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PrimaLuna's superb new Prologue One integrated amplifier

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COMPETITION - WIN REVOLVER'S SUPERB R45 LOUDSPEAKERS

Tubes strike!



There's certainly no shortage of fine sub-thousand pound transistor amplifiers on the market, but finding a good tube design at this price is another matter. Newly formed Dutch company PrimaLuna looks set to change this with its £800 Prologue 1 integrated, says Dominic Todd...

normally look at a product's rivals later on in the review, but in this case I think it's worth examining them straight away. Take a deep breath and consider the Naim Nait 5i (£700), Musical Fidelity X-150 (£800), Arcam Diva A90 (£850), Cyrus 8 (£800), and Sugden A21a (£900). By anyone's standards, it's one formidable list of opponents, and life certainly isn't going to be easy for any new kid on the block. Yet the PrimaLuna has one critical key ingredient that all these rivals lack; thermionic valves.

Whilst one would imagine the Class-A Sugden to be the closest sonic rival, actual tube amplifiers are still pretty rare around this price. Unless you're prepared to build one of the World Audio kits, then the closest rival is probably Icon Audio's £900 Stereo 40i. Rather like the Icon Audio, the PrimaLuna also uses 4 EL-34 valves and is also built in China. It appears that PrimaLuna's Herman van den Dungen wasn't alone in his thinking [see panel]...

Irrespective of where it's made, I was actually very impressed with the Prologue 1's build quality. It's certainly no Naim Nait, but succeeds

in different ways. For a start there are no circuit boards. Everything is hard wired and, by and large, very neatly and professionally too. I could only find a couple of solder joints whose ragged finish just let the side down. The great advantage of hardwiring, of course, is that it makes tweaking so much easier, although I'd let the warranty run its course before attacking with soldering iron!

Component quality is fair, and actually a little better than you'd expect at this price. As well as the EL-34s, there are Russian Electroharmonix 12AX7 and 12AU7 driver valves. The ALPS volume pot is a decent device and operates smoothly. The internal 'speaker cable isn't of especially high quality but the plastic encased speaker binding posts were better than I'd expected. You don't by an amp' like this for features but, even so, it would be nice to find an output to compliment the four line level inputs. This won't be an issue for digital recorders, but for recording from and/or to analogue, this could be a pain. The unit looked good with evenly applied paint and a very practical valve guard. Overall, when it comes to style, fit and finish, PrimaLuna can be proud of this first attempt.

SOUND QUALITY

Hooked up to a pair of Mordaunt Short MS906 Avant loudspeakers, I found the Prologue 1 considerably

more than adequate in terms of sound quality. As you'd expect from this type of amplifier, with Capercaillie's 'Why Won't You Touch Me?', there was some softening at frequency extremes. Yet although the bass certainly lacked the tautness of the Naim Nait, it did actually pack quite a substantial punch. In terms of bass weight the PrimaLuna is up there with the best at this price. Yet it was the midrange that really impressed, especially with this type of music. There was a mellifluous tone to the lead vocalist and great presence too. The downside was a slight lack of clarity in terms of staging, although it never became bad enough to suspect a 'speaker of being reverse phased.

A smooth and beguiling midrange you'd kind of expect from a valve amp', but the intricate detail of higher frequencies was rather more surprising. Whilst there are transistor rivals that are more incisive still, there was plenty of detail and space around the percussion. The highlight, however, had to be the violin's timbre, which instantly relegated the transistor rivals to sounding rather mechanical. Yet it didn't get it all its own way. At higher volumes the sound did noticeably harden, and the sound became harsher at just the point when the others would be just starting to get into their stride - careful loudspeaker matching should alleviate this, however...

