

PrimaLuna DiaLogue One

Integrated Amplifier

By Rich Teer

A few years ago, a company called PrimaLuna (which is Italian for “First Moon”) caused quite a stir with their reasonably priced “ProLogue” series of tube amplifiers. There were

a number of models in the ProLogue series: a couple of integrated amplifiers, a line-level preamp, a pair of stereo power amps, and a pair of monoblocks (a CD player later rounded out the range).

I must admit to having being bitten by the PrimaLuna ProLogue bug: a pair of ProLogue Seven monoblocks have been my reference power amps since December 2007.



Designed in the Netherlands and made in China, the ProLogue products sported features uncommon (if not unheard of) at their price points, including point to point hand soldered connections, premium quality parts (e.g., Alps potentiometers, Nichicon and Realcap capacitors, WBT-style speaker terminals, and gold plated input sockets), a heavy gauge fully vented steel chassis with hand-rubbed paint work, and (on some models) upgraded Solen capacitors. The ProLogue amplifiers also featured an innovative “Adaptive AutoBias” circuit. This frees users from having to use matched tubes and monitoring the bias on their output tubes, and has the added bonus of making tube rolling and replacement very easy. PrimaLuna’s wares are imported into North America by Upscale Audio, and are distributed here in Canada by AudioScape Canada.

Refusing to rest on their laurels, PrimaLuna’s head honcho, Herman van den Dungen, and designer Marcel Croese (Goldmund’s former chief engineer) worked behind the scenes to create a “step-up” series of amplifiers that improved on the ProLogue series without costing a fortune. The result of that effort is the DiaLogue series of amplifiers, the entry-level DiaLogue One integrated amp being the subject of this review.

Technical Description

The first thing someone familiar with the ProLogue amps will notice about the DiaLogue amps is their weight. Weighing in at a hefty 29 kg (63.8 lbs), the DiaLogue One is almost twice the weight of ProLogue One, which weighs 17 kg (37.5 lbs). Most of the additional weight is due to the huge power and output

transformers, which are designed for wide bandwidth and high efficiency, and are said to lower the output impedance for greater control over speakers with difficult loads. The power transformer is toroidal for low hum.

The DiaLogue One features five line-level inputs (labelled CD, Tuner, Aux1, Aux2, and Aux3). A sixth input, labelled HT, is a home theatre pass through. This is useful for hybrid home theatre/stereo systems, where one uses a system as usual when listening in stereo but uses a receiver or other surround sound processor when watching movies. In the latter mode, the front left and right channels are driven by the DiaLogue One and the other channels are powered by other amplifiers. With a home theatre pass through, the signal integrity of the the stereo signal isn’t compromised by passing it through a surround sound processor. Unlike its ProLogue counterpart, the DiaLogue One also sports a pair of RCA output sockets to facilitate connection to a tape deck or other recording device.

Vinylphile readers will be interested to know that the DiaLogue One can be ordered with an optional \$269 (CAD) MM phono stage (dubbed the PhonoLogue), which can be fitted by one’s local PrimaLuna dealer at ordering time or a later date (end-user installation—assuming a certain level of dexterity with a soldering iron—is another option). My review sample didn’t include the phono stage, so I asked AudioScape Canada’s Allan Feldstein to send me one, which I installed part way through my evaluation. He also sent me a set of KT88 output tubes, so that I could compare them to the stock EL34s.

Talking of output tubes, another facility offered by the DiaLogue amplifiers is the ability to switch between ultralinear and triode mode on the fly. Switching between ultralinear and triode mode is as easy as pressing a button on the beautifully crafted infrared remote control; the current mode is indicated by a bi-colour LED mounted on the top panel near the driver tubes (red for ultralinear mode, green for triode). The remote control—which weighs a hefty (for a remote control) 335 g (12 oz)—is made from anodised aluminum, has silky metal buttons for all amplifier functions, and has a rubber ring around each end to protect the surface upon which it is placed: nice thinking! It also has buttons to control the PrimaLuna CD player, and frankly shames the crappy cheap plastic remote controls most other companies seem to be content to use.

The front panel is a wider version of the 10 mm (3/8”) thick brushed aluminum sheet ProLogue users will be familiar with, and is available in natural or black anodised finishes. It houses the volume control and input selector, power LED, and the remote control’s infrared receptor. Like the remote, the front panel controls have a high quality, silky feel.

