

PrimaLuna DiaLogue Premium HP Integrated Amplifier

The PrimaLuna DiaLogue Premium HP Integrated Amplifier at £2,998 is billed as a fit an forget valve amplifier that avoids many of the

headaches traditionally associated with valve amp ownership. Ian Ringstead takes one for a spin.

This was always going to be an exciting product to review. Firstly because it was a product I had always wanted to review and although not new to valves I had never taken the plunge in the past to buy one and so when given the chance to try the Prima Luna I couldn't resist.



OUTSTANDING PRODUCTboxed



029-PrimaLuna DiaLogue Premium HP Integrated Amplifier Black-high res

I have followed this manufacturer from their beginnings and heard the amps at many shows over the years and have always been very

impressed with what I heard. Valve amps have a certain mystique amongst audiophiles, love them or hate them, but I have always been open minded and every time I have heard one at the numerous shows I have attended over the last 40 years they always fascinated and usually impressed me. Prima Luna is a relatively young company compared to its established rivals from the USA and Europe being founded in 2003. The name Prima Luna is Italian for first moon and founder Herman van den Dungen adopted the name from his Grandparents and a place in Italy.

More than 30 years of high-end experience in the fields of design, manufacturing, export, import, retail, and after-sales-service is the basis for a range of affordable and reliable, yet highly musical products. Together with Marcel Croese (of Goldmund fame) and Dominique Chenet (of Jadis fame) he heads his team to simply bring the best products, with the best service and for the best price. The philosophy of the PrimaLuna



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clientèle.



033-PrimaLuna DiaLogue Premium HP Integrated Amplifier Black-high res

this is not a great behemoth and fitted neatly on my equipment rack, being no wider than standard separates. The only proviso is that you must give it room to breathe with adequate ventilation as tubes obviously get hot, so it rested on the top shelf. I had the black version, but it is also supplied in silver. The quality of finish is to automotive paint standards and there are five coats of paint applied, not as many as a Rolls Royce, but still very impressive. The front panel is simply laid out with a volume control on the left, the input selector on the right and headphone socket. The controls are well weighted and solid in feel and use. In-between are power indication LEDs and a neat touch is the green and red valve operation LEDs as you can switch on the fly via the remote control between triode and ultralinear mode, allowing one to alter the sound at the flick of a remote switch. What a great feature. Although not a new innovation, being switchable via the remote is so convenient.

PrimaLuna amps are famous for long tube life and running relatively cool. What they've done is increase the power and output transformer size, designed and built a larger Adaptive AutoBias board, and all the supporting circuitry required to run eight power tubes instead of four. This doubles the power and increases bass slam. Customers can use almost any tube on the market and the new DiaLogue Premium HP can be shipped with EL-34s, Gold Lion KT88s, or Tung-sol KT120s

The headphone amp runs from all the power tubes and the elegant, well designed circuit allows you to switch from speakers to headphone as you wish. If you love private listening, this amp is ideal. I tried this feature near the end of my time with the amp and I have to say it was excellent with very low noise and no detectable hum.

The design and development that has gone into the PrimaLuna range is astonishing.

team is that it is not just the PrimaLuna products, but also the people involved in PrimaLuna that have to be top-of-the-bill. So the goal for PrimaLuna is to give you excellent designers, highest quality manufacturing and a first-class sales and after-sales network. This is all without becoming unaffordable and involves Western design and marketing, combined with Far East manufacturing under European control and Dutch after-sales-service. PrimaLuna say they are proud that skilled and experienced distributors and dealers from all over the world have now started to recognize the potential of the PrimaLuna brand for themselves and their

With a philosophy like that I was eager to try the DiaLogue Premium HP Integrated Amplifier in my system. Absolute Sounds, the distributors here in the UK, very kindly supplied not just the standard EL34 valves that are normally supplied, but also a set of KT120 valves. This was great because I could then compare the difference between the valve types (tube rolling as it is called).

The DiaLogue Premium HP Integrated Amplifier is very solidly built and extremely well put together, being neat in appearance and footprint. Unlike some valve amps I have seen at

As with all PrimaLuna amps, you never have to worry about biasing your amp ever again, and the need for matched tubes is eliminated. Just plug in EL34, KT88, or KT120 (as well as many others) and the on-board Exclusive Adaptive AutoBias does the rest. Tubes are constantly monitored and kept in their best operating range, reducing distortion by up to a claimed 50%!

Silver-plated, oxygen-free continuous crystal (OCC) copper with a Teflon dielectric wiring is used in the critical signal paths (point-to-point wiring is used throughout) and an ALPS Blue Velvet motorized volume control is used as standard. TAKMAN premium resistors made in Japan are used inside the amp, as are SCR Tinfoil Caps in the critical signal paths and while they are expensive, the PrimaLuna team felt they could not be left out.

