



PRIMARE CD31 CD PLAYER | PRIMARE I30 INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER  
ATC SCM19 LOUDSPEAKERS | £4,499



# The right stuff

*A system that floats like a butterfly and stings like a bee... but not in the wallet!*

**A**t the height of his powers, the great Muhammad Ali used to quip: "How can I lose with the stuff I use?" stretching the fourth and eighth words for maximum poetic impact. It was invariably delivered with the playfulness of a glib boast but, in Ali's case, you knew it had its roots in a self belief that couldn't have been anything other than deadly serious.

It seems to be part of what sets the great apart from the good: nothing so fickle as flair; nothing as unpredictable as raw talent; nothing contrived merely to impress or floated on a froth of hype. Just 'the right stuff' from skin to core, unshakeable self belief and a delivery system that doesn't get deflected by the winds of change for change's sake, or the temptations of trendiness.

This *Beautiful System* has exactly that kind of 'can't lose' quality. It's a clearly conveyed message that, while it may not be the sexiest-looking collection of boxes ever to grace the pages of a hi-fi magazine, it's operating with superior 'stuff' that lifts it onto another level.

## BO' SELECTA!

In the case of the softly gleaming but masterfully understated Primare CD31 CD player and I30 integrated amp that front this month's combo, the lofty altitude of that level was envisioned from the start by a man called Bo Christensen. A Danish industrial designer by trade (and passionate audiophile by nature) Christensen's frustration with the sound quality, aesthetics and user interface of what he called "typical audio gear" ignited a quest to do things better. During the late 1980s, he gathered together a team of like-minded designers, including electronics engineer Bent Nielsen, and formed Primare. Christensen pulled

together clean Scandinavian design, simple circuitry and straightforward operation, and arguably, the most effective 'minimalist aesthetic' in affordable modern hi-fi was born.

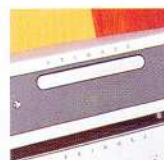
Although Christensen left Primare in 1994, Nielsen remained, working along side Copland luminary Lars Pedersen and renowned audio engineer Michael Bladelius (formerly of Pass Labs and Threshold among others) to advance and focus Primare's art in the digital and analogue domains.

Primare's dedication to the cause is reflected in the stated aim of the CD31: to 'extract the last elusive nuance from CD and shrink the noise-floor almost to zero'. It uses high-grade discrete circuit components and fully balanced low-noise topology throughout, matching a high quality 24-bit DAC (for 96kHz sampling) with a high performance 24/96 filter, and an ultra low-noise, high-speed output stage. Multiple isolated low-noise power supplies are said to keep the musical signal free of electrical interference and exploit the full potential of the CD31's balanced design. Attention to detail is typically meticulous, right down to the gold-plated analogue, digital and balanced outputs. The weighty robustness of the heavy steel casing inspires bags of confidence, too.

## MEATY SHUNT

But the I30 amp is much, much heavier, as befits a 100 watt design with such a robust power supply. The meaty custom-made toroidal transformer and double active regulators are teamed with local regulators to ensure that all stages receive the current needed without stress or strain. And the smooth-acting 'shunt to ground' type volume control (usually found in much more expensive products, according to Primare) is said to

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**Primare CD31 CD player**  
**£1,500**

There are flashier looking CD players. Flashier sounding ones, too. But there aren't many with the sonic integrity of this Primare. It does everything a digital source should with none of the nasties.



**Primare I30 integrated amp**  
**£1,500**

Like the CD31, this svelte Danish powerhouse puts in a performance that belies its 'modest' 100-watt power rating. Drives even the relatively power hungry ATC speakers like a dream.



**ATC SCM19 loudspeaker**  
**£1,499 per pair**

Not the prettiest speakers ever, but capable of superb sound quality when partnered with the right electronics. The naturalness of the midrange and treble are special, bass off the scale.





▣ preserve accurate channel balance at low volume levels, an impression of precision massaged by the accompanying digital display. The preamp section offers full remote control of all functions, including switching for its six inputs (including vinyl via the optional phono stage).

The ideal partnership, of course, would be speakers with a matching minimalist aesthetic and single-minded dedication to delivering the sonic goods without agenda or affectation. In the standmount SCM19s from the Acoustic Transducer Company (more commonly known as ATC) we have them.

