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Mark Craven is blown away by the music and movie skills of Primare's luxuriously styled nine-channel AVR

Slick and smart Swedish receiver

Earlier this year we looked at the A35.8 from Primare (HCC #331), a multichannel power amp that signalled the Swedish brand was turning its attention once again to the cinematic side of the home audio business. And if that model had niche appeal, its new SPA25 AVR is more mass-market – albeit with a £5,000 price tag.

A glance over the specifications shows this receiver has been designed to cover all (well, nearly all) of the modern home cinema bases, while retaining the audiophile air of Primare's catalogue of two-channel hardware. So it offers

Dolby Atmos and DTS:X decoding, Dirac room correction and Dolby Vision and HDR10+ passthrough, in conjunction with Primare's bespoke network audio platform (Prisma) and some hi-fi centric touches.

Perhaps a better way to look at the SPA25 is to highlight what it doesn't do, and most notably this is offer support for console gamers with 4K/120 playback and VRR ambitions. The unit's HDMI stage (four inputs and two outputs) is HDMI 2.0b, and pegged to 4K/60.

Primare, anticipating some gnashing of teeth from potential customers, is up-front about the reason for this feature shortfall. 'This design choice was made purposefully, as when we began the design effort a number

of years ago now, we lacked confidence in the then-available chipsets being able to provide the performance claimed and being readily available for a small manufacturer like us, particularly given current supply shortages.' The company says that 'in hindsight' this was a smart move, as the first HDMI 2.1 chips were flawed.

Additionally, Primare argues whether having an AV receiver in the video chain of a high-end gaming system is something that gamers actually want. 'Player versus Player [games], especially at higher resolutions and frame rates, are nearly invariably played using purpose built, highly sophisticated gaming computers with associated gaming displays, and headphones complete with microphones for player communication.' It also says it discussed the issue with software companies in its home city of Malmö.

So, the upshot is the SPA25 won't play ball if you want to use its HDMI switching with a 4K/120 source. Primare does, however, expect its future 'reference' processor model (the SP35) to be HDMI 2.1-compatible when it surfaces toward the end of 2023.

Switch-mode power

Like the eight-channel A35.8 amp, this nine-channel receiver uses Class D amplification, which is generally cooler-running than Class A/B, and much more energy-efficient. Power, this time from Hypex UCXD250LP modules, doesn't hit the highs of the A35.8, however, being rated at 90W per channel (as opposed to 150W). A switch-mode power supply, with active power-factor correction (APFC), feeds into



the row of amp cards, each fitted with their own heatsinks – there are no cooling fans here. And as the SPA25 follows the brand's now customary approach to circuit design, using surface mount components and the shortest signal path wherever possible, the power devices are connected directly to the speaker output terminals.

As well as those six HDMI ports, the back of the receiver has a decent range of connections (albeit with none of the legacy video hookups still found on some competitors). There are analogue (with 7.1 support) and digital audio ins, a pair of subwoofer pre-outs, plus – welcome at this price – a USB-B input for hi-res playback (up to 768kHz PCM and DSD 512) from a PC/Mac. Perhaps the only missed trick is a headphone out, which might be expected from a device with musical talents.

If you don't want to listen to tunes from a traditional wired source, you can use Primare's Prisma app, which grants access to internet radio, network/USB stores, and streaming platforms. Only Spotify is built-in; others, including Tidal and Qobuz, are included under the 'Cast Services' heading, and require you to first set up the SPA25 via the Google Home app before you can use them. Note that Tidal Master files are, at the moment, off limits.

The app itself is tidy and responsive, and does offer a smattering of settings. However, full control of the SPA25 is via its onscreen menus and supplied backlit remote. The latter is a new multi-device model (supporting all Primare's Prisma-enabled hardware) and did take me a while to get used to – it has no labelled input keys, for example. Yet spend some time with the manual, and explore the text-based menus, and you'll uncover the amp's tricks, including 17 customisable presets, Dolby and DTS upmix modes, and speaker/channel settings. Of course, the addition of Dirac (the base level package, with correction >



AV INFO

PRODUCT: Nine-channel Class D AV receiver with Dirac

POSITION: Currently the only AV receiver in Primare's lineup

PEERS: Arcam AVR31; Anthem MRX 1140

1. This is Primare's first AV receiver since the 2014-era SPA23

2. The SPA25's aluminium front panel sits forward of the main chassis

3. Central OLED display is flanked by volume knob (right) and input select keys (left)



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up to 500Hz – but you can buy a license for the full enchilada) sends much of the setup process to your laptop.

