

PRIMARE SPA21 ♦ £2,000 (approx) ♦ 01423 359 054 ♦ www.csesolutions.co.uk/

In praise of simple AV pleasures

Can too much technology be a bad thing? Alvin Gold puts the case for the Primare SPA21, an AV amp that's opted out of the fast lane



I have a question, not a rhetorical one – which is how it may look at first sight – but a question that goes right to the heart of many people's experience of home cinema hardware.

My question is: why is it all so complicated? Does home cinema need so many technologies, so much high-powered digital malarkey to make it tick, when stereo can be made to work with comparatively simple circuits, moderate power, no subwoofers – not even tone controls in a well-ordered system?

At one time it looked as though we might be spared from the tyranny of excessive complication by the introduction of HDMI-like single-wire interfaces for audio and video. But right now we're stuck in what looks like an indefinite transition, wherein we have to put up with old and new interfaces side by side just to ensure that the hardware will fulfil all reasonable requirements – and because the new high-tech interfaces don't always perform in practice as well as they appear on paper. To my mind, complication is almost invariably the sworn enemy of quality. If you ask me, it's one of the reasons why stereo systems so often outperform multichannel systems.

The Primare SPA21 bucks the complexity trend by being purposefully simple, or as simple as is reasonably possible and still pass as a modern, well equipped amplifier. The intention is flagged by the thick, high-quality aluminium front panel, whose clean lines are barely disturbed by the complement of two rotary controls, and a handful of selectors. It is almost a dead ringer for Primare's own stereo amplifiers, except that it is a little taller, deeper and (of course) considerably heavier. The back

panel is much more fully equipped, but overall the SPA21 remains remarkably straightforward, almost stripped down by contemporary home cinema standards. Has Primare thrown the baby out with the bath water?

The SPA21 has five power amplifiers, driven from two toroidal transformers which are said to be powerful enough to sustain 100 Watts/channel with all channels driven. Extra channels (eg surround back) are available using the line outputs, supplemented by a bass/LFE redirect, with the additional option of duplicating bass information on the main speakers and the subwoofer for real bass freaks. Outputs are available at line level for up to 8 channels, and there is a similar number of inputs for when a 7.1-channel analogue source is available.

The SPA21 offers a DTS ES (6.1-channel) mode, though not Dolby Pro Logic IIx. Anything above 5.1 channels will require an additional matching stereo power amplifier, which you can buy from the Primare range. There's also a 7.1-channel Pure analogue input for DVD-A and Super Audio CD sources, such as might be delivered by Primare's own DVD30 universal disc player.

Each input can be set up with sensible defaults, for example a standard surround

LAB REPORT

	Excellent	Good	Average	Poor
Manufacturer's Rated Output				
100W per ch into 8Ω (5 ch)				
Measured power @ 1kHz				
2ch driven: 140W into 8Ω	✓			
5ch driven: 125W into 8Ω	✓			
2ch driven: 240W into 4Ω	✓			
5ch driven: 190W into 4Ω		✓		
Fidelity firewall @ 1kHz/2ch				
130W: into 8Ω (0.02%THD)	✓			
Distortion @ 1kHz				
0.005%THD @ 50W (8Ω)		✓		
Frequency response				
20Hz-20kHz +/-0.1dB	✓			

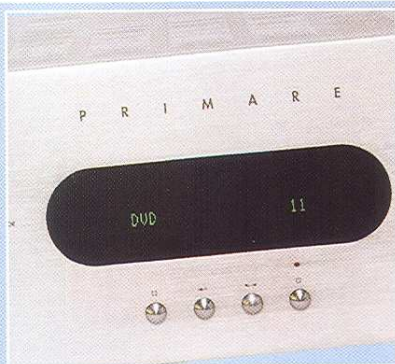
RATINGS

Highs: Build quality; solid sound for stereo and multichannel alike
 Lows: Limited connectivity; First generation audio codecs only; no auto setup;

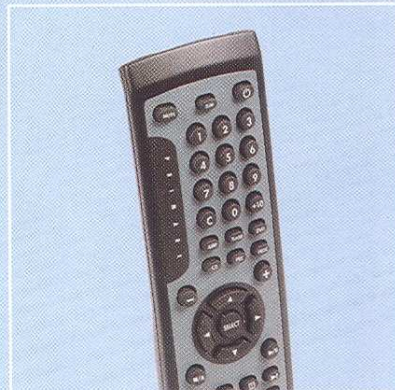
Sound	★★★★★
Build	★★★★★
Features	★★★★★
OVERALL	★★★★½







