

Primare PRE60/A60 preamp and power amplifier

Primare's reputation is largely built around its range of amplifiers. Although its disc players, streamers, and DACs are beyond reproach, it's the amplifiers that people most associate with the brand, and for good reason. The PRE60 and matching A60 represent the present top of the Primare tree. And it's a fine tree, too.

The PRE60 and A60 are the first seriously high-end amplifier products released by Primare in some time, and that's

not simply high-end in terms of price. The PRE60 is every bit a 'now' product, as it stands between the all-digital hub of tomorrow and the all-analogue line preamp of today. The only omission is the phono stage of yesterday afternoon, but Primare makes the R32 MM/MC stage for that purpose. The PRE60 runs in fully balanced mode – it may have four single-ended line inputs, but these are 'up-converted' to balanced mode internally. On the digital side, the PRE60 features an XMOS-USB input alongside the usual slew of optical and coaxial S/PDIF digital inputs, and feeds all signals through a Burr-Brown sample rate converter to upsample data to 24-bit/192kHz to then output to a Crystal DSD-chummy Delta-Sigma DAC. There is also an Ethernet port and wireless LAN connection, which allows UPnP/DLNA network streaming, vTuner internet radio, and is all controlled via Primare's very natty app. If this all sounds ▶





▶ familiar to regular readers, that's because the PRE60s digital stage combines the DAC30 DAC and NP30 network player we are so fond of here. If your audio source is now either a computer or a network, think of this as these two devices combined with a really good balanced gain stage, the attractive fluoro display on the front panel notwithstanding.

The A60 is equally interesting. Like the preamp, it's a fully balanced design (once again, the single-ended inputs are converted to balanced operation), and like the preamp it comes in a fairly substantial box, but this 300W power amplifier is not as hefty as you might expect, because it uses Primare's UFPD modules: that's Ultra Fast Power Device, not the University of Florida Police Department. These are better known as Class D amplifier circuits, with two modules per channel and what Primare calls an 'Isolated Power Factor Control' switch-mode power supply. The latter limits two of the current (no pun intended) criticisms of Class D and switch-mode supplies – introducing noise and EMI right in the very place it's least welcome. The amp modules themselves are similar to Hypex modules, which is a good start in audiophile Class D. Nevertheless, Class D and high-end are not yet natural bedfellows, despite all the good work done by Devialet and especially Mola-Mola to prove otherwise.

Primare holds well to the 'first, do no harm' dictum of the Hippocratic Oath (musical edition). The pair leave little in the way of footprints on the music played. All you get is just a slight forwardness to the overall presentation, which gives music a clean, direct, and inspired demeanour. The rest is fundamentally 'right' sounding.

I'm going to toss out a concept here that I've been mulling over for some time - the concept of the 'blameless reference'. This is a product that fundamentally does nothing bad to the signal, is at least as good or better than its peers, and while not necessarily cheap, is not priced to a point where only former directors of FIFA can afford the product. My take here is that pre and power products in this 'blameless' category should cost in the thousands, but not the tens of thousands. The PRE60 and A60 fall into that category, in performance and price.

I mostly used this combination fed by a Naim UnitiServe and into Spondor's excellent D1 standmounts, using balanced cables from Cardas throughout, and the net result of this was to think 'wrap it up, I'll take it!' It had the right sense of scale for playing anything from Steel Pulse to Al Kooper, enough pace to keep up with Burial, and enough musical coherence to flow with Saint-Saëns 'Danse Macabre'. This sounds like faint praise, but there

were no musical interludes that strongly drew me to them enough to point them out in print, and that is a part of the Primare's greatness. Where other systems force you toward one genre or another, and those become highlights, this simply plays everything without grace or favour.

If it's power you want, the Primare delivers it with energy and drive. If it's soundstaging, it's as good as the speakers you use. If it's infectious rhythm, then the music needs some infectious rhythm rather than have it thrust upon the sound. It's that sense of doing a thing, and doing it right that Primare really gets here. That's not damning it with faint praise; that's prizing it for its honesty and integrity.