Primare's screen menus feel a little old school with the lack of graphical flourishes, but the receiver itself is achingly good-looking. Its 12kg weight is supported by three rounded silver feet, and the front panel sits proud of the rest of the chassis. It's a thick slab of powder-coated line-grained aluminium, framing Primare's very readable OLED display. The style and build quality of the SPA25 can't be overstated.

Lightning-fast

Any five-grand AVR – no matter how luxurious it looks, or how many streaming/EQ smarts it has – will live or die on its movie sound quality. So allow me to play doctor and give the SPA25 a clean bill of health. This receiver is blessed with a scintillating audio performance that elevates it above the pack. It's Class D amp stage is lightning-fast,

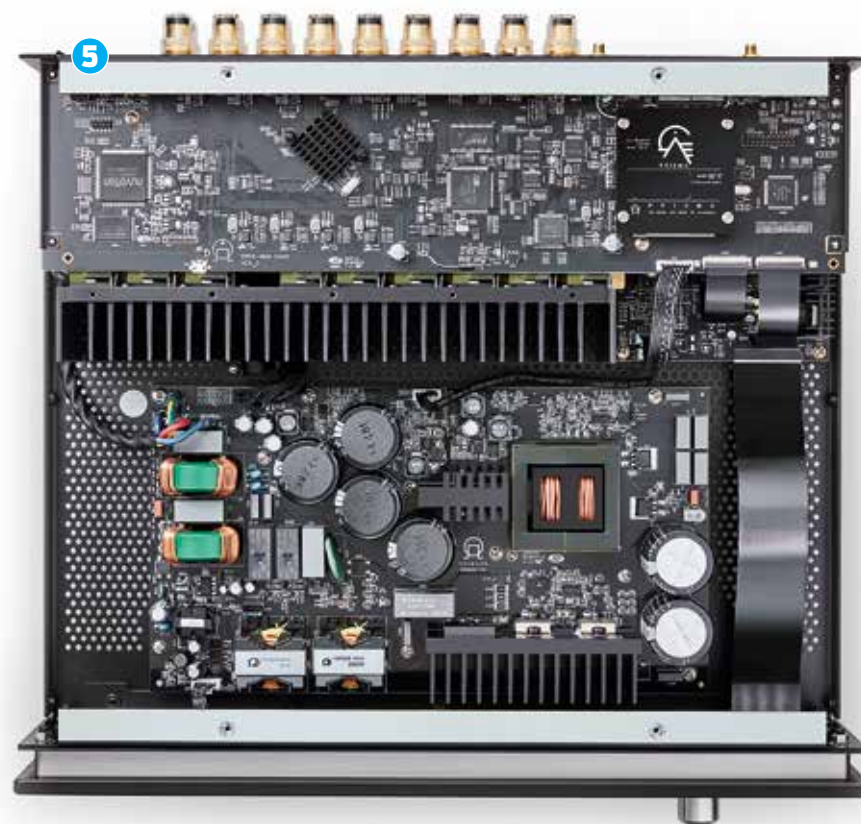
'The SPA25's sound is a mixture of smoothness and aggression that will make you want to keep listening'

detail retrieval is exemplary, and it paints largescale soundfields with grin-inducing accuracy. But what's arguably best of all about Primare's machine is the musical bent that underpins it all. Tonally, everything sounds richly inviting – be that dialogue, background music, or the bassy swells of a soundtrack.

Bonkers videogame adaptation *Uncharted* (4K BD) opens with the whistle of wind, and the most delicate of 'ping' sounds as a ring on a chain flutters in the air. It's a quietly stylish start to a movie, and the SPA25 lays out it all out in crystalline clarity. But as the sound of the wind grows to a roar, and our young hero (Tom Holland) realises he's plummeting toward certain death, the soundmix changes up a gear or two, and so does this amp.

There are whippy effects as plane cargo ropes rip free, slicing through the air and the soundstage. Next comes the score from Ramin Djawadi (*Pacific Rim, Eternals*), introduced by pounding drums and cello stabs, before laying on high violin strings that signify Holland's panic. There are subtle textures wherever you look (or listen).

It all sounds so effortless through the SPA25, and this is where the unit really earns its crust. Practically every AVR I've ever heard can throw its weight around, and send Foley effects flying to all corners of the room. Primare's model



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sounds classy and naturalistic while it does it. More thoroughbred horse than over-eager greyhound.

