

Quad 99 Series Preamplifier and 909 Stereo Power Amplifier (TAS 203)

Two Classics Revisited

June 2nd, 2010 -- by Paul Seydor

Source: The Absolute Sound



Am I alone in being puzzled or amused by what has long seemed a curious contradiction in high-end audio? On the one hand, components are made for long use, the prominent buzzword when it comes to parts being "mil spec," meaning to military standards of longevity and reliability under difficult and demanding conditions of use. On the other, many audio manufacturers replace "old" (i.e., two years and younger) models with something resembling the regularity of automobile manufacturers, while

hardcore audiophiles change components about as often as James Bond his bed partners. So who, I sometimes ask myself, is actually benefitting from all those mil spec parts? Second hand buyers, parts manufacturers?

It's easy to understand why digital products are replaced so quickly: The technology advances so rapidly that this year's top-of-the-line is soon bested by next year's or the following year's entry-level. But when it comes to amplifiers and preamplifiers, once you set aside Class D switching amps, not much has changed in the way of fundamental technology in tubes or solid-state for the better part of two decades, which means that model replacement is mostly market-driven.

A happy exception has always been Quad of England. When the company was owned by its founder Peter Walker, products were changed maybe once every couple decades. The Quad II tube amplifier was in production for 18 years, the original ESL for 28, the ESL 63 for at least 15 (much longer in actuality when you consider that the 988 and 2805 are the same basic speaker only with improved housing and cosmetics). The 33 preamp, 303 power amp, and FM3 tuner enjoyed life spans of more than a decade and a half, and the first current dumping amp, the basis of the 909, was introduced in 1976. Walker built products that worked and worked for a long time, and his customers really did keep them for a long time. Even during that difficult period in the nineties when the company was sold and bounced through a couple of owners before settling down with the current Chinese, there wasn't that much model replacement, and its core electronics, the subject of this review, have remained unchanged since their introduction in 1995 (the 99 preamp) and 1999 (the 909 power amp).

Although the 99 Series was largely the work of Stan Curtis and the 909 of Jan Ertner, both are based on Peter Walker's designs and are thus very much in the Walker tradition, which is to say superb performance (the 909 especially) at a reasonable price, intelligently chosen features that answer to the needs of real world music playback in the home, user-friendly design and ergonomics, novel styling of understated elegance, and a compact footprint approaching that of mini-components (I've often wondered if the small size of Walker's electronics was compensation for his space-hungry ESLs).

Until recently available only in a silver grey finish with blue accent buttons, the 99 Series can now be purchased in black or, for a small up-charge, two-toned champagne gold, called "Classic" to coordinate with the drop dead-gorgeous "Classic" finish option in the 2805/2905 ESLs. The new choices in finish seemed to offer a suitable occasion to revisit these fine components and see if the current samples are representative of the performance I raved about eight years ago in TAS 128. There was no reason why they shouldn't be, but it would be rare indeed if any component with a long market life had parts identical in every particular to those when it was introduced. The bane of manufacturers' existence, suppliers will often change a part or discontinue it without warning or even notification; and sometimes they just go out of business entirely, leaving the manufacturer to scramble about for replacements.

Still, I was not too worried. In the years since my review I've recommended the 99 preamp/909 amp combination to well over a dozen friends and acquaintances, all of whom remain happily satisfied with their performance. And I've heard from at least as many TAS readers who did the same, while any number of on-line chat groups seem to corroborate my early evaluation. I always keep this combination on hand, both as a price/performance reference and also because, well, I just enjoy using and listening to them, about which more anon.

Both new units, supplied in the black finish, were auditioned right out of their boxes with no warm up, sounding as you would expect from brand new components: a little bright, a little edgy and congested, characteristics that lessened considerably throughout the first listening session, which lasted a couple of hours. Come the next day the old familiar sound was back: the same tonal neutrality; the same complete absence of edginess, glassiness, hardness, or grain; the same involving musicality and naturalness that sweep all before it.



Despite the presence of electronics much costlier than these, I often reinstate the Quads just because they are so pleasing to listen to. However, as I noted in my original review, it is not uncommon to hear Quad electronics described as sounding "different" from other electronics. This is true. The Quads are very much against the grain (sorry about that) of prevailing tastes in reproduction these last twenty years, by which I

mean that the top end is not in the least prominent. It's not zippy, not pacey, not sparkling, not crystalline, not airy, not tingly, not bright, not zingy, not sizzling—choose your own adjective or euphemism. The probable reason for this is their bandwidth-limiting.

Those against bandwidth-limiting charge that while the limiting takes place well outside the audible frequency spectrum, its phase shifting effects are evident within it. Those who favor it argue that relieving the system of the stresses of ultra-wide response makes for a more natural and relaxed presentation. (One reason I believe tube amplification remains so popular is that tubes for most part are intrinsically bandwidth-limited.)

