. The trick would be to eschew anything that might limit its appeal solely to hardcore audiophiles, while attracting newcomers. Hence, the unit is handsome, its valves protected under a safety cage, and with a small footprint of only 310x380mm. This unit shouldn't cause any domestic ructions. All that's missing is a remote control for the volume. Equally, it's an all-in-one package aimed at a music lover who wants what every integrated amp buyer wants: separates performance in a single chassis, a decent MM/MC phono stage, useful connectors. And, by George, they did it. PJW would be proud.

that made me sit up and take notice. However much I like the wee Ortofon moving-magnet, I'd never gotten the same *frissons* of sonic ecstasy that I expect on a regular basis from a Koetsu. Tim explained why I was delighting in what surely must have been a relatively humble phono stage, despite it offering switchable MM and MC settings.

'The phono circuit is a sealed box, a simple, discrete transistor circuit obeying my tube principles, not your usual nonsense high-feedback circuit. It was a concession to get the package to fit, to deal with hum, etc.'

Believe me: it's both quiet and widely dynamic, and the Ortofon loved it. The acoustic space of the Cowboy Junkies'

Trinity Sessions was open

and airy in a way I could not have anticipated, any more than I would have demanded such competence of NAD's brilliant PP2 phono stage. You don't expect the circa-£50 NAD to

perform miracles, so you approach it realistically and thus it never lets you down. So, too, the phono section of the Quad, only it delights in going the extra mile to surprise you, especially in terms of dynamic contrasts. I've heard stand-alone phono stages that cost more than this Quad which don't deliver the same joyous result.

GETTING TO THE TRUTH

When comparing the mono and stereo vinyl copies of Jeff Beck's *Truth*, the massive percussion and the thuds in 'I Ain't Superstitious' naturally served as touchstones for the mono vs. stereo shoot-out. So wide and open was the sound through the Quad's phono section, and so detailed the resolution, that the single vs. two-channel presentation ceased to be an

issue. I was able to focus solely on the sound quality and ignore the *non-spatial* characteristics, hearing just the sounds and textures with a sense of authority unfettered by worries about positioning, dimensions, *et al.*

Another quality manifested itself vividly with these recordings, while listening to a young Rod Stewart working his magic on 'Ol' Man River'. Voices can challenge a system the way a piano does: the textures, the tics, are paramount in recreating a convincing sonic experience. The Quad caresses everything from the natural sibilance to the amount of desired nasality to the sound of the singer's chest and throat.

Few are the voices as distinctive as

Stewart's. It's only of late that Rodders has been recognised as a worthy stylist beyond the rock genre, thanks to his series of *American Songbooks* in honour of the songwriters I mentioned on

p22. Prior to this, his fiefdom included heavy metal, soul, R&B and a brief (but financially fruitful) foray into disco. Here we find him, *40 years ago*, singing a Kern/Hammerstein masterpiece, dropping into the persona of a weary black man with the skill he would exploit again many decades later. The Quad showcases his voice, including his odd bursts of falsetto, against a churning rhythm section of Mickey Waller and pre-Stones Ron Wood.

As an exercise in proportion, it is masterful. Exploiting the full range of the Sophias, the Quad uses the bass octaves as a support for Stewart, and you can't help picturing him standing on the notes. OK, so that's about as odd an image as one can muster, a bit too of-the-period and its passion for mind-expansion, but it sounded that way – and it reminded me

of an earlier audio experience, in which the music seemed to float above the loudspeakers.

That first taste of truly three-dimensional sound involved the Byrds' *Ballad of Easy Rider* LP. It was the track 'Armstrong, Aldrin and Collins' and the way the spacecraft launch appeared to rise above the speakers and through the ceiling that taught me in an instant about image height. Uncannily, the Quad does that again and again with both vertical information and off-stage sounds, to the outside of the speakers. Returning to the Cowboy Junkies, anyone who knows the sound of a Calrec Soundfield microphone will giggle with delight upon hearing that LP through this amplifier. You wonder where Tim fitted the Ambisonic decoder and the eight channels it demands.

