



PRIMARE CD31 CD PLAYER | PRIMARE PRE30 PREAMPLIFIER
PRIMARE A30.2 POWER AMPLIFIER | REVEL F50A LOUDSPEAKERS | £9,900

Body and soul

Some hi-fi is faster than a Ferrari and thinner than Jodie Kidd. This beefcake combo restores a sense of proportion

To the best of my knowledge, no hi-fi reviewer at the sharp end of the business has ever employed the phrase 'a lovely tone' to describe the sound of a hi-fi component. Tonality is a valid enough subject that allows any number of descriptive possibilities in pursuit of subjective precision: fat, thin, warm, cold, strident, mellow, smooth and coarse are merely the cruder examples. But 'lovely' tone? No.

Pity. My grand-dad, long since passed on, frequently used to comment that his Grundig Yacht Boy – a monster of a portable radio back in the days when Grundig was a quality gig, with more bands at its disposal than Bob Geldof – had a lovely tone. I was just a kid – yet to thumb through the my first hi-fi magazine – but I knew exactly what he meant. It meant just right. Neither too fat nor too thin, too warm nor too cold. The sound had legs beyond the leading edge, a depth, a substance and a complexity of texture that was both inviting and reassuring. Male voices sounded golden, massed strings romantic, brass bands brassy.

Rose tinted? Quite possibly, especially by the standards of what followed. Speed, resolution and rhythmic alacrity made quite a splash in the 1970s and 1980s and attracted a following that still marches to a snappy beat. Especially here in Blighty – we got into the rhythm method even more than a brace of popes. It was an important development that pushed audio designers in the right direction. By the same token, there were those who felt left behind, who felt that they were being short-changed and who, to be blunt, yearned for the return of tone controls, so that they could fashion their own 'lovely tone'. One theory is that the high-end, in at least one of its more multi-faceted guises, has grown up to meet that demand.

Of course, the truth of it is that tone controls aren't the answer and never have been. A little treble cut and bass boost can warm things up and give you a rough approximation of what some people call the 'radiogram sound', but for it to have real body, weight, control and that elusive 'human quality' – as well as the pace, transparency, clarity and detail vital for true high-fidelity reproduction – it needs the inner structure and solidity only a seriously capable (read big and expensive) system can give.

BIG IS BEAUTIFUL

And here it is. Big and expensive is comfortably handled by the hugest and heaviest speaker yet to grace the pages of *Beautiful Systems* – though, at £6,000, not quite the priciest. Hailing, perhaps unsurprisingly, from Southern California in the USA, the F50a is the top model in Revel's more 'affordable' Performa range. It's a lofty beast, but elegantly narrow and its five drivers are deployed in the all-important quest of delivering a genuinely wide bandwidth. The complement comprises a trio of ceramic composite 165mm cone woofers, which are said to reach all the way down to the lowest octave with the help of a large, rearward-firing reflex port. A 135mm ceramic composite cone driver housed in its own separate sub-enclosure gets the critical middle frequencies all to itself. Finally, the F50a's 25mm titanium dome tweeter claims a frequency response extending far beyond the audible spectrum (ideal for SACD) and allied to wide dispersion characteristics.

Two sets of high-grade terminals for bi-wiring or bi-amping are provided, but more unusual is the tweeter output level control that allows a one decibel boost or cut (in 0.5 dB increments) to compensate for room acoustics and loudspeaker placement. Constructed from what Revel calls "specially

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**Primare CD31
CD player**
£1,500

New flagship disc spinner from Primare combines spare, clean-cut looks and fortress build with state-of-the-art internals and a big sonic performance.



**Primare
PRE30 preamp**
£1,200

A peach of a preamp, the PRE30 delivers purist sonics but doesn't stint on facilities. Cool 30-series design and excellent build are major attractions.



**Primare A30.2
power amplifier**
£1,200

Back-strainingly heavy, the A30.2 doesn't disappoint when it comes to taking control of big, complex speakers. Serious grunt meets grace and finesse.



**Revel F50a
loudspeaker**

£6,000 per pair
True wide bandwidth performance in typical Revel style. Brings music to life with an unforced delivery that simply sounds more real.



braced composite material" and finished in real wood veneer, the F50a's cabinet isn't exactly a thing of vanishing subtlety, but it is a satisfyingly understated piece of woodwork that's less imposing in situ than it is wrestling it out of its transit carton. Interfacing options with the floor include reversible spike feet to accommodate installations on carpet, tile, or hardwood. In addition to the maple finish of the supplied pair, it can also be had in equally pretty natural cherry or black ash finishes. The full-size black front detracts slightly, but the whole finish is extremely classy.

SWEDISH SOPHISTICATION

The latest disc spinner and pre/power amp combo from Sweden's Primare – a company, like Revel, with a reputation for concentrating on the whole performance envelope rather than just tunes and timing – make an arresting partnership with the speakers, sharing a similar solidity of architecture and simplicity. The sophistication is all on the inside. The stated aim of its CD31 CD player (an evolution of the highly regarded D30.2) is to "extract the last elusive nuance from CD and shrink the noise-floor almost to zero". At least according to Primare's blurb.

