Primare 928 System

Sometimes you rediscover a classic once so far ahead of the curve that it cuts a dash to this day – and we’re not just talking style but sound. Is this ’80s amp one of them?

Review: David Price
Lab: Paul Miller

The 1980s was a decade of great change. Consumer products that had been the stuff of science fiction just 15 years earlier – digital watches, home computers, LaserDisc players – were now increasingly commonplace. The era had a dynamic, hedonistic feel, and it was now acceptable not just to have wealth but to show it. When it came to hi-fi, there was an explosion in the number of high-end products, many of which were styled in a manner sufficiently garish to impress your friends and family. Indeed, this brashness was a badge of authenticity – ‘real hi-fi’ stood in opposition to the likes of the achingly beautiful modernist creations of Bang & Olufsen’s industrial design guru Jacob Jensen. As fellow Dane Bo Christensen thought he could do better than both approaches however, and set about creating something so exquisite looking that it put even B&O to shame. As it happened, it was also one of the finest-sounding pre/power amplifier combinations of its era.

MUSIC OBSESSED

Primare Systems of Denmark – although now based in Sweden and trading as Primare Systems AB – was launched in 1984. It boasted a team of music-obsessed engineers that included Bent Nielsen, who is now the company’s electronics chief. The idea was to fuse superlative sound with exquisite ergonomics and a style unmistakably different to that of other high-end hi-fi. The 928 System was the result, launched in 1986 with a price tag of £8750. The concept was to make something that would go beyond the typical Japanese 12-month product cycle. The design brief also included making ‘living products’ that didn’t go out of fashion and could be upgraded in due course, as technologies changed.

Primare’s current marketing manager Terry Medelen explains that the company’s design language was based around the concept of ‘lagom’ – a Swedish term for ‘just the right amount’. The idea was to strike the right balance between ease-of-use and style, with no useless frilliness to detract from the user experience. This concept ‘informed our very design language was based around the concept of lagom – a Swedish term for ‘just the right amount’.

Today it is visually arresting in its sultry ’80s black, while a version offered in a satin grey finish was no less striking.

MEET THE PANEL

The package comprises the Series 928 preamplifier and two matching Series 928 monoblock power amplifiers. All together, they are surprisingly compact and seem smaller still, due to the clever packaging. Indeed, compared to high-end American components of the period, they’re an essay in minimalism. The chunky gold-plated volume control knob dominates, and feels positive to use. After the first batch of amplifiers, a wired remote control was bundled, which by the standards of the day was an audacious luxury.

At the time of its launch, the only serious music source around was a turntable – CD hadn’t yet achieved audiophile respectability – so the preamplifier has highly configurable phono inputs. Remove a panel and you’ll see DIP switches with ten settings for MC sensitivity and 12 for MC impedance. Another panel offers phono channel balance settings in 0.5dB steps from 0dB to 2dB, and there are DIPs for MM sensitivity too – although capacitance is set at a nominal 100pF for both types of cartridge.

The bank of ten toggle switches on the preamp performs various functions, though while having a delightfully ‘clickety’ action, they’re a tad fiddly to use. Inputs include MC and MM phono, CD, tuner and tape – although the latter doesn’t provide off-tape monitoring. There’s a low filter for vinyl rumble, switchable phase inversion and mute, while the full-size headphone socket reminds us that people used cans in the ’80s, too. Under the lid, meanwhile, electronics designer Bent Nielsen delivered something that would go beyond the typical Japanese 12-month product cycle.

Rather, it is the music that issues forth from the loudspeakers that impresses...

LEFT: Inside the 928 preamp [no 50 in 1986] the volume control is revealed as a precision 24-step attenuator. Note the separate plug-in cards for the MM and MC phono stages, and screened PSU alongside.