PrimaLuna custom-winds their own AC toroidal transformer and instead of a cheap selector switch, PrimaLuna has a relay and circuit mounted at every input. If you select a CD player input, for example, a relay closes and a perfect load is presented to the item you are listening to. All other relays are open so as to prevent crosstalk between inputs. If the power transformer should overheat, the "Power Transformer Protection" circuit cuts primary power, allows the amp to cool down, then resets itself.



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The DiaLogue Premium uses three 12AU7 tubes per channel and as mentioned previously you can switch between Triode/Ultralinear from the remote. In ultralinear you get the flattest response, whilst in triode mode you get a sound that PrimaLuna say people have compared to 300B single-ended amps. On the chassis' deck in front of each power tube, is a small LED that lights up if the tube goes bad. The circuit then puts the amp into protection mode, you just replace the tube it tells you to and turn the amp back on. Another useful safety feature is the "Output Transformer Protection" circuit that protects the output transformers in the event of

users crossing speaker wires. A "+B relay" replaces the plate fuse and works in conjunction with the OTP-circuit to protect the amp against tube failure.

The amp has dedicated subwoofer output for those that prefer smaller speakers and a sub.

That is one comprehensive list of features but what about the sound of the amp? I found this amp immediately engaging, solid and real sounding with a lovely depth to the sound being produced. There is no hint of a syrupy sound or lack of clarity here which is a negative attribute that is often levelled at valve amps, particularly older designs. All types of music were beautifully portrayed. I tried Fink's album *Wheels Turn Beneath My Feet*, a favourite of my colleague Dominic Marsh, because it is a superb live recording from several venues during their European tour. Each venue has a different acoustic and it was easy to hear the differences with the PrimaLuna in place. Also very apparent was the excellent quality of the sound recording and I was able to pick up every nuance of the atmosphere and characteristics of the guitar, bass and drums. The kick drum on *Sort of Revolution* was amazing and had a real palpable feel and wallop to it...almost as if the drummer was in the room with you. Tracey Chapman's *Fast Car*, amongst the many great tracks from her first album from the eighties, sounded fresh and still had a joyous feel to it even all these years later. Great music never dies out.

## CONCLUSION

What I learned listening to the PrimaLuna DiaLogue Premium HP Integrated Amplifier was valve amps

can be domestically acceptable as well as “fit and forget”, something that has not always been the case and one of the reasons valve amps have not gained universal acceptance. PrimaLuna have certainly done their best to arrest this issue and I feel they have succeeded admirably. Now as to which mode was best is truly down to personal taste and will depend on many variables. I switched many times and although it was obvious on occasions, I wouldn't like to say which was best. The same was true of the output tubes, EL34's or KT120's, with the KT120s having a more powerful sound than the former. Again you choose. Both were excellent and it may well depend on your room size and speaker efficiency as to which ones you choose.

At £2,998 this amp isn't cheap, but when you appreciate the effort that has gone into this design I think it is fantastic value compared to many of the more expensive brands out there. The remote control is excellent, hewn out of metal with rubber protective bands either end. Recently PrimaLuna announced you can add a Phono module, allowing owners to use a turntable with a moving magnet or high output moving coil cartridge on one of the amps inputs for a very reasonable cost. Nice touch and keeps the box count down.

The power output was more than adequate and I had loads on tap, after all valve watts are certainly more powerful than transistor watts in my opinion.

Power output is quoted as follows: EL34 – Ultralinear 73 watts, Triode 42 watts and KT120 – Ultralinear 89 watts, Triode 51 watts

All in all a truly versatile amp. What more could you ask for? Well PrimaLuna also make pre amps, power amps and a nice looking CD player. If you fancy taking the plunge into valve territory the PrimaLuna range is a great way to enter without fear of problems. There are of course other excellent companies producing valve amps, but PrimaLuna seem to have covered all bases and although not budget they don't bankrupt you if you are serious about owning a very reliable long term investment.

