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PrimaLuna **WERELDPREMIÈRE!**

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Prologue Premium

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PRIMALUNA PROLOGUE PREMIUM INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER AND CD PLAYER



PrimaLuna strikes again!

PrimaLuna founder Herman van den Dungen is well-known for his original vision and working method concerning the audio community. He is a true master in finding inventive “out of the box” methods of offering existing or original products to enthusiastic customers. A prime example of this ingenuity starts when a stylus company is not willing to supply their products to a fledgling (at the time) company, Durob Audio. Herman doesn’t think twice, and approaches another stylus manufacturer where he was taught to replace elliptical diamond tips with then “modern” Shibata diamondtips. Herman is soon considered as the man in audioland who finds a solution for every challenge. (It was Robin Hood who stated “Every challenge has a solution; if there is a way, we will find that way”). Today Herman is quite busy with organizing affordable production in China of beautiful and very high-quality audio products designed by him and its team. In this issue of Music & Emotion we have the world’s first look at the brand-new Prologue Premium Integrated Amplifier and CD player!



The name PrimaLuna is Italian, and means “first moon”. It was actually Herman’s grandmother who indirectly came up with the name. Herman’s grandfather (the first Herman van den Dungen) was given the nickname “Maantje” by his wife, which means “Little Moon”. So, take the first Herman, combine with moon or Little Moon you eventually get “first moon” or in Italian: PrimaLuna! The primary goal of this brand is to create the greatest possible quality product for the lowest possible amount. In Herman’s years of experience in audio, his greatest irritation has always been the disappointing reliability of many high-end products. To be able to realize his goal, he knew to surround himself by the best minds in the audio industry such as Marcel Croese (former Goldmund chief engineer), Jan de Groot (ex-Sphinx), and Dominique Chenet (ex-Jadis) make up his team, not to mention his network of distributors from around the world. After years of preparation, the first PrimaLuna product, the Prologue One Integrated Amplifier, entered the market in 2003. This firmly and compactly built tube amp is still available today and car-

ries a selection of quality components, including PrimaLuna’s own transformers, which are positioned in the middle of a precision hand-wired circuit. Like all PrimaLuna amplifiers, the Prologue One incorporates a push-pull ultralinear circuit, using four EL34 power tubes for 35 watts x 2 power output. The most striking component is PrimaLuna’s proprietary Adaptive AutoBias system, and a nearly 100% effective protection circuit. It is due to these innovative circuits that PrimaLuna is perhaps the most influential product on opening the world of tube amplifiers to a larger group of people, many of whom had been turned off of tube equipment because of reliability issues. With PrimaLuna’s unparalleled reliability, excellent sound quality and very affordable pricing of around 1,000 [in 2003], the Prologue One took the audio community by storm. In the years after the release of the Prologue One, the range has been steadily expanded with among other things a Prologue Two integrated with KT88 power tubes; and some years later a very high-quality tube CD player with a tube-based clock, the Prologue Eight. In 2005, PrimaLu-

na introduced the more luxurious Dia-Logue Series in addition to the relatively basic ProLogue Series. These products are superlative in every way, and have among other things a wider chassis with an eye-catching tube protection cover, better components at critical locations, larger power and output transformers, greatly improved voltage regulation and a full-function remote control. DiaLogue amplifiers can even switch from triode to ultralinear via remote; a feature that is, as far as I know, unique to PrimaLuna!

ProLogue Premium series

After several years of successful sales, eventually it becomes necessary to renew and improve the original ProLogue Series designs from 2003. The PrimaLuna design team has not been asleep these past few years, so the new ProLogue Premium Series is far more than a simple update. When Herman personally delivered the two boxes, I was not immediately astonished by the weight. Tube products usually weigh more than their transistorized brethren, especially because of the transformers. What did astonish me, however, was the looks of ■■■NEXT

the design. I thought to myself, "Herman, you said I was going to get the new ProLogue for review, not the more expensive DiaLogue!" As I continue unpacking, I keep thinking I am dealing a DiaLogue amp. Once I take a look at the front panel though, I know it's the ProLogue Premium model. It is easy to confuse the two, even sitting next to each other the ProLogue Premium and DiaLogue models do look a lot alike. Nevertheless, there are some easily perceptible differences. The first and most notable comes immediately when you try to move them; the DiaLogue is at least about 10kg [22 lbs] heavier than the ProLogue Premium due to its larger transformers. The DiaLogue is also about 2 cm wider. There are more differences internally, but the fact remains that both models at first glance look like two drops of water. Before I start off with my review, I think it is important to explain the new structure of the PrimaLuna program; in September 2009, quite a bit is changing. The original ProLogue One and Two will be replaced by a single, technically updated ProLogue Classic integrated amp. The ProLogue Eight CD-Player will remain in the line as well. The remaining ProLogue models will gradually be removed from the line up over the next two years. The new ProLogue Premium Series will cover all currently known models, but the cosmetic and technical designs will be all new. Instead of having a model One (EL34) and model Two (KT88) integrated, the two models will be combined into one: the ProLogue Premium Integrated Amplifier. The same approach is taken with the stereo and monoblock amplifiers. The model Three preamplifier becomes the ProLogue Premium Preamplifier, and the model Eight CD-player becomes the ProLogue Premium CD Player.

