

PrimaLuna Dialogue Premium Preamplifier

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Dialogue Premium Preamplifier - The Real Deal

as reviewed by Jim Merod



Driving North

The road from San Diego to Upland, east of Los Angeles, is both circuitous and a relief from decades of treks straight north up Route 5 or, northwest on the 405, to Santa Monica. Kevin Deal's Upscale Audio empire is defined by two locations in the bliss of semi-rural still rugged and hilly terrain. The supplement to his high-end commercial store is gorgeously situated within Kevin's well-landscaped house and its tasteful Scott Fitzgerald ambience. One might fantasize, or misconstrue markings of contemporary life, by finding a déjà vu delight in the recherché elegance of Gatsby's East Egg a century ago, appropriately understated with an exterior grace suggesting just how accurate Fitzgerald's cautionary narrator was to remind us that those who enjoy such benefits "are not like you and me."

I do not curse the remarkable Kevin Deal with inflated vision. The immediate fact of his ultra-musical universe resides with consummate attention to good taste, a menu of superior speakers and virtually unrivaled amplification units nested alongside what might possibly be the world's greatest archive of audio tubes. That, by itself, is enough to capture an unreconstructed music lover's heart. If you adore great music recorded with care and affection, you probably also cherish its reproduction on very good tube equipment.

Kevin Deal is a supremely engaging man. He ain't no commercial shark or quick draw sales shill. Although he occupies his professional life in the too often desultory world of retail exchange, he's found a way to elevate that work to a veritable art form. Kevin is good at what he does. In fact, he's better than good because he brings a degree of attention to his clients and co-workers that is cheerful, intelligent, deeply knowledgeable and truly sensitive. That is who Kevin Deal is: an articulate and passionate man dedicated to exquisite musical reproduction. In each aspect of that devotion he seems to interrogate himself, self-consciously, seeking precise sonic outcomes from each line of audio products he represents. I'm not sure how many audio dealers, store owners, sales reps and self-styled sonic "gurus" I've encountered over the last forty some odd years as I've circulated within the multiple orbits that define High End Audiophilia. Many too many... enough to have something like a personal and professionally-derived outlook on that slice of commercial reality.

In a word, I've come to understand that a large percent of those who "front" the high-end audio realm are not "audiophiles" themselves. I'm not indicting everyone in the audio retail field, but I am aware of dozens upon dozens of drab conversations, nonsensical advice, skewed perspectives and flat out numbskull interactions with folks whose primary function was to know their audio products and to assist a reasonably alert potential customer toward maximum value for any reasonable budget involved. In fact, many of these folks seemed not to care about music (of any sort) from an oblique angle of dim tolerance, without enthusiasm or commitment to its life-giving energies. Because of repetitive experiences with dull incompetence, and worse, I cannot help but find myself charmed, impressed, and genuinely appreciative of those who fully represent the best in audiophile music replication as if it were in their blood or family lineage. At the risk of embarrassing him, I'll confess that I find Kevin Deal to be one of those happy few. That coded phrase is Stendhal's. Here's a more direct rubric: in the world of top-flight audio reality, Kevin is the real deal.

Tubes, Toobs, And More

Let me go right at the heroic PrimaLuna preamp. My colleague Greg Weaver could dig into the complexity of the push-pull tube configuration that orients this not so humble masterpiece. I've heard solid-state preamps at virtually every conceivable price point. I've dealt with tube-based preamps performing beyond their retail tag, such as several that Conrad-Johnson produced over the years and a few go-for-broke ultra state of the art blockbusters that required a second mortgage on your home. I've encountered a mind-boggling range of transparency and dynamic truthfulness, as well as the wide variety of harmonic textures and sonic vivacity that preamplifiers have brought to the fore over the last four decades. On one hand, you cannot easily quibble with audio gear that delivers what you want (if you know what that is) if you can afford it. On a different paw, you might easily scribble with magic marker on your palm whatever ratio you've come to believe accounts for the trade off between any level of high-level performance you're seeking and the price you're able or willing to commit to it. What price-value ratio can you assert in clear terms to guide yourself as you scout through the jungle of audio possibilities? You are, of course, aware that your preamp is the absolute heart and soul of your musical universe, correct? Given that, do you want to scrimp on the very best unit you can (barely) afford? This is exactly the conundrum (dilemma, aporia, uncertainty, pain in the derriere) that divides the inauguration of potentially marvelous, organically evolving sound systems from the fulfillment of their promise as audiophile-projects steadily improving over time. In sum, the probability of dropping too much bread on a preamp in large part pivots on the luck of Heraclitus's Law of Sonic Ratios. Since you can never step into the same creek twice, it's always possible that the delightful unit you pop for will not sound as good as you thought at first blush. This, also, is exactly the dilemma facing you when you begin to build a superior sound system.