And you don't need the most immersive of Atmos or DTS:X mixes to have a thoroughly fab time with it. Zack Snyder's 2011 fantasy flick *Sucker Punch* plays out in Dolby Digital 5.1 via Sky Cinema, and sounded phenomenal, from the floaty, ethereal monologue that opens the film, to the disco-beat soundtrack (the Eurythmics cover is a hoot) and the largescale set-pieces.

Before Babydoll (Emily Browning) fights the giant Samurai, she enters The Wise Man's temple, footsteps echoing on stone floor and the SPA25 evoking the size of the space. The ensuing dialogue is beautifully rendered, one voice worn and rich, the other young and fragile.

Back outside, amidst the snow, Babydoll is greeted by the trio of oversized warriors, and the receiver unleashes a mighty bass performance. Each beastly growl sounds huge, as does the dragged sword across concrete floor. Primare's Class D amps don't want for speaker driving power – I had it laced to Perlisten R7t floorstanders (reviewed next issue) and their woofers were held in a firm grip.

The following scrap is awash with biting high-frequencies as timber is shattered and blades clash. None of it grated, or showed sign of strain. It merely sounded terrifying, a mixture of smoothness and aggression that will make you want to keep listening.

Thunderstruck

Stick to two-channel music and the SPA25 proves to be a chip off the Primare block. In this guise, the AVR's adaptive power supply swings into action to deliver a claimed 145W into 8ohm loads, and one of the unit's two eight-channel ESS 9026PRO DACs focuses conversion on just the L/R speakers. The company says this (plus the option of bi-amping), makes the SPA25 its most powerful integrated stereo amp yet.

Using the Prisma app, I streamed The Marshall Tucker Band's *Can't You See*. It shimmered from my stereo speakers with plump, brilliantly defined bass, sweet-sounding acoustic guitar and a flute (of all things) that seemed to float above it all. But it was a high-volume rendition of AC/DC's *Thunderstruck*, and this time through some smaller B&W 705 S2 standmounts, that impressed the most. This is a decent recording, but hardly 'audiophile-

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SPECIFICATIONS

DOLBY ATMOS: Yes **DTS:X:** Yes **IMAX ENHANCED:** No **MULTICHANNEL INPUT:** Yes. 7.1 phono audio inputs **MULTICHANNEL PRE-OUT:** No. 2 x subwoofer pre-outs; L/R/C pre-outs **MULTICHANNEL OUTPUT (CLAIMED):** 9 x 90W (into 8 ohms) **MULTIROOM:** Via Prisma app **AV INPUTS:** 3 x digital audio inputs (1 x coaxial, 2 x optical); 5 x analogue stereo **HDMI:** 6 x inputs; 2 x outputs **DIMENSIONS:** 430(w) x 142(h) x 420(d) **WEIGHT:** 12kg

FEATURES: Dirac Live; 2 x Ethernet LAN; Wi-Fi; Bluetooth; USB-B (PC/MAC); USB-A; Apple AirPlay 2; Chromecast; Spotify Connect; UPnP/DLNA; Prisma app and network player (including AIFF, FLAC, ALAC, WMA, DSD playback); Party/Stereo/Bypass modes; Hypex Class D amplification; 2 x ESS 9026PRO DACs; backlit remote control; aluminium front panel; 11.1-channel processing (use external stereo amp)

TESTED WITH



SUCKER PUNCH: After earning praise for his *Dawn of the Dead* remake, green-screen epic *300*, and *Watchmen* adaptation, Zack Snyder's career hit the buffers when this stylised, high-kicking fantasy flopped at cinemas. Yet *Sucker Punch* has plenty going for it, not least a wonderful AV presentation. A 4K BD would be nice...

grade', yet the clarity the SPA25 gave to the right-channel hi-hats in the intro section, and the depth and body of the drum kit when it arrives, was remarkable.

Welcome back

This receiver marks the triumphant return of a somewhat 'boutique' brand to the world of multichannel AV. There are more affordable competitors that carry more channels and more advanced HDMI connectivity, but I'm hard-pressed to think of one that sounds so comprehensively accomplished. Primare's SPA25 looks premium, sounds superb, and is worth every penny of its price ■

HCC VERDICT



Primare SPA25
→ £5,000 → www.primare.net

WE SAY: HDMI connectivity isn't state of the art, but if that doesn't matter to you then Primare's receiver must be heard. This is high-class hardware with heavenly looks.

4. Tidy rear panel includes 4-in, 2-out HDMI (4K/60), USB-B, and analogue input/pre-out bank

5.6. The SPA25 adheres to Primare's philosophy of 'artfully crafted ultra-short signal paths'