

Primare movers

Craftsmanship, customer satisfaction and attention to detail are the mainstays of the Primare story, which has seen the company grow from supplying a niche market with some of the most luxurious components around to becoming a global hi-fi brand whose aim is to take hi-end hi-fi to the masses. **John Bamford** meets owner Lars Pederson in Sweden

It seems like only yesterday when it was considered hi-fi heresy to turn off one's amplifier when retiring for the evening. In fact I recall a conversation, less than a decade ago, with an acquaintance who thought that a hi-fi wasn't a real hi-fi unless it was made in Salisbury and sported a Naim logo on the fascia. I had much better speakers than him, so I suggested he bring his CD player, amplifiers and power supplies over to my house in order that we could compare them with whatever components I was using at the time. 'That would be great,' my friend considered, 'but it would be a pointless exercise as my electronics only come on song after they've been powered up for four or five days.'

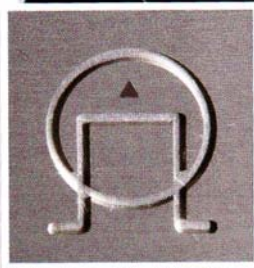
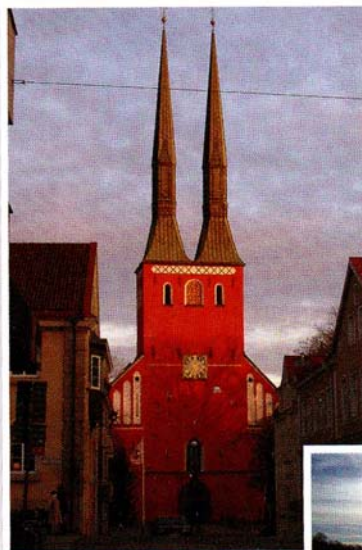
Today one feels guilty if leaving a component in standby, never mind leaving it fully powered up simply because it might sound better when it's 'warm'.

LET IT SNOW

Anyone unconvinced of the effects of climate change need only visit our close neighbours in Scandinavia. I'd prepared for arctic conditions on our visit to Primare Systems situated deep in the forests of Sweden, only to find that gas-guzzling 4x4s and snow chains are a thing of the past for the local community. 'We rarely get much snow these days,' said Lars Pedersen, the company's managing director, as we drove to the outskirts of Växjö to spend an afternoon listening to Primare's latest designs in Lars' purpose-built listening theatre. Lars drives a Lexus hybrid vehicle. Everyone in Växjö is mindful of their carbon footprint.

For as long as you're not one for the bright lights of a buzzing city, Växjö is truly a beautiful place in which to live. With a population of just under 80,000 (equivalent to the town centre of Wakefield in north Yorkshire) and a population density of just

RIGHT: Växjö in the south of Sweden, home to Primare Systems, is a cathedral city with a history dating to the 11th century



ABOVE: Lars Pedersen, MD of Primare Systems, has been at the helm since 1996. Inset picture shows Primare's iconic logo mark

ABOVE RIGHT: The SPA22 is a brand new 7ch AV amplifier employing 'UFPD' Class D power amp modules together with modular construction for upgrade 'cards' to avoid product obsolescence



48 people per square kilometre, the conurbation is surrounded by breathtaking lakes and forestry. We'd flown to Copenhagen in Denmark and taken a two hour train ride, north through the Swedish countryside, in order to arrive there. As we drove around the town, with the roads largely to ourselves, it felt as if the residents of Växjö had their own little piece of heaven here, remote from the majority of this planet's bustling population.

I was curious as to how on earth a hi-fi manufacturer producing audiophile products ended up being based such a long way from, er, anywhere...

