



Celebrating pure audio

Primare's lush-looking SPA23 is an unapologetically stripped-down home cinema amplifier. **Steve May** appreciates its highly-priced economy

AV INFO

PRODUCT: Premium 5.1-channel home cinema amplifier

POSITION: Currently top of the Primare AV range

PEERS: Arcam FMJ AVR750, Anthem MRX-710; Denon AVR-4520

PRIMARE, PURVEYOR OF high-end AV and hi-fi, isn't a noted follower of fashion. Its stock in trade is immaculately built and designed components for the connoisseur. While this philosophy has a natural affinity with two-channel hi-fi, it's a less easy fit with AV, where features and functions are typically stacked higher than Godzilla's galoshes.

The SPA23 home cinema amp wears its attributes on its sleeve. This is a beautiful-looking amplifier: the distinctive Primare bullet knobs bookend the unit's display, which itself is refreshingly large and legible. A quartet of buttons offer a modicum of on-body control.

On the back panel, Primare has swept away the forest of legacy inputs which routinely blight AV receivers. This amplifier offers five HDMI inputs and two outputs. All are vanilla-flavoured v1.4 offerings, so no talk of 4K passthrough or ARC here. There's no HDMI standby passthrough either. They will, however, tolerate 3D signals, which is some

concession to modernity. The two HDMI outputs, it should be noted, cannot be used simultaneously; you need to specify an output for any given source in the setup menu. In addition to four stereo phono inputs, there's a set of 7.1 inputs for use with Super Audio CD and DVD-Audio players, plus a second audio zone feed and full set of pre-outs.

Additional connectivity comprises six digital audio inputs (three coaxial, three optical), plus digital outs for both. System control options cover IR, RS232 and a trio of 12V triggers. Speaker binding posts are reassuringly meaningful. Like Anthem's new MRX models, there's no network functionality at all, not even a USB input. If you want file playback, you'll need a separate network source.

The SPA23 is a standard 5.1 design, with each channel rated at 120W into 8 ohms. This isn't a fantasy figure. The SPA23 can make grown-up speakers bleed, as I found out when I selected *Linkin Park Live in Texas* with the



As well as this full-size remote, the SPA23 comes with a palm-sized zapper

volume unwittingly ramped up. The blast was loud enough to stampede cattle.

Performance is outstanding. Using an Oppo BD player routed into a Musical Fidelity V90 DAC, the SPA23 effortlessly paints a wide, dynamic soundstage. *P5HNG ME A*WY*, from the band's CD/DVD pack, has a driving urgency that demonstrates the SPA23's ability to ringfence vocal clarity regardless how forceful the metal wrapper. The same track from the accompanying live DVD, in DD 5.1, offers even greater delineation. Similarly, *Numb* drops fast, deep and tight, with the ambiance of the stadium venue subtle but entirely convincing.

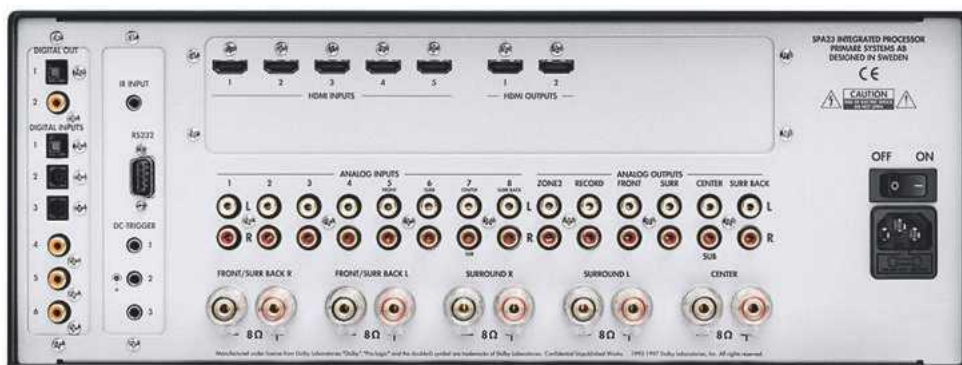
'Primare's UFPD amps sound lithe and entertaining. Multichannel mixes are seamlessly muscular'

Beneath the hood, the SPA23 employs 24-bit/192kps Wolfson DACs, used in conjunction with Burr Brown and Texas Instruments op-amps. The Bypass mode, which sidesteps all DSP, offers a tad more transparency than the main stereo mode, but there's not much to choose between the two.

