

PREMIER ISSUE

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The PrimaLuna ProLogue 3 Preamplifier & ProLogue 5 Power Amplifier

— JEFF DORGAY

A little over a year ago PrimaLuna came on the scene with their ProLogue 1 and 2 integrated amplifiers that featured simple tube circuits that were well executed and flawlessly assembled in China. Regardless of whether you liked the EL – 34 or KT – 88 version, these gorgeous little amps offered a lot of sound for the money. Working for another audio publication at the time, I was one of the many reviewers that heaped a lot of praise on PrimaLuna, and Kevin Deal at **UPSCALE AUDIO** for bringing this gear to the US. *(continued)*

Today, we have some additions to the line. The ProLogue 3 is an all tube preamplifier and the ProLogue 4 is an EL – 34 based power amplifier, while the ProLogue 5 is a KT – 88 based power amplifier. The ProLogue 3 is \$1295 with a silver or black faceplate, the ProLogue 4 is \$1045 and the slightly higher



powered ProLogue 5 is slightly more expensive at \$1295. While the integrated amplifiers sounded great and offered a tremendous value, getting the components onto separate chassis with separate power supplies has its advantages. As I was very familiar with the EL-34 sound of the ProLogue One after my review and subsequent purchase, (it now resides in music editor Norwood Brown's system) I wanted to try the KT-88 version this time around.

Technical Overview

First of all, these babies are built like tanks. Though they come in fairly compact packages (11" W x 16.5" D x 7.5"H) the power amplifier weighs in at a hefty 36 pounds and the preamp at 17.5 pounds. If you have never seen a PrimaLuna product up close, they are a treat. Elegantly understated, the chassis are finished in a very dark blue metallic finish that is all but black unless you look at it in very bright light and has the same level of gloss and smoothness you would expect to see on a classic car at Pebble Beach. A cage is supplied to keep prying hands away from the tubes, but if you are without small children or inquisitive pets, leave them off so you can see the tubes glow!!

The ProLogue 3 uses a pair of 12AX7s and a pair of 12AU7s with a modest gain of 11.5db and is subsequently very quiet for a tube preamp, especially one in this price range. The treat here is that it uses a pair of 5AR4 rectifier tubes in the

power supply, keeping the dual mono concept throughout. All the tube sockets are heavy duty ceramic and all wiring is point to point. There are four sets of inputs, a tape output and a pair of outputs so that you can use it in a biamped system or with an amplified subwoofer.

The ProLogue 5 uses the same tubes for the input stages and a pair of KT-88s for each channel of the output stage. No negative feedback is used in this amplifier and while it has solid state rectification, it does feature diodes of the fast recovery variety. As in all PrimaLuna amplifiers, the ProLogue 5 uses PrimaLunas' patented Adaptive auto bias system, so it is not critical to have output tubes that are matched pairs to achieve good performance. I have talked to a number of different designers and the jury is out on whether it is better to have auto bias or fixed bias that is adjustable by the end user. The PrimaLuna system works well and the sound quality is wonderful, so they have the right formula here. (Personally, I think it really helps the recent converts to tube world, not having to screw around with biasing duties...) There is a soft start circuit in the power supply, so tube life should be very good. We are keeping these two for a long term test, so we'll keep you posted in a later issue. Note: Along with the soft start feature,

the ProLogue 3 does not make a loud clunk or thump, should you turn it off before your power amplifier. This is a very nice touch in a preamplifier at this price range.

Both units have detachable AC cords and come with pretty substantial power cords right from the factory. The input RCA jacks are top quality and the binding posts on the output of the amplifier are very beefy WBT-style connectors. The front panels are a model of simplicity and the power switch is a large rocker on the left side of the chassis, which adds to the clean look.

Setup and Associated Components

If you have picked up any audiophile magazine lately, you know I love the sound of the PrimaLuna integrated amplifier, and the separates take the PrimaLuna sound to another level of refinement. Right out of the box, they sounded fine, but after about 25 hours had settled into really good sound, with a slight improvement after 100 hours. Once burned in, these two warm up pretty fast and are very groovy after about 30 minutes.

The majority of my testing was done with the Roan Audio model 5 minimonitors which are rated at 87db and have a load of 8 ohms. To mix it up a bit, I also used the Definitive Technologies P700 powered monitors that have a 92db efficiency as well as built in powered subwoofers. If you really like to listen to music loud, this was a great alternative choice. My trusty Naim Arivas (4 ohm, 90db) got rotated into the test system for a while and were not the best choice for the ProLogue 5, but when I swapped the ProLogue 5 for the Monarchy SM 70 Pro monoblocks, it was a wonderful combination with the ProLogue 3 preamp. (more about that later) Most of my source material was digital, using a combination of the Modwright Denon player and a Jolida CD100A tube CD player.