The new player uses high grade discrete circuit components and fully balanced low-noise topology

throughout, matching a high-quality 24-bit DAC (for 96kHz sampling) with a high-performance 24/96 filter, and an ultra-low noise, high-speed output stage with the aim of preserving every musical nuance. Multiple isolated low noise power supplies are said to keep the musical signal free of electrical interference and to exploit the full potential of the CD31's balanced design.

Attention to detail is typically meticulous, down to the gold-plated analogue, digital and balanced outputs. The weighty robustness of the heavy steel casing inspires confidence, too, as well as matching Primare's other 30 Series designs.

Not least the PRE30 preamp, designed by Mike Bladelius (of last month's *Beautiful System* fame). Under the cool Scandinavian lid is a new Class A coupled (single-ended type), discrete and fully-balanced design. The input stage comprises J-FET input devices coupled in a fold back cascade for maximum transient speed. All stages are current loaded and the current source is thermally compensated, (no DC servos are needed). The output stage uses MOSFET devices.

For the power supply, a custom-made 100VA toroidal transformer and double active regulators are teamed with local regulators to ensure that all stages in the design receive the current needed for

optimum performance. And the shunt to ground type volume control is usually found in much more expensive products, according to Primare.

The preamp offers full remote control of all functions, including switching for its seven inputs (two sets of balanced and five sets of unbalanced). It also provides individually adjustable input sensitivity for all inputs and a surround processor throughput, allowing the listener to use the PRE30 in a home cinema application.

Talking of home cinema, Primare has a reputation for high-quality multichannel components that only a handful of European brands can match. But this system is all about glorious, three-dimensional stereo, so the task of driving the big Revels is undertaken by the brand's chunky A30.2 power amp. A dual-mono design delivering 120 watts a side – each channel has its own identical, dedicated mono amplifier incorporating a heavy-duty, custom-made toroidal transformer and low noise regulated power supplies – the A30.2 uses four ultra-fast bi-polar output devices in a push-pull configuration. Each employs a low level of negative feedback – crucial, says Primare, to the reproduction of music if it's to sound natural.

Like much of the Primare range, the A30.2 is a weighty piece of kit constructed from 2mm thick steel. The





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back plate features seriously heavy-duty gold-plated loudspeaker terminals along with gold-plated RCA and XLR inputs.

MORE MUSCLE, MORE MUSIC

As with big American cars, so with big American speakers: there’s no substitute for cubic inches. The big Revels have so much grunt, grip and grace you have to steel yourself from winding up the wick until the walls start to ripple Matrix-like. If you feel inclined to listen to Eric Clapton live at close to stadium levels without a bead of sweat rolling those towering baffles, they’ll happily oblige.

Their sound is lushly detailed and insightful yet never forced or spot-lit. They’re strong at the frequency extremes (especially bass) and beautifully voiced in the middle. They image in 3D, they’re fast and they rock. They go loud effortlessly yet stay smooth and refined yet deeply dynamic. Most remarkably of all, they create the almost tangible presence of real musicians in the room. That elusive sense of ‘body’ I mentioned earlier.

All the better, then, that the amplification isn’t in any way bright or

lean. If you thought the archetypal smooth, laid-back, full fat West Coast sound was a thing of the past, think again; this system delivers a particularly polished version. In fact, if it were any more West Coast, it would turn The Prodigy into The Eagles every time you play a disc. Fortunately, the amplification isn’t *that* laid-back.

It isn’t just that the bottom end has satisfying weight, power and extension; mid-range and treble are wholesomely natural and full, too. True, this isn’t the airiest sounding system you’ll ever hear, but neither does it want for delicacy, detail or atmosphere. Not that your attention is constantly drawn to such things. The bigger picture is far more enthralling – it’s effortlessly musical and deeply enjoyable, especially when the sound is delivered in such a supple, loose-limbed manner.

So, if your idea of the high end is sound that’s faster, grippier and more agile than a Caterham Seven, this system might seem a tad dull. But we guarantee it will only seem so initially. After a while, you’ll find yourself

connecting more with the music and thinking less about the hi-fi. Yes, it’s smooth... but only inasmuch as it doesn’t draw attention to any particular area of the frequency range. More importantly, it successfully captures the structure and timing of a performance and, again, does this without undue emphasis or exaggeration. Too many timing-oriented systems deliver a perfect beat at the expense of the rest of the performance, and even the most potent ambassadors of timing (such as Naim Audio) have, of late, racked back a touch to produce a more balanced overall sound.

The Primare and Revel combination can project an expansive soundstage and image convincingly. And it can be subtle and seductive, too. It can even keep a beat. But best of all is the way this system brings a natural harmonic richness to instrument timbre and the emotion it can pull from a simply sung song if it’s there on the recording. The result is, of course, a hi-fi experience of the very highest order – but one most memorable for its lovely tone. **HFC**

David Vivian

