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# Växjö victorious

*A spanking new entry-level CD player from Sweden's most umlaut-infested town*

**PRODUCT** Primare CD21

**TYPE** CD player

**PRICE** £800

**KEY FEATURES** Size (WxHxD): 10x43x38.5cm

● Weight: 10kg ● RS232 and IR socketry ● Coaxial S/PDIF, Toslink optical, XLR AES/EBU digital outputs ● Burr-Brown PCM 1738 DAC

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**P**rimare Systems is based in the Swedish town of Växjö, not a name you want to be trying to pronounce after a night on the *aquavit* with a Swedish hi-fi designer.

Luckily, it's not necessary to get to grips with so many umlauts in order to enjoy the company's latest entry-level CD player, the CD21. A direct replacement for the similarly priced D20, this player was designed by a new man on the Primare team, Bjorn Holmqvist, who produced the CD31 that *Hi-Fi Choice* tested in *HFC 270*.

The CD21 is a stunning looking machine with build quality that would not seem out of place on a machine twice the price. Its aesthetic appeal is enhanced by the lozenge-shaped display and disc drawer, plus the simple selection of keys that flank them. The remote, by contrast, is a busy, utilitarian system-running affair, which did its best to

flummox us by requiring a stab at the CD button before it would send any data that the player could understand. In a full Primare system, you might have a DVD player as well, so this source of potential confusion is hard to avoid. Another minor irritation is the player's tendency to turn itself off given a ten minute break – although this saves the planet and reduces electricity bills, it also means you need to give the player a half-hour spin-up, playing a disc before it comes on song. Another blot on the copybook is the slow reaction time of the eject button. It needs a few seconds constant pressure to illicit a response, and this is true of both player and handset.

On the back panel, there are a couple more connections than you usually get at this price point. The most unusual is an XLR socket for a digital output. This AES/EBU socket delivers a 110-ohm electrical signal and suits high-end DACs, such as the Stello DA220 tested in *HFC 271*. There are also the usual coaxial and Toslink digital outputs and standard RCA phono analogue connections, alongside an RS232 connector for use by service engineers and multiroom installers. There's also a remote IR connector, useful if you plan on hiding this attractive player inside a cupboard.

Under the casework, the CD21 features a number of well-tested techniques for making the most of the humble compact disc. It uses a DVD-ROM transport mechanism that Primare dubs DVS; while slow-loading, this is very fast at accessing tracks. Its bitstream output is sent to a DIR1703 receiver that was selected for its jitter-suppression skills. Unlike many other new players, this one does not use upsampling and the press release goes so far as to suggest that such a process introduces its own form of coloration. Presumably, this is a coloration that Primare was able to counteract in its D31, which does upsample.

The converter itself consists of a pair of 24/192 capable PCM1738 DACs per channel, with this balanced topology being used for maximum noise rejection prior to output. Current to voltage conversion combines op-amps and MOSFETs with the signal remaining balanced right up to the output stage, which is actively driven by a MOSFET transistor. Primare uses SMD (surface mount device) circuitry to keep signal paths short.

The power supply utilises an R-core transformer with eight separate windings for the various elements in the player, each supply being regulated in ten steps. The supply to the



analogue output is claimed to have 'ultra-fast' discrete regulation, in order to provide enough power "for even the deepest sonic transient", according to Primare's blurb.

**SOUND QUALITY**

In our quest to find the "deepest sonic transient", we discovered in the CD21 a capable and entertaining player with few apparent shortcomings at its price point. You have to push it very hard through a system of considerably higher resolution than would normally be used in order to highlight its limitations. It's pretty successful in all important respects, but especially in its sense of solidity that comes from good stereo separation. This player is capable of producing large-scale imaging in all dimensions. The degree to which this is apparent depends on the quality of recording being played but, on pretty well everything we tried, it managed to eke out the shape and placement of the instruments and voices. As a result, discs sound more realistic and you get a stronger sense that the musicians are playing in the room... albeit somewhat more quietly than they would really be.

It proved equal to the task of extracting energy too. Jaga Jazzists' latest disc *What We Must* is a dense and powerful recording of ten musicians laying down intense grooves – the Primare delivered them in apparently full effect, extracting the light and shade as well as the glory of their climaxes. It also made sense of tracks that can often sound overpopulated with sounds; on some players, it seems that there are almost too many notes. but the

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Primare allows you to listen into the recording and make sense of the steamroller drumming.

Gillian Welch's simpler arrangements are equally well-handled and, if her voice is smoother and sweeter than usual through the CD21, that actually enhances the power of her songs. There was a strong sense of presence, the harmonic overtones of the guitars recreating the acoustic space of the studio while the thumping foot of her accompanist fleshed out the scale of the room. This proved a difficult album to eject, but we managed to find something equally engrossing to follow it with in the form of The Be Good Tanya's second album, *Chinatown*. This collection of emotionally captivating songs is seldom reproduced with this much clarity, the kick drum on *Waitin' Around to Die* managing to sound menacing despite its softness.

Occasionally, there is a slight sense of extra fullness to the upper bass with the CD21, but this only brings out the best in instruments like double bass and drums. It might be why the top-end sounds sweet as well, the extra girth below acting as a sort of filter to high frequency edginess. There was only one occasion when we managed to push this player to its edge and that was when playing some less than smooth live recordings from

Frank Zappa as loud as the system will go. That the Primare copes with this onslaught without undue distress is remarkable; the players that typically live up to this sort of exposure cost at least three times as much.

This is clearly a capable and highly engaging player, one that is well-equipped to take on the best of the competition thanks to its strong sense of sonic physicality. It has a good if not dramatic sense of timing and responds positively to pretty much every disc you give it, and you can't ask much more of an affordable and attractively built CD player than that.

Oh, and one final note... it's pronounced 'vecks-yer!' **HFC**

Jason Kennedy



**VERDICT**

<b>SOUND &gt;&gt; 85%</b> [Progress bar]	<b>PRO</b> Solid and three dimensional sound with great image scale and depth and a nice sense of timing. Great build for the money and nice styling.
<b>FEATURES &gt;&gt; 84%</b> [Progress bar]	<b>CON</b> Mildly irritating eject button and busy system remote, slow disc reading, not so clever with abrasive recordings and an annoyingly enthusiastic auto switch-off.
<b>BUILD &gt;&gt; 90%</b> [Progress bar]	
<b>VALUE &gt;&gt; 87%</b> [Progress bar]	

**CONCLUSION**  
This is a very easy player to enjoy – it's competent in all areas and its rendering of musical energy is ahead of the game in the sub £1,000 arena. If you appreciate an organic and engaging sound, it's more than worthy of a good, loud audition.

**HI-FI CHOICE OVERALL SCORE >> 86%**