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REVIEW: R32 PHONO STAGE
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Bridging The Gap

It's a sign of our times that today many pre and main amplifiers are supplied without a turntable input. But there are audio treasures to be discovered in vinyl, and to do this you'll need a turntable pre-amplifier, like the Primare R 32.

Considering the small number of audiophiles that for sound reasons cling to vinyl as the sound carrier of choice, there is a vast selection of turntable pre-amplifiers available. But for those who desire stylish design and solid build quality as well as great sound, the price rises above the four-digit mark faster than is comfortable. Not for the first time though, Primare proves that it's possible to achieve an appealing blend of price, looks, sound and build quality.

Different user requirements have generated a wide spectrum of options. It begins with a cigarette pack sized box, priced between 20 and 100 Euro, which turns a high level input into one suitable for turntable signals. Target groups for such compromises would be for example the owners of AV-Receivers, who drop an old 'Pink-Floyd' or 'Supertramp' LP onto their turntable twice a year without having any great demand for sound quality. From this entry point upwards, the frequency of use and the sales price rise proportionately up to a point where the 10,000-Euro barrier is cleared with ease.

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Finding the Ideal

Those who consider buying a turntable pre-amplifier do so with great care. The process usually begins with information gathering, then auditioning, with the results being scrutinised and discussed over and over. If you care only about sound quality you will surely find a bargain in no time. There are plenty of turntable pre-amplifiers that deliver excellent results for less than 1,000 Euro: the BlackCube by Lehmannaudio for instance. But what if you're looking for more? At the end of last year, i-fidelity ventured into the south-Swedish forests to search for a solution and found Primare, which is headquartered in the little town by the name of Växjö. Here, i-fidelity presents the evidence.

Don't judge the book by the cover

On first sight you might be tempted to ignore the Primare R 32 simply because it looks like a high ticket item. **The way it's built and designed could cost in the region of a couple of thousand Euros. However, the sales price recommendation is just 975 Euros.** How does that work? Very simple: the technical development and final product control is made in Sweden, but manufacture involves Asian producers. For many brands, this has become a common procedure but some still try to hide that fact. Almost 9 kilograms in weight, the R32 rests on three feet, which does not affect stability but can be an advantage when it comes to sound quality. **The front panel breathes pure high-end audio: the centre being occupied by the milled company logo with lettering above, whilst below, the model number is engraved - simple elegance in the tradition of best design.**

**Design without content?**

After removing the casing lid, the layman could be puzzled, because two thirds of the volume is air. However, that has a purpose. Many turntable pre-amplifiers are crammed into the smallest boxes, because the pre-amplifier circuit requires only a small board. In many minimalist solutions, the power supply, which has a negative influence on the audio signal, has a separate casing. The Primare R 32 incorporates both the audio circuits and the power supply, which are shielded from each other by a wall which splits the interior into two. This means that the PSU has the least influence on the pre-amplifier circuit. Producers of significantly more expensive turntable pre-amplifiers have also adopted this solution.

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The necessary adjustments

Turntable cartridges are available in many technical variants, and there are as many adjustments required from a turntable pre-amplifier. The R32 allows selection of MM and MC cartridges, which can be achieved using a switch on the rear panel, which changes the gain from MM 41.5dB, to MC 62dB. For moving magnet systems with very low output current, the amplification can be increased to 46.5dB by changing two plug-in bridges. Input impedances can be selected between 10, 20, 50, 100, 200, 500 ohm and 47 kohm. Notwithstanding the occasional exotic pick-up system, all values normally required can be set. If the exact value is not available, you can set it to the next lower value. For example, the Clearaudio MC-System Stradivari is ideally operated with an input impedance of 300 ohm. Therefore, in this case, set the Primare R32 to 200 ohm. The suitability of the setting can be verified with a simple audition.

The test system

In the i-fidelity test system, the smart looking Swede was placed between a Clearaudio Stradivari cartridge on a Clearaudio Anniversary turntable and the Audionet SAM G2 amplifier. From there, the signal was transmitted via HMS Concertato cable to the KEF Reference 205/2. Joining the Primare for comparison in this test were the Smart Phono by Clearaudio and the Lehmann Audio Decade. Turntable pre-amplifiers have the tendency to improve in performance if they are permanently attached to the power supply. The Primare R 32 has a single central power switch on the back, but the recommendation is never switch it off! Sound differences can be generated by using different power cords as well. After a few sound tests, we decided to use a Cardas-Quadlink cable.

The listening

First, we spun 'Night Ride Home' by Joni Mitchell. Compared with the Smart Phono by Clearaudio, the Primare produces a more zesty reproduction. The voice sounds more natural and livelier. The impression of space is also excellent, especially when compared with the Lehmann Audio Decade. Against lower priced solutions, the R32 gains points with better timing and rhythm. Bass strings for instance are not exaggerated one iota.

On LP, 'La Forme' by Kraftwerk is an overwhelming experience. The Primare plays the intro sequence with wonderfully rounded depth and power. The stability of its energy sets the R32 apart from its lower priced competition, and the electronically distorted voice sounds as it was meant to be: artificial. We began the next round with Aloe Blacc's expressive 'Loving You Is Killing Me'. **Here through its beautifully harmonic audio image you get a sense that the Primare is doing what it's supposed to do: making music.**

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The voice is nailed between the speakers; the background choir is partly atmospheric and partly foundation. Lastly, 'Dolphin Grace' by Larry Conklin takes a spin. Not one of us is keen to describe the sound image, because anyone just wants to enjoy it. This best describes the analogue audio phenomenon. The 180g print delivers many little details, which may be tracked by the cartridge, but eliminated by the pre-amplifier. This can completely change the way the vinyl sounds. **'Windrose' is a good example: guitar, flute, and bongos shape that piece of music, and the Primare 32 recognises every acoustic detail, especially of stringed instruments. It does not over or under-play their sound. In other words, the reproduction is very neutral. This blend of sound quality, build quality, and looks, at such a price is simply perfect.**

Specifications

Turntable pre-amplifier for MM and MC systems

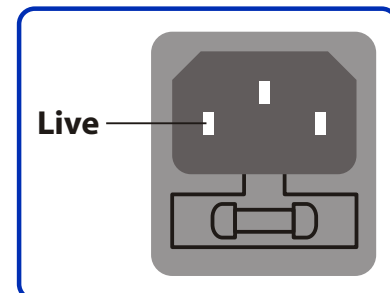
Inputs:	Cinch (Gold plated), IEC Socket / Power supply (Grid) Ground (GND)
Outputs:	Cinch (Gold plated)
Selectable input impedances:	10, 20, 50, 100, 200, 500, 47.000 ohms (channel separated)
Output impedance:	100 ohms
MM-/MC-Switchover:	Flip switches on the back
Central power switch on the back.	
Power indicator on the front.	
Measurements (W x H x D):	43 x 38 x 10 cm
Weight:	9 kg



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Test Result

The Primare R32 is in every aspect a successfully designed turntable pre-amplifier. High build quality, design, and sound quality, forming the essence of the product, which should cost a lot more than it does. The setting options are comprehensive, which allows the R32 to play seamlessly in many systems, bridging the gap between turntables and pre/power amplifiers. Naturally, the R32 passed the requirements for the i-fidelity.net-Highlight-award with flying colours.

Sound Quality**Very Good****Features****Good - Very Good****Manufacturing Quality****Very Good****Overall Grade****Very Good**

Looking from the rear of the connector socket of the Primare R32, the phase is on the left pole.

