Music master
Why this Primare pairing is all the amp you’ll ever need

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Different class

Pairing a feature-rich preamp with mighty Class D muscle, Andrew Simpson asks if this could be all the amp you'll ever need.

From the release of its flagship 60 series amps to the ongoing evolution of its DACs and streamers, Primare's engineers have clearly been cracking the whip over the last year and it seems that they're not about to slow down now.

Sitting below the 60 series, the 30 lineup is Primare's most populated range, comprising a standalone streamer, DAC and phono stage alongside a selection of amplifiers. Because of how Primare is designing its kit around clever upgrades via optional plug-in modules with extra functionality, there's a wealth of integrated or separate solutions to suit most system needs.

The PRE32 is the range's dedicated preamp, equipped with plenty of analogue inputs and outputs (including balanced), remote control and an OLED front display. Our test model also comes packing Primare's MM30 media board, which simply slots into a dedicated port on the amp's rear and ups its cost to £3,000. While this may seem like a bit of a price hike, this add-on is great value given the MM30 is lifted directly from Primare's £2,000 NP30 streamer (HFC 387) and comes brimming with a range of digital inputs, upsampling DAC and app-controlled streaming. Our test model also comes packing Primare's MM30 media board, which simply slots into a dedicated port on the amp's rear and ups its cost to £3,000. While this may seem like a bit of a price hike, this add-on is great value given the MM30 is lifted directly from Primare's £2,000 NP30 streamer (HFC 387) and comes brimming with a range of digital inputs, upsampling DAC and app-controlled streaming.

Our test model is also the first to get Primare's new aptX Bluetooth module inside its case, which costs £180 fitted, taking the fully-loaded PRE32 up to £3,180. Unlike many Bluetooth-equipped amps, the Primare outputs the Bluetooth receiver's signal directly to its own sample rate converter and DAC for improved sound quality, where it's upsampled to 192kHz. Sharing the streamer module from the NP30 means the PRE32 gets the same Burr-Brown PCM1792 DAC and SRC4392 24-bit/192kHz upampling converter for digital duties. On the analogue side of things, all signal paths are kept short and fully balanced with source selection, volume and balance controls all performed in the analogue domain. The PRE32 uses an R-core transformer and is DC coupled from input to output, with no capacitors in the signal path, as Primare has instead opted to employ active servos to compensate for DC present.

They're blessed with a sonic finesse that opens up the music to show it at its best.

DETAILS
PRODUCT
Primare PRE32/A34.2
ORIGIN
Sweden
TYPE
Preamp with media board and Class D power amplifier
WEIGHT
10.5kg each
DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD) 470 x 109 x 343mm
FEATURES
- Preamp with media board
- Burr-Brown PCM1792 DAC
- SRC4392 24-bit/192kHz upsampling
- Remote control
- Optional aptX Bluetooth module
- Balanced inputs/outputs
- Burr-Brown PCM1792 DAC
- Karmav AV Ltd
- 01423 358846
- karma-av.co.uk
- primare.net

www.hifichoice.co.uk
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Partnering the PRE32 is Primare’s A34.2 power amp that’s housed in the same case as the preamp with a simplified logo-embossed face plate. Internally the A34.2 side steps the more traditional Class AB approach of Primare’s £3,300 Stream Amp, to employ the same UPFD (Ultra Fast Power Device) Class D technology as the £5,000 A40.

The A34.2 incorporates a preamp stage comprised of Bay-Brown OP2134 and Analog Devices AD8215, two discrete UPFD amplifiers giving a substantial 2x150W into 8ohms (claimed).

The add-on is great value given it’s from Primare’s £2,000 NP30 streamer.

If you have the need and wallet for even more power, you also have the option to run two A34.2 amps in bridged mono mode, whereby each amp will give you a massive 550W to play with.

Feature comforts
But focusing on what’s inside only tells half the story, as beefing products from Primare, their build quality, build aesthetic, look and feel are pure Scandinavian chic. From its customisable front screen for naming inputs and tweaking screen colour to selecting source and tailoring settings, the PRE32 is utterly intuitive to use. What’s more, the embedded streamer also gives you access to Primare’s excellent app (for iOS and Android portable devices), which makes the supplied remote control seem utterly redundant.

