



Mini test

Four-way headphone
amp/DAC face off

All rounders

The Elipson Planet speakers
that are out of this world



Hi-Fi Choice

PASSION FOR SOUND

Issue No. 387

August 2014

Solid Silver

**A HARD
DAY'S NIGHT**
50th anniversary
soundtrack
tribute

Monitor Audio's S8 speakers
deliver sterling performance



Primare NP30

Stylish network music player and
DAC makes streaming simple

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PRODUCTS ON TEST:

Arcam,
Eltax, Korg,
Linn, Morel
& Origin Live



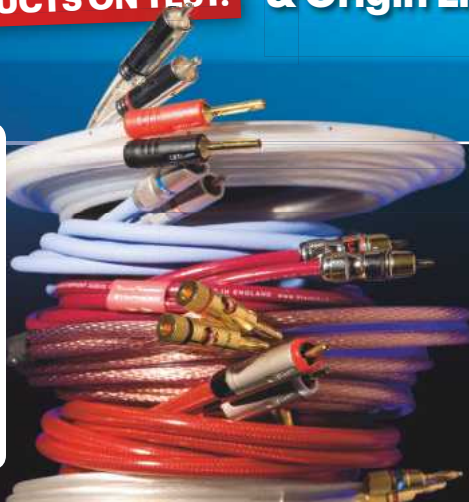
Pocket rocket

Introducing the ultimate
24/192 portable player

GROUP TEST

System upgrade

Six cable looms
get blind tested





105

Eltax

Monitor III BT speakers

"The benefits of integrating a subwoofer into your two-channel systems will be truly sublime"

Guide to... Subwoofers p116

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Silver 8 floorstanding loudspeaker

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LW and Audio Bridge two-way wireless loudspeaker system

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GROUP TEST

Cable looms £128-£406

27 Black Rhodium

Symphony Chrome/Twirl

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NuDiv2.0 DCT/CS2.3 IV

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33 QED

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35 Van Damme

LC-OFC Twin/2x6.00mm

37 Van den Hul

The River/Clearwater

MINI TEST

Headphone amp/DAC

£167-£395

84 ADL

X1

84 Fostex

HP-A4

85 Korg

DS-DAC-100m

85 Epiphany Acoustics

EHP-O2D



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Monitor Audio

Silver 8 floorstanding loudspeaker

CHOICE EXTRAS

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Cork and rubber turntable mat

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NCX-100 active noise cancelling headphones

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VooDoo Audio Avatar powercord

114 Maxell

MXH-DBA700 earphones

Never miss an issue – turn to p20 for our latest subs offer



DETAILS

PRODUCT
Primare NP30

ORIGIN
Sweden

TYPE
Streamer/DAC

WEIGHT
8.5kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
430 x 95 x 370mm

FEATURES

- Burr-Brown 24-bit/192kHz upsampling DAC
- Wi-fi and Ethernet streaming
- USB and S/PDIF inputs
- XLR, RCA and S/PDIF outputs
- WAV/AIFF/FLAC/ALAC/MP3/AAC/WMA/OGG file support

DISTRIBUTOR
Karma-AV

TELEPHONE
01423 358846

WEBSITE
primare.net



Primal stream

Music streaming Swedish style, **Andrew Simpson** hits the download button on Primare's premier league network player

With a reputation for elegant Scandinavian design, Primare's products are instantly recognisable for their minimalist approach to high-end separates. At £6,500 each, the recently launched flagship 60 pre/power amps ooze class from their two-tone titanium and black cases housing the company's latest UFPD (Ultra Fast Power Device) Class D technology. Below these amps sits a selection of more modestly priced amps, CD players, a DAC and a MM/MC phono stage.

