

Play More

Quad's new Artera Play+ CD player and preamp will make you play more thinks Noel Keywood.

Everyone has a big CD collection. Thinking about it reminds me of walking into the Virgin megastore on London's Oxford Street to see thousands in racks stretching away into the distance. That was yesterday of course: the store and its racks have long gone, but people have thousands apiece and a need to play them – preferably in better quality than ever before. Budget CD players are now increasingly rare but new premium quality CD players – with added bits – are becoming common and here I'm reviewing Quad's Artera Play+, price £1199.95.

We've reviewed the original Artera Play in our January 2016 issue and were impressed. As before this is a CD player and preamplifier combined, built around the ES9018 Sabre32 series DAC from ESS of California – renowned for its sound quality. Moreover, it has a smoothness of sound in keeping with the Quad tradition. A chip tried and tested – and all but famous for getting great

sound from CD.

Measurement revealed some small inconsistencies on the original Play, none of any great consequence, but they've been expunged from the updated Play+ by changes in filtering. A new addition – the + bit – is Bluetooth short range radio reception, with aptX, explaining the appearance of a small, screw-on rear stub aerial. Play music from your mobile 'phone via Bluetooth.

That's the outline. In finer detail the Play+ has analogue phono socket (unbalanced) inputs labelled Aux 1 and Aux 2 that run through the volume control and to the output sockets. By default there is no gain (x1) so what goes in comes out almost unaltered, except in volume but this allows two other analogue sources to be hooked into the system – even a Phono stage. When I say “no gain” that is from phono socket input to output; from phono socket input to balanced (XLR socket) output there is a gain of x2 (+6dB) but this will only come into play

if the XLR outputs are used to feed a power amplifier with XLR inputs, such as Quad's own matching Artera Stereo power amplifier (140W). Also, gain (or attenuation) can be dialled into the system – up to x2.3 (+7dB) – and this could be useful to match in low gain external Phono stages.

Yes, the Play+ can be used as a general purpose analogue preamplifier in effect, with say a turntable Phono stage connected into Aux 1 and a Blu-ray player into Aux 2. Additionally, there are S/PDIF digital inputs, optical and electrical, with optical working all the way up to 192kHz. And there is a USB input too for computer connection, with an upper limit of 24/384kHz according to the data sent to my MacBook Pro running Sierra – but the limit with a PC and Quad's driver is 32/384kHz.

With regard to DSD, PCs must have Quad's driver loaded (available on-line), which they also need to run PCM at



192kHz. Macs can only handle DSD within Audirvana Plus, a paid-for hi-resolution player (€60), because Mac core audio is PCM only. Audirvana sends DSD packaged over USB to look like PCM and in this form (DoP) the Play+ can handle DSD64, 128 and 256.

I suspect most people will be interested in the Play+ as a high performance CD player and what you get here is a slot loading mechanism and CD digital (16/44.1kHz) passed through the ES9018 DAC chip. The Play+ has four digital filters but only three work with CD I found – more later. Digital filters are commonly tokens to adjustability, having little affect upon the sound, but Quad's filter set on this player is gently influential upon sound quality. Quite right too – Peter Walker, Quad's founder – specialised in complex filtering so this is in keeping with brand values

The digital filters are Smooth (default), Fast, Wide and Narrow. Measurement showed Smooth was

a conventional wide bandwidth filter – what you usually hear, in effect, because it offers the best measured result. Fast and Wide were neither fast nor wide, but offered slow roll offs with good time domain damping. Narrow (with a 44.1kHz or 48kHz sample rate) was drastic, chopping off all frequencies above 6kHz.

Now to an apparent anomaly that had me puzzled. All four filters worked when using the digital inputs, but when playing CD only three filters were available; Narrow was missing. It could be selected, but wasn't applied, the player defaulting to Smooth. I was told by Quad the 6kHz cut-off of Narrow was felt to be drastic so had been left out, but there was some "discussion" about this situation in IAG's HQ. Odd. It is simply an option and in keeping with Quad filtering; worse, the handbook fails to mention any of this. It needs an addendum at least, because offering Narrow on the display but not providing it is misleading. Of these filters I'd use Fast or Wide

from my experience and preference for a sound that is not sharp, bright or ringy – as digital can be due to brick wall filtering that introduces pre and post ringing.

Changing filters could have been easier, without reversion to original after only seconds that made switching between them casually to compare their sound impossible. Each setting must be saved first. The remote control's Prog button must be held down to reveal the filter menu. Also on the remote control unit are all play functions and volume adjust on a scale 0-100. The remote will also select inputs.

