



PRIMARE SPA25 € 5,499

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Judgement ○○○○○

In recent years, Primare has focused on renewing its stereo offering. It returns to home cinema with the launch of the SPA25 AV receiver. In the meantime, a lot has changed in terms of surround experience. Will the Swedes manage to make a successful return?

# EQUALLY STRONG IN MUSIC AS SURROUND

The last AV receiver that Primare launched was the SPA23, eight years ago now. That's quite a long time in the home theater world. The big names in this segment - Denon/Marantz and Yamaha - traditionally released a full range of new AV receivers every year. Although, partly due to the shortages of parts, this is now more likely every two years. But still: Primare is clearly a brand that does not release an AV receiver regularly.

The appearance of the SPA25 is therefore quite special. And challenging, because since 2014 a lot has changed in terms of expectations among home cinema enthusiasts. Dolby Atmos, 4K video, HDR, streaming music services, advanced room calibration software...the list of novelties is quite long. So Primare already has an advantage: their new AV receiver offers an insane amount of upgrades compared to their previous model. Anyone who updates every year is forced to take smaller steps. The Primare SPA25 is a 9.2 AV receiver that can be configured to drive different surround setups. Its price tag of 5,499 euros and a feature list makes this receiver a challenger for

the highest models of the major brands. But also for more specialized names such as Arcam and Anthem.

In terms of streaming, it unpacks with Primare's own Prisma platform, in terms of room calibration, the company didn't have to drive far - from its own Malmö to Uppsala - to bring in Dirac.

## TRUSTED AND ELEGANT

The appearance of the SPA25 is minimalist in good Primare custom. You immediately recognize that you are dealing with a device from the Swedes, whether you go for the titanium gray or black version. The rounded

## PLUSES

### MINUSES

- ▶ Dirac chamber calibration
- + Sober yet comprehensive interface
- + Prisma-streamingoptions
- + Marries power with refinement
- + High-end stereoprestaties
- No HDMI 2.1
- Waiting for Roon Ready status

front panel that apparently 'sweats' in front of the housing is a feature of almost all Primares, from the compact I15 amplifier to the large A35.8 output stage. So the SPA25 is certainly not a break in style, and that's fine. It does give this device a distinctive face compared to average AV receivers. Yamaha, Denon and Marantz also take a more minimalistic approach to things these days, but this is still next-level. That thick front panel also gives this SPA25 a luxurious appearance, more akin to hi-fi equipment than other HT devices. If you put it away in a closet, it doesn't matter. However, you can park this Primare without hesitation on a TV cabinet without your living room being dominated by technology.

### HIGHLY FLEXIBLE

There's no such thing as minimalism when it comes to functionality. On the contrary, Primare opted for a 'maximalistic' approach where as a user you set the receiver completely as you want. For example, there is no mention of inputs, but up to seventeen 'presets'. Such a preset is not, for example, 'HDMI 1', but a collection of settings and inputs that you determine. For example, you can link preset 1 to HDMI 1 as the video input, with the secondary HDMI-out as the output, with an optical input as the audio input, and with the sound played through the receiver. Much more is possible, such as a fixed DSP mode, a certain Dirac filter and more.

You can also choose from one of five speaker presets. Because that flexibility is also there you can control five speaker setups, each with its own Dirac correction. Can be useful if you really want a stereo option that is fully optimized for music with a dedicated surround setup. Positive is the presence of autosense, a function that Primare also has on its stereo (pre)amplifiers such as the PRE35.

### Tech Specs

**What:** 9.2 AV receiver

**Power:** 9 x 90 Watt

**Inputs:** 4 x HDMI 2.0b, 2 x optical, coaxial, USB class B, 5 x cinch

**Outputs:** HDMI-eARC, HDMI, Preout (LRC), 2 x Subout

**Streaming:** Prisma-app, AirPlay 2, Chromecast, Spotify Connect

**Extras:** Dirac, smart home integration

**Dimensions:** 47 x 14.8 x 37.5 cm

**Weight:** 14kg

If you set this with a preset linked to one of the analog inputs, the receiver will immediately switch to the turntable (with phono preamp) or CD player connected to this input. You can even combine multiple presets with the same inputs, so you could have, say, one preset that the Apple TV sends to your projector and another that shows it on a TV in the kitchen.

### OSD WITH MUCH SIMPLICITY AND PEACE

You can use this 9.1 receiver for various building speaker configurations. It offers nine amplified channels, good for surround via 5.1.4 or 7.1.2. Height channels are thus supported, both in the form of speakers on the ceiling or as reflective Dolby models. In terms of pre-outs, the range is limited, but you can send the stereo channels to a separate stereo amplifier to achieve 7.1.4. An interesting option, because it opens the door to using a high-end stereo amplifier for music within a home theater.

Although we will see later that this is not often necessary thanks to the flexible amplifier approach. You can manually set a setup distances, levels and even delays in the interface of the SPA25.







You will find quite a lot of options, although the presentation and the range are a bit more sober than the AV receivers that go for a maximum of functions.