The NP30 is based on the MM30 'media board', a £1,300 add on that slots into dedicated ports in Primare's

I32 integrated and PRE32 preamp, turning them into fully fledged network players. As well as placing this module into its own isolated case, what the extra cash buys you in the standalone NP30 streamer is a dedicated power supply and output stage with an extra buffer, alongside a wealth of connectivity. Digital inputs include USB type A and B (asynchronous) for hardwiring laptops or iPods directly, alongside S/PDIF inputs shared over three optical (Toslink) and only one coaxial (RCA) socket. Because the latter will accept up to 192kHz compared with the optical sockets' 96kHz limit, I'd happily trade a couple of optical

sockets for another coaxial or USB, but you still have plenty to choose from. Wi-fi is also catered for via a rear-panel stubby antennae, but as this is limited to 16-bit/48kHz, the Ethernet port is my preferred solution to get the best of the NP30. Output-wise alongside a pair of line-level RCAs and an S/PDIF (RCA), you're offered a pair of XLRs, which are fully balanced right from the DAC.

Like its £2,000 standalone DAC30 cousin, the NP30 uses a Burr-Brown SRC4392 24-bit/192kHz upsampling converter, but instead of the DAC30's Crystal CS4398 Delta-Sigma DAC, the NP30 employs a Burr-Brown PCM1792 chip. Inside the NP30's



CONNECTIONS



- 1 RCA digital output
- 2 USB A and B ports
- 3 Ethernet port
- 4 S/PDIF digital inputs
- 5 RCA outputs
- 6 XLR outputs

chunky case the high-spec continues, with six analogue and three digital power supplies, a four-layer PCB and discrete FET output amps.

At a glance you're hard pressed to tell this streamer apart from its DAC sibling, because unlike your average streamer, the NP30 intentionally eschews a front panel screen in favour of a row of LEDs denoting power, chosen source and signal lock (these lights can also be switched off using the supplied remote). What's more, there's no dedicated desktop software for Windows or Apple computers. Instead, the NP30's internal Audio SeDMP3 'EMAS' (Embedded Module for Audio Streaming) is either controlled via Primare's latest C24 remote or the excellent Primare App (for Android and iOS devices). In practice the app is all you need, not because the remote control is in anyway poor, but because the app is so slick and intuitive to use. By deliberately engineering the NP30 in this way, Primare has played a clever hand, as an app is far easier to refresh than a product's digital hardware, and the NP30 won't aesthetically date as quickly as many streamers released in the last half-decade.

Appy and you know it

Once downloaded, the app automatically finds and connects to Primare devices on your home network. You can then choose your playback source, ranging from the NP30's digital inputs and music stored on your network, which the Primare identifies as 'Audio Server', correlating to its front panel 'Media' input.

Viewing the app via my iPhone 4s and iPad 2 neatly displays album artwork thumbnails, and once an album or track is selected for playback, a quick tap on the info icon reveals the music's format, bitrate and sample rate. There's also a random feature, repeat settings and most importantly, a volume slider to control the Primare's output

(in the digital domain) allowing it to act as a preamp, feeding a power amplifier directly or a pair of active speakers.

Primare has also thoughtfully included the vTuner internet radio platform within its app and Spotify users additionally can stream directly from their PC/Mac or an iOS smartphone via the MusicFlow and Remoteless apps.

Sound quality

From the opening bars of Devon Sproule's *Don't Hurry For Heaven* album streamed via a 16-bit/44kHz FLAC rip over Ethernet and with the NP30 driving my preamp from its balanced outputs, I know I'm in the company of an experienced beast. The Primare isn't like many a streamer or digital front end, which all too often sonically leap straight out of the speakers like an eager puppy, with dazzling zing that may be initially impressive, but quickly becomes tiresome. Instead it is quite the opposite, being more relaxed in character with a refined tone that's a joy to listen to for hours on end. In this respect it reminds me of a top-flight vinyl rig when a given arm, cartridge and turntable are working in perfect harmony to give a sound that's effortlessly balanced.

This sonic trait seems to particularly stem from the NP30's midrange, which remains smooth and lucid without being in any way forward or overly attention grabbing, helping to bring out the best in Sproule's unforced singing. The way the Primare stays true to Devon's relaxed vocal style tells me that it's quite happy to sit back and let the music flow with natural rhythm and pace. With the slow-rolling melody of Sproule's *The Easier Way* track, the streamer gives the melody just the right amount of bluesy ambience, presented in a convincingly proportioned soundstage so that



Two contenders come from Linn's streaming stable via the £1,750 Sneaky DSM (HFC 375) and £1,880 Majik DS. The Sneaky uses a Wolfson DAC for synchronous upsampling to 176 or 192kHz and includes a 33W Class D amp to drive a pair of speakers. You also get Ethernet and HDMI, but no wi-fi. The Majik adds a front panel screen, but doesn't offer S/PDIF inputs or speaker outputs, but it can be used as a preamp. Neither offer USB or balanced outputs, but Linn's Kinsky app is first rate. Both products are blessed with a highly engaging sonic flavour, that's full of emotion. Naim's £2,060 ND5 XS (HFC 352) packs a screen, wi-fi streaming and USB port, but no XLR outs. Expect it to be equally rhythmical with plenty of midrange presence.