Like Primare, ATC is a company driven by one man's uncompromising vision. Unlike Primare however, that man – Billy Woodman – is still very much at the helm of the company he formed in 1974. In fact, ATC still operates out of a few unassuming buildings in the heart of the Cotswolds. ATC's reputation, contrastingly, bestrides the domestic/professional sectors like a colossus across the globe and is the envy of many ostensibly bigger hitters. Clients include Sony, Pioneer, Chandos, Nimbus, Telarc, Pink Floyd, Pater Gabriel, the Sydney Opera House, the Royal Opera House

Covent Garden, the BBC and over 1,000 recording studios worldwide – any of whom would happily endorse Woodman's contention that ATC "builds loudspeakers, drive units, complementary electronics (passive and active) and custom installations that deliver nothing less than the best sound reproduction money can buy".

#### OVER THE EDGEWISE

If ATC has a secret weapon, it's probably the way its drive units are engineered. Or rather, deliberately over-engineered. The coils are wound edgewise from specially milled copper wire, providing a higher density of conductor than the norm. Along with new adhesive technology and ultra-fine coil-gap clearances, it allows extremely high power handling and excellent reliability.

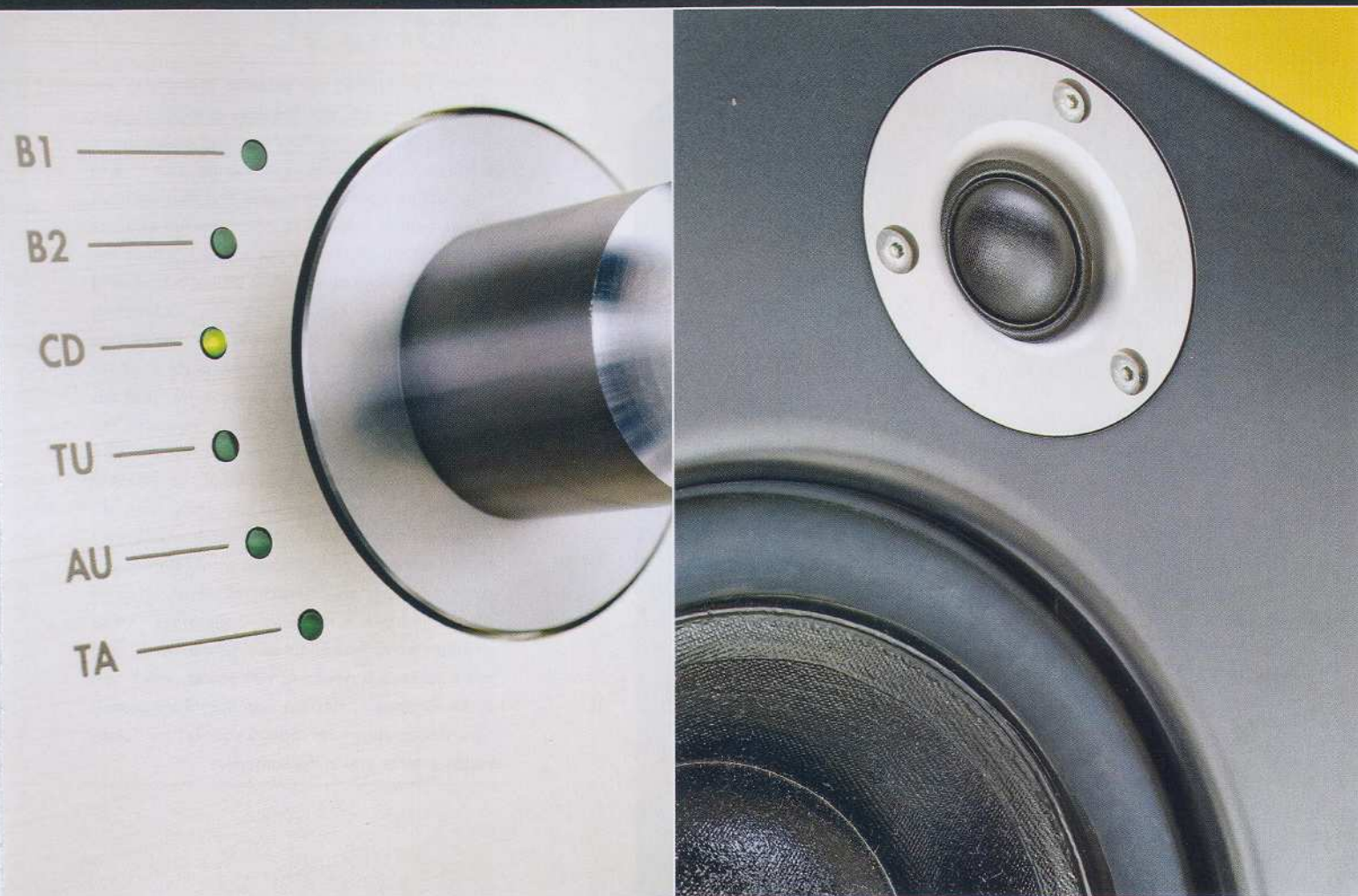
ATC's so called 'Super Linear' magnet assemblies – first used in its active studio monitors – are claimed to eliminate distortion caused by eddy currents in the magnet pole piece and front plate. The theory goes that in most speakers this effect is masked by mechanical distortion. But in the ATC bass drivers, its removal leads to greater linearity and low distortion.