**Sound Quality: 9.2/10**

**Build Quality: 9.1/10**

**Value for money: 8.9/10**

**Overall: 9.06/10**

#### **Pros**

**A true “fit and forget”, easy to use valve amp with remote control**

**Great sound with tube rolling capability and switchable triode/ ultralinear mode**

**Headphone output**

**Valve cage included**

**Excellent build quality**

#### **Cons**

**Remote is metal and very heavy so don't drop it on your foot!**

**Requiring eight output tubes can make changing expensive.**

**Having scored above 9 overall, the PrimaLuna DiaLogue Premium HP Integrated Amplifier**



**was given to Dominic Marsh for second review. Read what his findings were below. [Read more about our awards system here.](#)**

**Given that Ian has done a wonderful job of writing the history of the company and a detailed description of what does what in this amplifier, then my job as second reviewer has become a whole lot easier. Thanks Ian!**

Over the years I have owned several valve amplifiers, DACs, and CD players and none have stayed with me for any length of time for a number of reasons. Was it just me, or do other valve equipment owners get a touch anal about tube rolling? I kept searching and hunting for those elusive “better” sounding valves, swooning at finding a new old stock valve that has been malingering in a dusty store for decades with the rare gold pins and fancy getter, then being fed up when I could only find one of the blighters, when I needed a pair. Valve life was always at the back of my mind too and a new set was always on standby waiting after just 100 hours to jump in at a moment’s notice. Prodding around with a digital voltmeter through tiny holes in the base board to adjust bias settings did nothing for me either and top of my wish list was an amplifier I could simply plug another valve in and that was my entire involvement in the process. Another thing that I didn’t particularly like was the basic almost agricultural appearance of most valve amplifiers, which followed the same basic format of transformers in a row at the back, with the valves lined up in front like soldiers on parade standing to attention, then clothed in black. Arguably, some manufacturers hid that behind layers of bling with shiny panels or elaborate valve covers to obfuscate that, but the basic formula remained unchanged. Headphone socket and remote control facility? Dream on.

So, you might gather then from that I am no fan of valve amplification or valve anything, right? Nope. The arrival of the PrimaLuna DiaLogue Premium HP amplifier has made me go all gooey eyed again, as (nearly) all of my valve amp gripes have been neatly addressed by PrimaLuna in one fell swoop. Dominic is impressed.

What joy, to actually swap valves around at will with no grubbing around poking a meter here, there and everywhere setting up the bias. Remote control too, this man was in heaven, whereby you had direct access to source selection (rather than sequential incrementing), instant on the fly switching between Ultra linear and Triode modes, volume up/down and muting. Headphone socket as well, had to rub my eyes to make sure I wasn’t seeing things. Goodness me, I even found some indicator lights to tell me what the amplifier is currently up to. No singeing of fingers either from the mechanical Ultra linear/Triode switch some manufacturers have unwisely placed between seriously hot valves. Stunned and impressed now.

It is still the same basic layout though, with transformers at the back with a parade of valves in front, but PrimaLuna have made it very compact given there is a complement of 8 power valves and 6 signal valves to cater for. The paint finish is actually a metallic colour which I would describe as a dark Sapphire (I am colour blind so don’t take that as Gospel) which changes tone depending on what angle you view it, which again is a refreshing change from plain black. I’m none too sure about the valve cover though, which is a series of 10 round horizontal bars set into curved pie slice shaped triangular side panels, each fitted with a glass pane. In a home that has responsible adults only, the cover works as it should do as a means of protecting the valves from physical knocks, but if any young children are in occupancy, a close watch is to be kept on them as small hands can easily reach between the bars and bar 6 from bottom gets very hot indeed, being directly above the front row of KT sized valves, with a gap of only 2 or 3 millimetres so the valve itself can also easily be touched by curious fingers. Bars 8 and 9 are also situated directly above the rear bank of valves although there is more clearance between valves and bars so they get slightly less hot. Oddly enough, I perceived more heat radiating from the amplifier with the cover in place and I can only surmise the solid glass end panels are reducing the air flow around the valves.

One small thing Ian didn’t mention in his review is that this amplifier is heavy and I mean HEAVY. I

have a custom built seven level rack with 10mm toughened glass shelves and the Prima Luna had to go on the topmost shelf because of its height. It wasn't easy lifting it up from the floor to the top shelf and it wouldn't have surprised me at all if it pancaked it's way down to the bottom level taking each shelf with it on the way down. I was gingerly listening out for a while in case I heard the sound of stressed glass I can tell you. Surprising that glass can hold that much weight, but we are almost conditioned to believe that glass is a somewhat fragile substance to be treated with great care.

## SOUND QUALITY

Well then, banging straight into the sound quality without the preliminaries which Ian has kindly done already, I first listened to this amplifier with the stock EL34 valves fitted. Having heard quite a few EL34 equipped amplifiers over the years with just a pair of them in the output stage, I always seemed to get the impression that they were puffing and wheezing a bit, rather like when you have to change down a gear and rev the car's engine some more when going up an incline, as staying in top gear slows the car down and the engine is labouring. With the PrimaLuna's complement of four, I didn't get that perception at all, it seemed perfectly happy delivering plenty of good full bodied bass with no hint of wheezing. Where I felt it lacking though was in treble detail and impact, so I had to work to hear the treble details rather than the amplifier presenting it in full for me to listen to without effort and soon had the urge to swap to the KT120s supplied with the review amplifier to hear what transpires.