Swedish company Primare is best known for its high-end hi-fi components



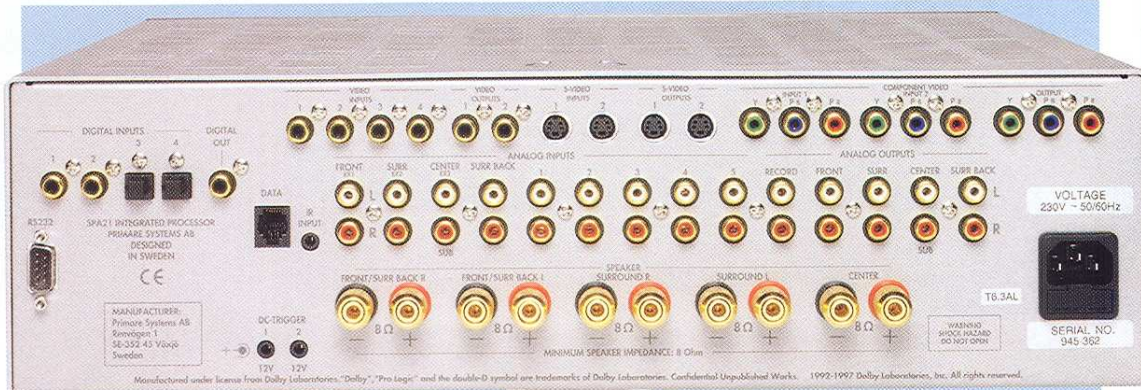
The remote is well made and remarkably simple to use



The minimal design and precision engineering inspire confidence

HCC PRACTICAL TIP

Compared to other similarly priced amplifiers from mainstream producers like Marantz, Pioneer or Denon, the feature omissions on the Primare SPA21 are significant. The most obvious include no internal power amplification for channels six and seven (the surround back channels in a 6.1 or 7.1 configuration). The Primare also lacks any form of mic-assisted auto setup, and it does not stretch to any of the latest digital interfaces, namely HDMI or IEEE1394/iLink/Firewire. Video switching is available in composite, S-Video and component video, but there is no video upsampling, which in turn means that your system may need multiple video connections to the system display.



Plenty of analogue connections here, but few digital inputs and no HDMI support

sound mode such as Dolby Pro Logic II for TV sources. Unused sources can be skipped when selecting inputs, making the amp extremely easy to use once it has been adjusted for the user's system, which shouldn't take long using the straightforward onscreen menu system.

In other respects, arguably where it counts most, the SPA21 is rather well equipped. The ability to programme each input with a preferred sound-processing algorithm is one such, so is the basic architecture of the amplifier, which includes custom in-house programming of the surround codecs onboard the Crystal CS493200 DSP. This claims to deliver better analogue processing (up to 24 bit 192kHz using PCM1738 DACs) than the off-the-shelf programs used in some rival hardware. A compartmentalised display and display driver section, a standard Primare feature to reduce mutual interference, and an unusually elaborate power supply section in which special care is taken to isolate circuit areas, are key to the SPA21's audio design.

Performance

The SPA21 may not win any prizes for equipment levels, but the resulting simplification undoubtedly explains its unusually fine audio performance. This is an amp of real refinement and definition, but above all it has a solid, meaty presence, a full-on presentation that is more akin to the standards expected of a good-quality stereo amplifier.

Image steering is explicit and capable of sustaining an immersive soundfield with well recorded film soundtracks – the opening set-piece scene from *Kill Bill Vol. 1* is a good example – though it rarely sounds quite as smooth or as progressive as the best. Overriding this, however, is the solidity of the sound, its presence and the feeling of control that it imparts. The

'The SPA21 is an amplifier of real refinement and definition, but above all it has a solid, meaty presence'

bass is immensely well controlled and stable, while the treble is clean, if slightly taciturn and restrained. But the overall effect is homogeneous, layered and subtle as well as packing a solid punch.

It is this style of presentation that makes the Primare a particularly good choice for a crossover audio/home cinema system, for someone who already has a quality stereo system and wishes to make the transition to multichannel without trading sound quality as part of the bargain. When it comes to grunt, the Primare is somewhat restrained. In our independent lab tests,

we measured 125W with all five channels driven – which is actually better than Primare's own 100W rating.

Conclusion

For those looking to both simplify the home cinema proposition without sacrificing performance, this SPA21 is prime contender. Perhaps, it's nearest counterparts are similar products from Naim and Lexicon; both share the Primare's core strengths along with a relatively-limited feature set, but the Primare scores extra for its attractive pricing and high-quality packaging ■

SPECIFICATIONS

ITEM	SUPPORT	DETAILS
Dolby Digital	○	Dolby 5.1, Surround EX, Pro-Logic II
DTS	○	DTS 5.1, ES, Matrix, ES Discrete, Neo:6
AV Inputs	○	4 inputs (composite and S-video)
Audio Inputs	○	8 line inputs
Component Inputs	○	2 inputs
Tape Loop	○	1 audio/video
AV Monitor output	○	2 composite, 2 S-video
Component output	○	1 outputs
Video upconversion	×	Not here
HDMI input/output	×	Not available
DVI input/output	×	Not available
Multichannel input	○	1 x 8 channels
Subwoofer output	○	1 phono output
Digital Audio input	○	2 optical, 2 electrical
Digital Audio output	○	1 electrical
Phono input stage	×	
Speaker out	○	5 pairs
Headphone	×	Not here
Amplification		5 x 100W
Tuner		No
Dimensions		430(w) x 135(h) x 400(d) mm
Weight		24.5kg
Also featuring		
RS232c, remote I/R in & 2x out (1 x programmable). Proprietary Primare 7.1 channel DSP mode. Menu selectable video, analogue audio & digital coaxial front panel input or output. True stereo bypass mode. Supplied with remote control that also operates Primare DVD player. All 8 channels available at line level.		