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ProLogue Premium Review

If you have watched Jeremy Clarkson rant about the roar and wild aggression of a Lamborghini you'll know that raw power can more than simulate this man. But he constantly speaks better of sports cars with more technology, smoother rides, stereos, and a sense of class. So obviously power isn't everything. The PrimaLuna ProLogue Premium

would fall into Clarkson's more recommend class. Read on to find out why.

Kevin Deal, the U.S. PrimaLuna importer, is quick to point out that when he was asked by Herman van der Dugen to be involved in the PrimaLuna project he was initially apprehensive. Point of fact, he even said a polite no to the first request. But, after a prototype landed on his doorstep he quickly changed his mind as clearly Herman was on to something. And Kevin was seeing the light.

Having sold tubes and hi-fi audio gear for longer than he would care to admit, Kevin has dealt with all kinds of issues. One of his better stories involves an elderly couple who nearly electrocuted themselves when sticking a screw driver into the circuit board area of an amplifier while it was on. Kevin realized that even though many tube amplifiers sound fantastic it wasn't obvious to everyone that they lacked some basic design fail safes and consideration. Accordingly, when he came aboard the PrimaLuna project he wanted those issues addressed and his concerns were met with enthusiasm and action. So now, as Kevin is fond of saying, PrimaLuna is like a BMW which to me means it has the excitement of a sports car, the gadgets and feature set of a town car, and the computer controlled safety features that keep one from over steering off the street and into a tree. What, however, does that mean in terms of the amplifier?

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ProLogue Premium Features/Specs

With the flip of the switch and the rolling of the tubes the ProLogue Premium can go from the exciting power and rocking aggression of 40 W of KT88 tubes to the smooth and robust warmth of 35W of EL34s*, hence the amplifier is multi functional. Also a key feature is the Adaptive AutoBias circuitry which continuously monitors and runs each tube in its "sweet"™ spot so as not to over stress the device. This protects the tube from failure and elongates the life span. The AutoBias on the ProLogue Premium is also designed to stay out of the audible signal path and the amp has a "soft

start" by which it gently brings power to the tubes, also expanding tube life span. It takes about 15-20 seconds from the time you flip the power switch to the time you'll hear music coming out of the amp.

Other nifty features include the Home Theater Pass Thru " which I did not test because I don't have a home theater set up " and the BTI circuit which stands for "Bad Tube Indicator". The BTI lights are located on the deck of the amp at the base of each tube so that if one goes bad there's no process of elimination, no fumbling. Additionally, the ProLogue Premium has a PTP circuit that will power off the amplifier if the transformers overheat and power cycle back on once cooled down. The OTP circuit protects the amplifier in case there's a massive tube failure. This, combined with a +B relay circuit, will reset the amplifier once the failed tube is replaced and is designed in such a way as to interfere as little as possible with the audio signal. These features are advantageous in that this amp largely takes the guess work out of owning a tubed unit and can save you a hell of a headache and a dent in the pocketbook.

You'll notice that while the amplifier is on the smaller side it is quite heavy. This weight comes from ProLogue Premium's transformers, which are nearly as large as those on the flagship DiaLogue Series. More iron usually translates into better sound quality and musicality.

An interior inspection of the PrimaLuna amplifier could lead one to believe it was built by someone with OCD. The point-to-point wiring is meticulously clean, wires are braided and twisted with absolute precision and everything is clean enough for open heart surgery. It really is a beautiful and carefully built piece of equipment that puts so many other hand made tube amplifiers to shame. The bottom panel is even vented to allow for air to flow up and out of the tube sockets to cool the amplifier while operating.

The ProLogue Premium comes in a high-gloss, Black Sapphire finish, with either black or silver faceplates. There are four gold plated left/right RCA inputs on the back, along with the home theater pass-thru. Six 5-way binding post allow for either 4 or 8 Ohms impedance options. There is even an extra grounding pin on the back incase your wall power isn't actually grounded. (Those of you in older apartments/homes, this is for you.)

On the face are two very solid feeling knobs. One is for volume and the other is input selection. The volume knob rotates very smoothly and feels compact, weighty, and pricy. It is a linear volume control that has a maximum gain of 37dB. The input knob appears to be software driven, so when you power cycle the

amplifier it defaults back to the first input. This is actually my only real complaint about this amplifier. I often had my turn table on input two and would get everything all set up, assume the listening position, and realize I needed to pop the selector over to input two. (I didn't use the remote while reviewing, but there is an input selector on it. "doh!")

While the amplifier was in my possession I ran the EL34 tubes and the 12AU7 with improved transformers that lower distortion at the front end. I paired the ProLogue Premium with the PMC TB2i monitors and used the Electrocompaniet PC-1 CD Player and Supra Sword interconnects and speaker cables. For analog I used my Rega P3/24 with a Moon LP3 phono stage and Sumiko Evo III Blue Point Special cartridge. I used the Granite Audio #570 power cable or the PS Audio PerfectWave AC5 with the amplifier. The differences between all the power cables I tried were very slight leading me to report that one doesn't have to pair the ProLogue Premium with a super expensive aftermarket cable to get great sound from it.



