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That the I57 bothers with HDCD at all is a tribute to its audiophile origins and aspirations. The D/A converter chips in question are Burr-Brown PCM1732s, running at 24-bit/96kHz. I don't know how much credit they should get for the I57's engaging sound, but of the six or so one-box CD receivers I auditioned during this hunt, the Carat I57 is, in terms of sound quality, the winner by a nose—not head and shoulders, but a large nose nonetheless.

The Carat's ergonomics weren't bad at all. I like the intuitive feel of a volume-control knob, but I got used to the shifty feel of the joystick. The I57's looks are a bit busy for my taste, but aren't a deal-breaker. An all-around good show, and \$\$\$ for excellent value for money.

Primare Systems DVD110 DVD receiver

Primare's drop-dead-gorgeous DVD110 caught my eye some time ago, in its previous CD guise. I requested a review sample, but was informed that because the CD version would soon be replaced by a DVD-based edition that would also have an entirely new amplifier section, I'd just have to wait for the new model. So I did.

Since then, Primare has changed their US distributor to the Sound Organisation of Dallas, Texas, who also import Rega equipment, which must keep them hopping, and Wilson Benesch, which, sad to say, probably doesn't. The good news is that, in the switchover, the US retail price of the DVD110 dropped from \$3000 to \$2500.

Even outside—or perhaps *especially* outside—the boundaries of my little project, the 75Wpc DVD110 is an immensely attractive product that could be the ideal solution for apartment dwellers or empty-nesters who don't want separate audio and video systems. The DVD110 has all the video connectivity options you could ask for, as well as a subwoofer output. I think that for many if not most people, two speakers and a sub are all that are needed to enjoy a DVD. However, my project was not to find a DVD solution for empty nesters, but to get the most audio bang for the music lover's buck.

Although the DVD110 is of standard "component" size, it was obviously designed to be installed out in the open, not in a rack. It's not only that the styling cues extend to the top plate; most of the

function buttons and their illuminated indicators are on the front edge of the top as well.

The review sample arrived in handsome casework of gray metal and brushed stainless steel (brushed black rather than stainless is also available). The DVD110's appearance is coherent, restrained, and classy in the extreme—it's one piece of electronic gear at which interior decorators will not turn up their noses—and the build quality is best of breed.

As the photo shows, the controls (except for the disc drawer's Open/Close button) are found on the front edge of the top plate, toward the right, as are their indicator lights. The buttons are set in a recessed area that extends from the faceplate to the back, so they don't stand proud and are of the same stainless steel as the casework. Primare's logo is milled into the top recess and front panel.

That front panel is very restrained in appearance. A subpanel with rounded ends contains the display window and the front-loading CD tray, which is offset to the left, and the shape of the CD tray's forward edge mimics that of the subpanel. Display elements and function indicators are illuminated in a restful leaf green, with adjustable brightness. The display shows the source, data such as CD track number and time, and the volume setting in a range of 0 to 79. A mini headphone jack on the front panel, under the Open/Close button, does double duty as an input jack for non-iPod MP3 players.

The Play and Standby buttons have two functions, depending on how they're pressed. A brief press of Play starts the disc playing or advances to the next track; a long press stops play. A brief press of Standby puts the unit in standby; a long press turns it off.

The remote control is very classy, made of matte plastic with the feel of suede. While the DVD110's owner's manual (v.2) claims that the remote has

an Open/Close button, on the remote furnished with the review sample that button was marked Setup. This is no big deal; if you want the disc drawer open, you're going to have to get up and go to the machine anyway. As for setup, it's pretty much a nonissue for audio listening—the DVD110 is not a multichannel device. By the way, the DVD110 is "smart" enough to close its disc drawer when you press Standby, if the drawer has been left open. However, it won't come out of Standby mode if you press Play, whether on the remote control or on the DVD110 itself.

The DVD110's rear panel is very full: an IEC power-cord inlet; a master power switch; good-quality, single-wire, EC-compliant speaker terminals with rounded lugs that won't take a standard wrench; five video-output sets, including HDMI; three line-level analog audio output RCAs (preamp, recording, subwoofer); three sets of RCA analog audio inputs; an iPod connector; optical and S/PDIF digital outputs; RS-232 and IR remote control jacks; and connections for AM and FM antennas.

The chassis has three compliant feet: two in front, one in back. Packing materials and the owner's manual are exemplary. The DVD110 is a tremendously well-thought-out product from an experienced high-end company.

