

# hi-finews GROUP TEST

Thinking of trading in your integrated amp for a meatier model? This month we've five contenders for your cash, increasing in price until they reach your personal sweet-spot

## INTEGRATED AMPLIFIERS £1255-£2895

### TESTED THIS MONTH

SUGDEN MYSTRO	£1255
ROKSAN CASPIAN M2	£1595
ASTIN TREW AT2000PLUS	£1750
PRIMARE I32	£2200
BELLES SOLOIST 1	£2895



Cutting-edge gear, cherry-picked by the *Hi-Fi News* editor



The pinnacle of sound quality within its peer group



Great sound, great value and a cut above its rivals

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What's your next upgrade going to be in your endless quest to reach hi-fi heaven? Are you thinking that perhaps your amplifier is long in the tooth and could be bettered by a modern design? Looking for more inputs or increased flexibility? Or perhaps you're starting from scratch and assembling a modestly-priced system – but not *too* modest, mind – comprising sensibly-priced components.

A good amplifier forms the heart of every fine system, as these five contenders illustrate. But rather than compare them as equals, we're interested each amp as a stepping stone to improving sound quality.

Sudgen's longstanding Mystro integrated might be a great place to start if you don't require oodles of power and too many inputs, while £340 more could buy Roksan's Caspian M2 with six inputs and pre/power in/outputs that will afford future upgrading. Or how about the Astintrew At2000plus, a breathed-on version of the company's At2000, which promises top sound quality together with comprehensive multi-room functionality? Also

featured here is a brand new integrated from Sweden's Primare company, renowned for the chic styling and high performance of its designs, and a really powerful American integrated from Belles that promises much of the sound quality of the marque's costly pre/power combinations in a compact chassis. Is there really a worthwhile difference between models, as one digs deeper into one's pockets? Or could you make do with a budget-priced model and simply spend the money on LPs and CDs instead? Choices, choices...

#### PUT TO THE TEST

The amplifiers were auditioned over a period of a fortnight (many enjoyable late nights!) using CD as our source. Tracks used to highlight sonic differences included James Brown's 'Give It Up Or Turn It A-Loose' from his 1970 album for King Records, *It's A New Day – Let A Man Come In* [Japanese re-master on Polydor, POCP-1856]. This is brimming with energetic brass and percussion, together with an infectious, funky rhythm section. We also used a well-recorded jazz

rock piece by Brand X (post Phil Collins, with Chuck Burgi on drums), the band's 'The Ghost of Mayfield Lodge' from 1978's *Masques* album [Charisma VJCP-68785] featuring majestic bass-playing by Percy Jones and sparkling percussive embellishments provided by Morris Pert. It's a surprisingly good recording from the era.

Meanwhile, to hear the true sonic character of each amplifier we used an audiophile recording of Liszt's First Piano Concerto (with soloist Todd Crow), recorded in a 500-seat theatre in the mid-1990s by First Impressions Music [FIMCD 006: 'Audiophile Reference 1' sampler compilation]. The sound is vivid and explosively dynamic. As the album note says, 'You should hear a Steinway concert grand centre stage, not a home upright piano.' And Tori Amos' rather energetic 'Cornflake Girl' hit from 1994 was chosen for its dense production and strident sound [limited edition CD single version on East West, 7567-85688-2].

REVIEWS BY JOHN BAMFORD  
LAB TESTS BY PAUL MILLER

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# Primare I32 (£2200)

Sweden's Primare company is renowned for its chic 'designer' components with immaculate alloy fascias and classy stainless steel controls. This I32 integrated is more than just a makeover of an existing design, however, as it employs the latest generation of Class D switching modules first introduced in Primare's multichannel AV amps in 2008 – dubbed 'Ultra Fast Power Device'.

Under the bonnet the I32's preamplifier section has a dedicated power supply and is isolated as far as possible from the two UFPD modules. As high efficiency is a given with Class D designs, here is an eco-friendly amp you needn't feel guilty about leaving in standby, as it draws just 0.2W. Power consumption is only 24W when fully switched on.

Also new for the I32 is an organic electro-luminescent (OEL) function/status display that is simply gorgeous. It's dimmable/defeatable; moreover each input can be named and individually trimmed for level and balance via a simple menu system. At the rear is a blanking plate for a forthcoming media input module to give the I32 an on-board DAC, with S/PDIF, Ethernet, USB and iPod connectivity.

## PRISTINE CLARITY

Sounding crisp and squeaky-clean, the I32 delivered startling clarity that was captivating. Forget any preconceptions about Class D switching amps having impressive bass delivery but offering grainy high frequencies.

This Primare sounded tight and grippy along with a highly explicit treble that made the percussion



ABOVE: Available in black or silver, the design is sumptuous with its stainless steel control knobs and buttons

of Brand X's Morris Pert and Chuck Burgi sound uncannily real, the ringing of cymbals struck by wooden sticks entirely palpable. And the bass was impressive: extended, powerful and highly descriptive.

The Primare digs deeply into the minutiae of recordings, highlighting for example the artificially created acoustic halo around Tori Amos' voice in 'Cornflake Girl'. There was no softening of the piano here, yet neither was the edgy sound of the dense production uncomfortable.

The sound was open, the pristine clarity allowing one to hear individual layers of the recording. The brightly-lit recording of James Brown was full of space and atmosphere too. Like the Belles powerhouse it seemed to tighten the rather boxy bass, allowing the notes to be pitched more clearly, where the cheaper amplifiers had tended to honk a one-note bass line.

