**Prime number**

Take one top-notch amp, add a DAC and streaming upgrade modules and the result is the I25 Prisma. David Vivian is impressed.

There are two types of modern integrated hi-fi amplifier. One has taken the idea of ‘integrated’ to a whole new level, adding a DAC and network streaming to the original pre/power in a box recipe, elevating its status to that of a true system hub. The other remains resolutely analogue with not a digital circuit in sight.

Sweden’s Primare understands this tension between die-hard purists and tech-savvy early adopters very well and its answer is both clever and blindingly obvious. In base form, its I25 integrated amp (last seen in our integrated amp Group Test, HFC 459) is a straightforward 100W design furnished with the company’s own compact and cool-running second-generation UFPD 2 Class D amplifier modules, which utilise high-speed switching rather than linear gain devices (and not ‘digital’, remember). UFPD stands for Ultra-Fast Power Device, an amplification module in a balanced configuration of four discrete amplifiers – two per channel. Primare is keen to point out that Class D amplifier technology has many inherent advantages, one of which is the ability to locate the heat sink directly on the circuit board within the amplification module, considerably reducing circuit path length and allowing for the power output devices to be directly connected to the speaker binding posts in the process.

There are five line-level RCA inputs and two outputs, plus sync/trigger and RS232 inputs for multi-room use. The I25 thus specified is an analogue integrated amp pure and simple, clean and understated in design and very nicely put together with control actions so slick and tactile they could make the elegant remote redundant.

Primare grew out of Danish industrial designer (and passionate audiophile) Bo Christensen’s frustration with the sound-quality, aesthetics and user interface of what he called “typical audio gear”. During the late eighties, he formed a team of like-minded designers, including electronics engineer Bent Nielsen, and formed Primare. Its mission was to design hi-fi of exceptional sound quality, elegance and user-friendliness, and to eschew the industry standard 12-month product life cycle by having actions so slick and tactile they could be in place before the second (SM35) decoder/processor module can join it. It’s the one that gives the I25 I’m looking at here its extra moniker: Prisma.

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**Spotify Connect**

Clarity, speed, grip, strong dynamics, neutral tonality – the Primare has it all

Nordic aesthetic still cuts it. The thick, brushed aluminium front panel, which stands proud of the main chassis by a few millimetres, has a single, lab-style rotary control that can be used for volume or input selection. It’s joined by three small buttons, one activating standby mode and the other pair for menu navigation and configuration. Although wide, the white-on-black OLED display in the middle is only 2cm tall and hard to read from a distance when showing track numbers, though the volume scale is a little larger. Under the lid, things are just as neat and efficient with two and four-layer double-sided circuit boards for shorter signal paths. Surface-mount components are also used whenever possible, again to keep signal paths short.

Updates slated for the second quarter of 2020 saw the Primare app for Android smartphones (currently iPhone, iPad and Android tablets are supported), AirPlay 2 and up-front Roon compatibility. Talking of the app, it covers just about everything including input switching, volume control, input sensitivity adjustment, input renaming and multi-room/multi-zone control between other Prisma-enabled devices.

Safely evolved from previous Primare designs, the spare yet refined

**REVIEWS**

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**PRIMARE I25 PRISMA £3,200**

**PRODUCT**

**Primare I25 Prisma
 Sweden/China**

**TYPE**

Integrated amplifier/DAC/pre-processor

**WEIGHT**

21 kg

**DIMENSIONS**

WxDxH: 450 x 105 x 410mm

**FEATURES**

- Digital inputs: 3x coaxial; 4x optical
- Digital outputs: 2x coaxial; 4x optical
- Analogue inputs: 5x balanced RCA; 5x unbalanced RCA
- Analogue outputs: 2x balanced RCA; 2x unbalanced RCA
- USB-A port
- Telephone 01423 358646
- Website: primare.net

Primare’s digital streaming platform or, as the company has it, the means to enjoy multi-room/multi-zone connectivity and control for playback of stored and streamed media, wired or wireless, all managed from any mobile device through a dedicated system control app. In addition to Bluetooth, AirPlay, and Chromecast core in conjunction with Google Home allows direct connection to hundreds of streaming applications. Updates slated for the second quarter of 2020 saw a Prisma app for Android smartphones (currently iPhone, iPad and Android tablets are supported), AirPlay 2 and up-front Roon compatibility. Talking of the app, it covers just about everything including input switching, volume control, input sensitivity adjustment, input renaming and multi-room/multi-zone control between other Prisma-enabled devices.

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Sound quality

Class D amplification remains a bone of contention among audiophiles, despite the huge gains in consistency and sound quality that have been achieved since the early days. Doubters – perhaps believing, as many apparently do, that ‘D’ stands for digital – could do worse than take a long, hard listen to the I25 Prisma. Yes, Class D still has an identifiable sonic signature, but it’s a far cry from the hard-edged, shiny, bright and off-puttingly chilly presentation of the hard-edged, shiny, bright and hard-edged Class D amplifiers. Despite the huge gains in consistency of contention among audiophiles, Class D amplification remains a bone of contention among audiophiles.

Subtly evolved from previous designs, the refined Nordic aesthetic still cuts it little if it fails to communicate the intention behind the playing and, again, we’re back in high-end territory. Irrespective of source – whether streaming the smooth soul of Anita Baker’s ‘Sweet Love’ on Tidal or playing the densely layered musical complexities of Pat Metheny’s ‘Imaginary Day’ on CD – the Primare combines impeccable timing with tight focus and a firm grasp of microdynamics, which does wonders for its ability to resolve nuance and inflection. It offers strong in-room presence where performers and instruments are portrayed with body and dimensionality in a truly spacious soundstage.

One of my favourite tracks from jazz fusioneers The Crusaders is ‘Shake Dance’, from their 1991 album ‘Healing Wounds’. Its relentlessly funky groove is great but the recording, while crisp and clean, is woefully dry, thin and bleached out – surprisingly so for a GRP production. There’s only so much the I25 can do to ameliorate this and it doesn’t inject as much warmth as a classic tube amp will, but still manages to deliver a plausibly fleshed-out presentation with a still greater sense of drive and depth.

A modern and heavily pumped electro-swing production such as Caravan Palace’s ‘Leena’ from the album ‘Chronologic’ is right up the Primare’s street, the amp exhibiting the kind of verve, slam and fulsome yet agile bass the track demands. Its relentlessly funky, high-energy funk is right up the Primare’s street, the amp exhibiting the kind of verve, slam and fulsome yet agile bass the track demands.

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Conclusion

Perhaps the OLED display could be a little larger. The tonal balance isn’t of a wonder box that artificialy warmed up, so it’s unlikely to appeal to tube aficionados. Maybe the app, while logically structured and impressively comprehensive, could be a bit slicker. But that’s about it as far as imperfections go. Analogue and digital in graceful harmony? That perfectly sums up the Primare I25 Prisma.

Enthusiastically recommended 

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY
VALUE FOR MONEY
BUILD QUALITY
FEATURES
OVERALL

Like: Superb sound quality; fine DAC; extensive streaming; spec; design and build

Dislike: Small display

SAYS: Something of a wonder box that marries the best of analogue and digital

www.hifichoice.co.uk

HiFi Choice