SPOT ON

If peerless soundstage portrayal is among the Quad's most vivid qualities, it follows then that tonal balance must be close to spot-on as well. Another revelation that has stayed with me over the decades was the pronouncement by Arnie Nudell (then of Infinity), that you cannot get one right without the other, for the clues to spatial characteristics are of such refinement and delicacy, and are borne by the tonal nature of the recording, that they *must* co-exist at an equal level.

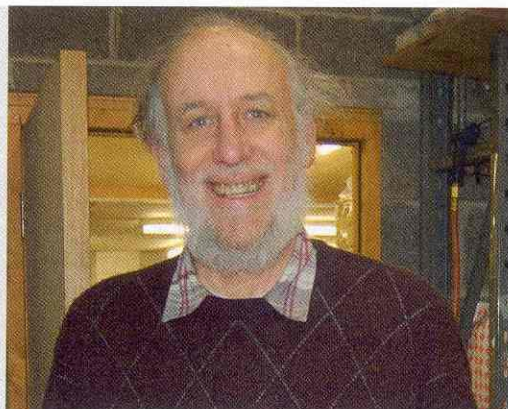
To test this, one ought to revert to mono, which effectively eliminates any interference, support or confusion caused by spatial characteristics, leaving you just with the innate tonal quality. (I still maintain, however, that one can hear front-to-back layering even without the left-right component, despite the logical argument to the contrary.) The Quad proved itself again and again as I played disc after disc from the two Beatles box sets. ☞

'Peerless
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TINIER TIM

Tim de Paravicini is the *de facto* keeper of the flame, his respect for Peter Walker ensuring fidelity to the ethos; one wonders what PJW would make of the mighty Quad II-eighty amp. Downsizing to an integrated, though, was a different sort of challenge for Tim.

'I designed it lock, stock and barrel, including the aesthetic. I saw it as an entry-level product that allows people to trade up. I took the front panel casting of the preamp, to keep the Quad signature look without the valves overshadowing the rest – the input selector is a play on the balance control of the preamp. The output configuration is still PJW's, but it's completely balanced. I needed to get 300mV sensitivity – the Quad II had woefully inadequate sensitivity. I wanted this to accept everything from cassette tapes to CD.' Oh, it does, Tim – magnificently.



AMPLIFIER



ABOVE: Quad has endowed its Integrated with three line and one MM/MC phono inputs, a tape input and a single set of gold-plated 4mm speaker cable outlets

Of course, some of the mono vs. stereo mixes are so radically dissimilar that the differences are bound to be pronounced. But the tracks known to differ minimally allowed the Quad to demonstrate the way it does not mask subtleties. (Note: You do have to examine the booklets that came with The Beatles CDs to find out which tracks were merely mixed down to mono, and which differ extensively. A mono button on the Quad would have helped!)

IF ONLY...

It must be said that the Quad II Classic Integrated exceeds its specifications and its mission statement, but it is not some sort of magical solution to all your electronic needs. Upon feeding it Koetsu and Transfiguration moving coils, I wished I'd had a phono stage with variable settings – something clearly beyond its price point. The extreme treble was slightly softer than I anticipated, although this may be regarded as a virtue if you are seduced (as I was) by the way this amplifier sounds like its loudspeaker antecedent. I miss a remote. And I would have loved a way to separate preamp from power amp.

But, given that I absolutely adore this product, those are minor, operational concerns. Only slightly more vexing is the price, which places this at £1200 more than, say, the (admittedly prosaic-looking) Audio Research VS160,

while it costs considerably more than the various models from Prima Luna. If this honey of an integrated amplifier were on sale at £3500 or even £3900, it could cause a stampede. At £2900, it could rule the world.

Despite that minor concern, though, I have no qualms over raving about the Classic Integrated. After all, there are some manufacturers out there asking £4500 for a metre of cable. The Quad's looks alone could seduce the credit card from my wallet, while the confident, robust, involving sound would render it inseparable from my listening room.

