



Looks That Can Deceive... The Quad II-eighty Mono-blocs

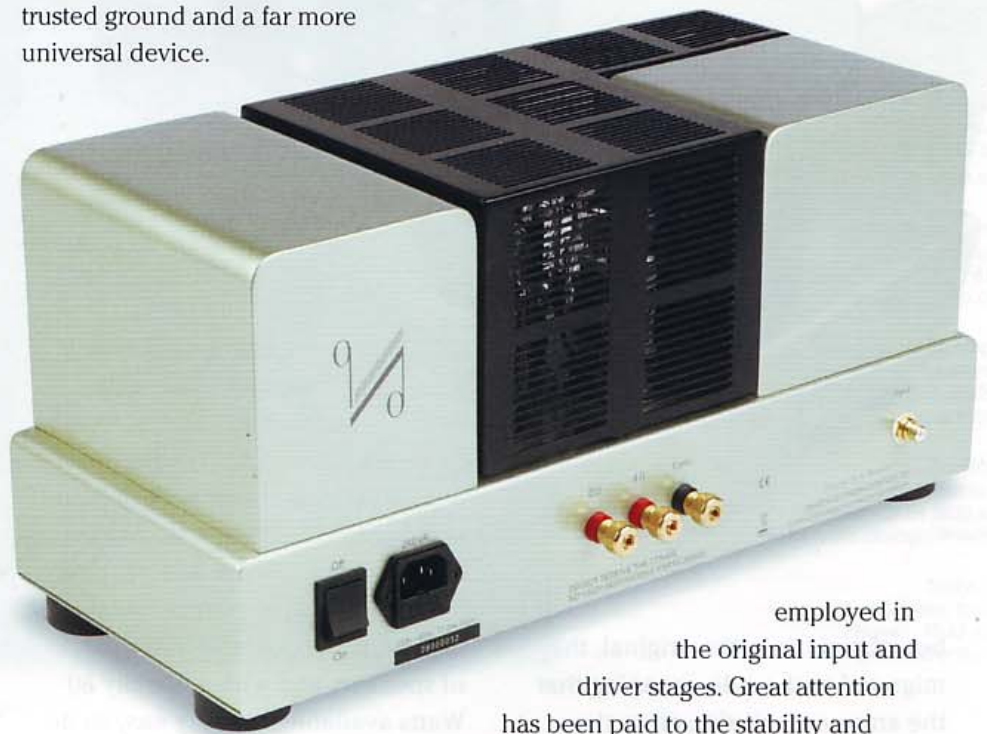
by Roy Gregory

It's far from an exaggeration to term the original Quad II power amps landmark products. For many a UK listener they represented the gateway to real high-fidelity sound, usually coupled with a 22 control unit and FM2 tuner, often with the revolutionary electrostatic loudspeakers to match. A whole generation grew up venerating the Quad name, while the impossibly long shelf-life of the Company's designs only added to that number. Then came their children, who also grew up around the distinctive electronics and speakers. Then came another generation, who rediscovered the joy of valves through second-hand Quad equipment – and so it goes. As a result, only the youngest of hi-fi listeners have remained untouched by the Quad experience, and even they will be aware of those early valve designs with their iconic looks – if only because the Company has revamped and re-released them in updated form.

The original IIs generated what was for the time, a fairly healthy 15 Watts from a pair of cathode coupled KT66s, a novel output topology which escaped widespread imitation in a world of ultra-linear designs. Those amps still exist in the shape of the II-classic, a faithful reproduction of the chassis and circuit of the original, with nothing more than updated socketry and components. But that's an amp for purists and the nostalgia market. Real systems these days need more power, and Quad also launched the II-forty. This 40 Watt mono-bloc was built into a larger chassis that retained the appearance of the original design, but employed a pair of KT88s to deliver

that extra power from a thoroughly revised circuit developed by Andy Grove. It's hard to decide quite what the reaction to the II-forty really was, but it's tempting to conclude that its sound wasn't Quad enough to appeal to the traditionalists, nor modern enough to appeal in its own right. Whether or not that's correct (and the forty remains available, so what do I know) the latest addition to the range marks both a return to tried and trusted ground and a far more universal device.

