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# Primare 130 Integrated Amplifier and CD31 Compact Disc Player

## A winning pair of aces

by Sallie Reynolds

The Primare (pronounced “prime air”) units, from Sweden, are handsome, easy to set up and run, and high in performance. In a year that dealt me good moderately priced high-end audio electronics to review, this pair has come up aces.

The 130 integrated (\$2495) started its sojourn here in my small system, with the Sendor S8es and a couple of good CD players (the \$600 Music Hall cd25.2, and \$2500 Musical Fidelity A5), and Nordost Heimdall cabling. I was breaking the amp in, not really listening critically, but liking the balance and clarity I heard on the fly. Then, in the middle of a loudspeaker review, I called on the Primare to pinch hit in the main system for the big Musical Fidelity kW500, which had to go in for retubing. I set up the Primare amp with the Acoustic Zen Adagio loudspeakers, MF CD 5 player, and Acoustic Zen cabling, and carried on.



The first moments after the exchange were discombobulating. Putting a 100Wpc device in place of one more than double that can shock the ear. But in time, the glories of the Primare began to make themselves heard, and in the months since, it has continued to improve, slightly but audibly. The kW500 came back after some weeks and I compared the two again. This time the Primare came off better in the contest than it had earlier.

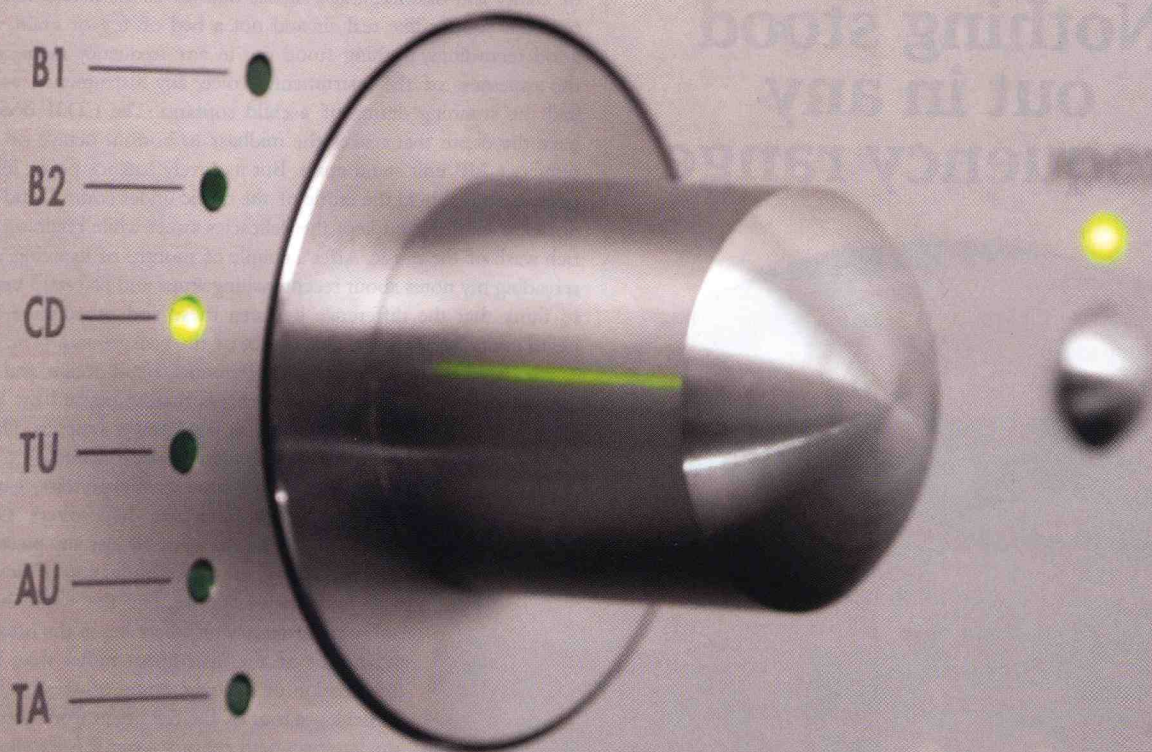
The most important aspects of the perceived improvement underscore the real value of the little Primare. Built with the Norse genius that fashioned early ocean-worthy ships and that still knows how to blend art and function (here, unusual attention at its price is paid to power supplies and isolation techniques), this little amp is a royal. Under its aegis, music of all kinds sounds wonderful. It is perhaps happier with delicacies than with the full storm force of orchestral tuttis, but it doesn't subtract much there, either, and delicacies, remember, can include grace notes and full-spectrum melodic runs on the organ on Reference Recordings' *The Great Organ at St. Mary's Cathedral*; chorus in full roar; the gamelan magic of Lou Harrison, which combines big-throated bellows and the smallest of tinker-bells. On *Mariza: Fado em Mim* [Times Square Records], the Primare brings out the details of voices and instruments, of lyrics and small interactions among instrumentalists, yet remains satisfyingly sonorous in the bottom octaves, and handles a subwoofer well. It has a full midrange, dramatic and musical; it brings out sweet, sweet highs and the primal cry of the treble on violins; it sparks cymbals and bells into life. It also lays bare recording venues and miking techniques, and you'd better hope they're good—on studio stuff, you'll hear sometimes