The outstanding string tone that I'd heard before was present again with 'The Divine Comedy's 'Sticks and Stones'. With the possible exception of the Sugden A21a, I felt that the string timbre was matchless at this price and just the type of 'taste of the high end' that PrimaLuna probably had in mind. Again the vocals had a great sense of body, with good height of stage. My only quibble here would be that although the vocalist was portrayed with great



presence and clarity, the staging was rather flat. A rival such as the Musical Fidelity X150 would have pushed the sound further into the room. Of course this is very much a presentational issue and whether you prefer your music to be presented before you, wash over you, or fired towards you with precision and force is down to personal taste. The PrimaLuna is very much a "presenter" in this case.

Of more concern was the soft bass, which, in this case, meant that the song lost some of its drama. The key here is that, more so than with its rivals, the choice of a pair of taut and efficient 'speakers is crucial to making the most of the amp'. Intriguingly, whilst the stringed timbre had been superb, the brass section was less so. By the standards of its leading transistor rivals, I found the upper mid-band slightly cloudy, and thus reducing the focus and realism of some of the brass sections...

Neil Young's 'Old Man' showed that qualities that had impressed or otherwise before needn't necessarily remain consistent across different music types. Whilst I'd found the staging to be a little flat previously, when the pace picked up about a third of the way through this particular song, the Prologue 1 could clearly reach deep into the room. More impressive still was the resolution afforded to steel and slide guitar. Whilst it wasn't massively analytical, one really could hear the clear textural differences between the two. The fact that I noticed, again that these weren't simply two ordinary guitars, is the type of detail typical in the PrimaLuna's presentation. It will get you thinking about the music again. An intimate experience then, even if the percussion wasn't as crisp as it could have been.

Royksopp's 'Remind Me' continued with the surprisingly upfront vocals, yet it was more the intensity of the introduction that impressed. This device obviously had a real affinity with the music, in a way that would make the casual listener stop what they were doing and sit down for a more serious listen.

Cone-flapping bass wallop was also on the agenda, but just don't expect the cones to be moving in the most linear of fashions. Whilst there's ample noise to annoy the neighbours, the control isn't quite there. Indeed after a spell with a Naim Nait 5i you may even feel obliged to call the Prologue 1's bass crude. No matter, because the PrimaLuna rallied in other areas. There were subtle effects drawn from the music that some competitors would miss altogether. Combined with the terrific attack in the lower midrange (just before it all goes soft), this really made for a captivating listen.

The same wonderful depth of insight into the music (for an amp' of this price) was present with Alexander Borodin's 'In the Steppes of Central Asia'. If you like a real sense of the recording venue then this could be just your type. Again, it's this sort of quality which you'd expect from a much more expensive amplifier, even if the rather subdued brass section isn't. As before the fluid and natural string section was rather slighted by a less than energetic brass, which lacked both bite and presence. I also noticed that whilst the dynamic scale was generally good, it could become a little compressed when the music became denser, especially so at high volume levels. Otherwise the smooth, seamless flow of music came as a welcome antidote to some of the rather more mechanical sounding transistors.

Unless you chose totally unsuitable 'speakers, it would be hard not to warm to the PrimaLuna. With simpler music there's often a level of insight and realism that's way above the usual class standard. Whilst the bass is rather soft, its

weight can't be faulted, and with the right sort of 'speaker - such as Revolver's R45 - could produce transistor-busting dynamics. Yet the PrimaLuna's not without its weaknesses too. Compression can set in, and the lack of bite can make some instruments sound lacklustre. Here, perhaps, is one of those rare amplifiers that would actually suit a 'speaker that is obviously bright in balance.

If you're looking for the consummate all rounder at this price then, clearly, the PrimaLuna isn't it. As well as the sonic disadvantages there's also the lack of a recording output, remote control and headphone socket to consider. Not to mention the bulk...Whereas a Nait will happily slip into the tightest space, and work reliably, the PrimaLuna won't. But then again it's a specialist product, and I love it all the more for being so. Take a bit of time in matching a system around the PrimaLuna and it will illuminate music like very few others this price. At £800, it's an absolute bargain!

