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REVIEW: I32 INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER AND CD32 CD PLAYER
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impressive improvement

It isn't hard to detect certain important parallels between the Swedish brand Primare and the homeland itself. Sweden, a country of tranquility, space, balance and beautifully-pure wilderness, and Primare, a brand of balance and well-organised design, with the ear-pleasing ability to generate the purest audio landscape. The predecessors of the models tested here - the I30 integrated amplifier and CD31 CD player - have been on the market for many years and are loaded with awards to such a degree that the new models are under exceptionally high pressure to succeed. Whether the Swedes actually improved them is for you to discover in the following European scoop test.

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Before I start discussing these two newcomers, I'd first like to quote one of my favorite anecdotes about components from the previous Primare series. It's some years since I was invited by Harry van Dalen of Rhapsody, to have a listen to one of his favourite systems. And no, it actually wasn't an expensive and expansive system, but the delicate floor-standing Avalon Symbol with the medium-priced Primare I30 amplifier and CD31 CD player as electronics. As expected from Rhapsody the cables where from MIT. The system wasn't actually set up in the main space but rather in a smaller adjoining, cozily pink room with the proportions of a small living room.

Especially for my visit, Harry brought a bag of personal software from his home and told me this was perhaps the system that offered him the closest and most intimate way to obtain the musical message, which is why the system was almost like family to him. I remember very well how he started with a particular song from Jimi Hendrix and that in the next moment I could feel the hairs on my neck and arms rising. It wasn't so much the explicitly well balanced sound as the difficult-to-describe feeling I had of comfort, dreams and magic, making it possible for the musical message to instantly address all my senses. And Jimi Hendrix was followed by Miles Davis, Bob Dylan, Herbie Hancock and many, many others, capturing my full and continuous attention. This system really had something magical: there was not a single moment when the music became boring or dull. Neither did the excitement ever diminish. It was mainly this beautiful memory that surfaced when I was asked by importer More Music to sink my teeth into the successors of the I30 and CD31.



I32 Integrated Amplifier

Primare is one of the relatively few brands that has a deep understanding of how important it is to be different and especially to stay different. It has a very strong character that manifests itself in these new models as a wonderful, almost irresistible combination of elegance, modesty, high-quality build and advanced yet easy operation. In the new I32 we have real evidence of the technical progression that drives Primare's desire for change, for despite the recognisable Primare design signature outside, the design inside has clearly been transformed in comparison to its predecessor.

But first, the physical attributes. At only 11 kilos the I32 (430 mm wide, 100 mm high and 385 mm deep) is an easy-to-handle device which generates 2 x 120 watt at 8 ohm and 2 x 230 watt at 4 ohm to provide an exquisite and especially stable power capability, plenty enough to power the lion's share of speakers on the market today.

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Three aluminium feet at the bottom, enveloped in a thin anti-skid layer, will ensure stable enough positioning, although with a single foot at the rear there is a tendency for the unit to tilt with excessive downward pressure on the rear corners. The solid looking enclosure is beautifully finished with great attention to detail, making it a treat for the eyes. All panels connect seamlessly with each other. The thick top cover includes a sunken Primare logo and the most eye-catching of them all is the front panel, which appears to float. Very original and stylish! Moreover, the equipment is available in titanium and black colours. The solid aluminium fascia design appears remarkably peaceful and chic and is equipped with two beautifully stylised, precise, solid RVS rotary buttons



and four push-buttons with a purposeful pressure action. This apparent visual peacefulness is seductive because this integrated amplifier is filled with an abundance of technology and potential, implemented to a standard way above the norm. Thanks to the clear, bright, white and dimmable OLED display, countless options and functions are adjustable. For example, the left rotary button is used for fine tuning the volume in as many as 79 steps. The push-button next to it is used for switching the device on and off, while the remaining three are used for operating the elaborate menu structure. The right rotary button acts as both source selector and menu setup control. And the I32 offers quite a few setup options, from setting the master balance and standard startup volume level to the naming of each input with corresponding balance and volume settings. There's also a fixed input available, allowing for the two channels to be part of a home theatre system. What makes this amplifier really special though is the highly expansive media module available later this year. This will immediately make the I32 suitable for processing all digital media currently on the market. There is of course an extra cost for these facilities, but the nice thing is that you decide whether you want to use these options or not. The media module is equipped for processing files up to 24 bit/192 kHz from streaming audio, internet, NAS or PCs and internet radio among others. Besides that, it offers plenty of digital inputs for connecting a multitude of other audio products such as CD players, smart phones, mobile audio players, satellite receivers, etc.

