

**Mark Craven** enjoys the refined sounds of Primare's latest home cinema processor



# SP25 Prisma is a smooth mover

Swedish audio company Primare likes to bandy around the words 'lagom' and 'hygge', the former translating to 'just right' and the latter signifying contentment and generally chilling out. Maybe this explains why its new AV processor has taken so long to arrive.

Let me explain. Two years ago Primare marked its return – after something of a hiatus – to the world of multichannel audio with the A35.8, an eight-channel power amplifier. This was good news all round, not least because multichannel amps aren't that common, particularly ones built around cool-running, high-efficiency Class D modules, and it sounded pretty damn sweet too [HCC #331]. As sure as day follows night, a partnering multichannel processor would be on the way. Wouldn't it?

The answer to that is 'yes', but Primare definitely didn't rush. First, it released the SPA25 [HCC #337], a new nine-channel AV receiver also based around Class D amplification. And while it showed the SP25 Prisma processor, auditioned here, at the Munich High-End show in 2023, it's taken a full year for it to reach shops.

No explanation is given for this delay, and while we can assume it might boil down to the usual supply chain issues around chipsets, etc, it might also be that Primare wanted to fine-tune the design of the SP25 Prisma, because it's at pains to point that it isn't simply the SPA25 with the power stage removed.

## Feet of engineering

It does look very similar though, adopting the same brushed metal titanium (silver) or black finish, and oh-so minimalist front panel with volume control and tiny standby and source



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up/down buttons flanking a long, slender display. This kind of spartan styling is very much a Primare thing (and even finds the setup mic input being placed around the back), as is the SP25 Prisma's use of three (rather than four) feet. But don't worry, it'll still sit sturdily on your AV cabinet.

Speaking of the back, this also has quite a minimalist feel compared to some AV processors, in part because analogue inputs and outputs are only offered on RCA, where some might have expected Primare to provide balanced XLR terminals to match its own power amplifiers – after all, its previous processor, the SP33, had balanced circuitry. I'm told, however, that cost implications account in part for the SP25 Prisma's 'single-ended' architecture, it being an 11-channel rather than seven-channel design, and that it outperforms the SP33 'on every parameter' regardless.

The processor offers four HDMI inputs, plus Main and Aux HDMI outputs, which is not an excessive number but likely more than enough for most buyers. As with the earlier SPA25 receiver, these are all HDMI 2.0 spec, rather than the 2.1 implementations required

for gamer features such as 4K/120Hz passthrough and VRR. Again, however, Primare is adamant that this isn't an issue for end users, as gamers in pursuit of optimum performance will connect their console/PC directly to their display, and not pass it through another device.

Arguably more of a feature shortfall concerns the SP25 Prisma's implementation of Dirac Live. Out of the box, the processor offers the room correction platform at its base level, tackling frequencies below 500Hz. Expanding to the 'full-bandwidth' (20Hz-20kHz) package will cost you an extra \$99 via Dirac – whereas on receivers from Pioneer and Onkyo, for example, full-bandwidth is included.

## Musically minded

There are other features here that are very nice to have, of course. The SP25 Prisma is somewhat unusual for an AV processor in having a USB-B input, which is a boon for those using their computer to manage music playback (and Roon Ready certification is promised soon as a free firmware update). The unit also incorporates Primare's proprietary Prisma network platform, meaning integration of streaming services in the Prisma app (including hi-res Tidal and Qobuz), DLNA playback, and Apple AirPlay 2, Spotify Connect and Chromecast options.

The SP25 Prisma will accept PCM to 768kHz/32-bit and DSD to DSD 512 over its USB connection. Digital decoding across all inputs is handled by the processor's pair of eight-channel ES9026PRE DACs, a configuration that provides extra brainpower for the front L/R channels, 'subtly improving stereo performance.'

On the movie side, 11-channel Dolby Atmos and DTS:X decoding accommodates speaker layouts to 7.1.4 (there's no Auro-3D handling or IMAX Enhanced certification), with the settings including specification of either 'Overhead' or 'Upward Firing' for your height speakers. Crossover and level can be set for each speaker, while turning Double Bass on will send both the LFE and full-range signal to your subwoofer when speakers are set to Full Range.