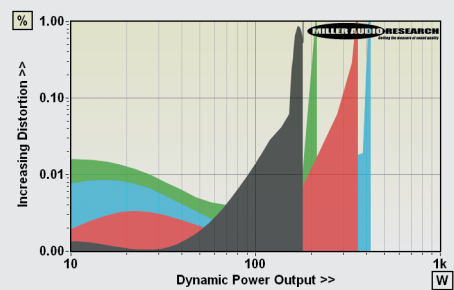
The audiophile recording of Liszt's piano concerto was spectacular in its three-dimensionality and explosive dynamic swings, and the space of the recording venue was clearly resolved.

Sound Quality: 85%



## HI-FI NEWS LAB REPORT

The I32's Class D modulators, filtering and feedback delivers a performance that's closer to the Hypex UcD modules than, say, a B&O ICEPower or Flying Mole. And no bad thing too as it posts rather more than its 120W specification at 160W/345W into 8/4ohm with 405W and 210W available under dynamic conditions into 2/1ohm loads. Unlike most Class D amps (but like the Hypex), the I32's response and distortion characteristics are broadly unaffected by speaker loading, offering a response flat to 60kHz (-3dB) and free of ultrasonic peaks or other resonances. Similarly, its output impedance remains impressively uniform at 0.024-0.07ohm right across the audio range, with the inevitable rise (caused by the output inductors) displaced to a harmless 1.4ohm/100kHz. Distortion is very low indeed at 0.002-0.006% from a subsonic 5Hz to 1kHz, rising gently thereafter to 0.037% at 20kHz and 0.05% at 40kHz. The A-wtd S/N is estimated at 90dB (re. 0dBW) but is compromised in practice by an idle tone at 8.5kHz bringing it down to 77dB. PM



ABOVE: Dynamic power output versus distortion into 8ohm (black trace), 4ohm (red), 2ohm (blue) and 1ohm loads (green)

Power output (<1% THD, 8/4ohm)	160W / 345W
Dynamic power (<1% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)	180W / 350W / 405W / 210W
Output impedance (20Hz-20kHz)	0.024-0.07ohm
Frequency response (20Hz-100kHz)	+0.0dB to -11.2dB
Input sens (for 0dBW/120W)	17mV / 196mV
A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBW/120W)	77.2dB / 98.0dB
Distortion (20Hz-20kHz, 10W/8ohm)	0.0005-0.037%
Power consumption (Idle/Rated o/p)	24W / 280W
Dimensions (WHD, pre/power)	430x100x385mm



ABOVE: To the rear can be found two balanced and three single-ended inputs; one of these can be configured via the menu to be a power amplifier input

# GROUP TEST VERDICT

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Unlike so many famous British marques of longstanding, JE Sugden & Co remains a wholly British company employing a local workforce. And its diminutive Mystro integrated is a lovely little amplifier, voiced exquisitely for budget systems in modest-sized rooms. It does precisely what Sugden promises, sounding graceful and smooth even with harsh pop recordings.

It's perhaps a little expensive given the minimal facilities on offer, although it does have the bonus of a built-in phono stage for vinyl users. It just never really 'opens its mouth' with truly excellent recordings, sounding a little congested through the bass and midrange.

## MORE OOMPH

Rather more capable overall was Astintrew's At2000Plus. It is substantially more expensive than the Sugden, delivering a similar easy-going sound quality that promotes prolonged listening sessions without fatigue – but with better bass control, especially at higher listening levels. If you love the sweet treble of the Sugden, but require an amplifier with a little more 'oomph', full remote control operation and substantially more facilities, you should really like the At2000Plus.

Roksan's Caspian M2 sounded rather different: more explicit and altogether more ambitious in the way it resolved fine details buried in recordings. Yes, it's less forgiving of brash recordings, but in terms of fidelity to the source it is a really excellent amplifier. It packs a mighty punch too, with deep, tight bass and thrilling dynamics – and represents fine value.

Commensurate with their prices (£2200/ £2895), the Primare and Belles amplifiers sounded thrilling. There wasn't much to choose between them in their ability to

recreate a truly lifelike musical event, although they did exhibit marked differences in presentation. While the I32 sounded clean and precise, allowing microscopic analysis of the recording engineer's art, the Soloist 1 sounded more gutsy with a 'darker' presentation that was, perhaps, less obvious.

There's detail in abundance from the Belles powerhouse, but it doesn't say, 'Hey, listen to this!'

The Primare, on the other hand, commands your attention, as it tends to highlight previously unnoticed details in familiar music.

## HEART VERSUS HEAD

While both are clearly high quality amplifiers suitable in forming the heart of an ambitious hi-fi system, this is where the difference between them ends. The Belles is very much a 'traditional' amplifier devoid of luxurious touches, save for having

a set of useful preamp outputs, a monitor loop, and remote control operation. It delivers high-end sound for a sensible price, however its rather 'agricultural' design might not instil much pride of ownership. You might not care, of course! It is a tremendously dynamic amplifier with an effortless, relaxed sound rich in texture.

Primare's I32, on the other hand, is a fine example of modern industrial design that looks a million dollars. And

its variable-brightness OEL display is simply gorgeous, as is the ability to name and configure its inputs (a common feature on up-market AV receivers, though). Moreover the promise of its forthcoming 'media module' plug-in board is a tantalising one indeed.

If I dare use such a well-worn cliché, I'd say you'd be choosing the Belles with your heart and the Primare with your head. ☺

'There's detail but it doesn't say "Hey, listen to this!"'



**ABOVE:** In line with their higher price tickets in this month's group of integrated amps, Primare's thoroughly modern I32 Class D design and the more traditional Belles Soloist 1 'powerhouse' delivered the most luxurious sounds

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