'I'm Danish by birth and grew up in Copenhagen,' explained Lars, 'until teenage rebellion kicked in and I went to San Francisco during the hippy era of the mid-'60s.' This would account for Lars' encyclopaedic knowledge of west-coast rock music that he enjoys to this day, along with American jazz and blues. He still regards San Francisco as something of a second home and maintains many friends there. 'When I returned to Denmark in my 20s I determined that I should learn



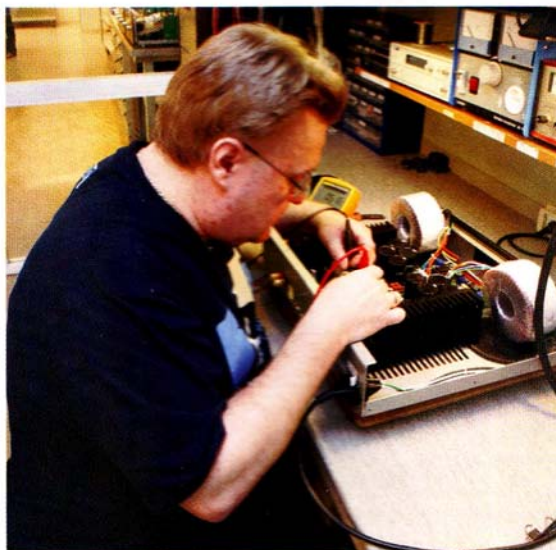
a trade in order to have any chance of supporting a family, so I became a cabinet maker and settled here in Sweden where furniture craftspeople worked in the spirit of hippy communes.'

Later during our visit Lars revealed that his main family home, now inhabited by his grown up son and his family, he built entirely himself – right down to the tables and chairs furnishing the property. Lars loves building things. When he needs to switch off from the pressures of maintaining a global sales and marketing operation that comes with the territory as the MD of Primare, there's nothing he enjoys more than building a new kitchen, or whatever, for the house he now inhabits with his wife in Växjö. 'The thing about cabinet making and building in general is that there's always an end to it. You start a project and when it's completed it's deeply satisfying; I find it hugely therapeutic.'

ON TARGET

His love of music and high quality replay found Lars working in a hi-fi store to help make ends meet when, like so many entrepreneurs in the hi-fi business, he found himself in the right place at the right time when he became the Scandinavian importer of British-made Target speaker stands and hi-fi equipment racks. This was nearly 30 years ago, when the hi-fi business was booming. And, as Lars is keen to point out, he had a great business from the outset because there was nothing to go wrong with his products.

Customer satisfaction was exemplary as Target's pricing was sensible and the products were eminently



ABOVE LEFT: Warehouse holds a double inventory of goods-in and checked goods ready for shipping out

ABOVE RIGHT: Per Jansson checking heatsink temperatures as products are soak tested for several days

fit for purpose. As there was nothing ever to break down with a stand fabricated from bent metal, a sale represented a profit in the bank and nothing was ever returned for servicing.

It might seem obvious, perhaps, but it became a lesson that Lars learned in business that forms the cornerstone of Primare's success today – as we were to discover later when we visited Primare's headquarters on the outskirts of town, just ten minutes from Lars' house. In Växjö, everything is just ten minutes away.

AHEAD OF ITS TIME

Audio historians will be aware of the bold design 'classics' of Bo Christensen, one of Denmark's leading industrial designers responsible for some iconic Primare designs during the '80s, long before the world of hi-fi had ever heard the term 'lifestyle'. Primare at this time was a niche company manufacturing some of the world's most expensive, luxurious and 'far out' audiophile products which, with hindsight, were way ahead of their time.

I recall vividly the few weeks I enjoyed the pleasure of having a Primare 928 preamp and monoblocks driving my system at home. Valve amplifiers, both home-grown and from America from the likes of Conrad-Johnson

'By the 1990s Lars had a successful business called Xena Audio which then owned Copland, Primare and QLN'

and Audio Research dominated the British ultra-high-end scene at his time (circa 1990), yet the solid-state Primare sounded gloriously sweet and refined and fabulously self-assured. The price of a 3-Series BMW, Primare's 928 was so luxurious that it operated via remote control, coming with a delicious coffee-table-style controller hewn from solid alloy. This at a time when remote control source selection and motorised volume potentiometers were the preserve of mass-market audio systems and rarely seen in high-end amps. The Primare 900 Series products were utterly exquisite.

By the 1990s Lars Pederson had created a successful business called Xena Audio which owned the Copland and QLN (loudspeakers) brands, financed through ↻

LEFT: Peter Jingsäter is chief of Customer Service

the sale of the distribution rights to Target products to Denmark's Ortofon company. Determined to grow his business beyond the realms of niche, high-end exclusivity, Lars allowed the designers of Copland valve electronics to go their own way in the latter part of the '90s. This allowed him to form a separate company, focusing his business solely on building the Primare brand and developing more affordable products that could reach a wider audience.