‘This is one of the finest solid-state amplifiers I have heard’

Primare says the amp is a fully balanced, zero (overall) negative feedback Class AB design, with high-quality components used including Sanken power transistors. Round the back there’s a choice of RCA or balanced inputs, with switchable input sensitivity, two very chunky gold-plated loudspeaker binding posts and an IEC power in, with a master power switch and fuse holder. Protection is provided against overheating, DC-offset, short circuits, RF interference and low voltage supply, the red LED indicating a fault condition. There’s even a variable speed cooling fan fitted inside, though Primare’s literature at the time stated this was unlikely to cut-in during normal use. Vital statistics for both preamplifier and monoblocks are 200x200x320mm (whd), and they weigh 9kg and 17kg, respectively.

2 DAVID LISTENS

Let’s cut to the chase: this is one of the finest solid-state amps I have heard. It has an evenness and openness that allows the listener to melt into the music. Whichever recording you care to play, the system lays it out on a plate with virtually nothing added or taken away. It also boasts copious amounts of power, which it delivers in a subtle, yet effortless, manner, there being no sense of the amp throwing its weight around in an effort to impress the listener. Rather, it is the music issuing forth from the loudspeakers that impresses...

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Note the separate plug-in cards for the MM and MC phono stages, and screened PSU alongside.
The headline news here is the amp’s cohesion. For example, 808 State’s ‘Joyrider’ [from Thermo Kings; ZTT WPCR-942] is an early ‘90s techno track that’s quite a challenging listen. There’s plenty of heavily compressed, dense synthesiser work and it’s pretty relentless, especially at higher volumes. The track can sound piercingly bright via some high-end amps – enough to have you reaching for the paracetamol – yet others can render it soft and rather euphonic sounding.

The Primare package treads an artful balance between the two presentations. Rather than sugaring the musical pill, it sounds translucent. The music doesn’t appear mediated or manipulated by the electronics but propagates around the room with an ease that seems uncanny. The 928 System does that old ‘magicking away the speakers trick’ and then some, there being little feeling of any demarcation between the listener and the recording.

VICE CAPTAIN

Soundstaging is also superb – both in its breadth and depth. With a simple, late ‘60s Blue Note recording such as Grant Green’s ‘Hurt So Bad’ [from Carrying On; Blue Note TOCJ-8667], this proved remarkable. The album was laid down with rudimentary analogue recording techniques, and properly reproduced can sound spectacularly wide and immersive. So it proved, with a ‘walkaround’ soundstage if there ever was one. Imaging was also extremely good, each instrumentalist sitting in their own precise point in space, playing independently from the others.

The way the amp rendered rhythmically driven music was excellent too. Although not a match for seriously expensive and/or tweaky tube stuff in this respect, it was not far off. Indeed, the benefit of its vice-like control of the low frequencies more than made up for the teeniest lack of liquidity in the midband. Icon’s ‘Desire (Icarus Mix)’ [from Various Artists, Behind The Eye Volume II; Eye Q Records 4509-99092-2] is a classic trance track that is all about the groove.

The 928 System made a masterful job of it, with tremendous grip from bottom to top. It didn’t seem in the least bit regimented – heard via some high-end solid-state amps it can sound as if the music has been ‘reclocked’ and delivered in a more metronomic way than when it was recorded. Here though, things shuffled along with a combination of bounce and grace. It didn’t come across as over-exuberant, yet nor was it too measured. Indeed it reminded me why I was so enamoured with this song when it first came out, all those years ago. Transients were dizzyingly fast, letting me hear the subtle interplay between the looped hi-hats and snare drums, while the bass synthesiser had true grunt without a hint of flabbiness.

SHEER FOCUS

It’s almost insulting to call the 928 System detailed, because this doesn’t fully convey its superlative resolution. The Stranglers’ cover of ‘Walk On By’ [from Peaches: The Very Best Of; EMI 5 40202 2] is a grungy late ‘70s new wave standard, where the band show off their technical virtuosity – which admittedly isn’t very ‘punk rock’. The sheer focus lavished on this old recording was quite something. You could pretty much hear every individual instrumental line playing along, with the various vocal and electric organ overdubs, plus that wonderfully scratchy guitar behind Jean-Jacques Burnel’s thumping bass guitar was delivered to a tee, as the snare drum and cymbal work battled alongside. Everything seemed so unforced and yet ‘It keeps you glued to your sofa listening, for hours on end’.