There are some small things here and there that we would have liked to see, such as the ability to place the on-screen display at the top of the screen with volume changes. This is useful if you watch with subtitles. It is clear that the SPA25's software is still being tweaked; so it is possible that the range of functions will expand. However, the brand's 'lagom' principles mean you should never expect to get a Yamaha-esque menu of sound modes and simulations. Simplicity: there is also something to be said for that.

#### **DIRAC PRESENT**

Choosing Dirac means that you get the SPA25 through this software to completely match your space. As is often the case, the SPA25 comes with a license for corrections up to 500 Hz. With that you can tackle many room problems like most room modes. If you still want to make adjustments over the full frequency range, you must upgrade to a full Dirac license yourself. Worth considering - if you know what you're doing. Dirac may be the best room calibration software in the world, but it is not software that offers a ready-made result at the touch of a button. It takes some time and knowledge to make the most of it. Some dealers therefore offer a service to set up a device at your home.

#### **AN HDMI CHALLENGE**

Primare does make one brave choice when it comes to the HDMI part. Because home theater builders who demand all stickers on the box will immediately reject SPA25 because it does not have HDMI 2.1 on board. The Swedish brand admits that finding suitable HDMI 2.1 boards was not easy. Then it got into talks with game developers about what hardware most gamers use, it turned out that the one scenario that actually requires HDMI 2.1 - 8K at 60fps, 4K at 120fps - was very rare.





The conclusion was to work with an HDMI 2.0 board that can handle 4K/60 and most HDR standards. In realistic terms, that is sufficient for film viewing for the near and perhaps more distant future. There are very few plans to make movie content in 8K, for example, and streaming services don't seem to be planning to do that yet either. But you can't ignore it: if you are a gamer who does play in those very highest resolutions and frame rates on your Xbox Series X or PS5, then the SPA25 is less suitable for you. Although, thanks to eARC, you could opt to hang that console directly on your TV, if it does support HDMI 2.1, of course.

The SPA25 is not extremely lavish in terms of video inputs: four HDMI inputs, two separately controllable outputs. For audio sources there are five cinch pairs, two optical inputs, a coaxial and - you don't often see that on an AV receiver - a USB class B port to connect a computer. This allows you to deliver hi-res material in the best quality, although that works just as well via the Prisma app. A typical Primare thing: there are two Ethernet ports, so you can also share an Ethernet connection with another device, such as an Apple TV 4K. Smart home integration is possible via IP, there is also an RS232 port and the necessary triggers. By the way, you can send it in combination with a certain trigger.

#### PRISMA

Primare built its own streaming platform years ago that is built into most products: Prisma. It is effective and relies on Chromecast and DLNA to give you many ways to play music through the Prisma app. You can easily play your own music files over the network in this app, and if you want to use a streaming service, switch to the app of that service. The SPA25 also has AirPlay 2 and Spotify Connect on board and is about to become Roon Ready

(it shows up as uncertified in Roon). So there are many ways to play music. However, Primare recently decided to enrich the Prisma app with embedded streaming services and internet radio. Apparently, the brand received a lot of feedback that users prefer to search and play their music within one app, instead of via the app of their streaming service. In short, in time the SPA25 will enable both paradigms.

#### UNDER THE HOOD

After the release of the A35.8 power stage with its Hypex Ncore modules, we wondered whether Primare would use its own UFPD technology in the SPA25 or Hypex.





## THERE IS PLENTY OF POWER TO DRIVE NINE CHANNELS

It has implemented the latter, but from the UCD series, not Ncore, more precisely the UCD250LP. This results in a receiver that can put a lot of watts into the scale: 90 watts per channel, even if each channel is controlled (4 or 8 ohms). When comparing with another brand, you have to look carefully at how manufacturers specify their figures. Often they will quote a higher number, but then controlled with two channels. Then the SPA25 reaches 145 watts per channel (with 8 ohm speakers).

It is striking that Primare never loses sight of stereo enthusiasts with its multi-channel products. The A35.8, for example, is as good an 8-channel power amp as it is a very powerful stereo amplifier (via bridging and bi-wiring). Same with the SPA25. It is an AV receiver, but the Swedes state that it can also be set up as a powerful integrated stereo amplifier. If you choose stereo and can bi-amp speakers, 290 watts per channel are available.

That stereo scenario is theoretically also possible with many other AV receivers. With the SPA25, however, the DAC section has also been modified to better present the stereo channels. The two ESS9026PRE chips are 8-channel DACs, with four channels dedicated to the left and right channels according to the designers to enhance stereo music reproduction.

### AS POWERFUL AS HIFI-ESQUE

For this review we do not hang the Primare receiver on our usual DALI Rubicon setup, but we connect it to a

5.x setup with Bowers & Wilkins 700 S3 speaker. Specifically, the 703 S3 floorstanders, the 705 S3 bookshelf speakers and the HTM71 S3 center speaker - all with the signature tweeter-on-top. To bring the whole thing to 5.1.4, we also connect the four DALI Alteco height speakers in the room and use the ELAC 2050 Sub as an LFE reproducer. The sources on duty are as usual an Oppo UDP-203, an Apple TV 4K and an Xbox One X.