ProLogue Premium Integrated Amplifier

Once I had absorbed all of this information, I was interested in finding out what the new prices will be. The ProLogue Classic Integrated Amplifier, which based on the original ProLogue Two with KT88 power tubes, keeps it's same



retail price of € 1,650, in spite of several technical improvements. You can also purchase the ProLogue Classic integrated equipped with EL34 tubes € 1,450. The new ProLogue Premium Integrated Amplifier with KT88 tubes retails for € 2,150 – considerably more expensive. The EL34 version sells for € 1,950. The DiaLogue Two retail price is € 2,400, still a financial step up. When I began to carefully inspect my to-be-reviewed ProLogue Premium Integrated Amplifier, I noticed an extraordinary beautiful product, at first glance giving the impression of a product with a much higher price tag. The product has extraordinarily solid build quality, finished in a beautiful anthracite metallic hand-rubbed gloss paint. The volume and selector knobs turn very smoothly, and

both the ALPS volume and 5-source source selector switch are controllable with a very beautiful anodized aluminum remote. Two rubber O-rings at each end of the remote offer a nice touch, and help to protect your precious pieces of furniture. The tubecage has a smooth round shape and very solid construction, that can be easily removed if desired. The rear side exudes real high end flair with its high-quality and well-spaced connectors; well maybe the speaker terminals are a bit close together, but offer both 4 Ohm and 8 Ohm connections. Removing the bottom plate reveals a sight that is a joy for they eyes, with plenty of hard-wired connections and some small PC boards for the autobias and various protection circuits. The ProLogue Premium Integrated Amplifier is sold with a





choice of four KT88 or four EL34 power tubes, and four 12AU7 input and driver tubes. Though each tube proudly bears the PrimaLuna logo, they are from the Chinese Shuguang factory; one of the largest producers of new tubes in the world. As PrimaLuna purchases such a large quantity of tubes, they get first choice out of all tubes produced. That is to say that, out of 1000 factory-selected and approved tubes, PrimaLuna selects 600 of the best, rejecting the rest and sending them back to the factory. That's what we call serious quality control.

Technical changes

Thanks to the larger chassis of the new models, more space is available for installing updated parts and no-compromise circuitry. The design team certainly

didn't choose the easy route; the list of changes is pretty serious. Here they come the one after the other: The ProLogue Premium Integrated Amplifier provides a switch on the right side of the chassis that adjusts the Adaptive AutoBias to optimize for for KT88 or EL34 power tubes. Next is the modification of the input tubes that are used. Originally the ProLogue series used the tried-and-true combination of two 12AX7 input tubes and two 12AU7 driver tubes. In the ProLogue Premium products, the 12AX7 tubes have been replaced by 12AU7 tubes. This tube has lower distortion values and larger linearity, as well as considerably lower amplifying factor, so low in fact that designer Marcel Croese had to design a new circuit around the 12AU7 in order to be able to

use them the way he wanted to. Happily I was able to test the original ProLogue along side the ProLogue Premium amplifier with the new tubes! Furthermore, the ProLogue Premium series use fast recovery diodes in the power supply, larger output transformers, and higher quality components are implemented in all vital areas in the circuit. The Adaptive AutoBias system has been further refined, and the protection circuit has been improved to offer the most protection possible: Bad tube indicator LEDs have been installed in front of each power tube to indicate a failing tube, and Output Transformer Protection that helps to protect the output transformers from catastrophic failure, even when no speakers are connected to the amp.