Out with the stock EL34s and in with the KT120s which was a quick and painless operation, but it also needed the rocker switch on the right hand side of the chassis switching from EL34 mode to KT88/KT120 mode before switching on again. My last encounter with a PrimaLuna amplifier (A Prologue 5 as I recall) it took a healthy 20 to 25 minutes or so before the amplifier came "on song" with its best performance and during the warm up period it didn't sound all that mellifluous to me. The DiaLogue Premium HP here however was ready to rock and roll within a minute or so of switch on, no doubt the auto biasing circuitry doing its job admirably.

I was hoping for better treble definition and the KT120s certainly gave that to me in spades. Not in a bright spot lit way I hasten to add, it was considerably silkier than that with a smoothness and refinement dispensed with a naturalness I found beguiling. Whereas I had to listen out for treble output with the EL34 set installed, the KT120s ladled it out in precise amounts that took no effort at all to hear. Fine for treble output then, the bass also moved up a notch in the switching process and almost came to the point of dominating the sound in my system. No need to panic Dominic, simply pick up the remote control, press the topmost button and switch to Triode mode. Cooo, that was easy and my lazy fat rear end was still sat on my seat. Love it.

Bass now acquired a significant measure of tautness without sacrificing power and heft, no longer the leading element in the sound I was hearing, so time to make this amplifier reveal its true performance envelope from my reference music selections. First into the CD drawer then goes my favourite workout music in the shape of Fink's "Wheels Beneath My Feet" live album, which I am glad to read Ian now uses as well for his evaluations, so my bit here should dovetail neatly into his observations.

Track one called "Biscuits For Breakfast" starts with the drummer making a short into on the ride cymbal and I expect no less for it to sound exactly that, with no tizz or fizz and the Dialogue didn't disappoint at all, with superb clarity and rendition, so a good start there. During the entire track the drummer sets up a rhythmic pounding beat on the kick drum that again has to have plenty of weight, yet remain under complete control, with the listener clearly able to tell if a hard or soft beater is being used. Of course the acid test for me throughout the entire album is how the venue ambience and audience is delivered and the benchmarks are that between each track I have to be able to hear the venue changes because each track has been recorded during one of Fink's tours across Europe. The audience too has different mannerisms and reactions, spread right across the entire soundstage from left to right and

from front to back too, so I should be able to pick out individual audience members with ease no matter where they are in the imaging canvas. I was able to do this without any difficulty at all, aided no doubt by the eerie background silence the DiaLogue has.

Unfortunately (or fortunately) I don't have speakers that present a difficult load to an amplifier. I tried the amplifier with my resident speakers, a pair of TAGA Harmony B-40 stand mounts and a pair Roksan K2 TR-5 speakers, which all sounded excellent with the Prima Luna DiaLogue HP amplifier, particularly so the Roksan speakers with their rather revealing ribbon tweeters.

## **CONCLUSION**

To sum up then, here is an amplifier from the PrimaLuna stable that gave a solid meritorious sonic performance in every respect. At this price point most other valve amplifiers sound just a tad anaemic and noisier too by comparison, then we can heap on top of that the fact that you can change valves in under three minutes and no need at all for getting the voltmeter out for setting up the biasing either. That will be good news to many no doubt, as too is the provision of a headphone socket and a full function remote control, which to me drags the whole valve amplifier concept well into the 21st century and far out of the 20th. I thought it was expensive but I disagree, given that it has a headphone socket, auto biasing AND a remote control to make easy living with this particular valve amplifier a busting good value purchase too and a long term "keeper" amplifier, as I dread to think how much it would cost to best it.

I am still a little vexed over the protection cage which covers the valve array though. Safety would only become an issue in a household that has young children who would see sparkling glass objects as something intriguing to play with, pretty much like they seem to be drawn inexorably to driver dust covers and tweeter domes on speakers that they feel should be concave instead of convex. Maybe that's the underlying reason why some people get a real kick out of popping bubble wrap as adults. Whatever turns you on, I say.

**Build Quality: 8.8/10**

**Sound Quality: 9.4/10**

**Value For Money: 9.2/10**

**Overall: 9.13/10**

**Pros:**

**Fabulous sound quality**

**Headphone socket**

**Full function remote control (Yes!)**

**Battleship build quality**

**Represents good value for money.**

**Cons:**

**Hernia inducing weight – not for those with back trouble!**

## **Reservations about small children and the valve protection cover**

**Eight power valves won't be inexpensive to replace.**

**Dominic Marsh**