KT88 output tubes. The II-eighty is the work of Tim de Paravicini, of EAR fame. Unlike the II-forty, it sticks far closer to the conceptual roots of the original, retaining the cathode coupled output stage and instead working to improve the quality of the driver stage and output transformer. The amp now uses a pair of twin-triode 6SL7s in a cascode configuration to provide slightly more gain and better linearity than the pentodes



The II-eighty is a bigger, heavier and more powerful amp altogether. By now, you'll not be surprised to learn that each mono chassis is rated at 80 Watts output, and clearly, the basic layout remains true to the original. Except that the chassis mounted capacitors of the II have been relegated to the inside of the enlarged mains transformer housing, in order to make way for a second pair of

employed in the original input and driver stages. Great attention has been paid to the stability and reliability of the circuit, running the valves well within their rated voltages and cross-referencing the driver voltages to each half of the output stage. Overall feedback is kept low at 16dB. The output transformer has also been designed to maintain the balance between the two sides of the output stage, whilst extending both bandwidth and power delivery at frequency extremes. The end result

► is a thoughtful and carefully executed update on the classic circuit, retaining its virtues and transporting them, intact, into the 21st Century. Not bad for a chassis and circuit topology that started life in 1953!

As well as the increase in size, there have been a few other changes too – and here I must note some mild disapproval. Connections are provided for a single-ended input, four and eight Ohm loads and an IEC connector. But rather than being positioned on the end of the shoe-

adjustments for the likes of bias, and the neatly executed valve cage is securely fixed in place. Finish is any colour you like as long as it's (champagne gold and) black.

With no user adjustments and the most basic connections possible, set-up couldn't be simpler, apart from one thing. The II-eighty sits on four beautifully finished rubber feet that hide both the fixings for the base plate and the amplifier's

was with the Vacuum State, a unit whose uncluttered coherence and natural sense of presence and music flow played straight to the Quad's strengths. In contrast, the higher resolution, transparency and micro-dynamic niceties of the Herron and Connoisseur seemed hobbled by the amps, with the two halves of the electronic equation pulling in different directions. Music



box chassis as in the original, they've migrated to the side, meaning that the amps now sit side on to the listener. It's a small thing, but it makes them harder to accommodate and less attractive to look at – at least to my eyes. That aside, fit and finish are both excellent, well up to the expected standards at the £5K asking price for a pair of mono-blocs. Internal construction is similarly neat, the entire circuit built onto a single, nicely spaced and laid out PCB. The amp offers no user

true sonic potential.

Anything between the base-plate and supporting surface, from simple wooden blocks through to a Stillpoints Component Stand, is going to constitute a significant sonic upgrade. Other than that, all you need to do is select a suitable system, which, at least in terms of speakers and with a healthy 80 Watts available, is pretty easy to do. Sadly, the matching (aesthetically at least) QC-twenty-four pre-amp isn't really up to the job of partnering the II-eighties. Expect a new unit from Quad before too long, but in the meantime I used pre-amps as varied as the Vacuum State SVP2, Herron and Connoisseur – and briefly, a Musical Fidelity X-Can V8, but that's another story. Of these, by far the most successful combination

seemed slightly forced, with an almost fixity of purpose about it. In contrast, hook up the SVP2 and performances sprang to life, easy and expressive rather than crimped and constipated. No contest then.

The way the Quads react to their partnering pre-amp tells you a lot about the amps themselves. Their sound is full and rich and solid, with a satisfying weight in the bass that gives them a real sense of substance and presence. At the same time (and rather like the original IIs) they are neither the most detailed or transparent performers, with bass that might be powerful and weighty, but is also a little soft around the edges. In short, you could sum them up (or dismiss them if that's your wont) as ultra traditional valve amps. Except that that would be to miss the point. The II-eighties go higher and lower, with considerably more overall ►

► coherence than any vintage amp I've used. They also deliver much more power. Rather than writing them off as old fashioned, you should instead consider them a worthy and worthwhile update, amplifiers that retain tradition valve virtues – and significantly reduce the practical and sonic weaknesses that used to accompany them.


