

QUANTUM LEAP

WHO SAYS STEREO AND SURROUND SOUND CANNOT PLAY WELL TOGETHER?

CERTAINLY NOT PRIMARE SYSTEMS AB.

BY DENNIS BURGER PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOHN PHILLIP

For centuries the greatest scientific minds in the world were split: Does light shoot through space in tiny particles or ripple through the ether like water? Both sides agreed that the theories were incompatible, until a trio of European gurus named Heisenberg, Dirac and Schrödinger came along with quantum theory. To paraphrase their revelation: Waves and particles are like chocolate and peanut butter, and the whole of reality is a Reese's cup.

This long-standing debate recalls the current state of high-end audio.

In one corner you have

traditional audiophiles, who staunchly defend their "two ears, two speakers" motto. In the other corner you have surround-sound aficionados, who enjoy being bathed in music and movie soundtracks from all sides. Both sides tend to agree that their interests are incompatible; any system that performs one task well is generally considered inadequate at the other.

Enter a new breed of European gurus named Primare Systems AB to lay this notion to rest. One need spend mere minutes listening to the SP31.7 mkII processor and DVD30 universal DVD player to realize that stereo and surround sound can be

two great tastes that taste great together.

The SP31.7 mkII makes no bones about being first and foremost a surround-sound processor. Although it does not advertise its prodigious capabilities with the usual slew of Dolby and DTS logos on its front panel, it offers most of the bells and whistles one would expect of a \$4,000 processor. And like most other such products, it includes a cheap plastic "throwaway" remote in the assumption that you will use something better, such as a Crestron touchscreen.

I must complain, however, about the shortage of component video inputs—the

SP31.7 mkII has only two. I find I must do some creative wiring to get around this limitation when I add my Xbox and PlayStation 2 to the system. At least one more component input would be welcome. But the SP31.7 mkII does give me the option of creating custom inputs, mixing and matching video and audio inputs or deactivating them, and naming the resulting inputs as I please. This flexibility makes the SP31.7 mkII simpler to operate than it sounds.

I also use the SP31.7 mkII's mix-and-match capability to set up the Primare DVD30 on two different inputs: one for watching



standard DVD movies, and another, which I rename "DVD-A/SACD," configured for DVD-Audio (DVD-A) and Super Audio CD (SACD) discs, both of which the DVD30 can play. Same player, two inputs, both optimized for different formats.

The SP31.7 mkII's intu-

DESCRIPTION

SP31.7 mkII: Surround-sound processor. Decodes surround sound and stereo, controls volume, routes audio and video from source devices to TV and amplifier

DVD30: Universal disc player with progressive-scan output. Plays DVD-Video, DVD-A, SACD, CD and MP3

AUDIO MODES

Bypass, stereo, Dolby Digital EX and Pro Logic II, DTS ES-Discrete and Neo:6, Party and Primare Surround EX 7.1

CONNECTIONS

SP31.7 mkII: Two component video inputs, three S-video inputs, four composite video inputs, four stereo analog audio inputs (one XLR, three RCA type), one AES/EBU digital audio input, five coaxial digital audio inputs, two Toslink optical digital audio inputs, 7.1-channel analog audio input for DVD-A/SACD, 7.1-channel analog audio outputs, coaxial digital audio output, Toslink digital audio output, stereo XLR output, stereo analog audio output (RCA type) for recording, one component video output, two composite video outputs, two S-video outputs, 1/4-inch minijack for IR input, four 1/8-inch minijacks for DC triggers, RJ-45 jack for computer input, RS-232 connection for touchscreen remote control

DVD30: Two component video outputs, S-video output, composite video output, SCART video output (for European use only), 5.1-channel analog audio output, AES/EBU digital audio input, coaxial digital audio output, Toslink optical digital audio output, two analog audio outputs (one XLR, one RCA type), RJ-45 jack for computer input, RS-232 connection for touchscreen remote control, one 1/4-inch minijack for IR sensor input

DIMENSIONS

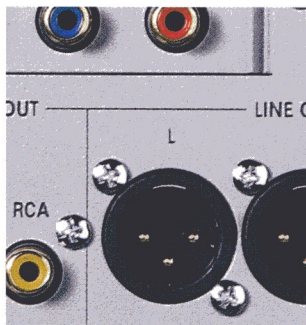
SP31.7 mkII: 3.9 x 16.9 x 15.2 inches (hwd)