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The other really radical thing about the I32 is that the internal design deviates from all previous and existing Primare models. You see, it is Primare's first integrated amplifier with a switching power supply and its own D class module named UFPD. UFPD (Ultra Fast Power Device) is a new high-quality application of D class technology. A full technical explanation is beyond the scope of this article, but it appears that Primare has actually succeeded in eliminating several persistent D class problems. Namely, this UFPD technology is unaffected by impedance variations thanks to intelligently applied constant variable negative feedback. There's more consistency across the entire audio bandwidth, ensuring no audible loss or preference for a certain frequency zone. Any distortion is kept to a minimum and is frequency independent. And another positive note: D class technology offers many practical and ecological advantages such as optimal use of the generating power with a minimum of heat output. This is why the enclosure is kept entirely cool, making it possible to install the I32 in spaces without much ventilation. Even without the optional media module, the rear panel is still well equipped because, in addition to connections for auto-controlling other Primare products, the I32 is provided with two balanced (XLR) inputs, three sets of cinch (RCA) inputs, an analogue recording output and a pre-amplifier output. The speaker outputs are of the good, large and reliable kind and suitable for spades, banana plugs as well as bare wires. Finally, the amplifier is complemented with a simple yet comfortable remote control, which controls the functions of other Primare devices.



CD32 CD player

I find it extraordinarily pleasing that Primare offers not only the optional support of the I32 amplifier for digital media like e.g. streaming, but it also ensures that music enthusiasts faithful to the CD format can get their share of advantages as well. And here it is, simply a good and reliable CD player! Even though there are proponents of 24 bit recordings, especially the streamed ones, in my experience the audible difference between a really well registered 16-bit recording on CD and a high resolution 24-bit file is more modest than many would have you believe! Streamed music usually sounds a bit dryer, flatter and less emotionally involving than the same music on CD. Also consider the fact that many of us still own an expansive and carefully compiled CD collection and like physically to deal with our musical media - so it's not so strange an idea to bring a high quality CD player to the market today.

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Matching the I32 amplifier, and in line with the Primare character, the CD32 player has a peaceful, balanced and cleaned-up design. The dimensions and weight (10.5 kg) are also nearly identical, giving the combined installation a perfectly co-ordinated look and feel. This device is also equipped with a precise white OLED display and three push-buttons for operation. A quick, smooth acting Asatech/Sanyo sliding mechanism is hidden behind the RVS compartment front. What makes the operation so beautiful is the fact that the wheel mechanism is of the faster type and reacts quickly to both input commands and the reading of the disks. Excellent! To ensure the visual peacefulness of the front panel, Primare decided to give two of the three available push-buttons a double function. Generally I'm not a big fan of such designs, but luckily the operation of the CD32 is well thought-out. The left button simply acts as the standby function. The button located on the right of the compartment door is used to open and close the compartment and to operate the stop/pause function. The last button on the right is used as the play button but also for skipping to the next track.



A nice visual aspect is the display of the corresponding icon when pressing one of these buttons. This means a square when pressing stop, two familiar upright bars when pausing, an upwards pointing triangle when opening the CD compartment, and a triangle pointing to the right when playing. The rear panel shows a multitude of connections: balanced (XLR) and unbalanced (RCA) analogue outputs, digital outputs for coaxial, optical, AES/EBU and a USB port. Just as on the I32 amplifier additional ports are provided for connecting other Primare equipment for auto operation. A RS-232 computer connection is present and also several infra-red remote control options.

As far as possible the internal design of the CD32 consists of discrete high quality components and short signal paths. The Burr-Brown PCM1704 DAC is used which works with 24 bit/96 kHz resolution. This DAC has a worldwide reputation for high quality and is successfully applied in many high-end models. Finally, the CD32 is provided with the exact same remote control as the I32, thus giving you a back-up device on purchase.

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Listening

Even before the arrival of these two Primare components, I was very curious about how they would perform. Not only because it has taken years for a completely new series of Primare products to find its way to the market, but mainly because of the technological modifications to the amplification through the D class principle. Many people still consider it to be of little use and criticise the often thin sound and somewhat grubby timbre.