No screen, but the 7mm alloy front panel and solid chunky feet make this one cool contender

the percussion and slide guitar have plenty of space to express themselves.

Moving on to more zesty musical matter via a 16/44 ALAC rip of Dennis Wilson's *Pacific Ocean Blue* highlights the NP30's ability to stay on its toes, anticipating grand dynamic swings, which it delivers with ease while ensuring the music maintains consistent levels of energy and momentum without any overhang. The funky and more complex grooves of this track really lets the Primare show just how effortlessly natural sounding it is. The soundstage is again notably expansive and accessible and as you'd expect of a streamer in this

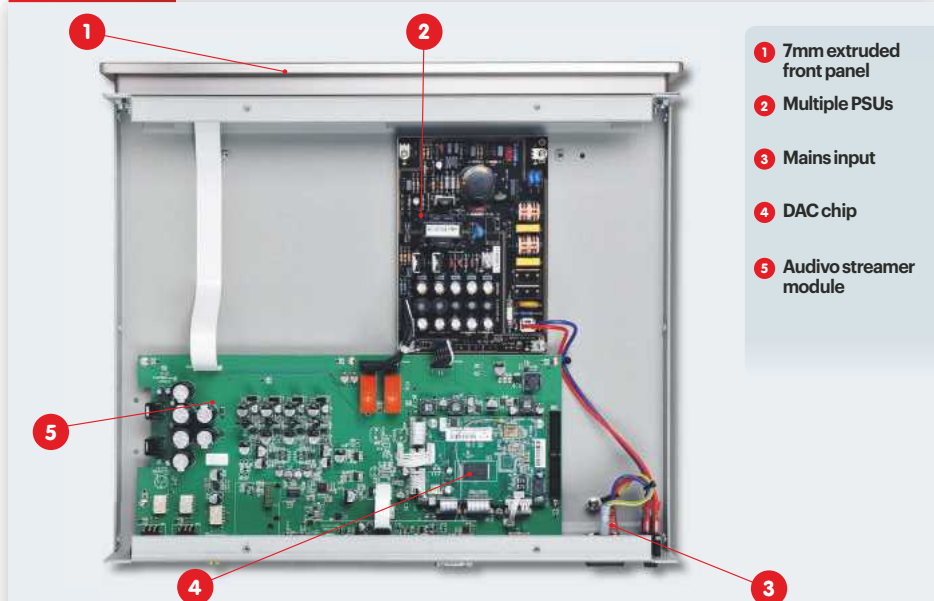
It's happy to sit back and let the music flow with natural rhythm and pace

price bracket, instruments are well separated with each one sounding convincingly three-dimensional. But what's more telling of the Primare's quality is how I can hear each instrument's unique characteristics when pinpointing them within the soundstage. The track's bass guitar sounds tight with slightly rolled-off EQ, while the rhythm guitar rings with more echo and the cymbals sound crisply defined, which when all combined has me reaching for the app's repeat icon so I can continue to explore all the sonic detail that lies just under the song's surface.

As with the Sproule album, the Dennis Wilson material again highlights that the Primare is blessed with an analogue richness that's as reminiscent of a top-notch phono stage as it is a DAC. Wilson's gravelly vocals flow with a languid ease that tells me that what I'm hearing is about as close to the album's studio sessions as I'm going to get within my listening room. The music is full of atmosphere that seems to bring to



INSIGHT



- 1 7mm extruded front panel
- 2 Multiple PSUs
- 3 Mains input
- 4 DAC chip
- 5 Audio streamer module

ON TEST

Unrelated to Primare's DAC30 outboard converter, the NP30 uses a Burr-Brown PCM1792 DAC to feed a phase-positive balanced output of just 2.07V (the DAC30 offers 4.3V). The NP30's 137ohm output impedance and 108dB A-wtd S/N are perfectly acceptable although distortion climbs over the top 30dB of

its dynamic range from 0.0005% to 0.005% at 1kHz and 0.0008% to 0.0028% at 20kHz.

