

Primare 15 System

by Alan Sircom



If ever there was a set of audio components that best fit the maxim of 'different paths up the same mountain', those components are Primare's entry-level 15 Series of products. We received four elegant and minimalist Primare boxes, knowing damn well that almost all of the actions of two of them could be slimmed down and squeezed into one of the other two. Which, at a cursory glance, makes those two boxes entirely obsolete, or at least exhibit a staggeringly high degree of redundancy. In fact, it exhibits nothing of the sort and instead highlights the sheer flexibility of the product line.

Hence, this is a short review for four different products because their commonality of features and options makes for either a review that reads like a weekend in PowerPoint Hell, or a 'this is what it does, now read the specs' review. As is the case here.

Here's the simple joy of this system. You can configure it in so many ways to reflect so many accents in a system. Think of it this way; you have a number of digital and analogue inputs today – LP, CD, Streaming, possibly some kind of tuner or tape machine, and so on. Some of these will be so pivotal to your musical enjoyment that they deserve taking a more thorough approach, others are more secondary sources and, while you don't wish to merely pay lip service to the source, neither do you want to spend big money on that source. Then there are sources that hold no interest to you at all. Often, by dint of what is and isn't included in the amplifier, you might end up either duplicating a much-loved primary source or having to spend more than you'd like on a secondary. Primare's approach lets you devote as much or as little on each option.

For example, perhaps you are really into vinyl, but have only a passing interest in streaming. Then you choose The I15 Prisma and the R15 Phono Preamp. On the other hand, if you have a turntable but rarely spin it, but you live your musical life flitting between Qobuz and Tidal, then go with the SC15 and the I15 with plug-in MM15 phono stage but no streaming. Or maybe you just want the least number of boxes... then it's the I15 Prisma with a phono stage. With the exception of the DD15 (which as a CD transport has no duplication on the I15), this is a system of true flexibility for the end user, with little functionality lost between on-board modules and stand-alone boxes (apart from the moving coil input of the R15).

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▶ The Prisma concept perhaps best typifies this flexibility of thought. Companies are wont to cherry pick their way through connectivity, poo-hooing the ones that aren’t added to their new box of joy for a number of (often tenuous) reasons. Prisma just supports all of them, and lets the end user pick their way through the options. There’s no need to ‘big up’ AirPlay or Bluetooth in the hope no-one notices the absence of Chromecast if you include all three. While that makes for some potentially ‘chewy’ moments in selecting your own personal best way to make music happen... it is ultimately your choice, not a choice enforced upon you by the manufacturer’s arbitrary list of sonic friends and foe.

Even this survey of Primare 15 options is incomplete, because alongside the DD15 CD transport, there is a CD15 CD player. And this CD player is configured as a Prisma network streamer in its own right, alongside the SC15 standalone network streamer and the built-in streamer option in the I15 Prisma. We opted for the DD15 and I15 without Prisma for simplicity because that’s the difference between creating an almost understandable route-map of Primare’s 15 system and having the same route map painted by Jackson Pollock.

There is a downside to all this flexibility and it’s, er, flexibility. It’s possible this many choices of almost the same thing will spell ‘analysis paralysis’ in some prospective buyers. In my primary/secondary/tertiary source selection, there will be those who cannot agree with themselves on a pecking order, and instead of seeing a flexible range of options, they just see too many alternatives. That said, these are the same people who will take 35 minutes to choose a sandwich filling in a busy lunch queue, so maybe we shouldn’t be *too* worried about their sensitivities.

Of course, all these myriad options and your decisions as to just how many boxes you want in your room are contingent on whether or not you actually want them in your room. The best on-paper system with the greatest flexibility will go nowhere if it sounds like a bag of spoons being tipped down a fire escape. Fortunately, Primare’s reputation for good sound is both long-standing and well-deserved, and there’s nothing about the 15 series that upsets that particular apple cart. Each component is similarly voiced, and that voice could be used to sell coffee or chocolate thanks to its rich, smooth, refined and satisfying presentation. That being said, it packs one heck of a punch when called upon to do so. Keeping things refreshingly Scandiwegian, I used the Swedish stack (culminating in the 60W Class D I15) with Denmark’s Audiovector’s R1 Arreté loudspeakers on their own stands. While the R1 is not a difficult speaker to drive, this should be a relatively unbalanced system revealing of flaws in the Primare. If that was its intention it failed miserably. The system sounded great and played both quietly in the background and at full tilt without complaint. I tried pushing hard with some technical deathcore (‘The Husk’ by Rings of Saturn on Tidal), but ears and neighbours got in the way.

All the usual audiophile elements are there, too. This system (taken as a system or as individual components) gives a great performance with stereo separation and soundstaging. There is lots of detail in there too; I played Bach’s Art of Fugue [The Emerson String Quartet, DG] and the Primare system returned a focused, cerebral sound, but one that – above all – was entertaining and satisfying to sit in front of.

There is one lone voice in all this; the DD15 CD transport. It doesn’t have three other similar products offering the same performance in a very slightly attenuated capacity, and cannot be press-ganged into service as a streamer, a phono stage, or a coffee machine. It’s just a slot-loading, low-resonance CD transport. OK, it takes its minimalism *really* seriously, but it gives an accurate, honest, precise and functionally invisible performance. It presents the digits without grace or favour, allowing the DAC to do the heavy lifting unconstrained by ‘quirks’ from the transport.

