

Luna Love

If you want a valve amplifier that embodies all the classic qualities associated with valves then you may well love the Prima Luna Prologue Premium, thinks Tony Bolton.

Dutch based amplifier manufacturers, Prima Luna have been busy of late, developing a new range to fit in between the well known ProLogue series and the more upmarket DiaLogue models. This has been called the ProLogue Premium and consists of a CD player, integrated amp and a pre-amp, to go with either mono-blocks or the stereo power amp, under review here.

It takes its styling cues from the Dialogue range, having the same curved (removable) valve cover, and internally, new output and power transformers, residing behind the big covers at the back. It is not a small unit, occupying a space some 370 x 200 x 400mm (w x h x d) and needing a strong shelf to support its 21kg weight.

It is available with either a silver or black fascia, in the centre of which sits a small green LED to signify power is on. This is activated by a switch on the left hand side near the front of the chassis, which is gloss black on all models. The fit and finish of the exterior was excellent.

At the back are two pairs of three speaker terminals. Alongside the negative posts are options of either 4 or 8 Ohm positive binding posts for the speaker cable. Beside these are the two RCA input sockets and the mains IEC inlet.

Internally the circuit borrows from both its cousins, with the ProLogue's zero negative feedback topology, and comes fitted with Solon and Nichicon capacitors. From the DiaLogue comes Adaptive AutoBias circuitry that allows recalibration of the circuit for either EL34s or KT88 valves at the flick of a switch. (The latter were fitted to this

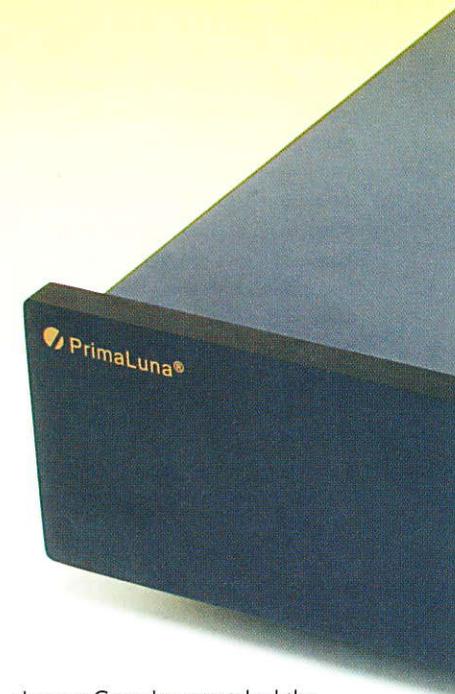
example, costing £13 more than the EL34 version). The circuit is also self biasing, so there is no periodic fiddling around with meters and screwdrivers.

The front end design is new, based around two pairs of 12AU7 valves, and features four protection circuits most of which are self explanatory; 'Bad Tube Indicator', 'Power Transformer Protection', 'Output Transformer Protection' and a '+B relay' which works in conjunction with the latter.

Given a claimed power output of 35 Watts, I plugged the ProLogue Premium Stereo into the upstairs system where it had a pretty amp friendly load from the 6 Ohm/ 95dB efficiency, Kelly KT3s. I put it through a couple of days running in and sat down to get properly acquainted.

Being in a jazzy mood I put on a 1960s stereo pressing of Ellington live in Juan-les-Pins, performing at the Antibes Jazz Festival on 29th July 1966. This stereo Verve recording is in good condition and, being recorded outside, has a different ambience to the more normal studio sound. The Prima Luna got into the spirit of the event enough to transport me to sunnier climes, even while one of the recent storms battered at my windows. The essence of life, and the more freewheeling attitude of the performers when taken out of a studio, came through, along with the Duke's frequent asides to the band, and to the audience on occasion. The last track, 'Diminuendo In Blue and Blow By Blow' a merging of two pieces, provided a show-stopping finish with Ellington in the centre of the soundstage and Paul Gonsalves on lead tenor sax, swinging away over on the right.