Enter the PrimaLuna Dialogue Premium preamp, a rousing tube-throbbing rock and roll work horse that defies the dark ancient philosopher's law of enigmatic sonic ratios.

Although I've heard just about as much live "in performance" music as anybody can accomplish in the sweep of seventy-plus years, and because I have steadfast but vigilant audio discernment, the skeptic in me recognizes the foolishness of over-confidence. I know that I once "knew" the glories and vicissitudes of LIVE musical sound performed in Boston's Symphony Hall and the old Carnegie Hall and the Village Vanguard and the new Birdland (as well as Pete Douglass' *Bach Dynamite and Dancing Society* in Half Moon Bay and the Venice Jazz Club in Italy, among other distinct venues)... but hearing those ambient enclaves on site, memorizing their sonic signatures, is a far different sonic mundo than capturing those ambient footprints on recorded media. Nothing in the fuzz of human knowledge and memory is so rigorously educating, recapitulative and outright recalibrating as the encounter, after the fact of being in noble musical geography, with the concrete facts of astutely recorded work. You remember a slight suck out in Disney Hall @2.6kHz? Maybe not. You thought that Freddy Hubbard played dissonant obligatos the night in La Jolla that he attempted to unbutton his bass players' gorgeous wife's blouse? Not at all. The dissonance occurred off-stage when the scheizen hit the fan. Before that, Freddy's obligatos were framed with Leonardo da Vinci's mathematical virtue.

My point is that the better the preamp giving you back what's on a master recording, regardless of media, the more you'll hear: more low level detail; more ambient information; more semi-tones; more dynamic subtleties. Just plain MORE of everything that's "there" to be heard! My audiophile and recording/ mastering life took a step upward when I was the recipient of a unique and truly special preamp prototype developed by audio engineer Steve McCormack (of McCormack Audio and SMc Audio). His Lady Day unit was the work-up model of his now greatly admired VRE-1C Reference preamplifier. As the lucky character inadvertently drawn into several listening sessions as that state of the art piece was underway, I requested the chance to purchase it. That good fortune literally revolutionized my audio and musical life. For long years I'd sought THE preamp I wished to live with in semi-perpetuity. During my extended search I had a dozen or more preamps in and out of my system. Several were beyond reach financially. None of them, as impressive as they were, caused tears to well as I boxed them back to their home bases. A few less costly models earned

respect, but they were uniformly nice pieces without the huge musical hearts I desired as companions: immense openness; precise sound-staging; low-level signal acuity; vivid ambience; harmonic rightness for each instrument (pianos and vocals posing the greatest demand and importance); and, most of all, sonic transparency in abundance. Those elements are precursors to a preamp's musical pedigree.

Since the audio cosmos is all about "musicality" from first to last—and not defined by over-etched signal differentiations—Steve McCormack's prototype music monster unit not only knocked me out, but it brought helpful sonic light to my listening reality and to my work as a recording bloke. From that moment forward I've had a world-class preamp to enhance my reviewing efforts—not preamps only, but amps, DACs, speakers, cables, music servers and power conditioners. Even better, I've had a stable, ongoing partner at the very center of my audio world. I cannot emphasize adequately how huge that partnership truly is.

My Lady Day one of a kind prototype preamp is not a tube-based unit. But its remarkable cleanness and big-hearted, transparent replication of signal delicacy has established a reliable standard for musical truthfulness. If you pass a silk sheet through an electric lawn mower, you'll have ragged silk hankies. The same decimation occurs with thwarted signal accuracy. Feed superior sound into garbage amplification and you'll get musical *schmegma*.

The virtues I've found in my longstanding preamp partner are in play in the Dialogue Premium's signal output. Its heavy build features point to point bonded-silver OCC copper wiring shielded by a Teflon dielectric: trademarks of self-respecting high-end preamplifiers. Its two 5AR4 tubes are augmented by three 12AU7 tubes per channel (six total), with a remarkable output-impedance of roughly 250 ohms, which collectively makes this dual-mono "smart design" not only without discernible distortion but a behemoth that accompanies just about any amplifier you can find (or name) with extreme ease of signal transfer and power delivery. This is a heavyweight unit not merely in its profoundly alluring musical reproduction. The bloody thing weighs in well over 50 pounds of truly brilliant engineering in each nook and crevice of this never to be re-sold or loaned out work of art. The new PrimaLuna preamp is a keeper.