In fact, the DD15 is good enough to show exactly why CD is still a going concern for audio enthusiasts even in 2020. There is a directness and presence to the sound that streaming can struggle to replicate and while many of us have all but moved on from spinning polycarbonate, the DD15 shows why CD is still so much more than a hard-copy to be ripped and stored away. In particular, I spun up the title track of *Blue Maqams* by Anouar Brahem [ECM] and got transfixed by the solidity and physicality of the sound almost immediately. Playing the same track through a local Melco 100-series server (ripped from the same disc) and then playing it once more through Tidal didn’t have quite the same effect. Chalk one up to the DD15 and the trusty Compact Disc. ▶

Finally, two of the boxes stand a little taller than the others in performance terms. And of those, the DD15 perhaps stands tallest; it's such a good option for those wanting a CD transport without all the flummery and magic beans that sometimes come with that box. There are better transports out there (possibly the upper tier transport from Primare's own 35 Series line being one of them), but not at anything like the price. Also, the R15 phono stage is a great option for those wanting to move up from the built-in phono stages but aren't at that 'cost-no-object' level. Once again, it has that Primare sense of musical honesty and accuracy without sterility that I think many find attractive.

It's easy to lose perspective in audio reviewing, nodding approval to a gizmo that adds a tiny benefit to a system despite costing as much as a reasonably well-specced BMW, but with this system in all its flexible guises and range of options, there is a sense of 'reasonableness' permeating the whole venture. None of the options are contradictory, none are best served by taking the cheaper option, and the cheaper option exists either for those with limited resources or don't feel a burning desire to develop that specific audio component too far. A good performance is had by all no matter which way up you stack the system. It's not the kind of system that requires a 'faint' whiff of bullshit to get behind, either. It's a pragmatic approach to a pragmatic range of options.

For my part, I'd be happy with the system whichever way it was put together. I began this tiptoe through Primare's nursery slopes by saying the options exemplify the concept of "different paths up the same mountain", but that's not entirely accurate. "Your Mileage May Vary" is the best description of how Primare's 15 system fits your requirements, and thus far none of the array of options is out of place or too confounding. In other words, if you want to keep your options open and have all of those options sound good, don't be surprised if all your electronics end up with a Primare logo on the front. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

DD15 CD Transport

Digital Outputs: 1 × RCA; 1 × TOSLINK

Control: C25 remote control; RS232; IR in/out; Trigger in/out

Colour Options: Black or Titanium

Dimensions (WxDxH): 350 × 329 × 73 mm **Weight:** 6.5 kg **Price:** £1,140

SC15 Network Player DAC

Digital Inputs: 3 × TOSLINK (192 kHz/24 bit); 1 × RCA (192 kHz/24 bit); 1 × 3.5 mini-plug (192 kHz/24 bit); 1 × USB-B (up to PCM 768 kHz/32 bit; DSD 256/11.2 MHz)

Digital Output: 1 × RCA (analog in = 48 kHz out; digital in = pass-through)

Analogue Inputs: 1 pair RCA, 1 3.5mm analogue/digital

Analogue Output: 1 pair RCA, switchable LINE or PRE

Frequency Response: 20 Hz–20 kHz +0.1/-0.6dB **Signal to Noise:** >90dB

Audio Formats: WAV, LPCM, AIFF, FLAC, ALAC, MP3, MP4 (AAC), WMA, OGG, DSD;

Wired Prisma Inputs: USB-A, LAN (up to 192 kHz/24 bit; DSD 128/5.6 MHz)

Wireless Inputs: Bluetooth®, AirPlay, Spotify Connect, Chromecast built-in

WLAN: IEEE 802.11 a/b/g/n/ac compliant; 2.4/5g Hz b, g, n mode

WiSA: 24/48–96 kHz high-resolution wireless speaker connection

Control: C25 remote control; RS232; IR in/out; Trigger out;

Colour Options: Black or Titanium

Dimensions (HxWxD): 73 × 350 × 329mm **Weight:** 6.4 Kg **Price:** £1,350

R15 Phono Preamp

MM/MC: moving magnet and moving coil

Gain adjustment: up to 45db MM and 65db MC

Load adjustment: capacitive and resistance

RCA: 1 × stereo pair input **Dimensions (WxHx):** 350 × 73 × 339mm

Weight: 6.5 Kg **Finishes:** black or titanium **Price:** £900

I35 Amplifier

Output Power: 2 × 60 watts @ 8 Ω; 2 × 100 watts @ 4 Ω **Analog Input:** 1 pair RCA

Analog Output: 1 pair RCA, switchable LINE or PRE **Frequency Response:** 10 Hz–20 kHz, -0.5dB

THD + N: < 0.05%, 20 Hz–20 kHz, 10 watts @ 8 Ω

Signal to Noise: > 80dB

Control: C25 remote control; RS232; IR in/out; Trigger out

Colour Options: Black or Titanium

Dimensions (HxWxD mm): 73 × 350 × 329 **Weight:** 6.4 Kg **Price:** £1,150

Manufacturer: Primare **URL:** primare.net

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