



PRIMARE CD21 CD PLAYER | PRIMARE I21 INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER
AUDIO PRO BRAVO FX-04 LOUDSPEAKERS | £2,750

Cool paradise

Style statement hi-fi is something Scandinavians know all about. But when it looks and sounds this good, it's a bit of Nordic heaven

That Swedes like their hi-fi is, of course, a given. True, not all of those long, sub-zero winter evenings are spent listening to music (a lesson in priorities to us all), but the very idea of high-calibre sound in the home is a natural fit with the climate and the lifestyle of the people. The Swedish hi-fi cognoscenti are also really into their music, especially jazz – many of the big jazz record labels (ones that aren't Blue Note, anyhow) are either of Scandinavian decent or feature a list of musicians and engineers that reads like a Viking legend. And the small but vibrant hi-fi industry very much mirrors the industrial preoccupations of the country, with the emphasis on clean, understated design and high-quality engineering at a reasonable price.

Which isn't to say you have to drive a Saab or a Volvo to fancy a Swedish hi-fi system. All you Merc drivers out there – tell me you're not drawn to the cool cut and sonic subtlety of the combo we've lined-up this month. The spare yet refined aesthetic mien of the electronics is the unmistakable work of Primare (no stranger to *Hi-Fi Choice*), while the slightly less well-known Audio Pro (actually founded a few years before Primare in the mid-1970s) contributes a pair of speakers that have to be among the most sensually elegant yet to grace these pages.

The way both companies enthusiastically embrace the 'affordable high-end' ethos suggests the possibility of natural synergy and outstanding value. Admittedly, giving the law of diminishing returns a sharp kick in the shin isn't always top of the agenda here at *Beautiful Systems* – remember, the best of the best always costs an arm and a leg – but there is certainly a case to be made for keeping the cost anchored in

the real world and, as we've discovered time and again, no shortage of companies only too willing to mediate the eternal conflict between price and performance. This system falls far from the 'arm and a leg' tree... it barely costs two fingers and a toe.

BO SELECTA!

Primare grew out of Danish industrial designer (and passionate audiophile) Bo Christensen's frustration with the sound quality, aesthetics and user interface of what he called "typical audio gear". In the late-1980s, he formed a team of like-minded designers, including electronics engineer Bent Nielsen, and formed Primare, its mission to design hi-fi of exceptional sound quality, elegance and user-friendliness. And eschew the industry standard twelve-month product life cycle by having the flexibility to evolve in line with technologies and methodologies. Christensen combined clean Scandinavian design, simple circuitry and straightforward operation. A trend-setting 'minimalist aesthetic' was born, which echoes in hi-fi (and not simply Nordic hi-fi) to this day.

Although Christensen left Primare in 1994, Nielsen remained, working alongside Copland luminary Lars Pedersen and renowned audio engineer Michael Bladelius (formerly of Pass Labs and Threshold among others) to advance and focus Primare's art in the digital and analogue domains. Today, the company's reputation for superior sound and style is stronger than ever.

Primare likes to put that down to the fact that it has its own rule book. Even the £800 entry-level CD21 that kicks off this system uses "the best optical media disc drive currently available", proprietary servo-controlled software, multiple



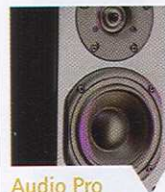
**Primare CD21
CD player**
£800

The less expensive of Primare's two CD players is not a poor relation. It uses the same meticulous engineering to deliver a similar sonic signature – and it really comes into its own with the I21.



**Primare I21
integrated
amplifier**
£750

Although not the most muscular integrated amplifier at the price, the I21's generous current delivery helps it to sound more powerful than its 75 watts a side suggest. A really engaging listen.



**Audio Pro
Bravo FX-04
loudspeaker**
£1,200 per pair

You'd suspect speakers as unconditionally gorgeous as these couldn't possibly sound as good as they look. You'd be wrong. Beauty and the beat.

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isolated power supplies, optimised digital to analog conversion stages and generously engineered output stages.

The transport mechanism and circuit boards are housed in an alloy and heavy gauge steel chassis which, as well as giving off up-market visual and tactile cues, provides strength, rigidity, and screening while, at the same time, damping vibrations from external sources. The front panel, which is a couple of centimetres proud of the main chassis, isolates the display circuitry from the audio circuitry to avoid interference. Digital-to-analogue conversion is performed by two Burr-Brown 24-bit/192kHz PCM1738 DACs, configured in an internally balanced topology to cancel out noise and distortion products. The signal path is balanced until its last stage where it becomes single ended. There is no upsampling as Primare believes it can colour the sound.