The Real Deal

The Dialogue Premium is an upgrade from the PrimaLuna Dialogue Three that I began this enjoyable long review process with. It employs Takman resistors and French SCR tinfoil caps. By normal high-end audio marketing standards, that should add hundreds of dollars to the unit's bottom line. Go a step further to discover its AC offset killer that not only increases hum resistance but, with its relay-based input circuits, prevents cross-talk between input channels. Since, unlike too many preamp stages that boost gain with the dubious intent to create dramatic output levels, this PrimaLuna unit has only 10dB of gain—a boon to high efficiency speakers (like Robert Lee's Crescendoes) since the likelihood of noise and hiss attendant to unneeded preamp gain is eliminated.

Five inputs are RCA pairs along with one RCA tape out pair and two RCA pre-out pairs plus a designated RCA home theater pass through pair that complete its rear side connection platform. At a retail price of \$3199, even on ol' audio war horse is forced to admit that this wonderful creation is not merely a "good value" and a "bargain," but one of the greatest pieces of certifiably audiophile grade gear on the market.

I've thought about my next statement for quite a long stretch. Assessing the worth of audio equipment across the entire market spectrum is a difficult task. Many elements enter in to that judgment. Each listener has preferences and desires. I cannot imagine any longtime audio reviewer who'll not admit that personal taste and individual aesthetic predilections shape his or her interpretation of gear. But, here, with the uniquely unexpected and truly "at the top" musical achievement of this PrimaLuna trail blazing preamp, not only is it somewhat (still) foolish to admit one's astonished veneration, but it is also necessary to just say flat out what one cannot by any credible stretch of assurance assert with certainty: namely, that in the devilish ratio of audio value gauged by bang-for-buck capitalist reification, the PrimaLuna "Dialogue Premium" preamp is clearly among high-end audio's greatest values... and, certainly, I believe, it provides essentially unrivaled musical accomplishment that no preamplifier at or near its retail price tag comes close to. The real enigma, in this reach toward assessment of absolute value, is how many much more expensive units achieve equal or almost equal sonic grandeur. My guess (and it is only that) is the sense that units five and six times its price may well fall short of what it delivers.

Clearly this unit is a jewel in PrimaLuna's well-run operation. In my curmudgeonly take on "things audio at the upper end," the new PrimaLuna preamp deserves, and receives, my highest praise. It is among the most fully-accomplished audiophile grade pieces of playback equipment on the market at any price. Its down-to-earth price is a revelation. And a supreme boon for high-end music enthusiasts. Years ago, Linn's LP-12 turntable established a benchmark for vinyl playback. That venerable unit continues to serve its owners beautifully. My entry-level model, enhanced by a Grado Sonata cartridge and remarkably matched Audience

cables, is more than thirty years old and undaunted as well as undiminished by long years of use. Richard Vandersteen's model 2Ce speakers jug on without a sign of aging and they are almost as ancient as my Linn LP-12. In sum, in the high-end universe a few extraordinary audio units have earned the status of "classics" and I see the real possibility that the Dialogue Premium may trek forward to garner such accolades.

I do not know Kevin Deal as a private person as well as I know him now as an audio professional whose astute awareness of audio play back gear is clearly among the best in his field. My truly enjoyable time at his chock-full house in Upland—full of speakers, amps, and tubes on top of tubes: walls of them; row upon row; rooms full; a once former garage now a stand alone tube emporium and archive—was defined entirely by moments of surprise and ongoing cheer because the host and his special domestic universe are defined by joyful relaxation.

Perhaps the kicker in that experience was the sight of several vintage motorcycles ready to roar out the door into rural nearby territory. Their feline majesty, on call at a moment's notice, sat perfectly poised as elite punctuation marks for such down to earth elegance. The casual setting that suffuses Kevin's personal terrain silently demonstrates how graceful it can be to bring great audio values to folks hip enough to find such an alert and savvy man. I'm certain that he takes great pride in his labor, which he engages with an effortless sense of serious fun. I'd bet that, in providing world class sound to people far and wide at a fraction of the reigning costs for glitzy audio bling, Kevin must experience the kind of deep, quiet satisfaction that those in any superior endeavor receive from the sheer joy of honest, helpful energy.

I doff my favorite Hawaiian straw hat to a guy who wears helmets on his zooming sleek torpedoes... a guy who, in my view, is the "real deal" because he earns the highest marks possible in his generous and instructive professional art. **Jim Merod**

Dialogue Preamplifier

Retail: \$3199

PrimaLuna U.S.A.
1042 N. Mountain Ave
#B PMB 406
Upland CA 91786
www.primaluna-usa.com
info@primaluna-usa.com
Tel 909-931-0219

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