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Hi-fi News & Reviews

PRIMARE CD32/I32

High-end combination with a remarkably explicit sound

The latest CD player and amplifier from Sweden's Primare have performance and potential, says **Andrew Everard**

At times, there's something almost folksy about Primare: talking about a facility on its latest I32 amplifier allowing start-up volume and maximum level to be programmed, the company says the feature is there "so as not to damage little ears".

This feeling of a brand that's slightly different carries through the Primare experience: it talks of its 30 Series in terms of "Perfection Per Function" and even those immune to the way hi-fi equipment looks would have to admit that its sleek Scandinavian design is quite unlike the rather prosaic looks of so much high-end audio.

And the 30 Series is unashamedly high-end: selling at £2200 each, the CD32 CD player and I32 amplifier have placed themselves in the relatively rarified air of the specialist two-channel market.

However, Primare isn't out of touch with reality: reassuring in its approach to high-end hi-fi is the understanding that top-quality audio can go hand in hand with ergonomics and real-world convenience. Using even highly-tuned products should be a pleasurable experience, rather than demanding sacrifices of the kind of "ease of use" facilities often found on micro-systems a tenth of the price.

Those volume-setting memories are typical of this approach, along with the ability to rename or disable inputs and adjust level and balance for each one. And the I32 has full remote control, a generous array of inputs on the amplifier – two XLR balanced, three on standard phono sockets – and the provision

of RS232, 12V trigger and infrared flasher/receiver sockets for simple integration in more complex systems.

There's an AV passthrough on one input, for use in a home cinema system, and, while there's a USB input on the CD player, allowing MP3 or WMA files to be played from memory devices, the amplifier can be upgraded to allow much more comprehensive access to computer-stored music.

A blanking-plate on the rear conceals a slot for a forthcoming "Media i/o module": although the exact specification is to be confirmed, the plan is for this to add three digital inputs (two electrical, one optical), a digital output, USB input, wired Ethernet and Wi-Fi wireless streaming and direct digital connectivity for an iPod/iPhone/iPad, complete with video output to a monitor.

The amplifier delivers 120W per channel, and is based around Class D amplification, in a proprietary development Primare calls UFPD, or Ultra Fast Power Device. The company explains that to date Class D switching amplifiers and their switch-mode power supplies have suffered from distortion, rising with frequency and compounded by the effects of speaker impedance on their



THE TEST MUSIC

ROGIER POLYCHORAL WORKS

Magnificat: His Majestys Saggbutts and Cornetts / Cave Linn (CD) CKD348

Even in its two-channel version, this Linn disc is a stern test of detail retrieval and resolution.

demodulation filtering: the UFPD design tackles this with a consistent feedback loop gain and the integration of amplifier and filter, so that load effects on the filter can be addressed continuously.

The result, the company says, is greatly reduced noise and output impedance across the audio band, along with wider bandwidth and a flat frequency response. There's also the side benefit of energy efficiency: the amplifier consumes 0.2W in standby and 31W in use.

The CD player, meanwhile, is more conventional, but shows the same kind of painstaking attention to detail. For example, rather than a DVD-ROM drive of the kind almost ubiquitous in CD players these days, the CD32 has a dedicated Sanyo CD laser assembly, combined with a servo section with a five-second memory for jitter suppression and isolation from mechanical shock.

Further jitter suppression is provided in the upsampling section, which offers the user the choice of passing the 44.1kHz CD data through untouched, or upsampling to 48kHz or 96kHz, and digital to analogue conversion is handled by two 96kHz/24-bit multibit converters from Burr-Brown. Fully discrete circuits are used in place of op-amps, there are no capacitors in the signal path and the output stage is similarly simple.

PERFORMANCE

As well as the "under the lid" engineering, the way Primare products are built – solidly, and with close attention to detail – plays a major part in their performance, as well as doing no harm whatsoever to the user-experience. The CD32 and I32 are beautifully finished, the controls are smooth and precise in operation and the displays are crisp and easily read.