The beat drove the music



along as Gonsalves stretched the capabilities of his instrument to the limits, although I do have to say that the bass, while romping along merrily, did not have the cleanest definition that I have encountered. Rather than a sharply defined leading edge to the notes, they tended to have a softer, slightly more rounded shape. Don't get me wrong, they weren't blurring into each other, the music was too snappily paced for that, but there was a little something missing from the attack, that I have heard done better elsewhere.

Seeking something a little calmer after such lurid sounds, I settled on Saint-Saens 'Carnival of the Animals'. This recording features the lines written by Ogden Nash in 1949 to accompany the piece, which are exquisitely read by the inimitable Noel Coward. Originally released in the USA on Columbia Masterworks, this is the 1958 UK release on the Philips label.

The Prima Luna seemed unfazed by a mono recording, and again got thoroughly into the spirit of the piece, placing the orchestra firmly



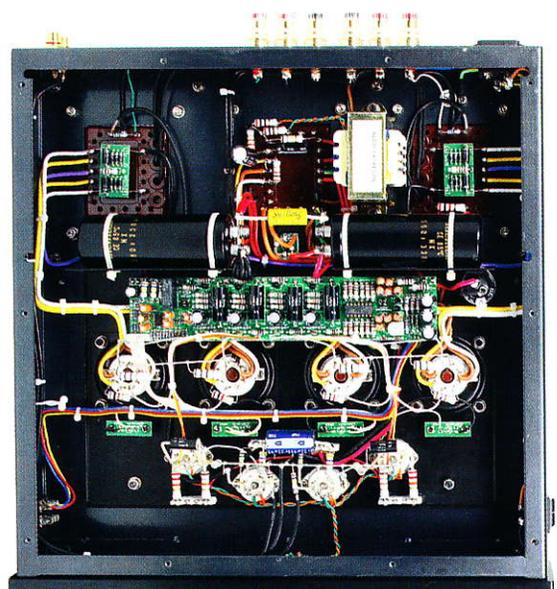
"it transmits atmosphere aplenty and, most importantly, plays enjoyable music"

between the speakers, occupying an area a little in front of the cabinets, and reaching a fair way back. Coward seemed to step forward in front of the musicians to disclaim his lines, before thoughtfully standing back, allowing the music to speak for itself.

Tonally, I thought the sound was pretty accurate. There was a pleasing delicacy to the treble where required,

and the sawing, deep strings during 'Elephants', plumbed the depths in a satisfying way. The xylophone in 'Fossils' plinked away merrily, before being joined by the rest of the orchestra, creating a pleasant flow of sound. Again, not as defined as I have heard, but still friendly to the ear.

Having discovered the easy-going side to this amp's nature I wondered





if more strident sounds would fare as well, and dug out REM's first Warner Brothers LP, 'Green'. This guitar driven rock, although melodious, still has some edgy sounds in it, and here I felt, the amp played it a little safe. The music was enjoyable, but there was a definite softness to the shape of some of the sounds that should, I felt, have been a bit more sharp and pointed. I also felt that the bass, certainly at the reasonably loud volume that I was playing at, lacked the floor moving intensity that I would have expected. It sounded as though it went quite deep, but I wasn't aware of it tickling the soles of my feet through the floorboards, as it would have been with the resident pair of Quad 303s on the job.

At the other extreme, the treble retained it's light but quite detailed touch, letting me hear the click of plectrum on guitar string. Imaging was good, with a strong central placement for Michael Stipe's vocals. The band were grouped around him, each occupying a firm point in space, although I wasn't aware of much air in between them – something that I am used to with this system in it's normal configuration.

Determined to see if I could get a little rawness from the Prima Luna, I treated it to some psychedelic trance from Rastaliens and the CD 'Xplore the Wild Side'. Track one, '2 Da Max', starts with a cymbal rushing towards you with increasing intensity, then the bass arrives, followed by synths making some quite twisted noises. Some rush out of nowhere, others perform a melodic little jig in the middle of the mix, before dashing off somewhere else. It is quite

intense music, with a driving, energetic beat, and while that intensity was there, I still felt it was a little too safe in a certain subtle way, that took away some of the point of the music. This is fairly hardcore dance music, and should lift you up

and make you want to move to it. Instead I felt stirred by it, but not enough to do more than tap my feet to the beat, rather than feel compelled to get up and bop around the room a bit (and no I don't play air-guitar!). I still enjoyed the sounds, but they did feel a bit softened, and almost gentrified in a way.