ProLogue Premium CD Player

Just like the Integrated Amplifier described above, the original ProLogue Eight CD-player has now been integrated into the more beguiling and larger chassis. Not only does it give the player a more robust appearance, but the added space is well-used when installing the components, allowing for optimal placement to minimize noise and hum. The CD player weighs in at a substantial 17kg [37.5 lbs]. As with the amplifier, the biggest internal change in the cd-player is the modification of the input tubes, incorporating four 12AU7 tubes. Two 5AR4 rectifiers carry over from its predecessor, quite striking for a CD-player in this price-range, which according to PrimaLuna offers considerable sonic advantages compared to standard solid-state rectifier circuits. Also the SuperTube-Clock is quite remarkable with measurably improved properties over other clocks. PrimaLuna is the only company in the world to offer a clock design using a tube as the oscillator. The rest of the player has been executed in a very sober way. Beside the demure blue/green display and the transport drawer, you find only four push buttons: Play/pause, stop/open, skip forward, and skip back. On the system remote control you find some more functions, but don't expect a repeat function or direct track choice, although the repeat function is hidden but

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still available! The backside provides the same high-quality RCA connectors as found on the amplifier, as well as both coaxial and optical digital outputs.

Listening 1 - KT88 power tubes

Since my Integrated Amplifier came standard with the KT88 power tubes, I decide to start with that configuration. I was fortunate to have both a Classic (with the old tube configuration) and a Premium, I decide to start playing with the former variant long enough to feel well prepared for the changes in the new Premium models. Only after I had made myself familiar—again—with the standard ProLogue model, I felt ready to test the Premium model. I kicked things off with the newest Andreas Vollenweider CD of Andreas Vollenweider Air (Noble 0196302CTT). The track “air dance” starts with gentle breathing, building to a large number of people sighing and panting louder and louder, until they eventually end up in a tasteful apotheosis with fully accompanying instruments. It is a beautiful opening for a CD in the known atmosphere of pushing, pulling and especially swinging style like Vollenweider used to have on his very first albums. The PrimaLuna started off well, immediately showing a

pleasantly sounding and stable soundstage. The different instruments are easily recognizable, while together with the harmonic tones of the electrical harp, they know how to melange themselves to one large organic image. Specifically the CD Player combines a remarkably large tonal richness with fluid and spacious reproduction which is quite rare with CD players. It’s maybe a bit much to call this a reproduction of an analog turntable, but the ProLogue Premium CD player does stand apart from most others. The next CD is the well-known Breaking Silence from Janis Ian. From this already well-recorded album, I recently received a rare gold disc version from Analogue Productions (Capp027). When I played the track “Tattoo” the reproduction was intensively emotional and organic, yet a little less precise or defined than I am normally used to. Now it’s time to find out what kind of difference I can expect with the new tube configuration. And what a difference it was! When I played the same track on the new ProLogue Premium amplifier, I could hardly believe my ears. The difference was astounding. There is a lot more air and the sound seemed more natural and holographic, far more than the original amplifier. This new configura-

tion is a big step forward. Suddenly Janis Ian’s song lyrics and musical parameters come together in a very tangible way. I am enthralled by the chosen tonal balance, which beautifully blends the traditional pink tinted tube reproduction of older designs and the often clinical tightness that characterizes so many solid-state products. Tonally the ProLogue Premium Integrated tends to have a kind of light-footed character in the low frequencies. Bass is very well defined, and can supply enough pressure, but the real strength that characterizes the far more expensive tube amplifiers with their larger output transformers, is missing a bit. Distortion levels are noticeably lower, and the tonality is far more natural with the new tube circuit. An excellent first impression!

Listening 2 - EL34 power tubes

The next listening session consisted of exchanging the KT88 power tubes for a quartet EL34 tubes. The EL34 tube is a very different power tube, so the power goes down a bit from 2 x 40 Watts with the KT88s, to 2 x 35 watts with the EL34s; not a big deal. I continue for a while longer with the beautiful Janis Ian album and the track “What about love?” Like the rest of the album, this track



grows beautifully during play. It starts subtly with acoustic guitar play, before adding a deep-reaching, growling electrical bass guitar and finally completed by the fragile voice of Janis and the high-energy of banging drums. The sonic difference between both types of power tubes isn't going to shock the world, but is still perceptible. The EL34 builds less on power and dynamics, and more on refinement and spatial character. The beautiful studio-acoustics of Breaking Silence have been carefully fine-tuned blending "real" acoustical as well as artificial with an EMT tube echo plate. With

the EL34 tube, this recording breathes even more and now the amplifier lets you hear an even more feminine Janis. The sound is also a bit sweeter, more subtle and spacious compared to the KT88s; the latter having a tighter and more impactful bass, better equipped to handle larger dynamic contrasts. In the end, your own tastes and the rest of your equipment will help to decide which tube you will prefer.

