This has been a happy review to write. For the last two years or so Quad of England, one of the pioneering companies in the history of home audio, has had effectively no American distribution. An abortive arrangement with a Canadian distributor for all of North America never worked out, with phones unanswered, messages unreturned, dealers unable to get product, all of which fueled rumors that Quad was going under. When I finally managed to get through to Quad itself, I was informed there was not only no foundation to these rumors, but the company was in fact prospering and had introduced a number of new or revised products and product lines (see Robert E. Greene’s review of the 2812 ESL in TAS 262). When Mobile Fidelity last year added an equipment distribution and importing branch to its familiar recordings operation, MoFi Distribution became the official importers of Quad products. Longtime readers of mine will know that I’ve owned some variant of Peter Walker’s ESL-63 for over a quarter century, the 2805s my reference since 2008; and for several years now I’ve owned a 99 Series preamplifier and 909 current-dumping power amplifier (see my review in TAS 203).

Quad’s two latest electronics initiate a new line called “Artera” and consist in a linestage/DAC/CD player and a two-channel power amplifier, which are named, respectively, “Play” and “Stereo.” This elliptical laconism conceals a statement of new direction, or at least intent, for the company’s electronics: requisite functionality allied to simplicity of operation with an obvious nod to “lifestyle” thinking. To be sure, harking all the way back to Peter Walker’s storied tube units in the early Fifties, long before the concept ever occurred to some advertising copywriter, lifestyle thinking has always infuded Quad’s home electronics: high visual style, a compact, even diminutive footprint, yet far from minimalist when it came to features, including balance and tonal control, filtering, mode (i.e., stereo and mono). All that was missing was a remote handset, but then nobody had that in those days. What’s different with Artera is the styling: crisp, trim, and sleek but very severe, with no color contrasts to offset monolithic black or silver or the softening touch of subtly rounded edges to chassis edges and corners. This new severity is clearly intended to mirror the single-mindedness of purpose and function, especially as regards the Artera Play.

The Artera Stereo

This 140-watt per channel amplifier is the latest refinement of Quad’s innovative, patented, award-winning “current dumping,” a circuit that uniquely uses a feed-forward error-correction circuit whereby a very high quality but low-power Class A amplifier draws upon a higher-power Class AB amplifier when a lot of power is needed. According to Quad’s thumbnail description, “The former emits a signal to compensate for errors between the input signal and the signal feed to the loudspeakers, while the latter controls the loudspeakers at all times and provides the current to generate the sound.” Several Quad amplifiers incorporated current dumping since its introduction in the late Seventies, culminating in the 909, one of my personal references since the late Nineties. The Stereo offers no more power than the 909 but is said to boast higher-quality but low-power Class A amplifier draws upon a higher-power Class AB amplifier when a lot of power is needed. According to Quad’s thumbnail description, “The former emits a signal to compensate for errors between the input signal and the signal feed to the loudspeakers, while the latter controls the loudspeakers at all times and provides the current to generate the sound.” Several Quad amplifiers incorporated current dumping since its introduction in the late Seventies, culminating in the 909, one of my personal references since the late Nineties. The Stereo offers no more power than the 909 but is said to boast higher-quality parts, complete dual-mono operation (though the massive toroidal power supply serves both channels), and a chassis claimed to “resist” external vibration. The new unit is slightly larger, with switch-selectable inputs for balanced or single-ended connection. One nice design
decision eliminates the canopy that extended over the 909’s back chassis, which made hooking up some larger cables and interconnects a bit of a challenge.

The most important change in the design, however, and the one that in my opinion accounts for most of the sonic differences between the Stereo and the 909 is the increased bandwidth of the former. The 909’s bass cut-off began around 13Hz, while the Stereo’s remains flat to below 1Hz; at the top end, the 909 started dropping beyond 35kHz, while the Stereo goes out beyond 70kHz, down 5dB at 100kHz (these figures come from Paul Miller’s measurements in HiFi News). Top to bottom this translates into a more tonally neutral and extended presentation, notably at the bass end, which is cleaner, and better defined and controlled, at once more nimble yet also more powerful. Indeed, the Stereo can boast pretty substantial slam, crunch, and sustaining power. Try Kei Koito’s Bach organ recital on Claves or the bass drum detonations on the Mata/Dallas/Delos Rachmaninoff Symphonic Dances (far superior to the old audiophile favorite on Turnabout).

Meanwhile, up top the Stereo is airier and more open without being in any way harsh or excessively etched or crisp, rather exceptionally delicate and detailed in the best way, without hurling gobs of overly accentuated detail at you in the name of “resolution.” But neither is its neutrality at the expense of a lively and engaging musicality, and it certainly passes the toe-tapping test. When it comes to the midrange, the Stereo also sounds more neutral and a little forward. But it appears forward only by comparison to the 909, and this is perfectly predictable behavior given the Stereo’s increased bandwidth. For one thing, the 909’s 13Hz cutoff makes for a warmer upper bass that leads to greater emphasis in the lower-midrange (this is more than likely the result of phase shift caused by the relatively high bass cutoff), by no means unpleasing but hardly accurate, and it is this mild emphasis can make the midrange seem a little recessed if your ears key upon the lower midrange as the norm. These distinctions held whether I was driving my 2805 ESls or the newest iteration of Harbeth’s 40.2 (review forthcoming), a magnificent full-range three-way monitor of rare accuracy.

Which amp is better? Objective, it should be obvious that the Stereo is because it’s flatter, more extended, more neutral—in other words, more accurate—indeed, a truly superb amplifier. Subjectively the answer is a tad less clear-cut. If I owned dynamic speakers of moderate to low efficiency, like the new Harbeths, I’d go for the Stereo owing to its greater control at the bottom, which among other things allows the overall presentation to be more dynamic as well. But for my 2805 ESls, I’d be happy with either, though there is something mighty pretty with the 909 because the 2805s benefit from a little extra juice in the lower midrange and upper bass. Moreover, to my ears there’s a subtle, admittedly difficult-to-define “organic” quality about the 909, a characteristic which is part and parcel of its benign tonal anomalies and which, frankly, constitute one of the reasons I purchased it in the first place and continue to listen to it regularly with great pleasure.

I must emphasize that this is a purely subjective response, not a pronouncement about the quality of one amplifier vis-a-vis the other. These characteristics I’ve here singled about the 909 are not gross but clearly are artifacts, which the Quad ESls and Harbeths readily reveal. I’ve not heard every amplifier Quad has made over its long history, but since I do have long familiarity with most of the highly regarded ones from every vintage, I have absolutely no hesitation in pronouncing the Artera Stereo by a good margin the finest amplifier the company has ever made.
and unquestionably the most uncompromised implementation of Walker's current-dumping circuit. It’s a really superior design in every way.

The Artera Play
As noted at the outset, past Quad preamplifiers have included phonostages, balance and tone controls, and high and low filters. The Play discards all these in favor of an orientation that is effectively all digital (despite two pairs of analog inputs for outboard analog sources, such as a phonostage or tuner), beginning with a CD player and a built-in DAC. Here is Quad’s description: “At the heart of the Artera Play nestles the ESS Sabre32 9018; a 32-bit, eight-channel hybrid multi-bit Delta-Sigma DAC considered by many to be the finest D/A converter chip available for stereo sound. This is Quad’s first component to utilize the ESS Sabre DAC, and external digital sources can benefit from its exceptional quality via a range of digital inputs. These include USB, with support for PCM data up to 32-bit/384kHz and also DSD64/128/256, ensuring the Artera Play is fully equipped to make the most of today’s hi-res music formats, as well as future advances in ultra-high definition digital sound.”

In addition to the analog inputs, connectivity consists in two digital and two optical inputs, one digital and one optical output, and main outputs for both RCA and XLR. A trigger circuit enables the Play to turn the Stereo on and off (a circuit that also worked with the newest version of McIntosh’s MC275, while the remote also operated my Marantz SA-CD 8004, likewise the Marantz remote the Play’s internal transport). A novel feature consists in four different filters for digital sources, of which more anon. Quad has kept the front panel minimalist with a vengeance. CD slots are slot-loaded while on/off and eject constitute the only buttons. What looks at first like a large circular knob is flush mounted, doesn’t turn, and in fact is a combination alphanumeric display and source/volume control. The middle of the circle displays input, CD track number, filter setting, volume level, and other information, while the perimeter controls volume or selects source by the press of a finger . . . sort of. Trouble is, neither I nor anyone else who came by could ever get the hang of operating that damned ring, attempts to change the volume invariably switching the source and vice-versa. These issues are evidently not confined to my review sample, because Ken Kessler complained of the same problems in his HiFi News review and “solved” them the same way I did: ignoring the front panel and relying for all control functions on the remote, which is superbly designed and works flawlessly. The remote also accesses mute, CD track selection, random access, programming, etc.

Sonically, as a linestage, the Play is fractionally on the yang side of the yin/yang continuum, with a presentation detailed, transparent, dynamic—in other words, very much like the stereo, characteristics observable when it drove other amplifiers as well (the 909 or the MC275). Once again, the impression of top-end extension and airiness and bottom-end reach is in abundant evidence. The built-in CD player exhibits similar virtues. On the whole I’d describe its yin-leaning performance as on par with but different from my yin-oriented Marantz SA-CD 8004 used alone. But I typically use the Marantz alone only for SACDs; for Red Book its transport feeds a Benchmark DAC1, a combination that to my ears sounds a bit more neutral than what I hear from Play. But on its own, Play’s CD reproduction is excellent and I used it for many hours, many days with great satisfaction.

The foregoing description applies to the CD player primarily when used with the filter Quad labels “Fast.” The three other filters are called “Smooth,” “Wide,” and “Narrow.” They are all designed to allow you to get the most pleasing sound from your digital sources, and therein lies a conundrum. Thankfully, they’re available via the handset, so you can make instantaneous comparisons fairly quickly from the listening location. According to the instruction manual, Fast, which has no ringing, preserves the “transient” nature of the music and has “purify” and “naturalness.” Smooth has a narrower bandwidth but “superior rejection of out of spectrum noise” and “near perfect technical response in the frequency domain.” Wide uses a gentler filter, “minimum ‘time-domain ringing,’ minimal out of spectrum noise and thus is quite useful for high sample rate (96kHz and above) files.” Narrow “typifies industrial standard characteristics (−6dB at 1/2 Fs with significant time domain ringing) and is included here for comparison purposes.”

If you can make any sense of these descriptions, you’re doing better than I, and cross my heart, they aren’t much help when you actually engage them. Obviously, digital reproduction depends upon complex filtering, the correct values and application of which affect the reproduction. While I could readily hear the differences among the filters, it was impossible to correlate them with Quad’s descriptions, not least because so much depends upon the source material. Take what follows as one man’s impressions.

Dismiss Narrow, which never sounded good. Moving on, Fast sounded consistently more open, dynamic, and subtly cleaner and more controlled than the others, for which reasons as much as any I used it for most of my listening. I can’t honestly say that Smooth sounded smoother as much as Fast, but on its own it was sacrifice something in precisely those areas where Fast distinguished itself, sounding moderately less dynamic, open, less controlled, and less defined, which I suppose could be interpreted as smoother.

Wide went further in this direction, extracting a greater toll in definition and clarity of line and texture, notably toward the bottom of the midrange, and thereby the whole bass region—smooth, yes, but a little mushy, even sluggish, despite what struck me as a certain lower-case appeal with very bright and edgy recordings (also true of Smooth). In other words, as with so many subjective matters in audio, what we tend to wind up talking about is that time-honored standby, tonal balance, which is to say frequency response.

I should point out that I don’t have much experience with CD players and DACs that offer user-selectable digital filters, but my colleague
Robert Greene has a lot. He asked to audition the Play and perform some measurements, and has written an extended comment that appears on theabsolutesound.com, which I urge you to read. One respect in which these filters are audibly different from any other digital filters in my admittedly limited experience lies precisely in their effects upon frequency response in the audible band. Typically, digital filters have little or no effect on that as such except in the area of phase shift. In the end, unless a digital source was noticeably bright, edgy, or otherwise unpleasant in some obvious way, I stuck with Fast both because it sounded better most of the time along the lines I described in the previous paragraph and because I assumed it to be default position.

All of which brings us back up against that conundrum: Is there a default or “neutral” or whatever you want to call it mode for this player or its DAC? By this I mean, if Quad had set out here to make the best CD/DAC player it could without offering a choice of filters but simply the filter it felt was the best, what would the thing sound like? It’s a fair question, because it’s not possible to use the Play without selecting one of the filters. Yes, I’m aware that all CD, indeed, all digital, requires filters, but, gentlemen, it’s really not nice to put options like this into a control unit without considerably clearer, more detailed, and more informative explanations as to what they actually do and how they measure. (Needless to say, the filters don’t operate on the analog inputs.)

While I’m at it, I have two additional complaints about the Play vis-à-vis past Quad preamplifiers and both involve what has been excluded. First, Peter Walker was a great believer in the desirability of broad-brand tonal correction, high- and low-frequency filters, and proper channel-to-channel balance for the home user. He knew that microphones, judgments of producers, and/or recording venues are imperfect. This is why he incorporated tonal correction and control on his preamplifiers, and it’s one of the reasons I continue to use the excellent 99 Series preamp. Clearly the present designers at Quad are catering to a mentality that is either “purist,” doesn’t want to bother with approximating desirable tonal balance, or seems to think that channel imbalances are nonexistent. But isn’t it weird on the one hand to eliminate tone controls, which are flexible and defeatable, yet on the other sneak them back in with those digital filters, which aren’t? Second, I am also puzzled that in a component more or less designed to be all things digital, including DSD, SACD playback is not integral. But then for reasons I’ve never understood, Quad has always ignored SACD.

Please note that I called these “complaints,” not criticisms. In his role as literary critic Henry James always insisted we must grant the artist his subject. The corollary in audio reviewing is that we should grant designers their brief. So allow me to reiterate my opening sentiment: This has been a happy review to write. The Play’s problematie front-panel volume/input arrangement and the obfuscating digital filters notwithstanding, Artera’s maiden offerings combine simplicity of form and function, elegant styling, compact size, and solid performance—in the case of the Stereo, quite outstanding performance.