Taking the core values of Bo Christensen's industrial designs and the work of Primare's chief electronics designer, Bent Neilsen, Lars' ever-growing experience in business management and production engineering helped Primare develop to where it stands today, supplying markets to all reaches of the globe.

Bo Christensen, a freelance designer, has not been involved in the company since 1993 yet his elegant industrial designs for Primare have proved timeless in their beautiful simplicity and aesthetic appeal. One look at Primare's products and, you have to say, they are quintessentially Scandinavian.

ALL IN THE FAMILY

As with so many British electronics marques, Primare components today are manufactured in the Far East. Bent Neilsen and co-product development engineer Bjørn Holmqvist who joined the team in 2000 juggle their time between supervising their manufacturing suppliers in Taiwan and China and the mothership – Primare's design and testing headquarters in Växjö. No longer the preserve of the wealthy, Primare products today encompass CD players and integrated amplifiers costing hundreds rather than thousands of pounds. The range includes DVD players, AV preamps, two-channel and multichannel power amps, not to mention the fabulous £1200 CDi10 all-in-one system that features AM/FM or FM/DAB tuners (market/customer dependent) and simply requires adding loudspeakers to taste.

'Just because we know how to make an amplifier and we have a good sound, we still want to make a better one'



LEFT and BELOW: Checking one of the first SPA22 AV amplifiers, comparing it against Primare's references. Construction is modular, allowing for planned upgrade 'cards' to be slotted in



ABOVE: Lars Pedersen (centre) considers design drawings with colleagues

RIGHT: Otherwise referred to as 'the brooding chamber' – heat generated in this soak-testing room is circulated throughout the rest of the building



Primare has recently introduced a 2.1 channel DVD system too, the DVDi10 employing an Analog Devices video DAC and Genesis FLI2300 video processor with 1080p output via HDMI. As with every other Primare component the DVDi10 features data and IR inputs and RS232 control capability for integration in automated multi-room applications.

'We know that entertainment products are destined for family rooms and are likely to be sited on a shelf or sideboard,' explains Lars. 'Consequently in addition to electronics design we brainstorm design ideas and focus on useability and real world practicalities.' Neat touches, that don't come about just by accident, include the way these systems can be pushed right up against a room wall, with the slightly over-sized bonnet concealing connecting wires at the rear.

DESIGN: A TEAM EFFORT

Industrial design of Primare products today is a team effort, the company having the wherewithal to hire in expert assistance when required from some of Scandinavia's top design houses.

'We have always been performance driven rather than feature driven and we are recognised for continually pushing forward, especially in the fields of D-to-A conversion and amplifier sound quality. Just because we know how to make an amplifier and we have a good sound, we still have the enthusiasm to want to make a better one. We are driven by the desire to make things better with every generation of product; we want more dynamics, because we want our replay systems to sound more alive.'

The CDi10 and DVDi10 were Primare's first products to employ Class D amplification. Encouraged by the sound quality resulting from research in this area

1985

Primare formed by Bo Christensen

1986

928 Series pre/power amps

1992

200 Series pre/power amps, CD player and tuner

1993

Bo Christensen leaves

1994

Bent Nielsen develops 300 Series, blueprint for all future Primare products

1996

Lars Pederson takes over and moves Primare to Sweden

1998

20 Series and 30 Series, based on 300 Series but more affordable

2000

AV products launched

2001

Pre 30/A30.2 pre/power amplifiers, V10 DVD player

2003

DVD30 Universal disc player launched

2004

New 20 Series and 30 Series including I30 integrated amp, DVD26 DVD player, CDi10 one-box system using Class D amps

2008

DVDi10 DVD/CD one-box, SPA22 AV amplifier with modular design and SP32 seven-channel Pre. SPA22 first with UFPD Class D technology



Primare's very latest SPA22 AV amplifier and soon-to-be-released power amps to accompany the brand new SP32 AV preamplifier are all using ultra fast power device (UFPD) modules that Primare believes are the first audiophile Class D amplifiers.