Digital diva

The SPA23 is one of a new breed of Class D amps from Primare designated as UFPD (Ultra Fast Power Device). The combination of digital amplification and switch-mode power supply might once have raised eyebrows at high-end hi-fi soirees, but in truth, premium digital amplification can sound extremely exciting (a prime example being Bang & Olufsen's ICE Power) and the tech offers practical benefits in terms of efficiency and heat management. Of course, poorly implemented digital amps can also sound metallic and glassy. Here, UFPD keeps distortion uniformly low (particularly around 7kHz) irrespective of load, evidently helping vocal performance. The

Back-panel connectivity is neatly arranged



SPA23 also employs isolating Power Factor Control technology which regulates the current from the mains voltage, massaging the supply.

The good news is that UFPD sounds lithe and entertaining. During the opening sequence for *Star Trek: Into Darkness*, Kirk and Bones flee from an unruly tribe intent on skewering them; spears whistle cleanly from front to rear. As the VFX grow in scale, so does the audio. When the erupting volcano roils around Spock, the shuttle craft spins around the soundfield, its engines evidently doing some heavy lifting from LCR to right rear, all seamlessly muscular via the Primare. This amp does spectacle well!

The SPA23 predictably snubs the trend of ubiquitous auto calibration. It takes a more frugal approach to setup, but it's not all sackcloth and ashes. The menu is a clean textual affair, covering all the required input, audio, video and speaker settings, plus control/zone 2 configuration. The video input allows you to not only assign and rename sources, but set equipment triggers, AV delay (in ms) and default audio processing, be it stereo, all-channel party mode, Pro-Logic IIx or Neo: 6.

Similarly, individual level and distance for speakers can be managed. You can alter the size and crossover for left, right and sub, plus centre and surrounds, in 10Hz increments from 40Hz to 200Hz, along with levels and distance. There's also a menu option, called Double Bass, to engage the subwoofer for stereophonic material (not so nice).

As you might have gathered, this Primare has zero interest in extra height or width processing. DTS-HD Master Audio and Dolby TrueHD are decoded using a Sharc DSP from Analog Devices; the amp naturally copes with sibling codecs such as DTS Neo:6, DTS 96/24 and Dolby Digital EX.

Class-leading clarity

The Primare SPA23 is an unashamedly uncomplicated home cinema receiver, enlivened by gorgeous design and ingenious amplification technology. While it's unlikely to be shortlisted by studious badge-hunters, it should definitely appeal to those after a premium multichannel experience. It's fit, fast and capable of class-leading clarity ■

ON THE MENU



→ Primare's menu system is as unfussy as its hardware design. Resolutely text-based, it's nevertheless easy to navigate and quick to use

SPECIFICATIONS

- DOLBY TRUEHD:** Yes. Plus Pro-Logic IIx
- DTS-HD MASTER AUDIO:** Yes. Plus Neo:6
- THX:** No
- MULTICHANNEL INPUT:** Yes. 7.1 analogue inputs
- MULTICHANNEL OUTPUT (CLAIMED):** 5 x 120W (into 8 ohms)
- MULTIROOM:** Yes. Second audio zone
- AV INPUTS:** 4 x stereo phono; 6 x digital audio (3 x optical and 3 x coaxial)
- HDMI:** Yes. 5 x inputs; 2 x outputs (v1.4)
- VIDEO UPSCALING:** Yes. To 1080p
- COMPONENT VIDEO:** No
- DIMENSIONS:** 430(w) x 385(d) x 180(h)mm
- WEIGHT:** 15kg
- ALSO FEATURING:** 3 x 12V triggers, RS232 and IR control; UFPD amplifier technology; Bypass mode; Power Factor Control technology; source -assignable inputs

HCC VERDICT



Primare SPA23

→ £3,500 Approx → www.karma-av.co.uk
→ Tel: 01423 358846

HIGHS: Dynamic, articulate presentation with acres of headroom; beautiful build quality and design; a doddle to use
LOWS: Limited specification – no network functionality, no HDMI standby passthrough and no 4K compatibility

Performance ★★★★★
Design ★★★★★
Features ★★★★★
Overall ★★★★★