As slick as the SP25 Prisma is in its physical styling, its onscreen menus could do with a bit of a polish. They're not hard to get to grips with, displaying functions in a logical manner, but the text-based approach feels a little old-school and isn't particularly crisp. Further adjustments possible here include tweaking the brightness and timeout

of the unit's OLED display, changing standby settings, network setup and so on. There's also extensive customisation of input (x16) and audio (x5) presets, so you can set name, maximum volume, DSP mode, etc, for different sources.

To potter around in here, you use Primare's Prisma remote. This is slim in the hand and backlit, which is good, but operation can confuse due to its role as a handset for other Primare components – make sure you don't accidentally set it to 'CD' mode, or you might find your commands go ignored.

Antennas are supplied for the unit's Wi-Fi and Bluetooth >



## AV INFO

**PRODUCT:**  
11-channel home cinema processor with Dirac Live

**POSITION:**  
Currently Primare's only multichannel processor

**PEERS:**  
Marantz AV 10;  
Emotiva RMC-1L

**1. No setup mic input on Primare's minimalist front-panel – you'll find it around the back**

**2. The Prisma app manages playback from your network, internet radio and streaming services**

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connections, with the former in particular worth using if you aren't going to run an Ethernet connection. Also note that despite there being no built-in headphone amp, the SP25 Prisma has a Headphone Mode for when an outboard amp is connected, either via its pre-outs (with volume control) or via its line out. And on the subject of pre-outs, the processor has two 'Front' pairs, thereby supporting systems with bi-amped front L/R speakers – something Primare's power amplifiers [see boxout, opposite] encourage.

**A family affair**

I'm familiar with Primare stereo products, having used its PRE35 Prisma preamp for a while in a two-channel system,

and it's interesting how much of the brand's DNA appears to have carried through to the music side of this processor. In conjunction with Primare's A35.2 stereo amp, music played via its USB DAC input, streaming app, or straight into its analogue stage from a Hegel Viking CD player (using the Bypass preset), was all about clear detail, silky-smooth upper registers and depth and definition to bass. 'First Time Blues', from singer/guitarist Orianthi with some guest playing from Joe Bonamassa, was an ear-opener streamed through Tidal, as the SP25 Prisma really dug into the various shades of light and dark – Orianthi's rock-inflected vocals, the thick tone of the main guitar riff, the pounding drums and sprightly hi-hat.

Meanwhile, something dripping in atmosphere and soundstage craft, such as Boris Blank and Malia's more obviously audiophile 'Celestial Echo', was also impressive, thanks to a wide, detailed presentation and dynamic handling of its numerous effects. As a two-channel DAC/preamp, the SP25 Prisma cuts the hi-fi mustard.

Helping out here, presumably, is Primare's approach to internal construction and circuitry. Inside the high-quality casework, the manufacturer has stuck to its 'short signal path' ethos for the four-layer PCB, while isolating the preamp stage (with new IC op amps) from the SP25's DAC, streaming, video switching and audio processing elements. There's a dedicated power supply for the preamplification too.

**Dead impressive**

Moving upward from two channels, with Primare's A35.8 multichannel amp added to the mix for a 7.1.2 setup, this processor's refined, luxurious sound continued, only now with more in the way of low-end excitement. The opening scenes of *Mission: Impossible - Dead Reckoning* (4K Blu-ray) were painted with rich and resonant dialogue from the Russian submarine crew, well integrated LFE, and lush upper-frequency smoothness. Indeed, this might be the SP25 Prisma's calling card – no sense of HF distortion, no nasty edge at all. When torpedo tubes are loaded, treble

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effects sounded distinct and sharp, but not grating. And when the torpedo fails to impact and the mix goes quiet, Primare's processor easily handled the faint whine of high-pitched strings that breaks the silence.

Next up, Ethan Hunt meets a new IMF recruit in an empty Amsterdam building. The quietness of the scene was well played, the SP25 Prisma teasing out tiny details with realism, such as the rustling of a bag or footsteps on concrete, while the two-hander dialogue is crisply defined,

**'This might be the SP25 Prisma's calling card – no sense of HF distortion, no nasty edge at all'**

Tom Cruise's voice as distinct as always. Subsequently, the script rapidly takes us to the Empty Quarter of the Arabian desert, where the processor continues to paint a serene picture, disgorging the musical score and soft-touch detail with ease.

At this point you might think it lacks a dynamic side, until the soundtrack blooms into life as Hunt is spotted and a gunfight begins. While not losing any of its sense of control, the SP25 Prisma leans into the drama. Horse hooves pound the ground as bullets fly across the LCR stage, while Ilsa Foust's sniper rifle shots are exquisitely tight and the roaring wind of the sandstorm blows all through the room. This is an involving piece of sound design that worked a treat here, and told me an awful lot about the processor's ability to conduct a 3D soundfield.

