

# Primare I21 Integrated Amplifier

Jeff Dorgay

**Neutrality is the theme song of this Danish integrated amp and matching CD player.**

If you are looking for the perfect combination of great sound, zero maintenance, and elegant packaging, look no further than the Primare I21 integrated amplifier. Delivering a conservatively rated 75Wpc, the \$1495 I21 should have enough power to drive, at reasonable levels, all but the most insensitive speakers. And with its centrally located volume control, LED status panel, and pushbuttons, this amplifier would be right at home in the Museum of Modern Art—or in a vodka ad.

My review sample came in Primare's new titanium finish. Build quality is outstanding; this is a very solid little amplifier. Removing the cover revealed a massive toroidal power transformer and a layout that is as tidy as my Power Mac G5. Kathleen Thomas, from importer Sumiko, told me that Primare's designers are constantly refining circuit topologies and that they don't buy into any particular trend. In the case of the



I21, the designers found that one large power supply offered better sound.

The follow-no-trends philosophy is also applied to the amp's dual faceplate design. If you look at the I21 from above, you can see a gap between the thick, machined front panel and the beginning of the chassis. This is where Primare placed the switching and house-keeping circuitry, isolating it from the

gain stages and making for an extremely quiet amplifier.

Even after spending a whole night on my doorstep in the chilly Pacific Northwest, the I21 sounded great right out of the box. I noticed a slight improvement after about 20 hours of use, but nothing more after that. As with most solid-state electronics, the I21 sounds better if always left on.

To give the Primare a fair shake, I evaluated it with a few speakers that would be logical candidates for such a moderately priced amplifier. Because the Primare is so neutral, perhaps even a touch reserved, all the speakers sounded as I had originally expected. My reference Vandersteen 2Ce, with its relatively low 86db sensitivity, played very loudly and had great bass control, possibly due to the amp's high-current capability. Even though it costs twice as much as the I21, the Naim Ariva was also a good match and, due to its higher sensitivity, played the loudest of the bunch. Moreover, the highly detailed Arivas were not at all constrained.

## The Primare CD21 CD Player

As the designated companion to the I21, the CD21 is exactly the same size and sports a similar front-panel layout and button arrangement. It features a pair of Burr-Brown 1738 DACs, shares the basic transport of higher-priced Primare players, and uses separate power-supply regulation for the digital, transport, and analog sections to minimize noise and improve detail. This single-ended player can also be utilized as a transport with RCA coaxial, TosLink, and AES/EBU digital outputs; an RS-232 output is also available.

Neither overly warm nor extended, the CD21 is very neutral-sounding. It did a great job with every type of music I threw at it. Nothing came across as harsh or pushy, just nice, relaxing, and musical. While it wasn't terribly sensitive to cables, I had great luck with DH Labs' Silver Sonic Air Matrix interconnect, which is a bit more laidback than the Revelation cable I use with tube CD players. Even though it's the perfect match for the I21, the CD21 worked equally well with my two tube-amplified systems.

The no-fuss, no-muss CD21 is the Honda Accord of CD players—it's understated and offers Lexus performance for a lot less money.


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Thanks to its high-current design, the I21 did a great job on my favorite bass test records, in particular Kruder and Dorfmeister's *The K&D Sessions* [!K7] and Tommy Lee's *Never a Dull Moment* [MCA], revealing a lot of texture in the lower registers and subtly reproducing mids and highs without drama or coloration.

But the I21's relaxed neutrality made both of my tubed CD players sound a bit too relaxed. At first I feared it was the amplifier, but a call to John-Paul Lizars at Sumiko brought me the companion CD21 CD player (see sidebar), which woke things up and proved to be the best counterpart for the I21.

I again got great results when using my Rega Planar 3 for analog playback. Those of you with (or considering purchasing) a reasonably priced table will not be disappointed playing records through the I21, though its lack of a phono stage means that you'll need to purchase an outboard unit. (The \$549 Pro-Ject Tube

Box pairs incredibly well with the I21.)

The most difficult aspect about reviewing equipment like the I21 is its neutral and inoffensive sonic properties. While the amp doesn't have earthquake-like bass or the last degree of finely etched detail in the highs, it does extremely well everything an integrated amplifier should. You simply hook it up, turn it on, listen to music, and enjoy. While your audiophile friends are adjusting this and tweaking that, you'll already be on your fourth CD. 

#### DISTRIBUTOR INFORMATION

##### SUMIKO

2431 Fifth Street  
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(510) 843-4500  
sumikoaudio.net  
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Prices: I21: \$1495; CD21: \$1295  
(black or titanium finishes)

#### SPECIFICATIONS

##### I21 Integrated Amplifier

Power Output: 75Wpc (8 ohms); 125Wpc (4 ohms)

Inputs: Four line-level RCA

Dimensions: 17" x 4" x 15.2"

Weight: 35 lbs.

##### CD21 CD Player

Analog Outputs: RCA

Digital Outputs: RCA, TosLink, and AES/EBU

Dimensions: 17" x 4" x 15.25"

Weight: 24 lbs.

#### ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

Rega Planar 3 turntable; Rega RB300 arm; Shure V15VxMR cartridge; Bottlehead Seduction phono stage; JoLida JD100 and AH! Njoe Tjoeb 4000 CD players; Naim Ariva, ProAc Tablette, and Vandersteen 2ce loudspeakers; Wireworld Equinox 5 and DH Labs Silver Sonic T-14 speaker cables; DH Labs Silver Sonic Air Matrix interconnect

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