Without pretending to settle a longstanding debate here, let me just admit that I am often attracted to bandwidth-limited electronics for the reasons just cited: They do tend to make for a more natural sounding presentation, one that's easier to listen to over the long haul. I grant that in an immediate spot comparison, especially if you're listening to music with a lot of high-frequency content, your initial reaction may be that the Quads are a little laid-back, rolled off even. But try to resist the snap judgment and listen further, then go back to whatever the comparative component is. You may be shocked how bright it suddenly sounds. Saying which, let me emphasize that the 99/909 in no way sounds dim or dark. On the contrary, the combo has a very clean, exceptionally low-distortion presentation with a wonderfully open and vivid (HP's word) midrange that I'd put up against any amplifiers I've heard or used.

But bandwidth-limiting at the top is not where potential inaccuracies generally intrude; it's at the bottom, and here the 909 has an Achilles' heel for some listeners. According to the specifications, the amp begins its limiting around 13Hz. Now there is no musical content down that far to speak of and little of anything else. But if you have speakers that really do respond flat to below, say, 40Hz, you will find the sound is a little warmer than what you'll hear on an amp that's flat to DC. I don't find this a problem with most program sources or speakers, including my own Quad 57s and 2805s. Still, if you're a real bass freak, you'll probably want or already have an amp flat to DC. And yes, even with speakers of a more normal bass response—say, flat to 50Hz—you may want a tad more articulation from the bass. To which I must add that the 909's bass is in no way soggy, cloudy, or ill-defined—quite the contrary, on acoustic instruments it sounds very natural, that is, warm, rounded, and true to the real thing. Nor should it be inferred from this low-end limiting or its small size that the 909 is in any way dynamically challenged: This is a very muscular amplifier, capable of generating 11 amps peak current of truly outstanding stability. Playing the still-ultra-demanding Sheffield Drum Record, the 909 acquits itself handily in all departments.

However, I shouldn't want to paper over the bass issue or in any way suggest that progress in amplifier design hasn't been both real and worth the while, so allow me to present a differing opinion from my colleague Robert Greene: "Quad amps were band-limited in the old days because of technical limitations of the time together with the apparent fact that Peter Walker did not really worry much about bass. Since music is concentrated in the midrange, his stuff even so sounds quite good. But it is an established fact that an amplifier flat to DC changes its input signal less in audible terms than does one that is not. And the higher the frequency where the cutoff begins, the more audible its effects." It needs only to be pointed out that from time to time REG still very much enjoys listening to his own Quad 306 amplifier, which he has owned for many years.

As for myself, the 99/909 partnership will always be among my reference electronics; if I were to stop reviewing tomorrow I would still keep them. Nor does anybody I know who owns them plan on replacing them any time soon. Why? Indulge me an observation—purely subjective, I grant, but still, I think, valid—from my first review: "Every time I return these components to my system, separately or in tandem, I find that in about 30 seconds I'm no longer listening according to typical audiophile categories, no longer thinking about powerful lows, extended highs, liquid midranges, awesome dynamics, get-a-load-of-that-depth images, and the rest of it. There is about these components a total, all-involving musicality that makes me forget I'm an audiophile and become a music lover all over again." Or, as Harry "Sweets" Edison once said of a take during a particularly difficult session with Frank Sinatra, "Man, it just don't get no better than that."

SIDEBAR: Features

Despite its diminutive size, the 99 Series preamp is a true full-featured control unit that will accept four line level inputs (including tape recording with monitoring), each with separately adjustable sensitivity, plus Quad's proprietary Quadlink bus for Quad CD players and FM tuner (appropriate cables are supplied); it has an excellent built in mm/mc phonostage, superb tone controls and filtering (all defeatable), and Quad's unique (and uniquely effective) tilt circuit (which shifts the 20Hz–20kHz response from +/- 1, 2, or 3dB about an axis centered at 1kHz) (likewise defeatable); the handset duplicates all the controls on the chassis including volume, balance, and all tone, tilt, and filter functions. My only real complaint is that the jacks are spaced a little close together on the back of the preamp, which is made worse by the top of the chassis protruding beyond the back panel to provide a kind of canopy. But this arrangement does make for an exceptionally neat appearance once all the connections have been made. When the 909, rated at 140Wpc, is connected to the 99 preamp via the Quadlink bus, it is a true balanced connection. Single ended RCA jacks are also provided. A fuller description of both the features and design aspects of these products is available in my earlier review (TAS 128).

The pricing? Believe it or not, these components are even better values now than when they were introduced. At \$1100, the 99 preamp costs \$250 less than it did in 2001; at \$1550, the 909 amp is \$400 less. Man, you just can't do no better than that.
PS

SPECS & PRICING

Quad 99 Series Preamplifier

Inputs: Three aux, one tape, one phono (mm/mc selectable), plus Quadlink bus for Quad CD players and FM tuner

Frequency response: 10Hz–20kHz +0dB/-0.03dB

Dimensions: 2.75" x 12.63" 12.2"

Price: \$1100 silver or black, \$1200 Classic

Quad 909 Stereo Amplifier

Frequency response: 13Hz–40kHz +0dB/ 1dB

Power: 140 watts/channel 8ohms, 225 watts/channel 4 ohms

Dimensions: 5.51" x 12.63" x 9.45"

Price: \$1550 silver or black, \$1700 Classic

TAIGA LLC

quad-hifi.co.uk

info@taigallc.com

(888) 838-2442