Primare I35 Prisma integrated amplifier

by Alan Sircom

I thought this would be one of the easiest reviews to write, and in a way it is. Having already extensively covered the base Primare I35 integrated amplifier in Issue 163 and the Prisma network and DAC concept in both reviews of the award-winning I25 (in Issue 172) and as a part of the 15 system (in Issue 187), joining all the dots to make the Primare I35 Prisma integrated amplifier shouldn't be too difficult?

In a way, I was right. But only in a way. What I didn't expect was just how significant the effect of the combination is on the perception of the I35. If ever there was a product that exhibits the notion that 'the whole is greater than the sum of the parts' it's the Primare I35 Prisma.

We're getting ahead of ourselves. First, a quick recap. The I35 was the first amplifier from the brand to feature its UFPD 2 amplifier modules. UFPD stands for Ultra Fast Power Module. This Primare designed and exclusive to the brand Class D module has long provided instantaneous current delivery and extremely low distortion, but in its new UFPD 2 guise has more linear amplification across the entire audible bandwidth than previous modules. It also means Primare can make a true 150 watt per channel amplifier in a relatively small chassis without heat issues.

The I35 is an extremely modular design, allowing a series of add-on board options to bring the amplifier from base model, through I35 DAC (with modular DAC board added) right through to the I35 Prisma tested here. Prisma adds a wired and wireless streaming board to the I35+DAC option. However, there are a significant number of other avenues to get access to that Primare streaming option, including using the matching CD35 CD player with its own Prisma option as a digital hub, and connect via the analogue inputs to the I35, or take that player's digital output to the I35's optional DAC. The core I35 sports two sets of XLR balanced inputs, three RCA single-ended line inputs, and both fixed and variable outputs for a home cinema processor or tape loop.

Adding both DAC and Prisma makes the I35 one of the most comprehensively specified integrated amplifiers out there at the moment. The DAC board alone adds four S/PDIF Toslink connectors and two coaxial RCA links, as well as USB input and S/PDIF/RCA output. But no AES/EBU link. ▶

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▶ Adding in the Prisma section brings two Ethernet connections, provision for an external USB hard drive and two antenna for connection to a smartphone for (Apple and Android chummy) Bluetooth music replay (Apple and Android chummy) or controlling the Prisma section via the Prisma app.

All of this is well documented in those previous reviews. There is not much point re-hashing them further. And, staying on that tip, the other thing that hasn't changed is the sonic performance of I35 or Prisma, when they are brought together under the same roof. It's the same enjoyable, musically-oriented performance we've heard from Primare, with a good sense of rhythm, a nice, wide soundstage and enough detail to make the presentation pass muster with the audiophile cognoscenti as much as it does with the music lovers who just want something entertaining and fuss-free. As I noted in the original review of the I35, there's something of the 'chrome bumper' Naim sound to this, although without the peaky sound of more than 30 years ago. And, one last sonic point; consistency. The DAC and Prisma sounds like the I35.

Tonally, the I35 Prisma is rich and satisfying rather than bright and breezy, and yet it comes over as both energetic and dynamic sounding. That's the 'Chrome Bumper' connection as these were all the elements that drove people into hi-fi stores in the 1980s, and all of those elements are improved here, with more detail, midrange clarity, and focus. And that holds regardless of input.

Set-up of Prisma is a breeze (at least for those net-savvy enough to have built their own home network), and the Prisma App makes connection and use simple. The app goes for the kind of unflustered simplicity we have come to expect (but sadly not often receive) from good network apps, and I'd put the Primare option (both in install and day-to-day use terms) up there with the best. In many respects, the next generation of audio buyers more as likely to be swayed by the quality of the app than by the character of the electronics, so Primare deserves praise for getting this right.

There was a line in that last paragraph that came to define how this review began to unfold: the next generation of audio buyers more as likely to be swayed by the quality of the app than by the character of the electronics. This is a key part of the Primare I35 Prisma. Not that the character of the electronics is somehow wanting, but it's the way your approach to the amplifier changes when thinking of it as the Primare I35 and the Primare I35 Prisma that shows just how we are changing, and why this product is at the epicentre of that change.