'While Class D amplifiers initially can sound dynamic and vivid, extended listening often proves them to be fatiguing. Female voices can sound harsh and metallic, percussion like breaking glass. Our UFPD technology employs 30dB constant loop gain in the entire audio range and beyond the filter resonant frequency. It treats all signals equally, regardless of frequency or slew rate and can suppress the filter resonance entirely.'

Listening to Lars' system one would never guess that the Primare power amps were Class D amps, the sound being characteristically smooth and relaxed... and enormously powerful and dynamic, aided by Lars' JBL horn loudspeakers. Using two Blu-ray players (one American, one European) we spent an afternoon plundering his BD collection of concerts, grinning at the extra information of the 96/24 soundtracks. 'It's important to be excited by new formats and new ways of doing things rather than believing that there is only one way to make hi-fi sound and simply stagnating. We are going into the next phase; with the economy the way it is right now the spirit of the world will change and I feel this will accelerate the change of product types consumers use in the future.'

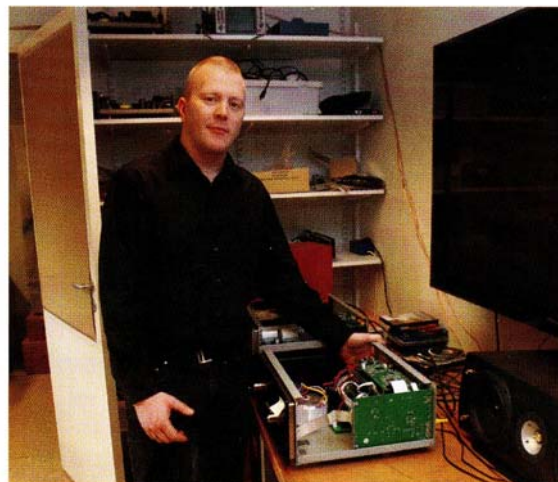
Later Lars reveals to me that many new products are on the drawing board, including amps that have on-board DACs and built-in media clients.

KEEPING THE CUSTOMER SATISFIED

Knowing that manufacturing was in the Far East, I hadn't expected to see much at Primare's HQ other than design offices, warehousing and a servicing/repair department. I couldn't have been more wrong, in fact, as every single product is soak tested for several days and thoroughly inspected to ensure 100% consistency before final packing and warehousing ready for sale. Under Pedersen and his team Primare's success has been built on reliability and customer satisfaction. Selling complex precision electronics components is nowhere near as straightforward as selling Target speaker stands – it's inevitable that components will fail once in a while – but Primare's focus is on eliminating every chance of failure wherever possible.

'It's fair to say that we are typically Scandinavian in our pragmatic approach to running a business,' Lars reasons. 'As there are only a dozen of us here we are working as a community; while we all have our specific

RIGHT: Primare's seminal 928 preamplifier – still the only hi-fi component in Copenhagen's Museum of Industrial Art



ABOVE LEFT: Gustav Ljunggren prepares items for shipping
ABOVE RIGHT: Bjørn Hegelstad introduces the new SP32

roles in the overall operation of Primare, everybody is multi-tasking and nothing is ever left to chance.

'Quality control is paramount, especially when reliant on outside suppliers, which is why every product is individually tested. After all, if a product fails not only have you disenfranchised a customer, but you've lost money too. Any profit from the original sale is lost several times over in the cost of shipping back to base and subsequent repair.'

TAKING UP-MARKET TO THE MASSES

From its niche, very up-market beginnings Primare has succeeded in bringing a taste of the high-end to the masses, just as Lars Pedersen and Bent Nielsen envisioned over a decade ago. Primare even supplies the chain of Magnolia AV stores in the USA, Magnolia being a little more focused on higher-quality products than the mass-market electronics superstores that have suffered terribly since the collapse of the US economy. Indeed, a peek at Magnolia's website today reveals that the chain ranges only six brands of AV electronics alongside a myriad flat panel TVs and 'home theater' projectors: B&K, Denon, Marantz, McIntosh, Pioneer and Primare. It's a fairytale success story of a small, specialist hi-fi manufacturer with audiophile roots branching out to the mainstream of consumer electronics.

Primare has a fine reputation to maintain. With its dedicated team of enthusiastic audiophiles in Växjö it has every intention of keeping it. ☺

