

● REVIEW PRODUCT OF THE MONTH

Primare BD32

Possibly the ultimate universal disc player - and more, says **Andrew Everard**

Before you read any further, check the price of the Primare BD32. Yes, that is £3250, and now you're probably experiencing the kind of feeling I had when the initial press release hit my email inbox.

After all - as many will tell you - everything from streamed music to films or concerts on Blu-ray is all about ones and zeros, and thus any piece of equipment designed with any degree of competence will play the material to the same standard. Yet having seen the information on the Primare, I was more than a little fascinated. After all, it will play just about any disc, from Blu-ray to DVD to SACD to CD, and will also play music from external hard drives or - via built-in Ethernet - from a home computer or network-attached storage device. But then so will many players selling for a tenth of its price. Or less.

Of course, we're all aware of how the law of diminishing returns works in consumer electronics, in that you have to spend ever greater amounts to achieve smaller gains in performance: it's (relatively) easy to get the first 80 per cent of the performance right, but each percentage point thereafter is hard-won.

That's what you're (hopefully) paying for in the Primare: a no-compromise player able to handle a wide range of media and formats, and play them to the highest possible standards.

To that end, the Swedish manufacturer takes the basic building blocks of a universal disc player with streaming capability, in this case Oppo's BD-93, and around them designs an audiophile-quality audio player as well as a highly accomplished home cinema machine.

For that reason, this review will concentrate on the BD32's audio performance - take it as read that the Primare is a fine performer when hooked up via HDMI to a suitable AV receiver,



PRIMARE BD32 UNIVERSAL DISC PLAYER

Price £3250

Disc formats played Blu-ray (standard and 3D), DVD, DVD-A, SACD, CD, HDCD

Additional formats played (from disc, USB or eSATA drives) JPEG, Picture CD, AVCHD, MP4, DivX, MKV, FLAC, WAV, MP3, etc.

Audio outputs Balanced stereo on XLR sockets, unbalanced stereo on RCA phono, 7.1-channel analogue, digital out on AES/EBU XLR, optical and electrical S/PDIF, and two HDMI

Video outputs Two HDMI (with 3D capability), component and composite analogue video

Other connections USB, eSATA, Ethernet (Wi-Fi with adapter), RS232 control, 12V trigger in/out, infrared remote in/out

Accessories supplied Remote handset

Dimensions (WxHxD) 43x37.5x10.6cm

primare.net
karma-av.co.uk

and capable of smooth, stable 3D performance, as well as playing standard Blu-ray discs and DVD video titles extremely well.

However, the meat on the bones here is the work Primare has done on the audio performance of the player, the use of custom-engineered power supplies (for video and audio), and the addition of a better user interface and enhanced control and input options to suit the enthusiast.

The audio section here is able to decode all audio formats without an intermediate conversion stage, including Dolby TrueHD,

DTS Master HD and - most significantly - the DSD format at the heart of Super Audio CD.

Stereo output uses Crystal's top-end CS4398 DSD digital to analogue conversion, with separate circuitry for the balanced stereo output on XLRs and the conventional single-ended phono outputs, plus a dedicated relay-controlled filter path for DSD.

A standalone multichannel output stage is used to feed the 7.1-channel analogue outputs, using a Crystal CS4382A DSD DAC chipset, and both stereo and multichannel sections use Burr-Brown op-amps, audiophile

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The BD32 has two main power supply sections: one for operational power, the other for standby, the latter switching off when the player is being used. The main PSU uses an entirely linear design, with separate windings on the main transformer feeding the analogue

'This is a player capable of thunderous bass, allied to as much agility and low-end speed as anyone could ever want'

and digital power supply circuits mounted on opposite sides of the player. The entire chassis of the player is used to disperse the heat generated by the power supplies.

PERFORMANCE

It's a chunky piece of equipment, built in cool metal in that very Scandinavian, very Primare fashion. And while it's neither huge nor especially heavy, it feels both reassuringly solid when unboxed and nicely planted – on its three feet – when installed.

And where it counts – on sound quality – the Primare has everything going for it, whether one plays concert or opera Blu-ray discs with DTS-HD or Dolby HD soundtracks, one of the growing range of audio-only Blu-ray discs, SACD titles or even CDs.

This is a player capable of thunderous bass weight allied to as much agility and low-end speed as anyone could ever want, a treble fully able to make the most of the extended frequency range available on higher-resolution discs without ever becoming hard or strained, and the most appealing midband, combining expression and openness with a beautifully natural flow. Put simply, this is a multiformat

player more than capable of holding its own against the very best dedicated SACD and CD hardware, and requiring no allowances to be made for the wide range of material it can handle.

That's as true when playing music from an external drive, or streaming from a network: the Primare is dependent on the quality of the files it's playing, and thrives on

higher-resolution FLAC or WAV, but it's not too hard on low-bitrate MP3s.

If you're just going to use it connected to an AV receiver via an HDMI cable, then on to a display using the receiver's monitor output, you could just be wasting your money on the BD32: to make the most of this player, you have to use its onboard decoding, digital-to-analogue conversion and analogue output stages, into a stereo amplifier of very high quality, or AV amplification with multichannel analogue inputs. For most of this review I used my old, but still excellent TAG McLaren Audio AV32Rbp-192 processor, which has analogue bypass inputs, and the TMA 100x5R:10 power amplifier. By dint of its age it's now a 100X5R:9, but still sounds wonderful with so accomplished a source.

The BD32 is by no means a mass-market product, and I expect relatively small numbers of this unit will be sold to high-end audio/video enthusiasts willing to invest in the rest of the system required to justify buying so accomplished a player. But that shouldn't detract from what is a remarkable effort by the Primare team in creating one of the very best disc players on the market. **G**

DESIGN NOTES

Lars Pedersen

MD, Primare

From traditional music to the role of stereo in a multimedia world



Lars Pedersen has run Primare since 1996, when he took over the company and moved it to Sweden. He's still heavily involved in the design of all of its products, and can trace his earliest musical influences back to traditional music at school when he was learning to dance at the age of six.

Then came pop music on the radio, The Beatles and The Rolling Stones, while one of his most memorable musical experiences was Jimi Hendrix at the Tivoli Concert Hall in Copenhagen. When asked about his favourite classical music and composers, the answer is unequivocal – Mahler 2.

Classical music plays a major part in the tuning and design of the company's products – 'Bruckner's Symphony No 9 from Skowaczewski and the Minnesota Orchestra, and Varujan Kojian and the Utah SO's recording of Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique* spring to mind' – though Pedersen says team design means everything from jazz to hard rock is used.

He enjoys the experience of music on Blu-ray, saying that 'today's multichannel can liberate the space and acoustic of a live recording like no other source'.

But stereo quality is vital to products such as the BD32: 'it's a Primare universal player not just because it can play all discs, but because we think it plays them at a universally refined level.'

'Team design means that everything from classical to jazz and hard rock is used'

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