## Primare's amp partners

The brand's A series has two-channel and eight-channel options – so how to make them fit?



Clearly, an 11-channel processor is crying out for an 11-channel power amplifier for the sake of simplicity and AV cabinet real estate. Primare, however, sells just the stereo A35.2 (£2,900) and the eight-channel A35.8 (£4,500), so if you want to create a one-brand combi you might be looking at more than one extra box, depending on your speaker setup. That said, because the A35.8's eight channels are split over four bridgeable pairs, there's some flexibility on offer – channels 'left over' from your Atmos array could be used for bi-amping one or more of your key speakers. For example, for a 7.1.4 system, Primare suggests possibly using three A35.2s and one A35.8, for a 'high-power' config with bi-amping of the LCR speakers...

## SPECIFICATIONS

**DOLBY ATMOS:** Yes **DTS:X:** Yes **IMAX ENHANCED:** No **MULTICHANNEL INPUT:** Yes. 7.1 **MULTIROOM:** No **HDMI:** 4 x inputs and 2 x outputs **AV INPUTS:** 3 x digital audio (2 x optical and 1 x coaxial); 5 x analogue stereo; USB-B (DAC input) **VIDEO UPSCALING:** No **DIMENSIONS:** 430(w) x 145(h) 405(d)mm **WEIGHT:** 12kg

**FEATURES:** Ethernet x2; USB-A; Wi-Fi and Bluetooth (with supplied antenna); 2 x subwoofer outputs; Dirac Live room correction (upgradeable to full-bandwidth); Prisma network player/streaming integration with app (includes Tidal Max and Qobuz); Chromecast built-in; Apple AirPlay 2; Spotify Connect; Roon Ready (via future firmware); audio and preset configuration; 2 x ESS 9026PRO eight-channel DACs; Prisma remote; headphone mode; HDMI 2.0 connectivity on inputs/outputs; black or titanium finish

## TESTED WITH



### MISSION: IMPOSSIBLE - DEAD RECKONING:

By now you might have thought Tom Cruise had tired of performing death-defying stunts, but this latest *M:I* instalment proves otherwise. Up there with the finest entries in the long-running franchise, this is blockbuster cinema at its best, and it comes with stonking sonics on 4K BD.

Dirac EQ, even if you stick to the basic licence, will make a difference to the SP25 Prisma's in-room presentation – and you should certainly run it, as in my experience it seems to tighten up *everything*. Choice of partnering amp will impact sound too. Primare's own models, with their snappy, transparent delivery, seem a smart fit. The chaos of *...Dead Reckoning's* Rome car chase, with Hunt in the electric yellow Fiat, came at me thick and fast, a collage of zippy sounds from throaty petrol engines to electric motors, squealing tires, and beeping horns.

The scene's woozy camera movements were accompanied by smooth panning effects, and the surge of engines from the rear of the soundstage was surprising in its ferocity. And when Hunt ends up locked to the steering wheel, with the car on the underground line and a train approaching, the sound of the latter rumbling along the tracks was eerily reminiscent of the hours I've spent riding the London tube...

## A star is born

Primare's SP25 Prisma is extremely impressive. It seems completely at ease dispensing stereo and multichannel soundtracks, with nothing sounding jarring or out of place to shatter your sense of enjoyment. There's a clean, smooth, absorbing air to its performance that, while perhaps not quite as attacking as some processors, should be applauded. By way of example, the 'Shallow' scene from *A Star is Born* (4K Blu-ray), is one of the most emotional moments in recent cinema history, and through the SP25 Prisma it literally tingled my spine.

Some might want more from Primare's model in terms of HDMI ports, balanced connectivity or UI panache, but I'm certain its sonic performance will draw you in ■

## HCC VERDICT



### Primare SP25 Prisma

→ £4,300 → [www.primare.net](http://www.primare.net)

**WE SAY:** Definitely a case of better late than never, Primare's 11-channel processor looks smart and sounds gorgeous. Just don't expect any HDMI 2.1 skills.

**3. The SP25 Prisma's five pairs of analogue inputs (bottom left) double up as a 7.1-channel input**

**4. Inside, Primare's custom toroidal transformer and analogue circuitry (bottom) are isolated from video/audio processing and network board (top)**