DVD30: 3.9 x 16.9 x 14.9 inches (hwd)

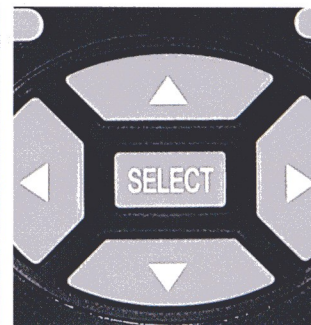
PRICE/CONTACT

PRICE: SP31.7 mkII \$3,995; DVD30 \$3,995

CONTACT: 510.843.4500
www.sumikoaudio.net



Pro-style XLR audio inputs and outputs (left) grace the SP31.7 mkII—but the remotes (right) for both the SP31.7 mkII and the DVD30 are the usual generic plastic throwaways.



itive interface would make this renaming and reconfiguring amazingly easy but for one problem—the SP31.7 mkII will not send its on-screen menus through a component video connection, so I lose the menus entirely when configuring the DVD input. Like most other high-end surround processors, the SP31.7 mkII forces me to hook up an extra video cable to my TV to finish the setup. A few of its competitors, though, display the menus on the component video output, and some include a small, front-panel LCD video screen that makes setup more convenient. Of course, if you're the type who never dares to adjust the settings of your surround-sound processor, then only your custom installer needs to worry about this problem.

While the initial setup

can be a bit daunting, the resulting touch-of-a-button operation allows for a clean, minimalist front-panel styling that sets Primare components apart from their busy-looking, button-covered competitors.

Minor setup complications prove worth the trouble, though, because as soon as everything is tweaked and I fire up the DVD30, the SP31.7 mkII and Primare's accompanying A30.5 mkII amplifier, I find myself in utter awe of the sound pouring out of my speakers. From the first guitar riff of America's *Homecoming* DVD-A disc, I immediately notice the crisp channel separation and brilliant but refined treble.

Each channel is more distinct than I am used to hearing; every note is given more room to breathe. Then the vocals kick in, and the natural timbre of the

midrange takes my breath away. Each surround-sound music disc I put into the DVD30 suddenly sounds much better than it has a right to, with rich, warm sound and a large, defined sense of space. I toss in Bucky Pizzarelli's *Swing Live* SACD and almost forget that I am still sitting in my media room at home.

I then kick back for a few hours of swordplay and eloquent verbosity with *Kill Bill: Vol. 1* on DVD and am taken aback by how well the player handles the difficult, complex mix of bone-crunching ferocity and smoother-than-silk voices. The DVD30 also pumps out a clean and respectable progressive-scan image, and its onboard video adjustments allow for a fine degree of subtle tweaking.

When my better half pops in one of her comedy shows on DVD, I love the



The look (left) of Primare products is spare, yet they offer advanced features.

The SP31.7 mkII includes such modern touches as RS-232 and RJ-45 connectors (left) for automated control and software updating.



fact that the player reformats the non-widescreen image to fit our widescreen television. I also like the replaceable video output board, which will allow for future upgrades like DVI or HDMI digital video outputs should Primare create them. Uncompromised audio is obviously Primare's gig, but video performance from the player holds its own with other units in this price range.

But here comes the real shock to the system, the single aspect of the setup that probably impresses me the most. Knowing that this surround-sound gear is not supposed to sound good with stereo music, I audition a few CDs nonetheless, simply for the sake of thorough inspection. To my utter amazement, the sound reminds me more of a dedicated music system with a high-end CD player than of a surround-sound system pressed into stereo music duty. The two-channel sound coming from a run-of-the-mill CD is exquisite. Stereo performance from DVD-A and SACD is so good it almost hurts.

A quick look at the back of the SP31.7 mkII reveals Primare's commitment to two-channel sound. You might notice the set of stereo inputs and outputs that look like three-pin microphone connections. These are called XLR jacks, and they are the highest-quality analog audio connection. XLR connections are not exactly uncommon on processors of this caliber; some even have enough XLRs for a complete surround-sound setup. But the SP31.7 mkII improves on many competitors by including a bypass mode that routes analog audio directly to the outputs with no digital processing in between. Add Primare's A30.2 stereo amplifier, and you have not only a pure two-channel setup at which no audiophile could possibly scoff, but also the basis of a world-class 7.1-channel surround-sound system—all controlled by one amazing processor.