Because this is determined by the DAC/analogue stage, there is precious little difference in THD between any of the S/PDIF, USB or network audio inputs. The same is true of digital jitter, even via the wired Ethernet

connection, thanks to the proven performance of the Audio SeDMP3 embedded network solution (<20psec at all sample rates). The frequency responses are more obviously tailored by sample rate than through the DAC30, reaching -0.39dB/20kHz (44.1/48kHz), -2.7dB/45kHz (96kHz) and -13.7dB/90kHz (192kHz). **PM**

life the energy of the recording, which really gets my pulse racing.

Piping internet radio via a Radio 3 live performance of Christian Blackshaw playing Schubert's *Sonata in C Minor* at the 2014 Aldeburgh Festival, I'm immediately transported into the audience, a stone's throw from the stage. The elegant piano work is edge of the seat stuff as the Primare lets the notes climb and fall with deliberate softness or palpable punch as Blackshaw dictates. The piano keys ring with convincing realism, while its bass notes carry impressive weight that's of a quality well beyond your average internet radio experience.

Equally impressive is how the NP30 gives little if anything away when streaming via Ethernet, compared to feeding it directly from my laptop via USB cable. Back to back comparisons using a 24/192 FLAC of Claire Martin and John Martyn's *Man In The Station* reveals that both inputs sound exceptionally smooth and layered with detail. Bass is well rounded with plenty of texture across both inputs, and enough power to give my Dynaudio floorstanders' bass drivers a thorough workout. The guitar work is blessed with exceptional delicacy, illustrating how the Primare fully

appreciates and understands how to present such a quality recording to do it justice.

Conclusion

With its top-quality minimalist aesthetic, the NP30 exudes class without visually showing off. But behind its understated casework lies a deceptively smart product. Its dedicated app is one of easiest and most intuitive, making the Primare a breeze to get to grips with. Its internal DAC is also seriously good, giving the music a sophisticated mellow tone that both digital and analogue fans will enjoy in equal measure ●

Hi-FiChoice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



LIKE: Articulate and effortlessly musical; Great app; XLR outputs

VALUE FOR MONEY



DISLIKE: Just one coaxial S/PDIF input (but three optical)

BUILD QUALITY



WE SAY: Combines a well executed streamer with a superb sounding DAC and with preamp functionality to boot

FEATURES



OVERALL



Q&A

Lars Pedersen
Primare MD



AS: Why haven't you fitted a screen or included desktop software?

LP: We feel that neither is necessary as the NP30 is carefully designed for the way music lovers use and interact with online and stored media today. The Primare App is far superior in functionality than anything a traditional integrated screen can provide. To meet consumer expectations, we've developed our app as a portable hi-res interface that works with widely used software like JRiver, Asset and Twonky and looks just as good on iPads as it does on smartphones.

Why have you used an Audio Video streaming module?

We have a long working relationship with Audio and greatly admire its streaming solutions. This arrangement has allowed us to collaborate on the NP30 project to fine-tune the technology specifically to meet our own requirements and expectations for a Primare 30 series product.

How does the NP30 improve on the MM30 media board?

While the MM30 is a great streaming upgrade option for I32 and PRE32 owners, the NP30 is a more capable audio solution because it has a dedicated bespoke output stage with its own power supply. It's a complete streaming solution, which includes great internet radio options and because it has an integrated volume control, the NP30 is a very discreet standalone audiophile system when hooked up to active speakers, especially when using the balanced connections.

Are there other updates planned?

Yes, we're constantly evolving the firmware for our streaming product line, which includes the MM30 and NP30 as well as our new 60 series PRE60 model. Recently we've introduced auto upgrade functionality to the app, which notifies users of new firmware and provides the option to install, so the user is always assured that they're using the latest firmware, without having to search for it.