Quad have kept the user interface simple enough. The mains supply is a big linear jobbie on board – no switch mode wall-wart here. As a result power input is through the usual IEC mains lead and there is a rear on/off rocker switch. Power on (standby, less than 1W) is shown by a small red LED on the front panel and switching on lights the display at left a dull blue. Surprisingly, this is





The busy rear panel gives a good idea of what Quad cram into this 'CD player'. Note the balanced XLR audio output sockets, with phono socket outputs and inputs to their right. At left are S/PDIF inputs and an output (for external DAC if need be).

running iOS 12 had much the same sonic qualities as CD I found, with little obvious difference between them. But then Bluetooth with aptX compression on the Play+ measured 98dB Dynamic Range our measurements showed – not far off CD at 101dB. This explains why Bluetooth introduces so little audible degradation and why I was happy to sit and play no end of tracks from my iPhone. Queen's 'Radio GaGa' (24/96 source code) with its stabbing synth sequences underlined the dynamic punchiness and strong bass provided

by a big linear power supply on board. Benjamin Grosvenor playing Chopin Piano Concertos (24/96 source code) was gracefully calm and melodic in presentation, reflecting the deep yet smooth resolution of ESS's DAC in what is the fine electronic environment of the Artera Play+.

CONCLUSION

The new Atera Play+ is superbly engineered, in its physical form, its facilities and its underlying electronic architecture. Finely honed with a useful filter set, big linear power

supply on-board and easy to use CD player plus comprehensive remote control that was not overly complex but still full featured (if with small, dull legends) I found it one of the best CD players – with added bits! – I have used and heard. Pity that the Narrow filter doesn't work with CD but it's not a big issue I feel. Bluetooth connectivity is a useful addition, providing sound quality from a mobile phone that was all but as good as that from CD. What this player offers at the price is more than impressive.

MEASURED PERFORMANCE

The new Artera Play+ measured 119dB EIAJ Dynamic Range via its analogue balanced XLR outputs and the unbalanced phono socket outputs – a very high figure that imparts depth and translucency, rather than the papery flatness of much digital. With CD (16bit) Dynamic Range was limited by the quantisation noise floor of 16bit (not the player) to 101dB – still good result.

Unsurprisingly, digital distortion was very low at 0.02% with a 24bit input and 0.2% from CD, the latter figure being as good as it can get from 16bit. Bandwidth with CD measured flat to 21kHz where with the original player it rolled down early. With a 192kHz sample rate input response extended to 52kHz (-1dB) with Smooth filter, rolling down slowly to the 96kHz upper theoretical limit to ensure no sharpness in the sound. Wide and Fast filters provided earlier roll offs but better time domain impulse damping, whilst Narrow was drastic at 44.1/48kHz sample rate, having a 6kHz upper limit.

Output was on the high side at 2.2V (phono socket) and 4.5V (XLR socket) at full volume.

USB is now also consistent in its performance, offering identical results to S/PDIF digital in terms of frequency response, distortion, dynamic range and noise.

The preamplifier has no gain from phono input to phono output (i.e. unbalanced) as standard but +10dB of gain can be dialled in. However, the XLR output has double the output of phono so a gain of x2 is available from phono in to XLR out as standard.

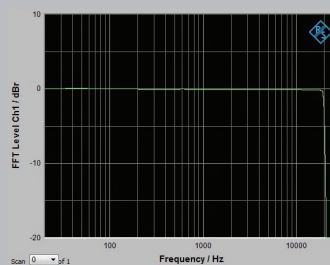
Frequency response measured flat to 80kHz, distortion was low at 0.003% (1V out) and noise low at -105dB. Maximum input/output is 2V, just adequate to accept analogue from an external silver disc player.

The Artera Play+ measured very well all round. It has been honed to give superb digital. The analogue input/output overload could have been higher and Narrow filter made operative with CD. NK

Frequency response (-1dB) 4Hz-52kHz
Distortion (24bit, -60dB) 0.02%
Separation (1kHz) 112dB

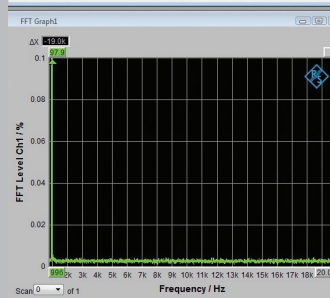
Noise (IEC A) -117dB
Dynamic range 119dB
Output (Phono/XLR) 2.2/4.5V

FREQUENCY RESPONSE



DISTORTION

THD all d	Level RMS	Frequency
0.0235 %	4.4125 mV	997.00 Hz
OFF	OFF	OFF



QUAD ARTERA PLAY+ CD PLAYER
£1199.95.



OUTSTANDING - amongst the best.

VALUE - keenly priced.

VERDICT

A CD player and preamplifier – analogue and digital – with broad ability and superb sound quality. Impressive, especially at the price.

FOR

- sound quality
- ease of use
- facilities

AGAINST

- no Narrow filter with CD
- awkward filter selection
- incomplete user manual

Quad
www.quad-hifi.co.uk