In my October column, I wrote: "I drove the [Eminent Technology] LFT-16s with Arcam's Solo Music and Solo Mini CD receivers, Primare's new DVD110 DVD-based one-box receiver, and Carat's I57 one-box. . . . I divided most of my time between the Primare and the Carat. The Primare was ever so slightly lighter in texture and more agile in articulation—or, if you prefer, the Carat was ever so slightly more mellow and cushiony. The Primare was a stainless-steel French Chablis to the Carat's oaky California chardonnay—a bit amusing, in view of Carat's French headquarters (the I57 is built in China). With the Primare, I was happy with the



Primare's elegant DVD110 offers DVD playback and a subwoofer output.

LFT-16s' tweeter jumpers in the Low position; with the Carat, I moved them back to Mid."

Further listening did little other than to reinforce those impressions. For example, playing the Tallis Scholars' recent and excellent remake of Allegri's *Miserere* (CD, Gimell CDGIM 041), I found the Carat just slightly richer in the midrange of male voices, a difference that remained constant no matter which speakers I was using: the LFT-16s, Fried Compact 7s, GINI's LS3/5as, or Harbeth's HL-3P-ES2s.

Playing Julie London's *Time for Love: The Best of Julie London* (CD, Rhino R2 70737) through Harbeth's HL-3P-ES2s, the Primare offered a little too much detail—London's mouth sounds were a bit too present, and there was some chest resonance. Without question, that was a much more detailed, less veiled presentation, but, all things (including money) considered, I preferred—at least with this album—the less expensive, perhaps euphonic combination of the Carat I57 one-box driving the LFT-16s. However, without doubt, London's recording of "I Surrender, Dear" sounded stellar through the Primare-Harbeth combina-



PSB's Imagine B: \$\$\$ for exceptional value.

tion, which might be just the ticket for you. However, the total price of that combo, including speaker cables and stands, will be closer to \$5000 than \$3500, and the small Harbeth's lack of deep-bass extension might rattle over time.

The DVD110, again with the small Harbeths, was slightly more percussive on *The Complete Nocturnes* of Fauré, in an excellent traversal by pianist Charles Owen (CD, Avie AV 2133).² Compared to the Carat, the Primare made me want to listen at slightly softer levels—but someone else would be happier with the Primare's greater dynamics.

The DVD110 could play way loud and go plenty deep. Driven by the Primare, the LFT-16s were nostalgically punchy with *The Best of Sade* (CD, Epic EK 66686), and grandly opulent with organist James Busby's performance of Herbert Howells' *Master Tallis's Testament*, from *Pipes Rhode Island* (CD, Riago 101). Despite containing a digital amplifier, the Primare ran warmer than the Carat, though not hugely hot.

For much of the time I just listened to music, enjoying the Primare for what it offered. Only when I switched between them did the differences between the Primare and the Carat become evident. Essentially, they sounded more alike than different, and both sounded very, very good.

In fact, the risk is of overstating these CD receivers' differences, which for

² If the solo-piano literature is the major source of your musical nourishment, check out this recording. Owen plays with subtle and poignant poetry (www.charlesowen.net). The CD is an excellent recording job, and the piano itself is well balanced in tone and nicely secure in tune.

many listeners will be overshadowed by loudspeaker preferences or room acoustics. You might listen to both and slightly prefer the Primare, as I slightly preferred the Carat. In this price tier, I think that issues such as DVD capability, styling, and ergonomics will play as large a role in many decisions.

Had the dark-horse Carat I57 not pipped past by a nose, the Primare might have been my overall recommendation. For people who want DVD capability as well, the DVD110 is a great DVD receiver at a very reasonable price.

PSB Imagine B loudspeaker

The Carat I57 costs \$1995, which leaves us with not a huge amount left in the budget for loudspeakers—somewhere between \$1000 and \$1500, taking into account the need for speaker stands and cables. PSB's new Imagine B two-way bookshelf model (\$1000/pair) now joins Eminent Technology's LFT-16 and Renaissance Audio's MLP-403.5 speakers as worthy of your consideration if you're putting together a system in the \$2500–\$3750 range.

I originally didn't intend to cover the Imagine B, as its 5.25" mid-woofer seemed to go in the direction opposite from where I wanted to go. Two things reversed that decision. First, there just aren't that many speakers in the \$1500-and-under range with larger woofers. Second, *Stereophile's* Stephen Mejias heard the Imagine B at its press intro in New York City, and told me he was very impressed. Now I am, too.

The first thing I noticed about the Imagine B was that its appearance and its level of fir'n'finish are leagues ahead of its price. Veneer of real cherrywood stained a deep red covers the speaker's curving sides, top, bottom, and rear. The front panel is semigloss black. Grilles are provided, but I didn't use them. The woofer and tweeter are attached without visible fasteners, and both are surrounded by smooth, compliant, rubbery plastic. The rear port and biwire terminals are elegantly designed, as is the inconspicuous brace that stabilizes the rear, in view of the rounding of the cabinet's bottom.

PSB claims that the Imagine B's frequency response is 52Hz–23kHz, ±3dB,

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