This confidence extends to the sound: it may not please those who like their music smooth, lush and with all the harsh edges rounded off, but then there are plenty of amplifiers and CD players capable of delivering such a flattering presentation.

Instead, the Primares get the listener closer to the heart of a recording by revealing all of its nuances, allowing one to appreciate fully all the qualities – or, if you're unlucky, foibles – the performers, producers and engineers have committed to disc.

Listened to individually, the CD player has an entirely neutral sound, with no sign of emphasis in the bass or sweetening of the treble: its low-end is powerful – thunderously so, at times – yet taut and controlled, while the treble is open and explicit. Where they meet, in the midband, the CD32 sounds deliciously unfettered, delivering glorious vocal and instrumental character.

Allied to impressive handling of both microdynamics and really big swings in level, it opens up even the most complex recording to expose its components, which will appeal as much to score-followers as audiophiles. The

amplifier makes the most of these qualities by doing – well, nothing, really. It has excellent grip on the speakers it drives, giving a clean, rhythmically precise presentation without a hint of smear or overhang to notes and making everything played through it both highly intelligible and easy to follow, but beyond that the I32 really doesn't impose any character of its own. It simply takes in what's delivered at the input terminals and punt it out via the speaker terminals, only louder.

That may seem like a rather flip way of describing the I32's capability, but it's also an accurate one: this is a powerful amplifier, as capable when handling the full force of a symphony orchestra as it is with accompanied solo voice or instrument, but it's one you really can't hear working. That, in my book, makes it a somewhat exemplary device. ☺

PRIMARE CD32

Primare CD32
Type CD player

Price £2200

Inputs USB for MP3/WMA playback

Outputs Stereo analogue on phonos and XLRs,

digital on optical, phono and AES/EBU XLR

Other connections RS232, 12V trigger in/out,

infrared flasher/receiver

Accessories supplied Remote handset

Dimensions (WxHxD) 43x11x38.5cm

PRIMARE I32

Type Integrated amplifier

Price £2200

Power 2x120W into 8ohms, 2x240W into 4ohms

Inputs five line (two on balanced XLR, three on RCA

phonos), with gain/balance trim on each input, and

AV/bypass on Input 5

Outputs Record, preamp out (on RCA phonos)

Other connections RS232, 12V trigger out, infrared

flasher/receiver, bay for forthcoming digital in/out

module

Accessories supplied Remote handset

Dimensions 43x10x38.5cm

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SUPER AUDIO CORNER

A closer look at, and listen to, some recent high-definition recordings



DVOŘÁK

Symphonies Nos 6 & 9
Symphonies Nos 7 & 8
Baltimore Symphony
Orchestra / Alsop

Naxos (CD) NBDO014; NBDO010 (oas)

These audio-only Blu-ray discs combine 51-channel DTS-HD Master Audio and stereo LPCM taken from 24-bit 88.2kHz original recordings and show Naxos as innovative as ever, leading the way in exploring technology.

Recorded live in Baltimore's Joseph Meyerhoff Symphony Hall, when played on a Blu-ray player and surround sound system they deliver not only riveting performances but a wonderful sense of space and presence. More please, Naxos!



ANDRÁS SCHIFF

'Plays Bach'
EuroArts (CD) 205 8134
Recorded in the Protestant

Reformed Church of Leipzig, as part of the city's 2010 BachFest, this generous Blu-ray release runs almost two and a half hours and includes performances of Bach's six French Suites, the *Overture in the French Style* and, as an encore, the *Italian Concerto*. As a fill-up, if any were needed, we also get an illustrated lecture in which András Schiff explains Bach's in just over half an hour!

The disc is presented in fine-looking 1080i HD video, with a choice of stereo PCM or richly atmospheric 5.1-channel DTS-HD Master Audio, the latter showing just how much surround sound can bring to even simple solo piano when it's recorded in so spacious and lively a venue.