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PrimaLuna Prologue One integrated amplifier

A Chinese-built budget valve amp from Dutch debutant PrimaLuna wows our oft-curmudgeonly correspondent. How do they do it for the money?

PrimaLuna Prologue One

PRICE	£799
SUPPLIER	Pistol Music
CONTACT	0208 971 3909
WEBSITE	www.hifi-notes.com

Although there is no detailed research to back up my guesstimate, I'd hazard that, based on my limited attendance at hi-fi shows, at least 50 new audio brands appear every year. Ordinarily, seedling brands are at best curiosities with the shelf-life of a fruit fly - here today, gone tomorrow. Unless, that is, they have something in the way of a pedigree.

PrimaLuna, a new valve amp from Holland, is immediately hamstrung in my book because of its absurd name. That's Latin for 'First Moon', which strikes me as a particularly ludicrous moniker. But there have been worse, of course - 'Anodyne' was a pip - and the name will pale (geddit?) into insignificance when you see the product that wears it. It's distributed in the UK by Pistol Music, a new division of Absolute Sounds.

Readers may recall a Dutch brand of hot-rodded Marantz products called AH! Njoe Tjoeb (speaking of daft names...) that offered ridiculous value for money, truly superb performance for negligible outlay.

The new company, part of Dutch high-end distributor Durob Audio's empire, represents all-new tube-related products - as opposed to modified components - of which 'extremely good

quality and [and] extremely good price/quality ratio are the main features.'

Durob's Herman van den Dungen, the closest that audio has come to producing its own Keith Richards, has applied over 30 years of high-end experience to the PrimaLuna project. His track

brand Goldmund, along with Dutch designers once involved with Sphinx. Croese co-designed PrimaLuna's custom-made transformers with 'one of the most experienced transformer designers in the USA.' Uniquely, PrimaLuna also includes as part of its design team a group of local high-end

With apologies to various British and Italian geniuses, this amplifier has - to my ears - no equals at its retail price

record is impressive, having distributed extreme high-end components in the Benelux territories while playing an active role in the creation of Kiseki cartridges and tone-arms, Milltek cartridges, PinPoint cones and other accessories.

Herman's team of fellow high-end veterans includes Marcel Croese, who designed for Swiss

dealers and consumers 'who judge every step taken by the design group. Prototypes, in-between-products, final products are tested in the field before going into "real" production. Direct comparisons with other brands' competitive models of the same but certainly of much higher prices is an important part of the judgement.'

So, before we even get into the product, you're going to wonder how a European brand, saddled with typically high EU operating costs, can offer bargain products. Simple. Like savvy brands of far greater size, PrimaLuna has turned to China.

According to Herman: 'The design-people teamed up with two Chinese companies to build the products as economically as possible, without forgetting our strict tolerances of quality. The companies were chosen after serious and intensive studies and visits to China. A very important factor for the final choice was the proven experience and excellence of these manufacturers in the past.'

Herman is adamant that the PrimaLuna amps must not be mistaken for the earliest valve amps that came flooding out of China. Reliability and build quality have improved logarithmically over the past decade, to the great distress of Western manufacturers not using Chinese manufacturing. Factor in the costs, and the results can border on the unbelievable, as you will see.

In unleashing this Sino-Dutch product on the West, Herman insisted that after-sales service would be a function of the fundamental electrical design. 'Distributors, dealers and consumers should not waste their time and energy in difficult repairs. A faulty tube should never damage a circuit. The maximum replacement in the field, by the owner is a tube or a fuse. If an owner wants to replace his tubes - as several audiophiles like to do - no readjustment of the bias should be necessary. That is why we designed our "sustained auto bias" servo circuit with plate-fuse protection.'

The ProLogue One, a 35W integrated stereo valve amplifier, is PrimaLuna's first product. No matter where you look, the 292 x 196 x 381mm (whd), 15kg ProLogue One oozes quality. If your only experience of Chinese-made valve amps were the early 1990s efforts that suggested that every day was the 4th of July, you're in for a treat. Starting at the front, the knobs for source select and volume have the feel of something with a price tag to match a decent 42in plasma screen, and they rotate concentrically. The black front panel is finished to perfection, the power-on LED fits its aperture snugly, the side-mounted power-on rocker switch has no free play. The rest of the case is enamelled in a dark sapphire colour, including the valve cage, which was a particular delight: instead of screw fitting, it snaps into place using... banana plugs! Beneath it, the four input and driver tubes are arrayed in front of the four output tubes. Behind them are the massive transformers.

