

Primare I35 integrated amplifier

by Alan Sircom

I'm used to dealing with amplifiers. One look through the pages of this issue shows just that; my house has become cardboard and crate city this month. So, although there are models that impress, ones that really hit home are quite rare, and ones that actually shock you at how good they really are don't come along that often, especially ones in the 'doesn't cost as much as a nice Mercedes' category. I was expecting good things from the Primare I35 – the brand has a good reputation for making fine electronics – but frankly this one has me stumped. How did Primare make something this good... and it really is good!

The I35 is the first amplifier from the brand to feature its UFPD 2 amplifier modules, as distinct from the original UFPDs fitted to the last generation and models like the A60 power amplifier that remain on the order books. UFPD stands for Ultra Fast

Power Device, an amplification module in a balanced configuration of four discrete amplifiers – two per channel. This Class D device has long provided instantaneous current delivery and extremely low distortion, but in its new UFPD 2 guise really lives up to that 'Ultra Fast' part of the acronym. It also means Primare can make a true 150 watt per channel amplifier in a relatively small chassis without making the box hotter than the surface of the sun.

Although we went amplifier-only purist at this time, the I35 is an extremely modular design, allowing a series of add-on board options to bring the amplifier from base model, through I35 DAC (with modular DAC board added) right through to I35 PRISMA (which adds a wired and wireless streaming board to the I35 and DAC option). While this takes the I35 into bold new places, there are a number of different system pathways and options, all of which are harder to justify if the top banana I35 is selected as standard. For example, you could configure the I35 as standard and use the matching CD35 PRISMA as digital hub, and connect via the analogue inputs to the I35, or you could do the same, but this time connecting the CD35 PRISMA to the optional DAC, place the PRISMA module in the amplifier, and connect the CD35 via digital or analogue inputs. Or, you could even opt for the DD35 CD transport and connect to the I35 DAC or the I35 PRISMA. Maybe in the future, Primare will add a phono stage module, and the number of optional combinations will achieve peak modularity!



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▶ Rather than opt for one of the variations, we went for the base platform. That being said, it's not exactly 'base'; with two sets of XLR balanced inputs, three RCA single-ended line inputs, and both fixed and variable outputs (hey, there might still be some people with cassette recorders... but more accurately this is for a home cinema processor).

The amplifier needs a little bit of running in. However I received it with some miles on the clock, so the amount of running in required is unclear, as is the degree of change that running in creates. Asking around suggests the running in process, and the changes it creates, are mild.

I plugged the I35 in and liked it. I changed the speakers (from LS3/5as to Wilson Duette II) and still I liked it. I swapped out cables, and I liked how it sounded. In fact, at no time and with no combination of bits and pieces I have to hand (and there are a lot of them) did it exhibit any 'don't like it' properties or characteristics. OK, if you are going to use an amp-crushing full-range loudspeaker that costs as much as a small house then the I35 gets a little strained, but in the real world, you aren't going to find a combination that doesn't satisfy.

A big part of putting a smile on your face here is the combination of keeping a taut sense of rhythm throughout, and a sound that is extremely entertaining and attractive. A big way of determining this isn't just listening to music; plug a TV or cable TV box into the amplifier and the designed-for-TV-speakers sound of something like *Casualty* [BBC-One] is transformed and you begin to realise the relative sophistication of the foley work, the effects, and the ability to pick out speech from a maelstrom of over-the-top plot devices. It's hard to like this hack Saturday night 'trauma-porn' as it has been running for decades and 'Holby' has long run out of accidents to befall its hapless residents. But the I35 makes the programme entertaining like it once was.

It's music, however, that will make or break the I35. And it's music that the I35 does very, very well indeed. You'll probably begin as I did, with several well-trodden pieces of music that are used for assessment but they will lead, and lead quickly, to the music of your youth, or the music of your passion. I realised I was on to something special when I found myself playing Louis Armstrong's 'West End Blues' [*Hot Fives and Sevens*, JSP] which segued into 'Another Girl, Another Planet' by The Only Ones [Columbia]. These are core pieces of music for me. They hold special powers and only come out when the stars are aligned. Playing these tracks means I'm enjoying the music on an atavistic level and everything in the system is sounding great.

There's something of the classic 'Chrome Bumper' Naim Audio sound about the Primare I35, both tonally and on that sheer musical enjoyment quotient that is so hard to pin down. Tonally, the I35 is rich and satisfying rather than bright and breezy, and yet it comes over as both energetic and dynamic sounding. These were all the elements that drove people into hi-fi stores in the 1980s, and all of those elements are improved here, with more detail, midrange clarity, and focus. Other aspects like soundstaging are also excellent, but it seems my personal preferences and priorities place that lower on the hierarchy. ▶

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TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Integrated amplifier with optional internal streamer and DAC

Power output: 2 × 150W in 8 Ohms

Minimum load: 2 ohms

Analogue Inputs: 2 × balanced (XLR),
3 × unbalanced (RCA)

Line level Output: 2 × unbalanced
variable (RCA)

Frequency response: 20Hz–20kHz -0.2dB

Signal-to-noise ratio: > 100dB

THD+N: <0.01%, 20Hz–20kHz, 10W at 8Ω

Dimensions (H×W×D): 10.6 × 43 × 42cm

Weight: 11kg

Price: £3,200

Manufactured by: Primare AB

URL: primare.com

Distributed in the UK by: Karma AV

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► That’s perhaps the biggest thing about the Primare I35: it shakes the audio tree. Received wisdom held by some parts of the audiophile community states that there was a golden age of audio (defined as, “around the time my equipment was made”) that is unassailable in performance, and anything with Class D is an Agent of Satan. Sorry if my cynicism is brimming over here, but it’s products like the I35 that demonstrate the patent nonsense of these seemingly ineluctable audio truths. This is an amplifier that has the Devil’s Amplifier Class running cool and clear and it is extraordinarily modern in design inside and out. And yet, if you listen with your ears instead of your eyes and your prejudices, you’ll discover that this is an absolute blinder of an amplifier – possibly one of the best there is!

By virtue of ‘not taking the kids on holiday’ this month, my house has filled with very expensive amplifiers, and that gives me some perspective on what’s good, and what’s great. We are extremely lucky at this time because what’s good is outstanding, and this amplifier takes on some very big guns and wins. More buys you better as you might expect, and there are amplifiers that are brighter sounding, even richer or sweeter sounding, and ones that deliver way more power, volume headroom, dynamic range, and transparency. But here’s the thing, none of those amplifiers costs £3,200. What the I35 does is bring all of the good parts of audio with no sacrifices, skip all the bad parts, and make something that sounds sweet while it does its job.

I can’t help thinking that right now, this is perhaps the focus point in amplifiers. It’s the point where all the good things in audio come together, and beyond this you are more likely to get ‘more’ instead of ‘better’. OK, if you triple the cost of the I35, you begin to get back to ‘better’ as well as ‘more’, but the Primare I35 just does it all so well, it makes me question the need to spend more.

We sometimes try to describe products in a sound bite. It’s the ‘if I can sum this up in a single word...’ cliché, and I’m as guilty of it as the next scribe. With the Primare I35, though, sound bites don’t work because it’s more complex than that. So, instead, if I could try and describe the I35 as a person, it would be ‘a good bloke with whom I’d happily sink a few pints.’ Not showy or self-important... just entertaining to be around. As any British bloke will tell you, pub-related praise is the highest you can get! +