

PrimaLuna Dialogue Premium Preamplifier

Reviewed by Lang Phipps

Once I wrestled the 53 lb. PrimaLuna Dialogue Premium Preamplifier into my component rack I had 48 hours of tube burn-in until I could hear what all the hype was about. Two days later I clicked the unit on, noting a solidness in the switch as a quality bellwether, the way the sound of the door closing on a fine car tells a bigger story. In the time it took to drop the needle and get back to my listening chair I heard what I'd long been waiting for. Music that hit me mid-chest and put a kid-happy smile on my face. Music that bypassed my critical-thinking audiophile mind and made me want to leap out of my chair and dance.

A little background.

I'd been in heavy modding mode for several months when the PrimaLuna preamp arrived. I'd added a hand-made tonearm to my Rega P25 turntable and upgraded both the sub-platter and the motor. I'd tube rolled to add warmth to the sound of my Rogue 99 preamp. I was enjoying the results, but still listening analytically, ticking off the boxes from the high-end lexicon. Wide, deep soundstage: *Check*. Black background: *Check*. Well-defined bass: *Check*. Until I heard the PrimaLuna, I was like many other audiophiles who had struck a Faustian bargain: I had an enviable sound system capable of astonishing sonic feats but I'd essentially lost the experience I'd had as a kid of being moved by a great song playing on a cheap AM radio, listening to *the music, not the equipment*. I'd almost forgotten what it was to have that simple visceral experience.

Into the guts.

For good reason, every review I've read of the PrimaLuna Dialogue Premium Preamp goes deep into its insides and inventories the unreasonably-high-quality-for-the-price parts and features. Which is the story here — and isn't. For this review I want to shift the emphasis from the hardware to the, dare I say, ecstatic musical experience it delivers. Since the extravagantly good parts make the magic happen, I too will go under the chassis and call out the highlights.

Netherlands-based Durob Audio BV is behind the PrimaLuna line. Designer Herman van den Dungen and his business partners have to a large degree democratized the high end by offering five-figure build quality in components retailing for under \$5000, and in the case of the Dialogue Preamp, under \$4000. The company's belief is, why skimp on relatively inexpensive parts when spending more will raise the level of performance well beyond what's expected for the asking price of the finished product? A key place to start is the point-to-point wiring which shows handwork equal to any competitor out there, and doesn't compromise on the all-important signal path with Swiss-made continuous crystal oxygen-free copper with a Teflon dielectric for optimal "musical purity," as it says on the company's excellent online tour of the preamp's insides. This incidentally, is a useful feature of the web site that few other manufacturers offer, perhaps because they don't want you to see what's under the chassis.

The Dialogue is one of the vanishingly few preamps that is tube rectified, which adds warmth to the sound and thousands of hours of tube life. Behind the dead quiet background and remarkable detail retrieval is an AC Offset Killer which ensures that noise in the AC mains doesn't get into the circuits. The Dialogue is designed with an overall gain of only 10dB, about half that of its competitors', helping to produce an impressive signal-to-noise ratio of 93dB. Everything is about preserving the purity of the signal, down to the French SCR tinfoil capacitors and Japanese Takman audiophile-grade resistors used in critical circuit locations.

Into the mystic.

That was a lot of copy about the itty-bitty parts and I didn't even go into the amazing Alps Blue Velvet motorized volume control! It's easier to tell a purely factual story of the PrimaLuna Dialogue, but now I want to get into the more subjective listening experience since the music coming out of my speakers tells me that "the whole is greater than the sum of the parts" was never truer than here.

