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PRIMARE I21

Primare apes its own upmarket models, externally at least...

Primare, the Swedish maker of highly stylish audio electronics, must have worked hard at the new I21. It's physically the largest of the amps in this group, with great looks very much in the family mould, but it comes in at a price that's comfortably lower than all bar the Chinese-built Rotel. Granted, it's pretty sparse on the features front (four inputs, although that will probably satisfy the majority of potential users) but it's as well put together as any here, and is simple to operate, too. Primare also seems to have found just the right feel for the volume control, which is reassuringly robust to the touch.

Looking inside yields a few clues as to how pennies have been shaved off the price, with a low-cost industrial part looking after input switching – without any ill effects that we could discern. The volume control is also electronic, a common enough part being used there which also allows for balance control, while the pair of op-amps are well regarded audio types. Most components are discrete and surface-mounted, with output current passing through a pair of bipolar transistors mounted on a large internal heatsink. A single mains transformer is used, but it appears to have separate windings for each channel, making the amp very nearly true dual mono. The display can be dimmed via the remote control.

SOUND QUALITY

Illustrating, not for the first time, that there is always room for personal taste, even with such apparently 'simple' devices as stereo amplifiers, this one caused something of a division among our listening panel. One listener found it a shade passionless and slightly short on detail, while the other two were more inclined to place it among the top two or three of the group. Taking the known preferences of said listeners into account, this is an amp that will tend to please you better if you value liveliness and energy above intimate detail and insight. It's not that it's badly lacking in the latter



department, but at least a couple of the alternatives here can better it in those terms.

For instance, it was praised in the Michael Jackson track above any of the others for its involvement and its ability to bring on a smile. In the Damien Rice track its vocal prowess was liked by one and all, though there was a general feeling that the bass seemed a little loose or boomy. Here, however, the biggest discrepancy came to light between descriptions of the musical communication, varying from highly favourable to rather unimpressed. In our opera excerpt, with its multi-layered detail, the chorus was felt to be pretty well portrayed as a whole, though a little lacking in the individualisation of the singers. Solo piano fared well too, with all listeners thinking it sounded natural, though here again there was some variation – one listener described it as subdued, while another liked it best of the bunch.

Tonally this amp seems to have no specific flaws, with bass and treble both cleanly extended, while soundstaging is secure, just lacking a little in beyond-the-speaker extension. We also felt that performance with tricky speakers transcended expectations and all things considered this Primare amp, while not perfect, comes with a very strong recommendation. **HFC**

VERDICT

SOUND >> 86%



FEATURES >> 75%



BUILD >> 89%



VALUE >> 90%



Despite some slight reservations regarding ultimate levels of detail, the generally lively character of this amp can easily endear it, especially if you value energy over insight. Great looks and build quality, too.

HI-FI CHOICE OVERALL SCORE 88%

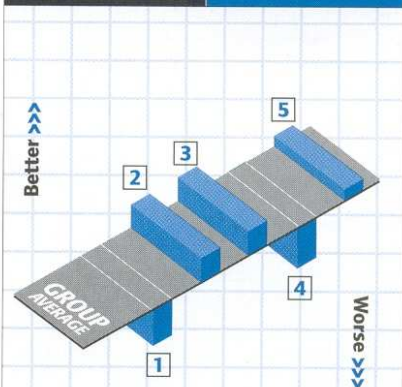


LAB REPORT

Primare's rating is 75W into 8 ohms, which seems fair – in fact, we got 81W. The increase when only one channel is driven is minimal, but into 4 ohms power very nearly doubles, and surprisingly there seems to be no dynamic headroom available, suggesting clipping is determined upstream and not at the output.

Bandwidth extends upwards to over 60kHz and downwards below 3Hz for tight 1dB limits. The electronic switching and volume controls will happily handle inputs to at least 4V, the highest we've seen from sane single-ended sources. Distortion is pretty low if not vanishing, while hum can be a problem with some sources, suggesting a minor grounding problem with the amp. Interestingly, intermodulation distortion shows next to no phase modulation. This is a new test of as yet uncertain correlation (see *Techno*, p21) but it's always nice to know things at least might be correct!

HOW IT COMPARES



- 1] Dynamic power >> -30%
- 2] Frequency response >> +20%
- 3] Dynamic range >> +20%
- 4] Distortion >> -35%
- 5] Output impedance >> +10%

SPECIFICATIONS

Measurement	Rated	Actual
Power output (8 ohms)	75W	81W
Distortion (1kHz/8 ohms)	0.05%	0.015%
Frequency response (20Hz-20kHz)	-	±0.1dB

CONCLUSIONS

This mid-market line-up shows greater diversity of performance than more up-market groupings

Our last amplifiers group, in HFC 266, ended on a very upbeat note. This time round, there's a little more variation between them.