For an awe-inspiring 5.1-channel surround-sound setup and a gorgeous stereo experience, the SP31.7 mkII/DVD30 combo is hard to beat. **HE**

DVD30 Player Specifications

Video Performance Features

PureCinema Progressive Scan (2-3 Pulldown)
108MHz/12bit Video DAC for high-quality DVD pictures
6Mhz Bandwidth
Twin-Wave Laser Pickup for CD/Video
CD/CD-R/CD-RW/DVD-R/RW (DVD Video Format) Playback
Super-Fine Focus Filter with 4:4:4 Video Upsampling

16 Video Parameter Adjustments with 3 User Memories (Progressive Motion, PureCinema (On/Off/Auto) YNR, CNR, Mosquito NR, Block NR, Sharpness High, Sharpness Mid, Detail, White Level Black Level, Gamma, Black Set-up, Hue, Chroma Level, Chroma Delay)

3 Factory Set Video Settings (CRT/PDP/Professional)
Still/Step Play (Forward/Reverse, Except VCD Reverse)
Slow Motion Playback (Except VCD Reverse)

Audio Performance Features

Multi-channel DVD Audio Playback
Multi-channel SACD Playback (1-bit)
MP3 Playback Capability
Bass Management
Triple 192KHz/24-bit (3x2 channel) Audio DAC's for Superior Sound Quality
Fully Balanced Circuitry, Front Outputs
T.H.D. + Noise <0.004% at 1KHz
Dynamic Range -100 dB
Signal-to-Noise-Ratio -100 dB
Channel Separation 100 dB
Output Level: 2.0 V maximum
Dolby Digital, and dts, Digital Outputs
Dolby Digital, and dts, Decoders

Convenience Features

Resume Function (DVD, Video CD)
Repeat Mode
Program Play

Video Output Terminals

Component Video (Y, Cr, Cb) Output x 2 (Gold Plated)
S-Video (S2 Compatible) x 1 (Gold Plated)
Composite Video Output x 1 (Gold Plated)
21-pin SCART x 1, RGB Compatible

Audio Output Terminals

Dolby Digital, / dts, / LPCM Coaxial Output x 1
Dolby Digital, / dts, / LPCM Optical Output x 1
Dolby Digital, / dts, / LPCM XLR Output x 1
Analog Output x 1 (Gold Plated)
6-Channel Audio Output x 1

Other Terminals

IR Input, 3.5 mm Jack
Data Input
RS232 Input

General

Finish Black or Titanium
Construction 2 mm Heavy-Duty Non-Magnetic Chassis
Power Consumption 38W Operating, 14W Standby
Dimensions: (WxDxH) 17 x 15 x 4 inches
430 x 380 x 100 mm
Weight 16.6 lbs, 7.5 kg

SP31.7 mkII Surround-Sound Processor Specifications

Analog Inputs: 1pr XLR (L & R), 7pr RCA (L & R)
Digital Inputs: 1 XLR, 5 RCA, 2 TOS-Link
Video Inputs: 4 Composite, 3 S-Video, 2 Component
XLR Analog Outputs: 1pr Front (L & R)
RCA Analog Outputs: Front (L & R), Center, Sub, (L & R), Rear (L & R)
Surround
Analog Record Output: 1pr RCA (L & R)
Digital Output: 1 TOS-Link & 1 RCA
Video Output: 2 Composite & 2 S-Video, 1 Component
Modes: Dolby ProLogic, Dolby ProLogic II, Dolby Digital 5.1, Dolby Digital Surround EX 6.1, Dolby Digital Matrix 6.1, DTS Neo-6, DTS 5.1, DTS ES 6.1, DTS ES 6.1 discrete, Surround EX 7.1, NTSC/PAL
Video: ~42W, Standby
Power Consumption: 1 Hz-100 kHz - 1 dB
Analog Data: Bandwidth: <0.005%, 20 Hz-20 kHz
T.H.D.: -110 dB
Signal-to-Noise Ratio: <10 Hz-100 kHz, 1 dB
Frequency Response:
Digital Data: 20 Hz-20 kHz ± 0.2 dB
Frequency Response: 17 x 15.2 x 4 inches
T.H.D. + Noise: 430 x 385 x 100 mm
Dimensions: (WxDxH) 22 lbs, 10 kg
Weight: