

Primare R35 solid-state, MM/MC phono stage

by Jason Kennedy



Load settings on a phono stage are rather like filter settings on DACs; not everyone bothers to try them out, yet their effects can be pretty dramatic. The degree of effect is often more apparent with phono stages than it is with DACs, but in both cases, it's always worth trying the available options. The new Primare R35 has more loading options than most for both main cartridge types, and the differences encountered were fairly obvious, but I'm getting ahead of myself.

The R35 replaces the R32 at the top of Primare's small selection of standalone phono stages, and there is just one other model, the R15. The R35 has both XLR and RCA output connections, but limits input to RCAs alone as this is what 99.9% of tonearms have on their output cables. It's slightly ironic that a cartridge device that has an intrinsically balanced output, rarely has XLR connections but that does make life a little easier for phono stage makers. I think I've only seen one or two with balanced inputs in several decades of reviewing.

Primare designed the R35 for use with 'virtually any' MM or MC cartridge and has a wide range of loading options to cater for both types. It also has three levels of gain, one of which is 70dB, higher than that typically encountered even

in dedicated MC stages. Interestingly it's higher still via the XLR output at 76dB. There are no fewer than 21 options for resistance loading as well, probably the most comprehensive range I've seen, these start at 10 ohm for MC and rise to the 47 kohm generally used for MM. Unusually there is another option for MM at 2.5 kohm, which I believe can work well with some high output moving coils.

Terry Medalen at Primare was in charge of 'voicing' the R35, which is a posh word for tweaking the design so that it sounds just so. There are numerous components inside a piece of electronics like this. A capacitor, say from one brand, will sound different to one from another company, even if the construction type and values are the same. Therefore Terry is in effect the final stage of a design process that began with engineer Bent Nielsen creating the four-layer circuit board topology and MM circuitry of the R35 and sourcing the power supply and MC stage from specialists. The power supply is a linear, discrete type based around a toroidal transformer in a mu-metal case. Many phono stages separate the power supply in a second box to stop noise polluting the very low-level signal being amplified, so this degree of shielding is necessary. More shielding is provided for the power supply ▶

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► the attack of the snare drum, so I went for 180 ohms and found the sweet spot resistance for the Aphelion 2. Now it delivered depth of image, excellent timing and a good midpoint between focus and scale. At this stage the pure funk of Beck's rendition of Stevie Wonder's tune became palpable. Thiago Nassif's *Mente* (Gearbox, see review in the back of this issue), has a tight and punchy sound and that remained - the kick drum still whacks you - but there was so much reverb around the voice and huge dynamic contrast. You get the muscularity without it threatening to bludgeon your ears.

I tried a different MC cartridge in the Van den Hul Colibri XGP. This specifies a resistance setting between 500 ohm and 1 kohm so I set the Primare up at the lower figure and gave it a spin. The Colibri is a much smoother and sweeter cartridge with juicy bass and higher output than the Rega: if you want the full vinyl warmth vibe, then it will be right up your alley. After my early resistance setting experience, I tried upping the setting to 600 ohm. I discovered that the sound could be more physical with outstanding vocals on *Raindogs* (Tom Waits, Island) and lovely tone across the board, underpinned by a weighty double bass. In for a penny, I pushed resistance up to the 1 kohm mark and found that the vocal now had a spooky realism that felt like Waits was in the room. The song '9th and

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Solid-state, MM/MC phono stage
Phono inputs: One pair single-ended (via RCA jacks)
Analogue outputs: One pair single-ended (via RCA jacks), one pair balanced (via XLR connectors)
Gain: 36 to 76dB (adjustable)
Input resistance: 10 Ohm–47kOhm (adjustable)
Input capacitance: 100pF to 1nF (adjustable)
Output impedance: 100 Ohms (via RCA jacks), 200 Ohms (via XLR connectors)
Output level: 2Vrms (nominal), 9Vrms (maximum)
RIAA linearity: +/- 0.2dB
Distortion: THD + Noise MM <0.02% 20Hz–20kHz, MC <0.03% 20Hz–20kHz
Signal to Noise Ratio: MM 85dB, MC 76dB 1KHz A-weighted 0.5mV input Gain
Dimensions (HxWxD): 92 x 430 x 384mm
Weight: 9.5kg
Price: £1350

Manufacturer: Primare AB
URL: primare.net

UK Distributor: Karma Audio Visual
URL: karma-av.co.uk
Tel: +44(0)1423 358846

Hennepin' had an ethereal presence from another time and place. Who needs poetry when you've got: "I've seen it all through the yellow windows of the evening train"?

The Primare R35 is that rare thing: an audio component with a lot of features that also sounds exceptionally revealing. Usually, it's one or the other, so getting both in a professionally executed package with some superior styling touches at a sensible price is quite an achievement. Even more so for a product that's designed, QC'd and shipped in Sweden, it's hard to see how they do it. I take my hat off to Primare. The R35 is a stonking phono stage that probably does work with any MM or MC cartridge. +