The ATC 'look', for the most part, is fiercely functional; indeed, the company proudly wears its 'pro' sensibilities on its sleeve, despite these days selling around half its output to the domestic market. Truth is, ATC doesn't really see eye-to-eye with the tweaky-freaky, 'golden-eared' members of the audiophile community and never has. Although quietly spoken, Australian born and raised Billy Woodman, like many of his countrymen, has a robust disregard for bullshit and, as far as sound reproduction systems go, that means pretty much anything that doesn't survive the rigor of his vertiginous engineering expectations.

Apart from the absence of a separate soft-dome midrange driver – an ATC first and the thing that made it the hero of the pro sector – the two-way, sealed box SCM19 perfectly encapsulates the ATC approach. Not exactly the daintiest of standmounts; each enclosure weighs a barely believable 16 kilos (9kg of which is accounted for by the main driver's motor assembly) and boasts a full Super Linear spec 150mm bass/mid driver (with a 75mm integral soft dome), plus a 25mm soft-dome tweeter with a precision alloy wave-guide. Claimed frequency response (-6dB) is 54Hz to







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22kHz and nominal impedance a load-friendly eight ohms, though the slightly below average 85dB sensitivity rules out low-powered amps; ATC recommends between 50 and 300 watts.

#### QUICK TRACK, GADDY THWACK

That said, the Primare I30 seems to leap at the chance to show what its 100 watts can do with the solid, muscular feed provided by the CD31 and leaves no one in any doubt that it's a heavy hitter. The thwack of Steve Gadd's drumkit on Steely Dan's re-mastered *Aja* CD sounded palpable through the ATCs yet, at the other end of the musical spectrum – take the swoony string arrangements on Joni Mitchell's *Both Sides Now* – the system displayed admirable delicacy. Real power, real poise. A great start.

And yet the Primare/ATC combination doesn't fall into the trap of focusing too hard on resolving detail to the detriment

of the bigger picture. The sound is finely revealing, harmonically rich and rhythmically coherent. Treble has brilliance and definition, but no glare or grain. Bass has speed and shape and plenty of welly. The presentation is technically stunning, yet it doesn't draw attention to the fact.

Indeed, it doesn't make a play for your attention with the kind of lapel-grabbing verve some similarly-priced systems might attempt. But the longer you listen, the more you appreciate the sheer range of tonal colours in its palette. On the other hand, with the right material, it can muster quite stunning dynamic clout. The presentation is weighty and controlled and has a fabulously architectural bass performance. There's something of the proverbial iron fist in a velvet glove about the approach and it draws you in.

So here's a system with real grip and insight that delivers music in a tangible,

coherent way with fine drive and rhythmic integrity. Better still, it's an act that doesn't trade subtlety for scale and impact. It's true that the ATCs soak up the power but, in practice, the Primare integrated sounds far more muscular than its 100 watts-a-side would suggest. And it backs up its power with a sense of poise and control that's never found wanting. In every respect, the package exhibits remarkable synergy.

We shouldn't forget the contribution of the CD31, of course. As with all the very best disc spinners, the solid imaging, air and brilliance it brings to the party is invaluable. But it doesn't overplay its hand. It's more concerned with definition than razzle-dazzle and, as such, fits in seamlessly and pulls its weight. But then, you'll have got the message by now. This is a class act that gets it right where it counts. Rather like the great Ali, it doesn't put a foot wrong. **HFC**

David Vivian