More than anything, I look upon it as purely, utterly and totally 'Quad', regardless of the place or its date of manufacture. ☺

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

If there is anything unexpected about Quad's integrated, it's the palpable 'real-world' power: this baby drove Wilson Sophia 2s with aplomb. Tim de Paravicini squeezed out as much grunt as a brace of KT66s-per-side can deliver, without altering the warm, seductive character of a circuit nearly eligible for its bus pass. Truly a Quad for the 21st Century, and in a more convenient package than you can imagine, it's a triumph.

Sound Quality: 86%

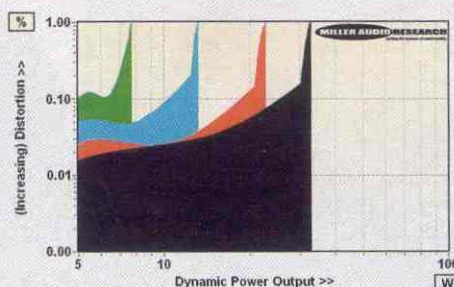


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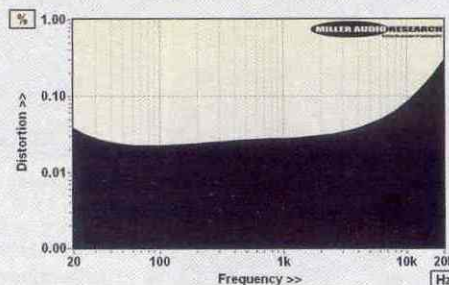
QUAD II CLASSIC INT. (£4500)

While retaining many of the original Quad II hallmarks, including its push-pull KT66 output configuration and single-tap output transformers, this 'integrated' version of the 1950-'70s classic is twice as powerful if Quad's 2x25W rating is any guide. In practice it does better than that, offering 2x32W/8ohm. However, while the transformers in the original design were seemingly optimised for an intermediate 6ohm load, this Classic Integrated model gives off its best into 8ohm, the output falling to 2x21W/4ohm [23W under dynamic conditions – see graph 1, below]. The output impedance is impressively low at ~0.2ohm for a transformer-coupled amp, a figure broadly maintained from 20Hz through to 20kHz. As a result, the amplifier's response holds up very well into 8ohm (–0.8dB/20kHz), 4ohm (–0.95dB/20kHz) and 2ohm (–1.5dB/20kHz) loads, despite the shortfall in power output.

Noise is low, the Classic Integrated achieving an A-wtd S/N ratio of 88.9dB (re. 0dBW) and a residual hum and noise of –76.2dBV (just 0.15mV, unwt'd). Distortion is also carefully judged in this design [see Graph 2, below], falling as low as 0.025% through bass and midrange at 10W/8ohm but rising to 10x this figure at very high (20kHz) treble frequencies. The output transformers also saturate quite quickly below 20Hz where distortion shoots up to 20-30% from 10Hz down to 5Hz at just 5W/8ohm – so beware that infrasonic bass from CD or LP sources does not rob the Classic of its energy! Readers are invited to view a comprehensive QC Suite test report for the Quad II Classic Integrated by navigating to www.hifinews.co.uk and clicking on the red 'download' button. PM



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



ABOVE: Distortion vs. frequency from 20Hz to 20kHz (10W/8ohm). Distortion increases markedly at lower frequencies, reaching >20% from 5-10Hz at just 5W

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Power output (<1% THD, 8/4ohm)	32W / 21W
Dynamic power (<1% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)	33W / 23W / 13W / 8W
Output impedance (20Hz–20kHz)	0.165–0.265ohm
Frequency response (20Hz–100kHz)	+0.04dB to –18.6dB
Input sensitivity (for 0dBW/25W)	54mV / 273mV
A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBW/25W)	88.9dB / 102.8dB
Distortion (20Hz–20kHz, 10W)	0.023–0.30%
Power consumption (Idle/Rated o/p)	163W/175W
Dimensions (WHD)	310x200x380mm