

PrimaLuna ProLogue One Integrated Amplifier

Jeff Dorgay



PHOTO: JEFF DORGAY

If they ever offer a Nobel prize for bringing affordable audio to the masses, I would be the first to nominate Upscale Audio's Kevin Deal. If you've been following the audio press at all, you know how well received the Kevin-Deal-distributed Ah! Tjoeb CD player has been. Like the Ah! Tjoeb, the \$1095 ProLogue One integrated amp—a tubed design, no less—was co-designed by Marcel Croese (the former chief engineer at Goldmund), and is rated at 35 watts per channel. (There's also a 40Wpc KT-88 version for \$1345.)

The ProLogue One features a 12AX7, 12AU7, and a pair of EL-34s per channel for a very simple circuit. The front panel has a volume control, green power LED, and an input selector switch with four inputs, all electrically the same. The rear panel features one set of

speaker outputs with beefy WBT style terminals (4 and 8 ohm taps) and four sets of high-quality gold-plated RCA jacks. An IEC socket is provided so you can upgrade the power cord at your leisure. Internally, the ProLogue One features point-to-point wiring for everything but the company's proprietary Adaptive Auto Bias board. A tube cage is supplied in case you have inquisitive pets or children, but the ProLogue looks much better without it.

Automobiles are my other passion, and I must admit while I am a big style junkie the nerd portion of my personality really appreciates build-quality. The ProLogue One is built like a \$3000 piece of gear; the dark metallic blue finish on this thing is just gorgeous. Getting it out of the box was like one of those toys that you keep opening only to

find another layer inside. By the third layer I found the amp, complete with a set of cotton gloves to handle it without leaving fingerprints. I guarantee that you will freak out at how great this little amplifier looks—it has a finish like a new Aston Martin. And I don't say that loosely; I just photographed a new Aston for a book project last week.

Upscale's clearly-written manual mentions that the ProLogue doesn't need an extended time to break in. It also describes the Adaptive Auto Bias that makes biasing output tubes a thing of the past. This circuit monitors and adjusts bias instantly, and PrimaLuna claims it also eliminates the need for matched output tubes and also extends the life of the tubes. Curiosity got the better of me, so I installed a set of EL-34s that I know have different sonic characteristics.

The difference in sound between the misfits and the factory tubes was almost nonexistent, but I did notice that the amplifier would play a bit cleaner at maximum volume with matched tubes.

Enough about how it looks and operates; how does it sound? Bitchin', that's how it sounds. Over the years I have owned, built, and tweaked quite a few amplifiers featuring EL-34 topology, all the way from the legendary Dynaco Stereo 70 to my last amplifier, a much-loved Conrad-Johnson MV-55. The ProLogue One is right up there with the best of this genre. Straight from the box it sounded great, but a little stiff. True to the manual, it did not take very long to break in and after about a week of casual listening at my desk, 95 percent of the magic began. It took about a month to get the last little bit of sound out of the amp, but I'm splitting hairs here.

I spend most of my time in front of five computer monitors writing about digital imaging for a number of other publications, so I get a lot of time to listen to music. The small system at my desk consists of a pair of original ProAc Tablettes, an old Proceed PDT 2 transport, a really old PS Audio Digital Link that I have modded a bit, and my old Dynaco SCA-35 integrated amp that is pretty much stock. Very warm tube sound indeed but comfy during 14-hour stints at the keyboard. For this review, I swapped the Proceed/PS Audio for my Ah! Tjoeb CD player (with all the Upscale Audio upgrades) and swapped the Radio Shack speaker cables for a pair of WireWorld Equinox 5 cables (that cost almost as much as the amplifier). Later on in the listening session, I also hooked up my Rega P25/RB 700/Shure V15xMR along with my Bottlehead

Seduction phono preamp to explore analog playback.

In a small-to-medium room at reasonable levels this amplifier will reveal a lot of music. In classic EL-34 style the ProLogue throws a very wide and deep soundstage, and has a wonderful midrange without sounding goey like a Stereo 70 or other vintage design. The ProLogue One is very neutral with little of its own "signature." With the ProAcs, imaging was very defined and close-up, yet when I took it out to the big room and hooked up my Vandersteen 2Ces the sound became more laid-back—unfortunately this amp doesn't have quite enough juice to crank the Vandersteens. To achieve higher volume levels a speaker with 90db or better sensitivity would be your best bet. What I did notice on both sets of speakers is a distinct level at which the music stops cold. Back it off a notch


and everything is fine. Go up and the music collapses, the magic is gone, compression sets in. Observe this one rule with the ProLogue One and all is well. But sheer volume is not what this amplifier is about. It's about groovy, dimensional EL-34 sound. My daughter's drum instructor always says, "It's the sound in between the notes," and that's what the ProLogue One is about. Everything has a great sense of airiness about it, and is more faithful to the original than a thousand-dollar amplifier has a right to be.

While the ProLogue One does a very respectable job of reproducing bass (remember, moderation) having good extension as well as detail, don't expect to rock the house with it. One of my favorite jazz recordings is *The Three* [East Wind], featuring Joe Sample, Shelly Manne, and Ray Brown performing some traditional jazz standards, recorded direct-to-disc.

Their version of "Satin Doll" has some great acoustic bass riffs that the ProLogue navigated with no problem. Highs are very smooth without being rolled off and the presentation is very relaxed, but the mids are where this amplifier really shines. Listening to "My God Called Me This Morning" on the Fairfield Four's *Standing in the Safety Zone* [Warner] was like having a gospel group right there in front of my desk, with all five singers having their own distinct voice and placement. Everything I listened to that was complex texturally was very absorbing and spatially well defined.

Whenever I audition a new component I have my twenty or thirty favorite tracks that really define how something sounds to me. With the ProLogue One I found myself just letting the whole record play and enjoying the sound, and I guess that is the highest compliment I can pay to this amplifier.

I wanted to make sure I wasn't missing out on anything so I did a little tube swapping. For what it's worth, you can change the character slightly by switching the stock Electro Harmonix tubes, but doing so doesn't make all that much difference. I also swapped the WireWorld speaker cables for my new favorite Home Depot 10-gauge cable. Here there was a bit more difference, with the HD wire a bit more grainy than the Equinox, but again, we are talking about using a \$950 dollar set of speaker cables with an amplifier that only costs \$1095.

In the end, you can substitute some spendy NOS tubes and ultra zooty cables to get more sound out of the ProLogue One, but for \$1095 I would just make it the cornerstone of a really musical three-to-four-thousand-dollar music system. Go to www.nobel.no right now and nominate Kevin for that prize! 

SPECIFICATIONS

Power output: 35Wpc (4 or 8 ohms)
Inputs: Four RCA
Dimensions: 15" x 11.5" x 7.68"
Weight: 36 lbs.

ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

Rega P25 turntable; Rega P700 pickup arm; Shure V15xMR cartridge; Bottlehead Seduction Phonostage; Ah! Toejb 4000 CD player with full complement of Upscale Audio mods; ProAc Tablette and Vandersteen 2ce loudspeakers; Wireworld Equinox 5 and Home Depot 10 gauge speaker cables, miscellaneous AudioQuest interconnects

DISTRIBUTOR INFORMATION

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