The back panel hosts the six pairs of gold-plated RCA input sockets (including HT), one pair of gold-plated tape output sockets, a grounding post for the optional phono board, and an IEC mains socket (the power cord is



detachable so that users can experiment with different power cords if they wish; I

end product, the amp is protected by molded, high density packing foam.

For the majority of the time I used the Allnic Audio Labs H-3000 phono stage



used the power cord that shipped with the DiaLogue One). The back panel also hosts the speaker terminals, and has connections for 4 Ohm or 8 Ohm speakers.

Finally, the left panel sports the main power switch and a removable cage protects the tubes.

Unpacking and Listening

One thing I do want to mention before I talk about the DiaLogue One's sound quality is the packing materials PrimaLuna uses. As befits a high-

On top of the foam is the instruction manual and a pair of soft cotton white gloves, the latter so that one can move the DiaLogue One without blemishing its paintwork. The whole lot is then boxed in two double-corrugated boxes. This inspires confidence that the amp will be delivered safe and sound, and indicates that PrimaLuna (quite rightly) has the view that it is better to spend a bit extra on decent packaging than it is to skimp on it and suffer the consequences.

For most of the evaluation period, I placed the ProLogue One on an amp stand between my speakers and used it with the EL34 tubes it ships with in ultralinear mode. I also tried it in triode mode, and with the KT88s in both modes.

to amplify the signals from my Lyra Parnassus MC cartridge before they were fed into the ProLogue One, but I also used a Sumiko Pearl MM cartridge to evaluate the PhonoLogue. I used the amp for between 50 and 100 hours before doing any serious listening.

Before I describe the sound of the DiaLogue One, I must mention two minor operational irritations I experienced during the review: when the amp is power cycled, the previous input is not restored (the CD input is selected regardless of what input one was previously using), and similarly, the mute status is not preserved across power cycles (i.e., the output is not muted, even if it was muted prior to turning off the power). Small

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points, to be sure, but worth mentioning nonetheless.

Using the stock EL34s in ultralinear mode, the DiaLogue One is a very neutral, great sounding amplifier. Bass—with one or two reservations I'll get to in a minute—was warm, deep, and tuneful. The bass drum on the first and third movements of Prokofiev's *Lt. Kije* [Classic Records/RCA Victor LSC-2150] could've had a touch more heft, but was otherwise very good. There's a real sense of the air being moved by the drum, and the amp's portrayal of the hall's acoustic space (as evidenced by the bass drum's reverb decay) was also a joy to hear.

Moving up to the midrange, piano and voices were well reproduced. For an example of the latter, listen to *Rain, Rain, Beautiful Rain* and *Who Were You Talking To* on South African a cappella group Ladysmith Black Mambazo's wonderful 1987 LP, *Shaka Zulu* [WEA 925 582-1].

The DiaLogue One's treble is clear, extended, and airy. Cymbals, bells, and triangles have a wonderfully realistic shimmer (when the recording allows). I was pleasantly surprised to hear the celeste's hammer hitting the bells in *Lt. Kije's* second movement, something I've not heard before. Subtle sounds, like

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a shaken or struck tambourine are reproduced in a lifelike manner.

Imaging was great too: the individual positions of the Ladysmith Black Mambazo singers can be heard in a slight arch behind the lead singer, Joseph Shabalala, the location of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra's instruments in *Lt. Kije*, and the various instruments used by Mike Oldfield on his debut album, *Tubular Bells* [Virgin Records V2001].

Micro dynamics were fine and the macro dynamics were almost as good. Where the DiaLogue started showing its limitations was on loud passages such as the foot stomping in *Who Were You Talking To*, and the fortissimo passages of *Lt. Kije*'s first and third movements. This was mostly apparent when playing the tracks at a realistic volume; at quieter levels the dynamic constrictions were lessened. Given that we are, after all, talking about an amp with a relatively modest 36 WPC power rating, this isn't too surprising (this is especially true when the non-trivial electrostatic load presented by the MartinLogan Spires is considered).