Listening 3 - EAT KT88 power tubes

For the last session we are finally going to use the extremely ambitious Euro Au-

dio Team KT88 tubes from the Slovakian Republic. These EAT tubes are not only famous for their special qualities but also for their extreme price tag! A quartet of KT88 tubes costs a hefty 960, which is about half the retail price of a new ProLogue Premium Integrated Amplifier! I have heard a lot about these tubes, but never had the opportunity to listen to them myself. The EAT KT88s come very well packed in a beautiful printed carton box with pre-cut foam and include a number of test certificates. Physically they stand out from other KT88s because of their satin black tube base; on most others you find chrome. What makes these tubes so expensive is the labor-intensive manufacturing process, in combination with the traditional build processes and selected materials. For example, it takes six to eight hours per tube just to execute the vacuum process; this is three to four times longer than the competition. Also these tubes are burned in twice and used for 24 hours in an amplifier for various test procedures, after which measurements are taken, providing the tube passes its screening process. Once I had removed the original Chinese tubes, I carefully inserted the EAT tubes into the snug PrimaLuna tube sockets. Next I eagerly switched **▶▶NEXT**

Associated Components:

Loudspeakers	Master Contemporary C, Verity Finn
CD-Player	North Star Design T192 + Extremo DAC, Accuphase DP600
Integrated amplifier	Unison Research Performance, Accuphase €-350
Equipment Racks	Finite Elemente Pagode Master Reference HD12, Furnaud Pressand 1ST
Interconnect	Siltech Royal Signature Empress
Digital cable	North Star Design White Gold I2S
Loudspeaker cables	Nirvana SX, Siltech Classic Anniversary 770L
AC cables	Nirvana PC, Kemp Reference, Essential Audio Tools Current Conductor, Siltech Royal Signature Ruby Hill II
Acoustic treatment	RPG Modex Plate (4x), Acustica Applicata DAAD 4 (2x)

the amplifier on and after a short while (lucky me!) all 4 power tubes begin to show their warm glow. Since EAT burns in the tubes at the factory, there is no need to do that yourself; and with the superb Adaptive AutoBias circuit from PrimaLuna, it is possible to make a very fast judgement. The verdict? That isn't too difficult to describe, as I am almost immediately overwhelmed by the enormous difference. No, I take it back; by the enormous improvement! Rarely have I ever, regardless of tube amp, heard such a big change and real improvement after exchanging a tube. Usually it is a little bit more of this, a little less of that, and if you are lucky you at best hear a subtle improvement. Make no mistake, the original PrimaLuna tubes are of the highest caliber, but after using the EAT tubes, the ProLogue Premium Integrated Amplifier soars to another level! The improvements came especially in areas where the differences with my own reference tube amplifier, the much more expensive Unison Research Performance amplifier, were the biggest. Right away I noticed a huge increase in dynamics and associated contrast, a lot more resolving power, and the tonal balance is a lot more neutral and slightly less forgiving. Most of all, the EAT tubes give a feeling of 3-dimensionality, that feeling of listening to real artists instead of a reproduction. At first thought, it might sound ridiculous to pay almost 1000 Euro for power tubes in an amplifier that costs 2000 Euro, but on the other hand it proves just how much more quality is available in the PrimaLuna concept than I originally expected. The only disadvantage is that with frequent use, these EAT tubes have to be replaced after about 3 years; a fairly costly business.

Conclusion

With so many other influencing parameters, this review has become quite vast, serious and complex. I tried to discuss as many issues as possible, both inside outside, to be able to fully understand these remarkable products. To achieve this I received a lot of assistance from the PrimaLuna design team, and I am grateful for their help. If I were to de-

fine these new products in one word, that word would be easy. The reproduction is very easy and relaxing, a result you can enjoy comfortably while reading a book, or while critically listening to a new piece of music you just bought. The functions are just as simple as a transistor set, just switch them on and they play. Immediately the ProLogue Premium pieces sound just as they should. With respect to their predecessors, large steps ahead have been made. There is now a larger and more stunning chassis, better components throughout, and most important the dramatic sonic improvement in the preamp section. The differences between the mutually tested power tubes shows how well the basic qualities of these products actually are. The standard KT88s are nice all-round, fluent and powerful. The EL34s are a bit shy and sweeter, but also more refined and spacious. The EAT KT88 tubes boost/catapult the amplifier to a high-

er level. You must hear the improvement for yourself in order to believe it. Now I am left to ponder; how will the more expensive up-coming [EpiLogue] PrimaLuna models sound with these EAT tubes? Enough for me to dream of. Fortunately the pleasant prices of these review products are not a dream, but pure reality. PrimaLuna strikes again!

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