Our review of the Roan speakers is going to be in the next issue of TONE-Audio, but I can tell you that they are a very neutral sounding speak-

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For those of you that produce megabucks gear, you better hope the folks at PrimaLuna don't start doing R&D at a higher level on the audio food chain, they definitely make gear that rocks!



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er and are easy to drive, so they were a nice match for the PrimaLuna combo. I also felt that for \$1500, they might be representative of what you might purchase to go along with \$2300 worth of amp and preamp. Keeping this in the budget, I used the DH Labs Air Matrix interconnects between amp and preamp as well as between preamp and disc player. Speaker cables were DH Labs Silver Sonic T-14.

The Sound

This amp/preamp combination produces great sound and is very musical. Detail at low to medium levels is very good and it doesn't really compress until you push it very hard. Even then it is pretty polite, but like the ProLogue 1, the ProLogue 5 gets to a certain point where it just will not play any louder and the soundfield just collapses back on itself. It's kind of like my old BMW 320i, it will get up to 100mph pretty quick, but after about 110, it's out of power. For most of you though, if you choose your speakers on the more efficient side, this will occur at a level that will be way too loud for your neighbors anyway. Besides, that's not what a small tube amplifier is about, it's about warm, smooth detailed sound, not brain damage volume.

Because of the KT-88 tubes, the ProLogue 5 is a bit drier sounding than the EL-34 ProLogue 4, but it has a bit more punch and a touch more bass authority and control, so the sound you prefer is up to you. Again, system matching is important and you need to make sure you get a pair of speakers that is synergistic. There are also a few work arounds that we will

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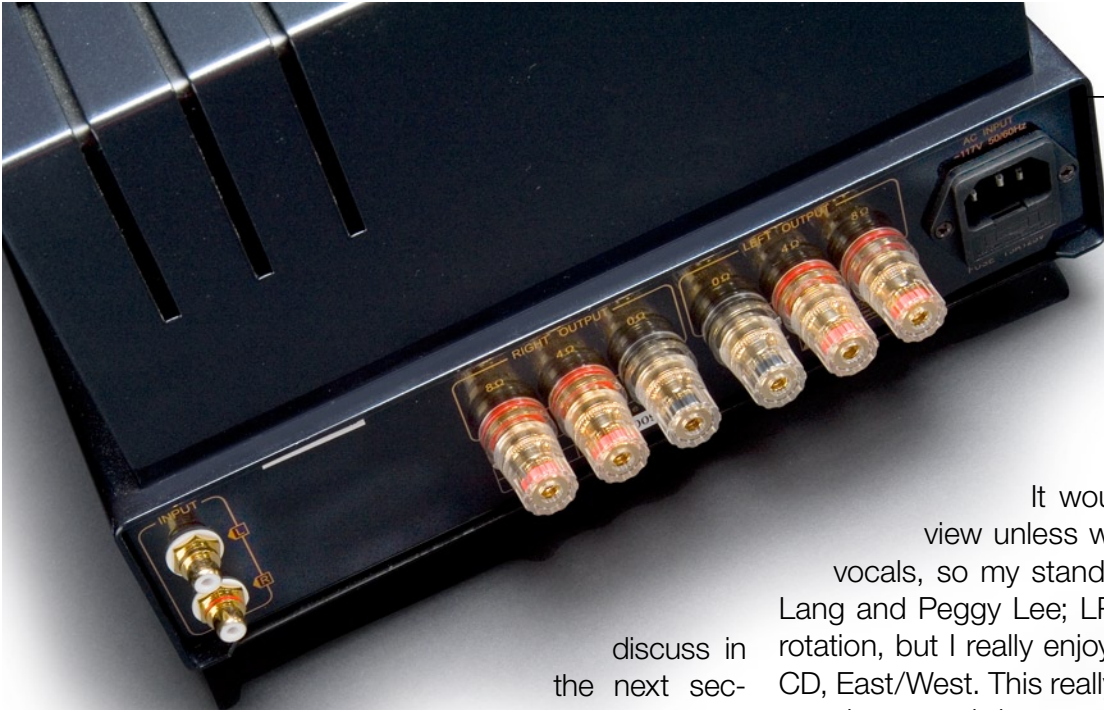


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discuss in the next section. Thanks to the adaptive auto bias, if you would like to tune the sound of your ProLogue 5 a bit, you can roll in a set of 6L6 tubes. I just happened to have a pair of Electro-Harmonix 6L6 tubes on the shelf, and the results were interesting. Not quite as liquid as the EL-34, yet not as dry as the KT-88, but a bit less power. Depending on your taste and speakers, this may be the Goldilocks tube for the ProLogue 5! Thanks to the soft start circuitry and adaptive auto bias in the ProLogue 5, tube life should be excellent.

This combination has a very smooth sound without being rolled off or overly warm or too lush. It almost sounds more like good solid-state gear, with that extra bit of dimension that just can't ever quite be achieved with solid-state. Obviously with 36 watts per channel, you can't crank up the orchestral music or listen to Genesis at Earth shattering levels, but used within its range, the PrimaLuna combination does quite nicely.