more than you want to. For instance, in *Woman of Song* [Chesky], Rebecca Pigeon's lovely, controlled soprano soared out of an overly reverberant studio that nearly marred the songs. I hadn't heard that studio hollowness so clearly before.

More powerful amps of equally good provenance have greater height in the stage, deeper lows, and the veritable power-pulse of large music that less powerful units lack. But the Primare has so little distortion and so few "noise" effects, it shines.

After first pairing the 130 with the Musical Fidelity A5 CD player, I put in the Primare CD31 (\$2295), which, initially, was startling. This little unit, like its integrated sister, has that remarkable combination





## Nothing stood out in any frequency range

of clarity and balance, and a silence that leaves the music floating on what sounds like real air and not a bed of fog or grain. On good recordings, nothing stood out in any frequency range, and the sweetness of the instrumental voice, any instrumental voice, had the stunning drama of a child soprano. The CD31 doesn't have the depth that makes the midbass to bottom octave on my reference MF unit stand apart. But its lovely balance point, like a fine hairspring, held the fabric of the music under control, and the noiseless background kept the delicacies sweet while retaining the rich wash of the music. After a couple of months of listening, and rereading my notes about recent visiting amps and players, I began to think that the difference between these and other units I've heard under \$2500 lies in that silence of the background. (The 130 integrated is a true dual-mono, differential circuit design, and has other important-sounding elements that lie beyond my ken. The CD player has multiple isolated power supplies. These things may explain their golden silence. Or not.)

Two recordings demonstrate well everything I have been hearing. I use Reference Recording's *Great Organ at St. Mary's* as a test for almost any piece of equipment: It lays bare the reproduction of power, clarity, frequency response, and the subtle stuff. And soundstaging, which here lies in the breadth and height of the instrument rather than side information or imaging. Some of the music is difficult—a tour of the full organ from 1600 to the late twentieth century—but it is excellently recorded, and a really good system will sort out the musical themes and elements and make the whole comprehensible to ear and brain. Throughout, the Primares let the melodies in the high ranks float out over the bassline of growling lows. Sometimes, the melody and its ornamentations dwell briefly in the big pipes, while the rhythm pulses in the highs. And those melodic lows have to be clear, clear, clear. I heard these glories in all their particularities with the Primares, as in no other modest system I know. For sheer excitement, listen to "Carillon de Westminster" by Vierne. Crank this one up—the amp can take it, if your speakers can—and you will be surrounded by flesh-trembling organ swirls.

