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Mini test
Four Bluetooth desktop
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PASSION FOR SOUND

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BEAUTIFUL SYSTEM
KRELL/PRIMA LUNA/
MARTINLOGAN

Point of **IMPACT**

Valves and electrostatics only do delicacy and finesse right? **Ed Selley** thinks this system missed that particular memo

On a few occasions I have found myself looking at a collection of electronics and feeling pretty sure that I know what to expect sonically. A bit of knowledge about the amp specs, the speaker size and the source equipment used and you're most of the way there. At least you might think so... This system uses a valve amp partnered with electrostatic speakers. What follows should be a laudation to the qualities we associate with these categories, but in practise it doesn't quite work out that way.

MartinLogan's ElectroMotion and Prima Luna's Dialogue have all the attributes you might expect from electronics of this nature. They then go on to augment them with some you simply don't expect. Part of this is down to their design, which in both cases introduces a twist to the accepted design principles and some of the cause lies with the source equipment, but the end result is entirely out of the ordinary.

In the case of the Prima Luna Dialogue Premium HP, the twist is the two letters at the end. The normal Dialogue Premium uses a pair of output valves per channel for power. The 'High Power' version here doubles that to four valves a side. With KT88 valves in place, it gives a hefty (and wonderfully specific) 73W in ultralinear mode. This is a meaningful amount of grunt for a valve amp and offers the possibility of really gripping



COMPONENTS

**KRELL CONNECT
STREAM PLAYER £3,500**

Available either as a streaming transport or as here, with an internal DAC, the Connect is Krell's first foray into streaming and is a 24/192kHz-capable player with internet radio and a choice of balanced and unbalanced audio outputs.

**PRIMA LUNA DIALOGUE HP
INTEGRATED AMP £3,000**

The Dialogue HP is the latest member of the Dialogue family and is designed to offer higher power outputs than the standard integrated. A variety of output valves can be used and these can be used in triode and ultralinear settings.

**MARTINLOGAN
ELECTROMOTION
ELECTROSTATIC SPEAKERS
£2,500**

The smallest of MartinLogan's hybrid electrostatic speakers is still a pretty sizeable design with an 8in passive driver partnering a 86 x 22cm electrostatic panel for midrange and treble frequencies.



BEAUTIFUL SYSTEM KRELL/PRIMA LUNA/ MARTINLOGAN



the speakers by the scruff of the neck rather than cajoling them to perform.

The amount of casual brutality that the MartinLogan ElectroMotion needs to strut its stuff is open to debate given that it has a claimed sensitivity of 91dB/W and fairly benign impedance to go with it, but beyond the bald numbers the ElectroMotion makes some specific requirements of a partnering amp. The twist with the configuration is that like many MartinLogan speakers it uses a conventional driver to fill in the low end that an electrostatic panel can struggle with. Some more expensive models use active bass modules, but the ElectroMotion relies on the partnering amp to power both sections which means the Prima Luna is well placed to use those extra valves.

Completing the picture

The final piece in the puzzle is a digital source from a brand with a different take on design to the rest of the system. Mention Krell and most people will envisage an amp the size of a family hatchback, very possibly with a visible heat haze coming out of the top. This tends to overlook that the company has made some seriously accomplished digital sources over the years and the Connect Stream Player looks to have been built in the same

mould. It might be Krell's first foray into network streaming, but it manages to look powerful even when it isn't doing anything. In fact you could argue it looks most purposeful doing nothing at all with the giant red standby light casting a menacing glow over its surroundings.

The system isn't one that's going to vanish into the background of most rooms. Given the plethora of valves it uses, the Prima Luna is commendably

This is a system that moves air and hits rib cages with palpable force

compact, but with the considerable expanse of glassware at the front it exudes a certain sense of purpose as well. The MartinLogan is deceptive in that the bulk of its overall dimensions is a relatively lightweight frame, but this is still a fairly sizeable speaker. Everything feels pleasingly over engineered from the flawless paint finish on the rear of the Prima Luna to the supplied remote controls that have almost as much metalwork to them as the devices they control.