Playing Neil Young's thoughtful and beautifully reflective *Prairie Wind*, the Quads are in their element, one pair of old troupers supporting another. The easy, relaxed communication of the band, the perfect pacing and weighting of their contributions, the sort of intuitive intimacy and understanding that only comes from years of playing together, is the perfect foil for Young's voice and the insistent prods and jagged rhythms of his guitar lines. The deceptive simplicity of a song like 'This Old Guitar' is given an emotional centre and gravitas by the Quads' stability and substance, the unmistakable harmony vocals of Emmylou Harris perfectly pitched in their fragile purity. The loping rhythm and almost sentimental melody are filled out with subtle backing, while the immediacy of the close miked vocal gives the song a breathy, fluid line that radiates its own inner beauty, its measured pace adding to the feeling rather than lagging. It's this natural momentum that makes music from the Quads so engaging, a quality that's really exploited by the SVP2.

It's that ability to reveal the shape and weight of notes, their harmonic complexity and identity, the rich warmth of the sound that makes acoustic instruments and voices such a joy. The crisp, percussive backing of the Peter Nordahl Trio is solidly impressive and redolent with texture, but there's no missing the disturbingly knowing quality in Lisa Ekdahl's almost childlike vocals

(and appearance). But the Quads are no one trick ponies. Sixties soul and jazz might be obvious fodder for their musical mores, folk-rock suitably delicate in its sensitivities, but how about a high-level outing with the synth slabs and flanged bass of Moby. The Il-eighties are right at home in this territory, their combination of sheer substance and smooth warmth allow you to drive suitable speakers (and your ears) within an inch of their lives, the sound's infectious, motive quality just egging you on, encouraging you to wind that volume control ever higher.

Quad and The Clash are hardly natural bedfellows – until now. The Il-eighties delivered the raw aggression of *London Calling* with pace, passion and enough atmosphere to conjure up the smell of sweat, spilt beer and fags that attended their gigs. Cheap Trick absolutely rocked The Budokan, Bun E. Carlos's drum beats arriving with the weight and impact of howitzer shells, this ultimate air-guitar extravaganza reaching new heights of physical excess. And The Cure? The Cure took on a rolling, irrepressible momentum all of their own, the pell-mell tumble through 'A Forest' taking me back to the joys of the Tannoy dual-concentrics I first played it on.

Quad has an undeniably "pipe and slippers" image which the Il-eighties do little to dispel – at least on the surface. But let them off the leash, take them for a walk on the wild side and they'll surprise you with a streak of the feline power and solidity that delivers real musical intent and authority. And the really great thing about them is that you realise, once you've discovered it, that that musical backbone and substance is exactly what makes smaller scale, acoustic music so satisfying and engaging. These amps

have surprisingly little to do with nostalgia and what there is, is all good. Partner them with a pre-amp and speakers that release their baser qualities alongside their obvious warmth and refinement and you might just hit the hi-fi jackpot – a system that can be both unobtrusive and seriously enjoyable. Sure, they look just like Quads – but there's definitely something a bit special going on under the hoods. Which raises the entertaining prospect of a few of Quad's more traditional customers getting rather more than they bargained for... 

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Push-pull valve mono-bloc
Valve Complement:	1x 6SN7 2x 6SL7 4x KT88
Inputs:	1x RCA/phono
Input Sensitivity:	1V
Output Power:	80 Watts into 8 Ohms
Damping Factor:	16 at 1kHz
Dimensions (WxHxD):	420 x 210 x 190mm
Weight:	20.4kg ea.
Price:	£5000pr

Manufacturer:
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