What I enjoyed the most about this gear was that it had a very neutral midrange, smooth highs and a very wide soundstage, allowing for a lot of air in the presentation. No matter what speakers I used, the PrimaLuna pair did a great job with vocal harmonies and music that was somewhat densely packed together. How Can You Mend a Broken Heart by the Bee Gees (Trafalgar, MoFi LP) served up great separation between the individual members as did Woodface by Crowded House (Simply Vinyl, LP) and all of my Crosby, Stills and Nash discs. Again, this is the kind of sound tube lovers live for!

It wouldn't be an audiophile review unless we listened to some female vocals, so my standards (Ricki Lee Jones, KD Lang and Peggy Lee; LP and CD) all got plenty of rotation, but I really enjoyed Jaqui Naylor's new live CD, East/West. This really put the ProLogue 5 to the test, because it is a very dynamic recording. Even at a fairly high volume level, the image did not fall apart.

While the ProLogue 5 will do an admirable job of playing music with low bass, it also had very good control over the bass. This is an area where the separate components with their own power supplies really allows a much better musical presentataion

But wait, this is only a \$1300 preamp and that's the kicker.

than the PrimaLuna integrated. The integrated is very good, but if you can spare the extra \$1200 bucks (and shelf space) you will be glad you went the extra mile. Listening to Moments in Love by the Art of Noise (xxxx, CD) and even my old favorite, Dark Side of the Moon (MoFi LP) left me very impressed with the bass performance of this pair.

High frequency response was also very good, and transient attack was fast, but in some cases just a little bit overdamped and lacking that last bit of air that a \$5000 dollar preamp would have. But wait, this is only a \$1300 preamp and that's the kicker. The longer you listen to this pair, you would swear you paid a lot more for them. Everyone that stopped by for a casual listen were floored when I told them how reasonably priced they were. Whenever I switched back from my reference system, I was always very happy with the level of resolution I was able to achieve with this pair. I spent a lot of days with the PrimaLuna pair on for 10 – 12 hour days with no fatigue. Switching to a modest turntable provided an even more liquid presentation, this gear is definitely up to the challenge.

The Phono option

For \$159, you can add a phono input to your PrimaLuna ProLogue 3. They make a great little module that can be installed by Upscale Audio (call them to inquire about installation pricing) or if you have good vision and reasonable soldering skills, can install yourself in about a half hour. It is a very small little board though, so if in doubt, have it installed.

I installed one in my ProLogue One and it is a great value if you are an occasional vinyl user, or aren't planning on spending a ton of money on a table. I had great results with Sumiko's Debut III, which already had an Ortofon cartridge preinstalled. This is one of the best \$300 tables I have ever heard and did a great job with the onboard phono section.

To take things up a notch or two, I substituted a Rega P3 fitted with a Shure V15, but was able to get more performance by using an outboard phono stage, in this case the Sumiko Primare R20 (\$695). Again, for \$159, this represents tremendous value and sounds as good or better than a lot of built-in phono stages I have heard, but if you are a serious vinyl enthusiast, the ProLogue 3 is so good, you will benefit from the phono preamp of your choice. Kudos to PrimaLuna for offering this flexibility.

The Sum of its Parts

There was one big surprise here though. While I think the PrimaLuna pair is quite good, if you are just in the market for a preamplifier, don't rule out the ProLogue 3, even in a bit spendier system. Thanks to its dual mono design and tube rectifiers in the power supply, this one is a real sleeper, kind of like an Audi S4 with the badges removed. You pull up at the stop light thinking you know what's under the hood and then get left in the dust when the light turns green.

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Being from the Badger State, I'm nosier than I probably should be, but I couldn't resist dropping the ProLogue 3 in my reference system with all the tweaks to see how it would do. Granted it was not as open or accurate as my Emotive Audio Poeta, but it was really damn good and out of this world good for a \$1300 preamplifier. Believe me, the ProLogue 3 was no disgrace with a few thousand dollars worth of interconnects hooked up to it and a Symposium Ultra base under it. You could easily make the ProLogue 3 preamplifier the cornerstone of a more expensive system. Everything I heard with the ProLogue 5 amplifier was even more apparent on my big system.

THE VERDICT

For those of you that produce megabucks gear, you better hope the folks at PrimaLuna don't start doing R&D at a higher level on the audio food chain, they definitely make gear that rocks! For those of you looking for high quality, reasonably priced hifi and want to enjoy all the things that make tube gear great without any of the hassle, look no further, this pair's for you. If I had to buy a system, keep the budget under five grand and I had to keep the system forever, this is the amp and preamp I'd buy. PrimaLuna has hit another one out of the park with great sound, great build quality and dashing good looks. Highly recommended.

As is typical, an amplifier and preamplifier that are designed together usually work quite well together and these two are no exception, but during the course of the test, I tried them both individually with other components to see how they would fare. They passed with flying colors. ☺