So, it's no shrinking violet but we know what it will sound like right?

Above: The HP variant of the Dialogue has the power needed to control the MartinLogans

Centre right: All the components feel exactly assembled and offer useful functionality

Above far right: The Connect is Krell's first streamer, but the house sound is retained to great effect

This should be a masterpiece of warmth and refinement with a soundstage to die for. With a spot of well-recorded acoustic music, it should be the audio equivalent of a shoulder massage and a nice glass of something expensive. And, for the avoidance of doubt, this system is spellbindingly good in this regard. With its considerable height over a normal seating position and impressive radiating area, the ElectroMotion creates a vision of the performance that even considerably more expensive conventional loudspeakers are left floundering trying to replicate.

Ultra vivid scene

The midrange lucidity is also absolutely superb. *Medicine* by Drew Holcombe and the Neighbours is tangibly and believably real. The decay to notes is an area that valve amplifiers seem to have the edge over their solid state brethren and although it seems minor, the effect on your perception of the performance as a whole is considerable. Combine the expansiveness of the MartinLogan with the vividness of the Prima Luna and you have something wonderful.

If the scope of this system's talents ended here, it would still make a great many people very happy, but the Krell seems to unlock another side of these

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products that gives this system traits you simply wouldn't expect. Put away the well-recorded acoustic material and reach for the gritty brilliance of Stereo MC's *Deep Down And Dirty* and prepare to be astonished. This system reproduces every low note, every electronic graunch and every utterance of Rob Birch with the determination and enthusiasm of a PA system.

How low can you go?

And not a clumsy PA system either. The 8in driver of the ElectroMotion is kept under a tight leash by the Krell and Prima Luna with the result that it starts and stops with commendable speed and agility. This doesn't stop it producing exceptionally deep bass. The 42Hz quoted roll off of the ElectroMotion must count as the most engaging understatement since Rolls Royce described the output of a giant V8 engine as "adequate". This is a system that moves air and hits rib cages with palpable force. Furthermore, the integration of the two radically different drivers is seamless and entirely imperceptible.

As a result, this system is so much more than a beguiling way to explore some safe genres of music. It has an almost chameleonic ability to shift gears and deliver a level of drive and attack that does justice to albums



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you'd never expect it would excel at. When you are done with going for it, you can turn it down, reach for something relaxing and no trace of this steely determination will impede the experience. This wide-ranging ability and sheer scale is so accomplished that there are very few similarly priced systems that spring to mind that can rival it. It is also completely painless to live with. Every aspect of the system can be controlled by remote and the

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Krell is completely app controlled as has become the standard for streamers. Pottering through your music collection by iPad wondering what to throw at this ensemble is one of life's little pleasures and marginally harder to do than blinking.

The final treat in this gift that keeps on giving is what happens when you give the system a little hi-res to play with. The Krell thrives on higher bitrate material and the attendant improvements in mastering and dynamic range. The jump in performance is palpable and the Prima

Luna and MartinLogans respond in kind. The way that an album with rough and ready mastering can be flattered while one that is sumptuously recorded can be given all the space it needs is an elegant demonstration that valves still remain entirely relevant in modern audio.

Gift that keeps on giving

Summing up this system in a succinct way is extremely difficult because the more time you spend with it, the more facets it reveals. There is scarcely space to note that the Prima Luna has a wonderful headphone output or that tuning in to Radio 4's excellent *Afternoon Drama* on the MartinLogans is to have an actual stage of actors in front of you. What is most significant is that none of these additional talents distract from one another. You could buy it for the midrange and soundstage and delight in that without caring that it will also rock with the best of them and handles electronica with an authority that serious solid state amps would struggle to match. There is something rather wonderful about how it meets your expectations while subverting them at the same time. You can judge this particular book by its cover, but trust when I say you'll be missing out on some scintillating plot twists ●