They all put out a healthy dose of power under real-world circumstances and they all address the basic sonic criteria with confidence. It's just that differences are more obvious, revealed not least by a greater degree of unanimity between members of our 'blind' listening panel. If three experienced listeners all hear the same characteristics in an amp,

unprompted, they're probably not imagining it!

That means that there's all the more to be gained by examining our conclusions and then having a listen for yourself. Find out how the various subtle foibles of each model strike your ear – do you really miss excitement in the Micromega, or do you find it the epitome of civilised sound? Does the Monrio's bass excite you beyond words, or do you find its congestion a major annoyance?

Chances are, your reactions won't be quite that strong, but it's

sometimes surprising how forcefully a small deviation from perfection can affect one's listening pleasure. We had some very enjoyable times with all of these amps, but in the end found the Arcam and Primare perhaps the most all-round satisfactory, even while recognising a slight lack of precision in the latter.

The Exposure was a hit as part of a pre/power duo in an earlier group test and receives an honourable mention here. Sadly, it was handicapped by an odd bit of electronic bad temper this time.

The Micromega, too, turned in a more than competent performance and has a trump card in terms of its multichannel ability, a useful add-on which could aid in trying to integrate 'proper' audio with home cinema. It's small and neat for the power rating too. Monrio's MC 207 left us unmoved despite an essentially lively manner, but it's still well worth a try if you've no need for more than a basic feature set, while the Rotel RA-03 made a highly creditable showing in company of models up to 140 per cent above its modest price. **HFC**

TRY THEM WITH THESE

CD PLAYERS

CAMBRIDGE AZUR 640C £250
This budget player offers some real sophistication and insight.

ARCAM CD36 £1,400

This recent arrival has near-perfect neutrality and astonishing detail.

SPEAKERS

PMC GB1 £995
The uncoloured sound of this small floorstander could be an ideal match.

SPENDOR S6E £1,495

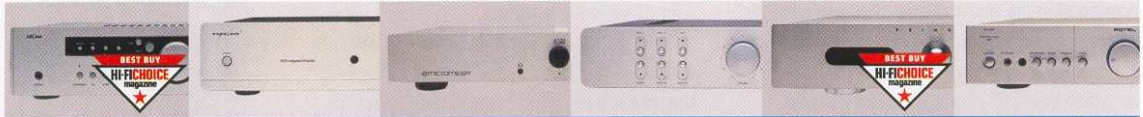
A satisfyingly big sound but with more finesse than one might at first expect.

HINTS AND TIPS

» Don't stack equipment on an amplifier – you could end up with overheating problems.
» Use decent cables in and out, and make sure that speaker cables are not frayed. Tighten screw-down speaker terminals from time to time.

» Use standby in preference to the mains switch, unless the amp will be off for a couple of days at least.
» Amps are seldom electrically microphonic, but the casework can resonate audibly. A few damping devices can work wonders.

INTEGRATED AMPLIFIERS AT A GLANCE



MAKE MODEL	Arcam Diva A90	Exposure 3010 Integrated	Micromega A-120	Monrio MC 207	Primare I21	Rotel RA-03
PRICE	£850	£1,000	£899	£1,195	£750	£499
SOUND						
FEATURES						
BUILD						
VALUE						
OVERALL						
CONCLUSION	A great sonic all-rounder with handy features, smart looks and good build – can't lose!	Full-bodied and enjoyable sound. Phono stage well worth the extra £200.	Small, neat and very well-specified, with detailed though slightly restrained sound.	Basically lively but a little prone to congestion and occasional bass looseness	Energetic sound, with just a little veiling of detail at times. Sounds much like its bigger brother for less.	Does all the basics commendably, only losing out in imaging and fine detail to dearer competition.
KEY FEATURES						
LINE INPUTS	7	5	7	5	4	5
TAPE OUTPUTS	2	1	1	1	1	1
PHONO INPUT	Optional	Optional	Yes (MM)	No	No	Yes (MM)
SIZE (WxHxD)	43.5x10x34cm	44x11.5x 0cm	43x7x30cm	43x9.5x33.5cm	43x10x38.5cm	43.5x9x34cm
WEIGHT	9kg	11kg	8kg	12kg	13.5kg	7.7kg
REMOTE CONTROL	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
BALANCED INPUT	No	No	No	No	No	No
LAB CONCLUSIONS E = EXCELLENT • G = GOOD • A = AVERAGE • P = POOR						
CLIP POINT (8 OHM)	29V G	28V G	28V G	27.5V G	25.5V A	25.5V A
FREQUENCY RESPONSE	±0.1dB E	±0.4dB G	±1dB A	±0.1dB E	±0.1dB E	±0.2dB G
DYNAMIC RANGE	101dB E	97dB G	92dB A	103dB E	101dB E	97dB G
DISTORTION	0.003% E	0.008% E	0.015% G	0.02% G	0.015% G	0.005% E
OUTPUT IMPEDANCE	0.07 ohm G	0.25 ohm A	0.045 ohm G	0.02 ohm E	0.04 ohm G	0.03 ohm E