



Star system

Packing a huge amount of functionality into a single chassis, **Ed Selley** recons this all-in-one has what it takes to go interstellar

When is an all-in-one system not an all-in-one system? In the exciting world of equipment terminology in 2017, the answer is when according to its manufacturer, it's an integrated amplifier. Even a cursory look at the specifications of the Quasar should be enough to determine that while it is unquestionably an amplifier, it has a feature set that makes it more of a logical competitor to all-in-one rivals. The Quasar is built around a Class D power amp derived from the ones used in the Elements series of components. Here it seemingly has a little more space to breathe because it produces a fairly healthy 180W of power into 8ohm. This is mated to a rotary encoder-type volume control with 220 increments, which should allow for excellent fine adjustment. As befits something described as an integrated amplifier, there is a useful

selection of analogue inputs: three RCA line inputs, an XLR stereo input and a preout. For all but the most sprawling systems this should be sufficient, but here the Quasar swings off into all-in-one territory. Partnering the analogue connections are seven digital inputs: three coaxial, three optical and a USB-B port that comes supplied with the required software for Windows operation and makes use of Leema's own M1 USB module. This combined total of 11 inputs is unlikely to struggle with any domestic system. A single pair of left and right speaker terminals at either end of the back panel completes the terminations. There's a UPnP streaming module that supports sample rates up to 24-bit/192kHz via wired and wireless connections along with native support for Tidal and Spotify Connect plus aptX-capable Bluetooth as a separate input. In terms of the key definition of

DETAILS

- PRODUCT**
Leema Acoustics Quasar
- ORIGIN**
UK
- TYPE**
One-box streaming system
- WEIGHT**
17kg
- DIMENSIONS**
(WxHxD)
435 x 95 x 350mm
- FEATURES**
 - Quoted power output: 2x 180W (8ohm)
 - Ethernet and wi-fi streaming up to 24/192
 - Inputs: 3x coaxial; 3x optical; 3x RCA; 1x XLR; 1x USB; Bluetooth
 - Streaming services supported: Tidal; Qobuz; Spotify Connect and internet radio
- DISTRIBUTOR**
Leema Acoustics
- TELEPHONE**
01938 559021
- WEBSITE**
leema-acoustics.com

an all-in-one; being able to operate without additional source equipment, the Quasar certainly qualifies. The DAC circuitry that supports this and the digital inputs is derived from the company's Quattro Infinity tech seen in Leema's more expensive products. All this functionality is housed in a relatively slim, full-width casework that has some of the trademark Leema styling cues – the sculpted curve on the edge of the front panel and white-on-blue display being chief among them. Everything feels extremely solid too. The controls and casework are robust to the touch and the overall effect feels worth the asking price. I do like the silver finish of the review sample but having encountered a black one on a recent dealer visit, that would be my choice. So taking all this into account, why would Leema be at pains to describe the Quasar as an integrated amp instead of as a true all-in-one? While there might be some long-standing policies on terminology, the main reason possibly stems from the manner in which this functionality is incorporated into the Quasar. Compared with rivals like the Simaudio Moon Néo ACE (HFC 420) where the app provides full control, the Quasar isn't anything like as cohesive. Here the app only provides control of the streaming functions and has no effect on volume or input

selection. While the front display is large and easy to read, its soul purpose appears to be limited to supplying information relating to the amplifier and incoming sample rates rather than displaying track or album metadata or artwork. Furthermore, unless the streaming module is physically selected, certain features won't work as they will in the vast majority of other products. For example, selecting the Quasar as the source for Spotify Connect will switch the streaming module to Spotify, but not the Quasar itself. The process for setting it up on a wireless network is also rather more arduous than is the case with most rival

It might look like an amplifier, but the Quasar is capable of so much more

products. This certainly isn't the end of the world and it must be said that Leema supplies an excellent remote control handset that provides most of the functionality that is missing from the app. Having said that, there is indisputably a lack of slickness compared with some key rivals. In the time I have it for testing, I find that the Quasar works best via its USB input connected to a smart device like the Melco N1A (HFC 397) rather than a true network product.

Sound quality

Turning a blind eye to some of these operational quirks is worthwhile because in terms of sound quality, this is a seriously accomplished product. Connected via USB, it tackles a 16/44.1 download of Lloyd Miller and the Heliocentrics with effortless musicality. If anything, it feels even more powerful than its healthy 180W output suggests, but where it works brilliantly is that its enormous reserves of grunt don't make delicate pieces of music sound overblown or obvious. The opening *Electricone* is beautifully handled. The plucked bass has plenty of weight, but starts and stops with real immediacy. When the brass starts over the top, it has a vividness and presence that grabs the attention and holds it from that moment onwards. Where the power makes itself felt most is the superb sense of dynamics. The live performance of Hugh Masekala's *Stimela (Coal Train)* has a gigantic spike in output as Masekala mimics a train whistle. It's an unflinching impressive demonstration of decent dynamic range, but with the Leema it is a visceral shock to the system even when you know it's coming. Partnered with a remotely full-range pair of speakers, the Quasar is effectively free from any limitations of scale that even very talented rivals can suffer from. This helps it sound effortless and entirely believable

pretty much regardless of the material you choose to play on it. This is aided in no small part by the bass response. It manages to combine power and impact with a speed and delicacy that can elude powerful devices. Connected to the Quad Z-4 that featured in the recent *Beautiful System (HFC 423)*, the Quasar adds an urgency to this slightly gentle giant that boosts its presence and impact without changing the overall rather lovely tonal balance it possesses. The massive struck drum on Fink's live performance of *Sort Of Revolution* is a truly impressive and visceral force that is felt as much as heard.

All but the most irredeemably terrible recordings remain listenable

Switching to the analogue inputs doesn't significantly alter the presentation, suggesting that the amplification is responsible for most of the personality of the unit. Connecting a Naim ND5 XS (HFC 352) via RCA imparts a fractionally greater sense of urgency to the way that the Leema performs, but the basic tonal balance stays consistent across both products. The biblical reserves of headroom also come in handy with vinyl too. While the Cyrus Phono Signature (HFC 408) has no shortage of gain, if you do find yourself lacking, the Quasar is probably going to have enough in reserve to get the job done. A welcome feature if this is the case is that changing the input will automatically drop the volume to a lower level to prevent damage to the drivers (this can also be turned off if you need). Among all this positivity, there isn't really much to be negative about.

CONNECTIONS



Q&A

Lee Taylor

Designer, Leema Acoustics



ES: What was the design rationale that led to the Quasar?

LM: Quasar was designed as a high-quality all-in-one audio solution for modern environments. Lots of music lovers are now exclusively streaming or have ripped their CD collection to a NAS drive.

The majority of products on the market have comparatively low power outputs and, therefore, can only practically drive high-efficiency speakers. At 200W RMS per channel, the Quasar is capable of driving pretty much any loudspeaker on the market to stadium-rock levels.

Streaming service integration was also important and was a new direction for us. We currently offer Spotify Connect, vTuner, Qobuz, Tidal and Napster, together with Dropbox and Onedrive account playback. We are also assessing the Roon platform and if it is deemed advantageous to include, we will add this service in a future firmware over-the-air update.

Is there a reason why it is referred to as an integrated amp rather than an all-in-one system?

It could be viewed as an integrated amplifier with valuable extra facilities or an all-in-one. However, to truly be an all-in-one for all people, it would have to include a CD drive and a phono stage in my view.

Is the Quasar the first in a series of products or is it a standalone one for now?

Quasar is the first in a series of new products that incorporate high-quality streaming/ripping and hard-disk storage facilities. The market is moving overwhelmingly in that direction and we aim to offer class-leading products in every sector. However, we are not rushing in, preferring to take time ensuring the products are stable, reliable and that they sound great.



There are 220 increments of control on the volume dial

Compared with the Moon Nêo ACE, the Leema doesn't necessarily create the same sense of joy when listening to music that can supply it. A 16/44.1 rip of Kings of Leon's *Spiral Staircase* moves with speed and enthusiasm, but some of the raucous, ballistic energy of the piece seems to have been smoothed off at the same time. This does have the benefit of ensuring that all but the most irredeemably terrible recordings remain listenable on the Quasar and services like Spotify Connect and higher-quality internet radio feeds also sound good. There are moments, however, where the Quasar might come off as fractionally restrained, but it does mean that it will handle most media without incident.

no less attention grabbing and realistic even though it all occurs on a much smaller scale.

Conclusion

All the positivity about the way that the Quasar performs has to be balanced against the reality that while it is fully featured and entirely competitive with key rivals at the price, it just isn't as slick and intuitive to operate. There are times when it feels a little like distinctly and discernibly separate components placed in a common chassis, and there are niggles that result from this that can feel somewhat frustrating at times. All of this can almost be forgiven, however, thanks to the sparkling performance it offers over such a wide variety of inputs. There are times when the Quasar feels entirely competitive with rivals that cost a great deal more, and it would be challenging to assemble separates capable of out performing it for the same amount of money. If you are able to overlook some interface foibles, this is an outstanding product at the asking price that really deserves to be on any shortlist ●

The biblical reserves of headroom come in particularly handy with vinyl

If you do have access to high-resolution material, though, it is truly outstanding. It seems to be able to make use of the extra information in a way that creates a discernible improvement over standard files. A 24/88.2 download of Dead Can Dance's *The Ubiquitous Mr Lovegroove* is quite superb. Brendan Perry's vocals are tangibly real and well defined and have an almost liquid quality to them that allows the track to flow without any sense of processing taking place. Combine this with the Quasar's innate ability to generate scale, and you have a truly inspiring performer. Neither does this ability hinge solely on 'big' recordings – a 24/96 download of Nick Drake's closed in and intimate *Things Behind The Sun* is



£300 less than the Simaudio Moon Nêo ACE (HFC 420), the Quasar fits more inputs and three times the power output into a chassis that is almost exactly the same size. The Moon responds with a very good phono stage. In performance terms, the Nêo ACE sounds slightly more fun and involving, but has little response to the grunt the Leema possesses.

The ACE has a far superior control interface with the MIND app making it a far slicker and altogether easier device to live with. For many users this might swing the balance in the Simaudio's favour, but it is hard to ignore the bang for buck the Leema offers.

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



LIKE: Powerful and engaging sound; excellent features; solid build

VALUE FOR MONEY



DISLIKE: Disjointed interface; very slight lack of excitement

BUILD QUALITY



FEATURES



WE SAY: A very accomplished all-rounder packing a huge amount of functionality

OVERALL