The I35 is a good, conventional amplifier. You use it in the way you have used amplifiers for decades. Select source, set volume level, listen. It's a part of a rack of electronics that may or may not include a CD player and a turntable. Cast your mind back 30 years or more and it could be doing the same task (OK, so the amplifier modules are very different, but the intent is the same). The amp with its built-in DAC has a similar position, although naturally it connects ▶

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Integrated amplifier with optional internal streamer and DAC

Power output: 2 × 150W in 8 Ohms

Minimum load: 2 ohms

Analogue Inputs: 2 × balanced (XLR), 3 × unbalanced (RCA) unbalanced variable (RCA)

Analogue outputs: 2× unbalanced variable (RCA)

Digital Inputs: 1 × USB-A, 1 × USB-B, 2 × RCA S/PDIF, 4 × Toslink S/PDIF, WLAN, LAN Line level

Digital Outputs: 1× RCA S/PDIF

Streaming/connectivity capabilities: multi-room/multi-zone, LAN, WLAN, Bluetooth®, AirPlay, Spotify Connect, Chromecast built-in, and RS-232 connectivity and control

Decoding capabilities: PCM to 24bit, 384kHz, DSD to DSD256 (DoP)

Frequency response: 20Hz–20kHz -0.2dB

Signal-to-noise ratio: > 100dB

THD+N: < 0.01%, 20Hz–20kHz, 10W at 8Ω

Dimensions (H×W×D): 10.6 × 43 × 42cm

Weight: 11kg

Price: £3,995

Manufactured by: Primare AB
URL: primare.com

Distributed in the UK by: Karma AV
URL: karma-av.co.uk
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▶ those digital sources directly to its built-in DAC, rather than through analogue connections... but once again it's an electronics box in a rack. Once you add in the Prisma, that all evaporates. Suddenly it's the only piece of equipment on display. It's the fit and forget/just add speakers digital hub. While we've had such devices before, the network component of the amplifier has not been so clearly an option before, and this allows you to view the Primare I35 as a 'before' and an 'after' Prisma product, and perhaps more importantly how that impacts upon you, the listener.

In a very real way, I've not had a more immediate example of just how potentially game-changing this is, even though I've been working with computer audio in some way or form since the Napster days. This isn't a 'technology' issue, it's one of philosophy of listening and the psychology of the listener. You change your way of thinking between 'I35' and 'I35 Prisma' and the change is well met and worth making.

It's an odd thing. The addition of Prisma almost immediately changes your perception of the Primare I35 from 'amplifier' to ' complete music-making entity'. It stops being just another product on the shelf, because it challenges the need for the rest of those products on the other shelves in your system. Even with a significant collection of unripped discs playing through a disc spinner of some description, you find yourself drawn almost inexorably to streaming; not in some Svengali-like way and not just for simplicity. It's because music happens that way and you want to get more of it. Where maybe you liked those additional devices as things you could enjoy in their own right, suddenly many become impediments to playing music as fast as you can. It's as if the I35 suddenly moves into pole position in your system and the other parts become of less and less importance. Granted, you still end up playing other formats (especially vinyl, which becomes your 'special occasion' listening source), but all that fuss and bother of having lots of extra bits in your system? They just stopped being a part of the audiophile obsession. Fast!

The Primare I35 Prisma isn't the only game in town, of course, and there are other fully integrated units that stream music from local and online sources with similar aplomb, but there's something about the Primare option that's beguiling.

Perhaps it's the absence of nonsense, the way it makes everything sound musically entertaining and enjoyable, or perhaps its the sheer ease of use. I'm pleased on a number of levels to have stepped from I35 to I35 Prisma, even though I suspect in today's world most people will just opt for the full-fat Prisma version. But that insight into how we relate to streaming and how it changes our perception for the better will stay with me. Thanks! **+**