I'm sensing that people may want more. But in a way, what the really good equipment should offer is not 'more'. We don't need impressive sounds at the high-end; we need instead for hi-fi brands to remember that 'hi-fi' means 'high-fidelity' not 'high-fireworks', and that's where products like the PRE60 and A60 come in. They don't impose their own character upon the source or the speakers. They merely act as neutral platform for a good sound, the kind of neutral platform ▶



- ▶ that you can use for anything from cable assessment to just enjoying a good pair of loudspeakers without the amps getting in the way.

There are three small caveats though, all relevant to Class D, although the last has a specific Primare twist. First, the A60 is not in its comfort zone with exceptionally impedance-strangling loudspeaker loads. ‘Amp-crusher’ loudspeakers from the extreme high-end require the kind of delivery only a toroidal the size of a crash helmet and beefy heatsinks can provide. Next, if you change loudspeakers, always remember to cycle the power (it’s good form in general to power down the amp before swapping loudspeakers anyway, but Class D seems to ‘map’ the loudspeaker load, and if you change the speaker without changing the map, you end up driving through a ploughed field). Lastly, you need to give these the A60 a good thrashing before it gives up its treasures. The first 48 or so hours from new (or after a long break from power) - ugh. It’s thin, flat, and uninspiring. Leave it to eat some Volts for a weekend and it’s a different amplifier. Oddly, there doesn’t seem to be a gradual transition to greatness - it seems to happen instantaneously. One second, ‘meh!’, the next, it’s ‘what did you do?’

Of the two, the PRE60 is the standout product, but more by virtue of getting so much right in combination than any marked sonic edge. If you took the DAC, streamer, and preamp as separate components in their own rights, you’d probably have to spend more to get to the same performance level. And let’s make it perfectly clear; these component parts aren’t exactly mediocre in their own rights. Hell, I was so taken with the NP30 after the review, I bought the review sample, and the PRE60 is every bit as convincing as a complete unit. In fact, I’d put the PRE60’s streaming performance ahead of my own NP30, despite it having the same basic modules, because the system gels together so well. The A60 is more than just a good partner for the PRE60; it’s an excellent power amplifier in its own right. It works extremely well being fed by a Townshend Allegri passive preamp, delivering the kind of clarity, detail, and dynamic range with which any good preamp can truly shine. But when a double-act is as good as the Primare pair, why break up the band?

Perhaps though, it’s the audio industry itself that makes the best accolade for the Primare PRE60 and A60. Go to a show, and see what amps the good-sounding rooms run by the more ‘sensible’ cable or loudspeaker demonstrators use, and you’ll keep seeing these Primare amps cropping up. The fact is, if you evaluate audio equipment by its sound quality instead of amplifier class, the Primare duo come very highly recommended. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

PRE60

Type: Line level preamplifier with built in DAC and streamer

Analogue Inputs: 2x XLR, 4x RCA, RS232, IR in/out, Trigger in/out, RF

Digital inputs: 3x Toslink, 1x coaxial RCA S/PDIF, USB A, USB B, RJ45, WLAN

Digital outputs: 1x S/PDIF RCA

Audio formats: WAV, AIFF, FLAC, MP3, AAC, WMA, OGG, ALAC

Sample rates: 32-192kHz

WLAN b, g, n mode: WEP (64 and 128Bit), WPA & WPA2 (TKIP & AES)

Record Output: 2x RCA

Pre Output: 2x RCA, 2x XLR

Input Impedance: 15k (RCA/XLR)

Output Impedance: 110 ohms

Frequency Response: 20Hz–100kHz -3dB

THD + N: < 0.003%, 20Hz–100kHz, 0dB

Signal to Noise: –115 dBV

Max in /out level: 10Vrms

Gain: 16dB

Dimensions (WxDxH): 43 × 38.5 × 14.2cm

Price: £6,500

A60

Type: stereo power amplifier

Connections: 2x RCA, 2x XLR, 2x WBT nextgen Speaker connectors

Output power:

2x250W 8 ohm, max 610W

2x500W 4 ohm, max 1230W

THD+N: <0.02% (1kHz 250W 8 ohm);

<0.002 (10W 8 ohm)

Signal to Noise: –105dBV

Gain: 26dB single-ended, 20dB bal

Dimensions (WxD): 43 × 38.5 × 14.2cm

Price: £6,500

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