Switching the EL34s to triode mode, the listener's perspective is moved back several rows, even after the lower gain of triode operation is accounted for (the power output is halved in triode mode). The presentation becomes a touch more lush, and dynamics are a tad more restricted. At the end of the day, listeners will decide which presentation they prefer, and their choice might even change depending on the track being played. Whether this choice is a blessing or a curse is left as an exercise to the amplifier's owner...

Replacing the EL34s with KT88s (and listening to them informally for a couple of dozen hours to burn them in before I did any serious auditioning), the sound seemed to be slightly subjectively louder. The DiaLogue One's bigger brother, the DiaLogue Two, uses KT88s (and has upgraded capacitors and faster switching diodes). The latter is rated at 38 WPC (rather than 36 WPC), but such a small difference seems unlikely to be the culprit. My guess—and it is only a guess—is that the KT88 has slightly more gain than the EL34.

Powered by the KT88s, bass had a little more weight over the EL34, and the treble has a touch more sparkle (the opening bells of *Tubular Bells* aptly illustrates this). Some sibilants seemed to be slightly exaggerated too, but this could have been a sign that the KT88s needed more burn in time.

Switching the KT88s to triode mode had much the same effect on the sound as with the EL34s: perspective was moved back several rows, and the sound became a bit more lush at the expense of very slightly reduced dynamics.

With the EL34s back in place, I proceeded to evaluate the on-board PhonoLogue MM phono stage. In this configuration (using the Sumiko Pearl cartridge) the sound shared many of the same traits as previously described. However, the frequency extremes were somewhat subdued and the sound was a bit veiled. Low level details, like shaken tambourines, were harder to discern. There was a reduced amount of air around the glockenspiel on *Tubular Bells* and the soundstage's width narrowed a bit: instead of expanding

out beyond my speakers, the width of the soundstage was constrained by the distance between the speakers. Finally, the listener's perspective is back a row or two (but not as far as when using triode mode when listening to other inputs).

My comments on the preceding paragraph shouldn't be read as being too disparaging. Considering its very modest price, the PhonoLogue is actually pretty good. However, the DiaLogue One is good enough to consider use with other, more expensive phono stages.

Verdict

PrimaLuna have another winner with the DiaLogue One: it's a great sounding, well-built integrated amplifier. I must admit I had a slight preference for the sound when the KT88s were installed, but even with the stock EL34s installed the DiaLogue One will make a fine control centre in a high-end system; the HT bypass adds to its versatility, enabling it to be used in a high quality hybrid stereo/HT system.

Adding the PhonoLogue is a good idea if you have (or plan to acquire) a turntable; if nothing else it provides a great stepping stone while you save up for something higher up in the phono stage food chain.

Given its relatively modest output of only 36 WPC (which is halved in triode mode), a home trial is a must if your speakers are inefficient or present a difficult load. However, if you're shopping for an integrated amp in this price range you'd be remiss not to have this one on your "must audition" list. Highly recommended!

Specifications

Description Tube integrated amplifier.
Power output 36 W/channel (ultralinear), 18 W/channel (triode).
Frequency response 10–30,000 Hz \pm 1 dB.
Input impedance 100 kOhm.
Maximum gain 36.5 dB.
Signal to noise ratio 89 dB.
Tube complement Two 12AU7, two 12AX7, four EL34.
Dimensions (hwd) 210 mm x 385 mm x 405 mm (8.3" x 15.2" x 15.9").
Weight 29 kg (63.8 lbs).
Finishes Natural and black anodised aluminum.
Serial number of unit reviewed 06100125.
Price (CAD) \$3,120, \$3,389 as tested including the PhonoLogue.
Warranty Two years non-transferable (6 months on stock tubes).

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Associated Equipment

Analogue source Forsell Air Reference Mk 2 turntable and arm.
Phono cartridges Lyra Parnassus, Sumiko Pearl.
Phono stage Allnic Audio Labs H-3000.
Preamp Audio Research SP-9 Mk 2.
Power amplifiers PrimaLuna ProLogue Sevens.
Cables Phono: Nordost Frey. Interconnects: Nordost Frey. Speaker: Nordost Frey, QED Qudos 4-Core. AC: stock.
Accessories Target and SolidSteel equipment stands; Mission Isoplat; Furman Elite 15-PFi power conditioner; Audio Physic cartridge demagnetiser; Last record and stylus cleaning products; The Cartridge Man tracking force gauge.