The second recording is an odd duck. I've found three rock or folk or whathaveyou groups whose sheer musicianship excites me: Lunasa, Nickel Creek, and the Portland, Oregon trio, Sneakin' Out, the newest of the lot (self-described as "post-apocalyptic electro-



acoustic throw-down"). Sneakin' Out is eclectic and brash, with art and skill to burn. I loved its first recording, *Train Wreck*, and now it has a new CD, *O.T.T.O.* (go to [www.sneakinout.com](http://www.sneakinout.com) for ordering info). This one just happens to have all the tests you need for the Primares, or indeed any system. *O.T.T.O.* was well recorded, and the venue is interesting. There is some acoustic stuff, as well as EQ'ing and electronicizing, which, combined, make it a complete musical exercise for your system. First of all, and throughout the sound spectrum, the Primares bring out a sense of breath-catching musical drive, which I believe in this case owes its glory to lack of distortion and noise. As to soundstaging on this studio recording, sometimes the space will suddenly go all small, as if it sucked in its breath. Then it will open out to fill your room beyond the speakers. I don't know how this was achieved, but it was all faithfully reconstructed by the Primares and Acoustic Zen speakers.

A third CD, McPhee's *Tabuh-Tabuhan* [Mercury], demonstrated a slight graininess in high hats and piccolos that I hadn't heard before. I exchanged the Primares for the Musical Fidelity units, and heard it there, as well, but not as biting. I don't have the LP to see if this is a digital effect, but I didn't hear it in any other (good) recording.

I've recently become addicted to good power cords and both the Primare units were wearing the Acoustic Zen Tsunami II (\$350). With them, their virtues became more evident, particularly in soundstaging and the low frequencies. No vices, at least to these ears, were added.

My main conclusion about the Primares is that they are remarkably musical, accurate, exciting—on all kinds of music, loud and complex as well as soft and subtle. With good, clean speakers, you really can't go wrong with this pair (about \$4800 for both). Of

the two, the 130 integrated is the star, because at \$2495 it performs beyond anything in its class I've heard. Sweet, clear, full, deep, untangling musical lines without separating them into an amusical mosaic. It's built with great attention to detail, and even has a 0/180° polarity switch on the front panel. You might have to double your money to better this amp.

At \$2295, the CD31 costs only about \$200 less than the Musical Fidelity A5, which is still my benchmark. The A5 has richer, more extended lows than the Primare, and provides an overall greater sense of the power and force of a musical tutti. The A5 without a good power cord slightly out-soundstages the CD31 with one. The CD31, on its side, has greater clarity in the treble octave than the A5, and it doesn't pay the all-too-ordinary price for that by sounding wimpy in the midbass or too thin in the lows.

Now, put this Swedish pair together, and they win the day. They seem to double their family virtues: sweet clarity across the musical spectrum, and golden silence between the lines. **TAS**

## You might have to double your money to better this amp

### SUMIKO

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### Specs & Pricing

#### 130 integrated amplifier

**Power output:** 100Wpc into 8 ohms, 180Wpc into 4 ohms

**Inputs:** Two balanced XLR, six unbalanced RCA

**Dimensions:** 17" x 4.25" x 15"

**Weight:** 34 lbs.

**Price:** \$2495

#### CD31 CD player

**Outputs:** AES/EBU, TOSLink, SPDIF co-ax, balanced XLR and unbalanced RCA, RS-232

**Dimensions:** 17" x 4" x 15"

**Weight:** 23 lbs.

**Price:** \$2295

#### ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

Musical Fidelity MF A5 CD player and kW500 integrated amplifier; Acoustic Zen Adagio, Vienna Acoustics Beethoven Baby Grand, and Spondor S8e loudspeakers; REL Q108 subwoofer; Nordost Heimdall; Acoustic Zen Hologram II speaker cable, Absolute interconnects, Tsunami II power cords