ULTRA FAST POWER DEVICE

The A34.2’s type of amp typically demands great noise margins and high impedance. Primare has gone the extra mile to ensure that these demands are met and provides the Class D topology with the requisite 7kVar of DC power to keep it happy. The symmetrically wound transformer is a great match for the A34.2 power amp as it provides clean and powerful power supply.

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The app also opens the door to internet radio via Fluxer, and Mac users can stream directly from Spotify.

Sound quality
Whether streaming music over Bluetooth or piping hi-res audio through hard-wired USB and Ethernet connections, these amps have clarity in abundance. Streaming The Handsome Family’s ‘For Any Road at 320kbps via Spotify through my laptop certainly doesn’t show any attention to the shortcomings of this compressed format. Male and female vocals have surprising levels of depth and delicacy even while the trumpets’ edges don’t have that sense of being unusually cut. Compared with other similarly priced streaming devices that I’ve recently plumbed into my reference system, the Primares certainly sound less boxy in over Bluetooth, Channel separation and, consequently, stereo imaging is impressively well rendered to the point that you sometimes have to look twice to realise you’re not hearing a higher bitrate version. But while Bluetooth makes for a worthwhile inclusion, you really need to serve the Primares a richer diet to properly benefit from what they have to offer.

Exploring a 16-bit/44kHz FLAC rip of Future Islands’ ‘Sing Single’ album streamed over Ethernet, let us know that these amps relish having more to play with. Percussion on Like The Moon is razor sharp, while being so foot-tappingly rhythmic, it’s addictive. Bass guitar notes take on a taut, resonant quality, and the keyboard’s atmospheres go deep and wide within the soundstage as their delayed echo trail off into the distance and a genuine space that is made.

But it’s not just the Primares’ timing and musicality that grabs your attention, it’s the way these amps seem to stay true to the purity of the music, without being overly clinical. Despite this album’s symphonic origins, the Primires are never artificial sounding. Even at low levels the way the music comes across undeniably neatly portrays all the fervour of the band’s performance, while cranking up the volume brings the rawness of Samuel T Herring’s vocal even closer. But that’s not to suggest that these amps are in any way forward sounding, because they’re not. They are very well focused across every aspect of the audiophile, and without any hint of colouration.

While the A34.2 power amp’s casework barely gets warm to the touch in, it certainly sounds ready for anything driving my Dynaudios. We can’t stress this enough, the 80dB S/n (re. 0dBw) is adequate but, unlike some Class D amps, it’s headroom. The 80dB S/n (re. 0dBw) is just what they’re capable of.

Conclusion
Despite covering all bases from amp to DAC and network streamer, you’ll never be found lost in a muddle of menus and button pressing, as the Primares come top of the class for an enjoyable, accessible, and rewarding user experience. And it’s not just the interface that scores highly, as they’re also blessed with a sonic finesse that opens up the music to its best, while being equally forgiving of poorer sources. Treat them to some hi-res material and they’ll really show you just what you’re capable of.

Q&A
Lars Pedersen
Primare MD

As: Why did you opt to move towards Class D instead of traditional Class A or B designs?
Lars: Primare has used Class D since the introduction of the CD110 compact system in 2007. We decided to start using our UPFD implementation of Class D because it has the potential for a natural and dynamic sound due to very low distortion and high efficiency.

Will all of your amplifiers use UPFD technology going forward? Or will you continue to also make Class AB amps as well?
We will continue to use UPFD because we think it sounds more life-like. All new Primare amplifiers since 2007, including the EISA award-winning PM3, are based on UPFD. We have an open-minded approach, but when it’s all about improving the sound UPFD is the best we can do right now.

Have you considered fitting an internal phono stage to the PRE32? No, the very sensitive phono amplifier will perform much better in its own dedicated, isolated housing with its own power supply.

What were your biggest challenges in developing these amps?
We built on our previous experience with Class D and Class A/B. We wanted to build Class D amplifiers with power supply and DAC functionality. We have developed our own technology for Class D amplifiers with Class A/B features such as high efficiency and low noise. Our focus is on creating a high-quality sound experience for our customers.

How will this new technology impact the future of Primare products?
This new technology will allow us to create amplifiers that are more efficient, have less noise, and offer better sound quality. We will continue to add functionality to our current products, but we will also use this technology as a foundation for future products.

What’s next for Primare?
We are planning to release a new product line that will feature our new technology. This will be a continuation of our focus on creating high-quality audio products with advanced technology.

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