PRIMA WHO ARE?

PrimaLuna are a brand new company associated with Herman van den Dungen of AH! fame. The intention was to create a model range that offered more than a taste of the high end, but for considerably less cash. Unsurprisingly this has mostly been achieved by building the products in China. As well as the Prologue 1, there is the Prologue 2 version, which features KT-88 tubes instead of EL-34s. In the future, PrimaLuna intend to introduce an automatic bias circuit and tube-fuse-protection. These have mainly been requested by the US and Japanese markets. Of more interest to us is the possibility of a pre/power version and possibly even tube sources such as tuner and CD. As is often the case, it all depends upon demand.

MEASURED PERFORMANCE

The Prologue One produces 40W per channel from its 8ohm winding. The figure drops to 36W from the 4ohm tap due to reduced coupling efficiency. This is all you can get from EL34s running in auto-bias push-pull.

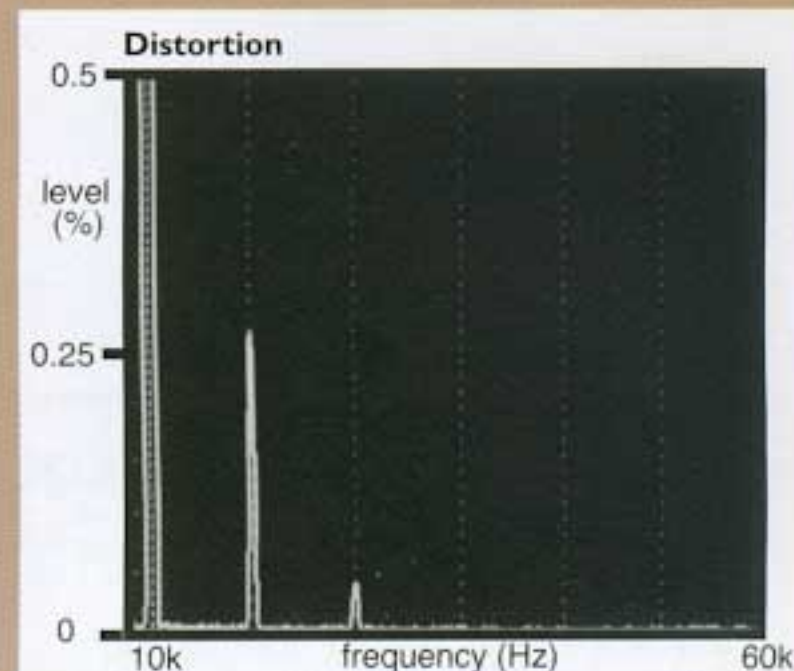
Distortion was low at low power output, measuring 0.25% second harmonic, a good result. Unfortunately, levels rose rapidly, hitting 1% at 8W output, with higher harmonics climbing steeply. This will sharpen and brighten the timbre, making for a fast but likely glassy, or shiny presentation, compromising the neutrality that is possible with valves. This will be due to leakage inductance or winding capacitance in the output transformer, influenced by how well it is layered and sectioned.

With good bass extension and low distortion swinging near full output at 40Hz the Prologue One should have plenty of grunt. Noise was low and hum negligible.

The Prologue One measures well in

most areas, but it will not sound as neutral as is possible due to its distortion characteristics. NK

Power	40watts
CD/tuner/aux.	
Frequency response	4Hz-33kHz
Separation	72dB
Noise	-95dB
Hum	1mV
Distortion	0.2%
Sensitivity	230mV



VERDICT ●●●●£

A refreshing change from the transistor competition with a captivating presentation. Excellent finish and build quality makes for a package strong on value.

PRIMALUNA PROLOGUE 1 £800

PISTOL SOUNDS

☎ +44 (0)208 971 3909

FOR

- Musical insight
- Finish and build quality
- Excellent value

AGAINST

- No recording output
- Limited features
- Soft bass response