LEFT: The function of the ten gold-plated toggle switches (and the colour of each LED) is indicated by a panel on the top of the preamp. Input selection, absolute phase, mute and ‘low cut’ are included alongside a standby switch.
ABOVE: The 928 preamp [left] has three line inputs, a tape loop and separate MM/MC phono inputs (with comprehensive sensitivity and loading adjustments) and separate headphone amp. Balanced [XLR] and single-ended [RCA] outs drive matching inputs on the 928 power amp [right] which has gold-plated speaker cable clamps so tight, each strand in the mix becoming a key part of the song’s overall effect. Even as I upped the volume, this highly compressed track continued to be revealed in a linear fashion, without a hint of distortion.

The beautifully recorded ‘First Coronation’ by Ryuichi Sakamoto [from The Last Emperor (Original Soundtrack); Virgin CDV 2485] showed how special the Primare 928 System really is. While excellent in all traditional ‘high-end’ hi-fi respects, such as tonality and soundstaging, the overall effect is far greater even than the sum of these parts.

The amp threw a smooth and uniform, slightly off-white light on the proceedings, cleanly illuminating every part of the recording yet never actually throwing out glare. Great subtlety and delicacy was demonstrated even in the quietest moments, yet the amp was able to wield serious amounts of power on dynamic peaks when the need arose.

It made for a wonderfully easy yet entralling listen, the sort that keeps you glued to the sofa for hours on end. Great high-end products do this, whisking you away from the hi-fi, the recording and your listening room into a magical world of music where nothing else really matters.

AND BEYOND...

By 1992 Bo Christensen was thinking along different lines and released the 200 Series. It would have seemed more striking at the time it appeared, but it lacks the ‘80s design quirksiness of the 928 Series. It was more comprehensive though, comprising a preamp, monoblock power amps, matching tuner and CD player along with a complete system remote control.

His last Primare product was 1994’s 300 Series, which one might say set the design language of all the company’s subsequent products, including those of today. Christensen left soon after its launch, going on to form Bow Technologies.

PM

ABOVE: Dynamic power output versus distortion into 8ohm (black trace), 4ohm (red), 2ohm (blue) and 1ohm (green) speaker loads. Max. current is 30.9A

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HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

Contemporary Primare products are hugely sophisticated, but there is no denying that its very first – the 928 System – was exceptional by any measure. In terms of aesthetics, ergonomics and sonics it is markedly ahead of its age having a timelessness to both its beauty and its sound that makes it one of hi-fi’s greats. ‘Design,’ as Le Corbusier once said, ‘is intelligence made visible’, and the 928 System is genius.

Sound Quality: 90%

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Continuous power (>1% THD, 8/4ohm) 140W / 270W
Dynamic power (>1%THD, 8/4/2/1ohm) 140W / 280W / 530W / 955W
Output imp. [20Hz–20kHz, pre/power] 1.04 ohm / 0.133–0.144 ohm
Freq. resp. [20Hz–100kHz, pre/power] –1.0 to +0.08% / –0.0 to –1.75% dB
Input sensitivity [for 0dBV/0dBW] 100mV [pre] / 214mV [power]
A-wtd S/N ratio [for 0dBV/0dBW] 93.5dB [pre] / 83.6dB [power]
Distortion [20Hz–20kHz, 1V/10W] 0.004% / 0.016% / 0.042% / 0.088% dB
Power consumption, [pre/idle/rated o/p] 32W / 4.9W / 228W
Dimensions (W/H/D, Pre/Power) 200x260x320/200x260x320mm

0              -            -            -            -            -            -            -            -        100

0              -            -            -            -            -            -            -            -        100

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