PrimaLuna provides conservative specification, reminiscent of vintage glassware in some areas. The frequency response is 20Hz-30kHz ±0.5dB and the total harmonic distortion - how's this for honesty? - is quoted as 1% with a signal-to-noise

ratio of 89dB. Input impedance is 100k ohm and input sensitivity 300mV. So far, so conventional - almost retro, eh?

Which was the first response my fellow listeners uttered. As the amplifier arrived at the same time I was undertaking a survey of small speakers, there was plenty of traffic through the listening room. Audio veteran Jim Creed and watchmaker Peter Roberts - the latter being particularly impressed with the PrimaLuna's parts quality and controls - both likened the sound to classic Radfords and Dynacos. Which was as good a place to start, as we auditioned them through circa-mid-1980s 15 ohm Rogers LS3/5As. I also tried the PrimaLuna with Spondor's S35se and Blue Note A3s loudspeakers, with sources including the Marantz CD-12/DA-12 CD player and the SME 30 Mk 11 with Series V arm and

Herman van den Dungen, the closest that audio has come to producing its own Keith Richards, has applied over 30 years of high-end experience to PrimaLuna

Koetsu Urushi cartridge into the EAR 324 phonostage, using Transparent wires throughout.

You can't escape the vintage feel - the EL34 has characteristics that firmly place it in the Golden Age of Analogue - but PrimaLuna's team has done its work. The sound is so clean and coherent that the overall effect is not that of a compact valve amplifier but of a rather more ambitious, high-end behemoth.

Probably the most striking manifestation of this was the size of the soundstage coupled with the sheer mass of the lower registers. Quite how a brace of EL34s per channel can kick so much booty is hard to fathom. It certainly sounds more robust than the Dynaco Stereo 70, if slightly more aggressive, while possessing greater punch than the more refined and genteel Radford STA25.

Where it veers dramatically from vintage amplifiers is in its sonic hygiene: whether it's down to newness or circuitry, the ProLogue One is cleaner, more detailed and more precise than its elderly forebears, and it demonstrates greater extension and control at both ends of the frequency range.

Despite this undeniable whiff of modernity, it still retains a charming, romantic quality, not unlike Herman himself in full-on seduction mode. But, also like Herman, the amp has a temper, too, and it was able to deliver the attack and power of up-to-the-minute power rock without problems. It handled the power chords and blistering transients on *Welcome Interstate Managers*, the new masterpiece from Fountains of Wayne, with sufficient speed and control, while displaying the

same upper frequency grace and 'air' grace that it called upon when splaying out the voices in Alison Krauss's 'Down To The River To Pray'. The rhythm section on Howard Tate's *Rediscovered* benefited from its fluidity and bass control, while the textures of that still-peerless voice were unmistakable. And this guy veers into falsetto even more frequently than Al Green. The PrimaLuna simply followed the vocal swings like an obedient servant.

Which leads me to one of those once-every-five-years-or-so watershed moments. I have no alternative but to state that the PrimaLuna ProLogue One is now my 'affordable reference amplifier'. With apologies to various British and Italian geniuses, this amplifier has - to my ears - no equals at its retail price of £799. Yes, that's right: *seven hundred and ninety-nine pounds*. It's

so shockingly good, and promises so much for the rest of the range that the UK importer, Absolute Sounds, has created a special division for this and other more cost-effective solutions.

I leave this review somewhat shaken and I don't know which is the more shocking: that so much is available for so small an outlay, that the Chinese are now capable of producing audio separates this desirable, or that, after 25 years, Absolute Sounds has something for sale that normal people can afford. We do, indeed, live in interesting times. ■

Ken Kessler

Technology

PrimaLuna's first product is the ProLogue One, an integrated stereo valve amplifier delivering 35W/ch from four EL34s (two per channel). Its front-end employs two 12AX7s and two 12AU7s, the design featuring automatic biasing and protection circuitry. It offers four line inputs served by gold-plated sockets, but has no line outputs, so recordists are not going to be too happy. Speakers are connected through lavish multi-way terminals with separate posts for 4 and 8 ohms.

Features

- Push-pull design using EL34 valves
- Four line-level inputs
- Outstanding at the price