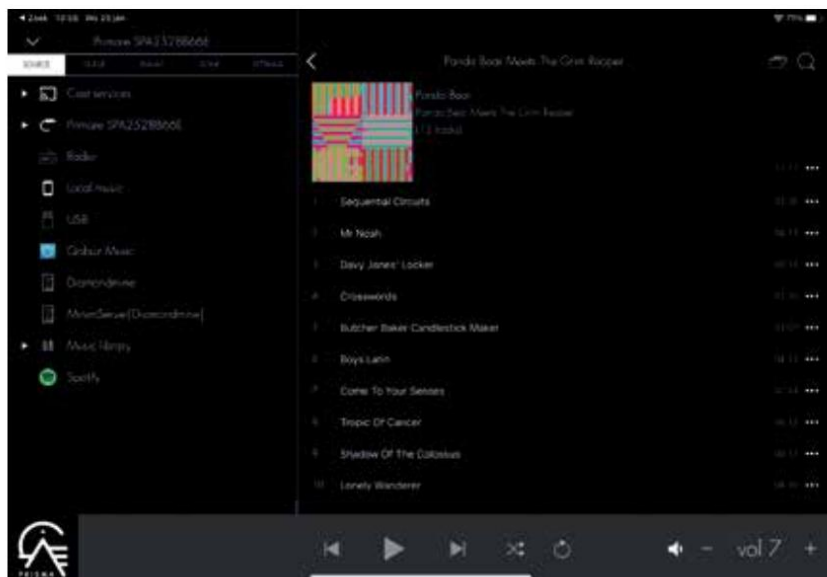
Game adaptations are usually not very good, but the first episodes of 'The Last of Us' suggest that this HBO series will break that curse. Even during the intense build-up to the collapse of society, the Primare knows how to transfer the minimal yet atmospheric soundtrack to the Bowers & Wilkins 700 S3 loudspeakers. The height channels will continue to be provided by the DALI Altecos on the wall.

Although initially not much exciting happens in the audio field, there are soon outliers that attract attention. The police cars passing by outside or the fighter jets flying over the viewer high in the air - subtlety is successfully married here to good positioning. And then we haven't called in Dirac yet.

We know from previous experience that correct Dirac adjustment can yield spectacular results. Although we weren't quite done fine-tuning yet, we were able to realize a very noticeable improvement. Both in The Last of Us and in an exciting scene from the Amazon Video series 'The Rig', when the torch on an oil rig has to be lit with a flare gun. In this sequence you almost continuously hear the waves crashing into the structure, and that is very present in this outdoor scene. There is a good immersion in the oppressive atmosphere of this series.

The complex Oscar-winning soundscapes of 'Dune' (UHD Blu-ray, Dolby Atmos) are, of course, a lot





tougher to put down properly. The marriage of the strange sound effects and the special music of Hans Zimmer produces something very unusual, distant yet intriguing. The challenge here is to create those soundscapes in a layered and defined way, because otherwise it sounds like a mush. The SPA25 succeeds in that, and we also notice that the receiver has the reserves to make those abrupt transitions from near-silence in some scenes to scenes with very intense audio. It becomes very impressive when Paul Atreides flies into a giant sandstorm; we can hear the grains of sand rattling past the cabin, just

as the mechanical parts give up the ghost. The moment the ornithopter rises above the storm, there is a very clever Atmos moment where the sound effect moves diagonally upwards. The ensuing crash is also a showcase of the Primare receiver's talent for delivering fine micro detail discreetly.

In 'Jurassic World: Dominion' there are enough dynamic peaks to register. Like the roar of dinosaurs of all kinds, for example when Chris Pratt and Bryce Dallas Howard are chased in Malta by a herd of raptors. It is striking that the effects in the rear channels are also very mature, with effects moving quickly and with good definition across the room.

It's an exciting performance, on the level of a receiver at this price point. What the SPA25 brings is a good nose for detail and relatively little coloring.

The hi-fi roots of the Swedes we notice while listening to music. Via the Apple TV 4K and Apple Music we can enjoy Sheku Kanneh-Mason, the virtuoso cello player, in a Dolby Atmos mix. Fortunately, it is still done quite subtly, making it sound like played in a concert hall.

The three-dimensionality is very convincing. What the Primare does excellently here is to put down the strings very naturally and authentically. We also have that with the fine guitar playing on 'The Longing' by Tamino, where the voice of (in stereo via Roon on the Oppo) Belgian-Moroccan singer hangs amid a lot of texture. Ask a die-hard stereo fan if he would like an AV receiver as a music player, and the answer is definitely 'no'. But put this device in a blind test, and it may well be 'yes'.

## CONCLUSION

The SPA25 is not your average AV receiver where a long list of features seems more important than the actual performance. Not that it's missing in this respect. Thanks to Dirac, the Primare has an excellent manner to tailor the playback to your speakers and room. There is also a lot of flexibility in how you can configure the device, without making the interface very complex. The lack of HDMI 2.1 support is a deal breaker for discerning gamers, but movie buffs will need less of it. We also appreciate that this receiver not only focuses on a sophisticated surround reproduction, but also really high-end music in stereo.