A tacitly understood caveat is that the preamp in question is part of *my* system, and since every hi-fi set is a chaos system, I can't foretell exactly how the Dialogue is going to interact with your components. The rub is that I was brought that much closer to the human source of the music with this preamp in the lineup with my Berning ZH-270 tube power amp, EAR 834p phone stage, heavily modded Rega P25 'table and Shelter 501 Mk III cartridge, Triangle 30th Anniversary Cometes main speakers, and REL Stadium III sub-bass. Before, I

was rewarded every time I went up into my listening room, but now there was a thrilling shift. With the right artist and pressing, I was having an emotional experience, kind of like falling in love. I was disarmed and moved and did involuntary things like drum on the arms of my Morris chair or laugh out loud with pleasure. The sonic picture opened up even wider than before and I was closer to the truth of the recording, the vibe in the room when the song was captured on tape, and the mood of the musicians — happy, hungover, stoned, or jiggy on caffeine. I felt more immediately in touch with the human pulse of the music.

The best recordings have this truth etched into the grooves of the record. How faithfully the tape captures the specific performance is what's meant by fidelity, and that pure thing is slightly betrayed, diluted every step along the playback chain. I believe the Dialogue compensates for this by keeping the signal path as clear as possible and by producing deep tonal richness that accurately expresses instrumental timbres. The energy of the performance comes through, even in the bass range where pitch is spot on and pace, rhythm and timing have an irresistible feel. Bandwidth is expanded. I noticed a mid-bass presence and warmth I'd been missing, which has made an unexpectedly dramatic difference.

A quieter background revealed low-level details and nuance in some of my most familiar records. At the other extreme, big sounds like Ringo's Ludwig Super Classic kit in the medley solo on *Abbey Road* fill my room with unnerving verisimilitude. I can clearly hear the different character and tuning of each drum for the first time. And with the lead vocal more forward and palpably right there in front of me, I feel like Joni Mitchell has truly bared her soul through the *Blue*

songs. This emotional intimacy happens over and over again with vocal recordings, from sweet Ella Fitzgerald to snarling Diamanda Galas. Listening is a living experience, more than ever.

I had a chance to audition the much-anticipated Beatles mono vinyl collection with the PrimaLuna and I can say that if you're a mono virgin, this preamp is an ideal introduction to the format. Mono is all about the music, not hi-fi effects; listening to the mono set with my eyes shut, all my gear faded away and I just had the Beatles right in front of me. New artifacts appeared in songs I'd heard thousands of times, such as Paul *almost* popping the mike on plosive syllables in many songs, or the heavy reverb used only at the end of the first bridge on *Yesterday* that made Paul's vocal even more plaintive. Individual tracks live in their own spotlight with mono, which is especially useful in appreciating the studio artistry of the Beatles, except when the snorting sounds in *Piggies* are so real you can smell the pigs.

The Beatles sounds like no other album in their discography, close miked, less heavily orchestrated, and featuring some stripped down, blistering rockers. It is literally made for mono. But in general, mono worked for the Beatles. They were meticulous about keeping their mixes unmuddied, to the extent that Paul often wove his bass parts into the songs (keep this in mind next time you listen to *Sgt. Pepper*) after the other parts had been laid down, something never done before or since. After getting through all 10 albums and the three-disc Mono Masters set, I realized that the PrimaLuna had done something wonderful, even fab — I was able to meet the Beatles. Again.

It's a wrap.

My last words on this brilliant performer go back to the hardware. For no added expense, you get a remote control that's heavy enough to carry into a bar fight and works superbly with the Alps potentiometer and relay-based input selector. The Dialogue Premium arrives with stock Chinese 12AU7 tubes, but since the estimable Kevin "Tube Guru" Deal is part of the Durob team as U.S. distributor, you can be sure these are far better than the standard tubes other manufactures use. I'm in no hurry to tube roll for a while — I'm having too much fun listening to my system the way it is.

Matched with the right speakers and power amp, the PrimaLuna Dialogue Preamplifier will be a revelation of musical truth that may change your listening experience by an order of magnitude, all at a price that brings sanity to the high-end world. I can't recommend it strongly enough.

Lang Phipps was a contributing writer for Listener magazine and has written features for the New York Times and Details magazine.