Signal paths are kept as short as possible and an internal mains filter ensures that any high frequency disturbance is removed before it reaches the power transformer, which is placed as far away as possible from the delicate analogue circuits. The player has an R-core transformer with separate windings for all of the different power requirements (mechanical, analogue, digital and so on). Each is individually

regulated in ten steps to ensure that enough power is constantly available.

Analogue outputs are by unbalanced phono connections while, on the digital side, there's one coaxial 75-ohm S/PDIF, one optical Toslink and one professional XLR 110-ohm AES/EBU output. The RS232 port is used for servicing and future upgrades. Most of the functions can be accessed through just six front panel push buttons but the full set, including scan and programming, need the remote.

Meticulous attention to the power supply and ultra-short signal paths are at the heart of the I21 integrated amp's design, too. As with the most expensive Primare powerhouse, the entry-level model's power supply is fully discrete with true dual-mono construction and separate transformer windings for each channel. The generous physical size of the 800VA toroidal transformer makes it an inherently good mains filter and its low output impedance promotes good voltage stabilisation. Power to the driver stage and preamp stage is individually regulated in seven steps, as is the digital supply to the front panel. Even though the power output of 75 watts per channel into eight ohms sounds less than Herculean, the I21's high current output means tricky speaker loads shouldn't be problem. The main circuit design uses J-FET input and bipolar

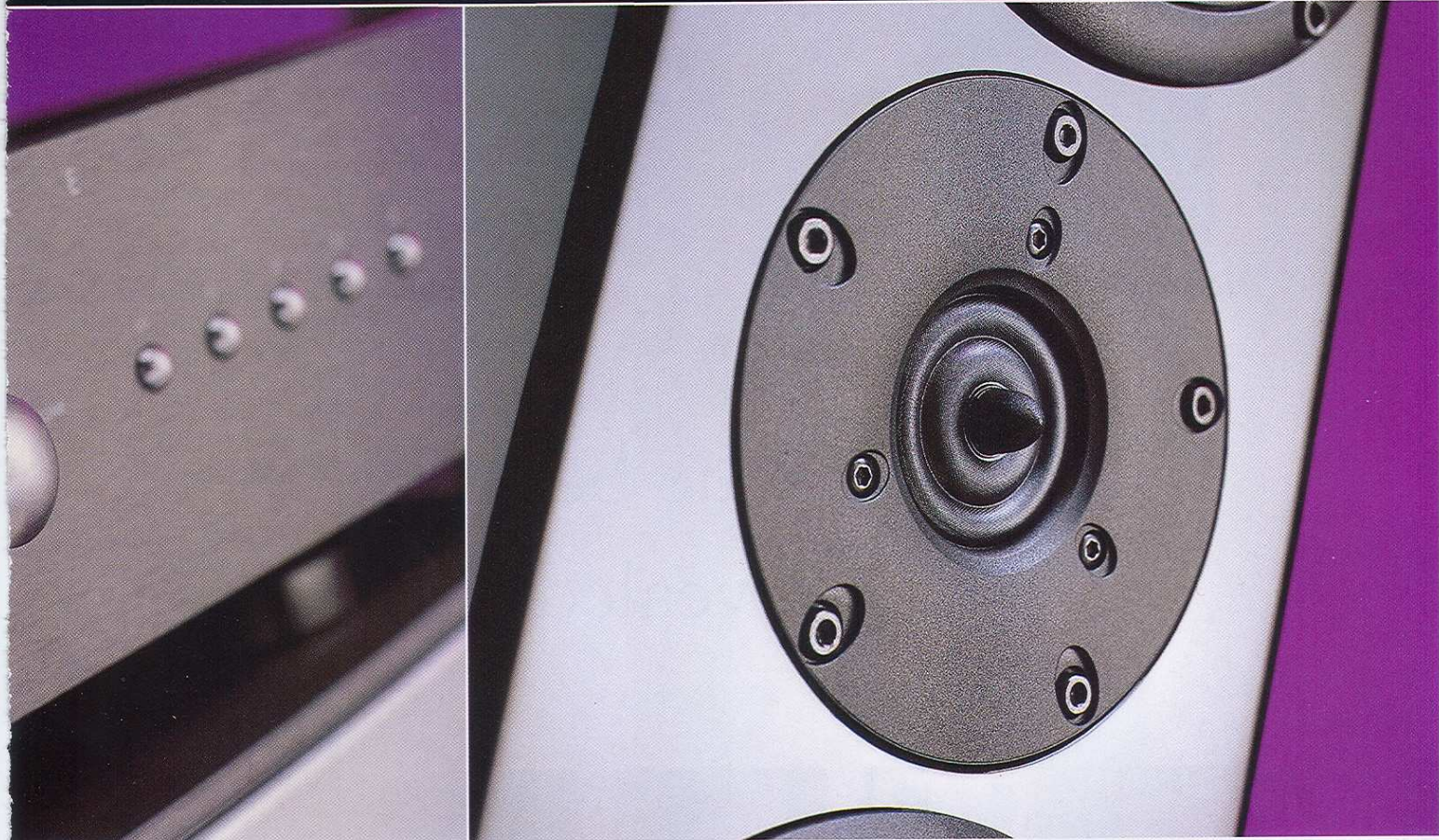
output devices (warmer sounding than MOSFETS) while the preamp section is derived from the circuit designs in the top-end PRE30 dedicated preamplifier.

Like the CD player, the I21 has a steel chassis, alloy casing and split front panel which, apart from the input selection buttons, sports just the milled digital volume control and small numeric level display. There are just four line-level inputs labelled CD, Tuner, Line 1 and Line 2. Round the back, the single set of chunky gold-plated speaker terminals can accommodate most audiophile speaker cables.

THE STAHL FILE

Which leads us to those tall, slim and artfully contoured glossy piano black columns. It all began for Audio Pro some 30 years ago with a subwoofer designed by a young electronics engineer called Karl-Erik Stahl. A small box with a deep, clean bass, the world was well and truly shaken – in fact, Audio Pro subs were the bass delivery systems of choice for the discerning LS3/5a owner of a decade or two ago. Today, Audio Pro also has a burgeoning range of two-channel and home theatre speakers and electronics, alongside a reputation for combining sumptuous looks and top notch sonics.

The £1,200 Bravo FX-04 is the second-best speaker in the Audio Pro line-up and is designed to be equally at



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home in stereo and multi-channel systems. Certainly, it’s hard to imagine a room decor than wouldn’t be enhanced by the presence of its gorgeously svelte, hand-lacquered teardrop cabinet.

The curved back design discourages the propagation of standing waves within the cabinet. It houses two 135mm bass/mid drivers and a 25mm tweeter in a D’Appolito configuration, claimed to deliver a more precisely defined soundstage.

Pedestal-mounted for extra stability, the cabinet’s downward-firing ‘AirFlow’ bass reflex port – much like some ProAc floorstanding designs – aims for better bass connection with the room. This seems to be justified by the 32Hz-42kHz (-3dB) frequency response. With a quoted sensitivity of 91dB, the Bravos don’t need a lot of power to go loud.

IT’S GENEROUS... HONEST!

What’s immediately likeable about this system is its basic generosity and musical honesty. Strong on detail, focus and intelligibility, it sounds properly integrated with a warm, natural balance.

You never get the feeling that it’s holding back or intentionally tailoring the music to produce a particular effect. Ebullient and energetic with rock, expansive with big orchestras, intimate and tactile with simpler acoustic material, the Primare/Audio Pro partnership has the canny ability to lay bare the spirit of the music.

Leonard Cohen’s vaguely melodic mumbling on the generally slow-burning *Ten Songs* album has a convincingly earthy quality. And when, as it occasionally does with Leonard, the music picks up pace, so does the system, its alacrity, assurance and dynamic freedom allowing the energy to swell with ease.

It’s the Audio Pro speakers that bring a sense of richness and air to the party. Their smooth, extended treble has fine inner detail and integrates smoothly with a midband that’s poised, open and articulate. The weighty yet thoroughly tuneful bass is impressive, too, sounding full and firm without verging on the warm and cuddly. Well, maybe just a little...

Few systems have passed through these doors that have sounded smoother or sexier with jazz. This perhaps isn’t surprising, given the Swedish love of the idiom, but the combination of detail (from the electronics) and warmth (from the speakers) makes this system a jazz natural. If it got any jazzier, it’d have to take up smoking Gauloises and grow a goatee beard.

Perhaps some of this jazz sexiness is smoke and mirrors. A more resolving system that retains the richness could certainly deliver a better overall performance, but here lies the system’s key feature. You may find a warmer or more detailed sounding system at the price, but you’re unlikely to find one that balances the two so deftly without seriously upping the dosh. Tack on the suave, sophisticated good looks and you can see why it deserves to sit among the great and the good of *Beautiful Systems*.

This isn’t the world’s most accurate hi-fi system but, for £2,750, its compelling musicality is nothing less than a revelation. **HFC**

David Vivian