That sums things up quite nicely I think. This amp is gentle and polite in the way it produces music. It is unlikely to cause sonic offense, but fans of bangin' toons, and driving rock might be left feeling a little as though their gran has just turned up at the party. Even though she's a game old girl and up for a bit of fun, everyone is minding their manners a little more than they normally would.

With jazz this was a little less obvious. Only really raucous noises made by saxophones and the like, seemed fractionally held back, but otherwise the music seemed far more suited to this amp's sensibilities. Classical material fared well, flowing with a naturalness that drew me into the music. And it is a very tuneful machine when all is said and done. A few experiments with firmer sounding

MUSIC USED:

Andre Kostelanetz and his Orchestra 'Carnival of the Animals' Saint-Saens Philips Records, GBL 5554, 1958

Duke Ellington and his Orchestra, 'Duke Ellington at the Cote d'Azur', Verve Records, SVLP 9170, 1967

REM 'Green' Warner Brothers Records, 925 795, 1988

Rastaliens 'Xplore the Wild Side' BooM! Records, BOOMCD018, 2003

valves may pay dividends here, but in standard form it transmits atmosphere aplenty and, most importantly, plays enjoyable music.

Personally I would have preferred a little less diplomacy in the sound, but these things are always a matter of taste and room/system matching. If you are in the market for a solidly built valve amplifier then I would certainly recommend an audition of the Prologue Premium Stereo. It is a friendly and easy to live with example of the breed.

SYSTEM USED:

Linn Sondek/ Hadcock 242 Cryo/ MusicMaker III
Luxman E200 phono stage.
Bent Audio TAP-X passive pre-amp.
Kelly KT3 loudspeakers.

VERDICT

Soft and gentle sounding power amplifier from Dutch manufacturer using KT88s.

PRIMA LUNA PROLOGUE PREMIUM STEREO AMPLIFIER £2313.00
Pistol Music
☎ +44 (0)20 8971 3909
www.pistolmusic.co.uk

- FOR**
- friendly, warm sound.
 - solid build.
 - tuneful.
 - creates atmosphere

- AGAINST**
- bass a little wooly
 - a little reserved with some types of music

MEASURED PERFORMANCE

The Prima Luna Prologue Premium produces 32 Watts into 8 Ohms and 4 Ohms, so coupling efficiency of the 4 Ohm tap is good. This amount of power is about right for KT88s run conservatively; they will produce up to 40 Watts as a push-pull pair but higher powers mean shorter valve life, so the Prologue treats its output valves kindly, but it does not reach the 40 Watt threshold as a result.

Because feedback is absent damping factor was very low at 0.44. In line with this distortion was on the high side and rose steadily as output increased, reaching 1% in the midband and 2% at high frequencies (10kHz) at -1dB below full output. With third harmonic in addition to second, the distortion pattern was rather more complex than is common, especially at higher power levels, so some muddle may well be evident.

Bass distortion wasn't higher than that in the midband though, so the output transformer cores are able to withstand strong low frequency magnetisation and bass quality will be OK, although perceptions will be swung by weak grip due to low damping factor. The solution is to use acoustically well damped loudspeakers, from Triangle or Wharfedale for example.

For a low feedback amplifier, however, bandwidth was unusually

wide, reaching right up to 103kHz (-1dB). Hum was minimal too, suggesting d.c. preamp heaters and good layout.

The Prologue Premium is strong in many areas, but also has limitations. Bass will sound soft unless well acoustically damped loudspeakers are used, because electrical damping is minimal. Modern valve amplifiers often produce less distortion at higher levels too. Measurement suggests a very typical valve sound. NK

Power	32watts
CD/tuner/aux.	
Frequency response	12Hz-103kHz
Separation	68dB
Noise	-113dB
Distortion	0.3%
Sensitivity	700mV

DISTORTION