But time changes things. Seeking to indulge the obvious interest expressed by the More Music employee, I decided there and then to unpack the equipment, connect it and listen to it while still freezing cold (just out of the car). After positioning and connecting the devices, we powered them up and delved into the menu structure presented by the I32. This appeared to be reasonably easy to master, so then it was time for some music. The first disc was 'First Touch' by guitarist Dominic Miller (QRM 104-2). On this album, originating from 2003, Dominic is in great form. The wonderfully full timbre and a large (artificial) ambiance of the recording are the perfect complement for the lingering jazzy and sometimes even funky character of the music itself.



We were both happily surprised to discover that the Primare system does not interfere with the music in any way, not even in completely cold conditions. It simply reproduced every radical twist and turn of the music and the almost three-dimensional guitar. The second aspect was also very surprising: a highly refined and especially contagious way of playing - outstanding homogeneity from high to low, the nearly effortless processing of dynamic contrasts and, considering the price-range, an especially high degree of authenticity with a sense of space that was well above the norm.

In the days since, I've played an enormous amount of music, and my respect and esteem for these rather average priced components is growing with every CD. This is simply really good stuff. A CD recording of 'Britten's Orchestra' by the Kansas City Symphony conducted by Michael Stern (Reference Recordings RR-120) was handed to me by Spectral owner (Reference Recordings and

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Spectral Elektronika are part of the same company) Richard Fryer with the remark that this was something really special, and without a doubt he's right. The music is extremely moving, wonderfully performed and recorded in the way that's special to Reference Recording. As beautiful as it is, this recording is also complex and demanding, making it a true challenge for any reproduction chain, regardless of price. The dynamic contrasts are very high, from extremely soft to deafening sounds. Moreover, in the climaxes, a large part of the audible frequency spectrum is dominated by a thundering bass drum, and on the best systems the three-dimensionality of the space created by the dome-shape of the 'Community of Christ Auditorium' in Independence, Missouri is beautifully communicated, together with the natural timbre and placement of the individual instruments within the room.

The Primare system performs this piece with passion, capturing the spirit of this thrilling music with great accuracy. In addition to refinement, these components also prove to possess an amazing resolving power, making even the very soft passages perfectly audible. Consequently this music with all its dynamic changes can easily be reproduced in full. The lower registers are tight, powerful when necessary and especially well defined, producing a very clear picture. Strings, percussion, woodwinds and brass retained all their natural dynamic qualities during the entire testing period - there was not a single moment of harshness, shrillness or granularity. Even the sense of three-dimensional space was clearly present, although with just a little less scale and stability when compared to the best systems.

So, where are the weak points? Well, I can give you a short answer, there are none! That's not to say that this I32 and CD32 combination is without an audible signature: the typical Primare sound carries a light air of friendliness and warmth, but the sound is dynamic and, when a recording demands it, offers the required expression, force, fire and sharpness. And this D class sound – what about that? Let me point one thing out first, the typical D class sound as feared by many, is utterly absent in this Primare system. In fact the sound is remarkably smooth and full range in a single tonally seamless entity, devoid of annoying artifacts. And as an added bonus it has an addictive dreamy refinement, as well as precision with low level information.



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Conclusion

Primare has made the audience and dealers wait, perhaps too long, for the arrival of a completely new series. But now that these devices are finally playing for me, I believe the quality to be so extraordinary that it justifies the wait. The design is (luckily!) still recognisably Primare, hence luxurious, prominent and chic. The possibilities and suitability for embracing all audio formats and delivery channels are present. The I32 is a totally modern amplifier with the tonal quality that is characteristically Primare in spite of the use of the modified D class technology. If anything that familiar rhythmic coherence and smoothness has been enhanced by a more grown-up and realistic representation of low level information and more powerful dynamics. In the end the I32 and CD32 have become devices through which everybody will find an involving music experience. They'll make you smile with their user-friendliness and excellent quality at such a reasonable price.

System

Speakers	Master Contemporary C, Wilson Benesch Arc
CD players	North Star Design T192 + North Star Design Extremo DAC, T.A.C. C-60, Naim CD 5i
Integrated Amplifiers	Unison Research Performance, T.A.C. V-60, Naim Nait 5i
Audio Rack	Finite Elemente Pagode Master Reference HD12
Interlinks	Siltech Royal Signature Empress, Echople Obsession
Digital Cable	North Star Design White Gold I2S,
Speaker Cables	Nirvana SX, JK-Acoustics Type III
Net Cables	Nirvana PC, Kemp Reference, Essential Audio Tools Current Conductor