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ProLogue Premium's Sound

I was grateful that the ProLogue Premium I picked up was already broken in by another reviewer. All I had to do was unpack it, set it up, drop in a CD and listen. The first thing I played was Dead Can Dance's live album "Toward the Within" and in the absence of my better half I had the opportunity to run the unit through its paces at a high volume. I quickly noticed the large sense of space. Of course the associate equipment helps portray the stage, but the depth, warmth and fleshiness of the performance sounded fantastic. The drums and percussions circling the two singers, the echoes of Lisa

Gerrard's voice off the side walls of the hall, the sounds made by the musicians or stage hands in the back ground in between songs were all easily audible. It was all there and it was very 3 dimensional and incredibly captivating. What got my attention most on this first listening session was the mid range dynamics. Lisa Gerrard and Brandon Perry's voices were so palpable I thought I could feel the heat off Brandon's every utterance and the cold precision and sorrow from Lisa's presentation. In fact Lisa's vocals came out of the speakers and pushed so hard against my face, penetrating into my eyes on every breath or inflection, I sat stunned in my chair. I couldn't move. There was more force and life from that amplifier/speaker combo than from my wife during an argument.

(Editor's Note: As it turns out, Adam has many, many more faults than he ever could have imagined but the amp is more forceful still.)

Over the next couple months I came to some general conclusions about the PrimaLuna. After playing a variety of music: pop, jazz, classical, rock and electronica, I think it is safe to say the amplifier does a great many things well. Tonally the ProLogue Premium is rich and musical. Violins and other strings have both good harshness or wood body texture provided it's in the recording. Drums are large, punchy, and resonance is audible but slightly drowsy in the lower region. Guitars, both acoustic and electric sound informationally conveying, but the amp focuses on a more opulent overall sound. For example, with Jeff Buckley's version of "Hallelujah" off the album "Grace", the spring reverb in his amplifier is fatter in the mids and lows and slightly less articulated than with other amplifiers that have a concise and less luscious low end. Cymbals have sheen and a natural decay without being harsh or grating. I listen to a lot of "God Speed You Black Emperor", and the crashing of two drummers banging on cymbals and high pitched experimental electrical guitar was clearly apparent but never overpowering and fatiguing. I could play this amplifier all day long at high volumes and never feel drained.

While utilizing the EL34 tubes, the lows have a moody sound rather than being overly prompt and impatient. This might irk some folks who prefer a faster and tighter low end, but I rather enjoyed the persona and mood the amplifier was able to evoke. I also noticed that the top end was slightly rolled off in such a way that gave CDs a more natural, less digitized sound. To test this I spent a couple days using the Audio Note DAC1 Sig "a very harsh and abrasive DAC in my humble opinion" and sound from the ProLogue Premium was more forward and aggressive, the digital and fatiguing glare was almost completely absent.

If the music has a stage presence, it's easy to discern. There are no gaps or holes and each instrument leaves individual space cues. Conversely though, if the recording is less than optimal, the ProLogue Premium lets you know, but only in a way a grandmother would "tisk" you for wearing your hat at the dinner table. It is not so over-analytical that it will make you regret having purchased half your CD or vinyl collection.

I'm tempted to say the amplifier is a good rocking amplifier, but it isn't. It isn't filled with the excitement of skinned knees and bloody noses that youthful aggression has brought to rock. At least not with the EL34 tubes in. The ProLogue Premium has a sense of values, a fair amount of seductiveness, and a sense of restraint. It acts more like a classic rocker, someone who has been there, done that, and really just want to have a good, fun, clean time at this point. Somewhere between the lines of Lynyrd Skynyrd and the Allman Brothers, all grown up. Maybe a tweed jacket, blue jeans and cowboy boots. And this is what I liked best about the ProLogue Premium because I could play it so damn loud. It wasn't abrasive at these higher volumes, it was just fun.

At lower volumes the amplifier acts more like a mood setter much in the way a smoldering fireplace warms the room but doesn't disrupt the continuity of a good conversation with friends over dinner. It isn't intrusive like that. Which means at lower volumes it could be seen as less energetic and invasive. Late night listening might not be as emotionally satisfying as letting loose without the fear of disturbing friends and family.

Final Thoughts

Overall I think PrimaLuna ProLogue Premium is a very good amplifier. Its versatility and fleshy tube sound add the sparkle of life into cold digital media and make vinyl all that more seductive. With all the failsafe and tube friendly features on it this is the perfect tube amplifier for someone who has been hesitant to get into this side of the audio world or for a tube lover who doesn't have the time or money to tweak this or fix that if something goes wrong. The ProLogue Premium is competitively priced and merits serious consideration by any audio lovers ready for the next step in their musical journey. If you haven't heard one yet, do yourself a favor and find a dealer and have a demo.

* Just as a note, the switch for the KT88/EL34 is on the opposite side of the amplifier from the power switch. They look and feel effectively the same. If you happen to accidentally switch the wrong one, the BTI monitor lights on the amplifier near the tubes will turn red. Switch the bias back to the correct setting and power cycle the amplifier. That is what quickly fixed it for me when I flipped the wrong switch.

Specifications

Output: 35 watts x 2 with EL34, 40 watts x 2 with KT88

Freq. Response: 20Hz-30kHz +/- 0.5dB

THD: Less than 1% at full power

S/N Ratio: 89 dB

Input Sensitivity: 300mV

Power Consumption: 300 watts

Dimensions: 14.5" x 8" x 15.5" (WxHxD)

Weight: 46.3 lbs

Inputs: 4 pair RCA / 1 pair HT bypass

Outputs: 4 and 8 Ohm speaker taps

Tube Compliment: 4 - 12AU7, 4 - EL34 (KT88 tubes optional)

Notes from Distributor

"For a customer with a pair of 'technical' sounding Thiels, the EL34's may be the hot ticket. For the person with Vandersteens, or any other speaker, room, or customer taste that needs to 'breathe' or have more 'pop' the KT88 or 6550 is the choice." A - Kevin Deal