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Primaluna Prologue 3 Preamp & Prologue 5 Amp

Mike Driscoll



LOVE THE DUTCH. The best vacation I ever took was spent, in large part, in Amsterdam, one of the most beautiful cities I have ever visited. The Dutch character combines the devotion to precision and “job well done” found in the German and Swiss cultures, but is tempered with a sense of practicality and good humor.

The reviews in other publications, both print and online, of the Primaluna Prologue 1 integrated amp seem to be all raves, and made me eager to hear one of their products. Upon learning that the Netherlands-based company had an all-tube preamp at an extremely affordable price, I contacted fearless leader Pitts to see if I could get a unit for review. (That’s “Gene, The Infeckable” to you and your immediate kin, Driscoll! Emperor Pitts)

Kevin Deal of Upscale Audio was delighted to send me a preamp, and asked if I wanted a phono stage, which neither Gene nor I knew was an option. Kevin also suggested that he send along an amp, the Prologue 5, which uses KT88 output tubes and develops 36 watts per channel.

Primaluna’s ads claim quite a lot for their products, such as “build quality the equal of any product at any price.” I think you will agree that is a pretty heavy-duty claim for such modestly priced gear, I would say. The Primaluna gear, designed in the Netherlands and built in China, is all hand-wired, uses Alps pots, audiophile-grade capacitors from Solen, etc. The design incorporates something called “adaptive auto bias” allowing the use of, according to the company, unmatched out-



put tubes, thus completely eliminating the need for biasing the amp. In a phone conversation, Kevin informed me that, although not recommended from a sonic standpoint, the amp could be used with four different output tubes, such as one EL34, one KT88, one 6L6, and one 6550. He claims that the auto bias circuit will automatically bias each tube to match the others. He also insisted that I remove the bottom covers from the units in order to check out their build quality, of which he is particularly proud. He also asked whether I wanted silver or black faceplates. (I chose the silver.) With all this offered at a retail price of \$1395, I was starting to feel like one of TV's "Mythbusters," and was very anxious to run these babies through their paces. And so, it came to pass that towards the end of March, two boxes from Upscale arrived at my door containing a Prologue 3, and a Prologue 5.

The first thing I did was to remove the bottom plates from each unit in turn, and admire the construction quality. These guys aren't kidding about their stuff being the equal of gear costing twice as much or more in this area. Hand wired, hand soldered, and with obviously high quality components. I also was surprised by the heft of these units, they are both solidly built pieces of equipment. The silver faceplates are a good quarter inch thick (and all true audiophiles are aware of the sonic benefits of thick faceplates.) The controls have a solid and expensive feel, the paintwork is flawless, at least to these aging eyes, and (a pet peeve of mine) the power on-off switches are easily accessible on the left sides of the units, towards the front. Although I was risking being late for work that day, I hastily wired the pre and power amps into my system, so that upon my return home, I could settle down and listen immediately. While I was at work, I left the units powered up and playing Music Choice from Comcast cable, so they would be warm and ready to go. (I'm sure my cat enjoyed the bluegrass music that day.)

Even though Kevin had told me that the phono stage needed 100 hours or more to sound it's best, I grabbed an assortment of LP's and sat down to listen. What I heard totally changed my perception of the sound quality available for such little money. Even unbroken-in, what I heard blew me away. The first LP on the 'table that night was "Francis A & Edward K, featuring the Duke Ellington orchestra with Frank Sinatra vocals. (Reprise S1024) The orchestra literally filled my listen-

NOTES

Primaluna Prologue 3 Preamplifier And Prologue 5 Amplifier, \$1395.00 each. U.S. distributor, Upscale Audio, 2504 Spring Terrace, Upland, CA 91784. Phone 909/931-9686, fax 909/985-6968, web site www.upscaleaudio.com, e-mail see web site "contact" page.

Associated Equipment

Sound Valves VTA70 tube amp, Jolida JD202a tube integrated amp, ODL HT-2 solid state amp, B+K Sonata series Pro 10 mc solid-state preamp, Audible Illusions Modulus tube preamp, Mirage M3si loudspeakers, Paradigm Atom loudspeakers, VPI HW19jr/AQ PT6/Sumiko BPS turntable and phono cartridge, Denon DVD2900 universal CD player, Pioneer Elite DV45a universal CD player, Margules Magenta ADE24 analog-digital enhancer, Interconnects and cables by Kimber, PNF, JPS, and Audioquest, assorted tweaks, footers, bases, stands, charms, and talismans to drive away evil audio spirits.

ing space and beyond, with width and depth extending farther out and back than I had ever experienced with my system. Timbre, harmonics, pace, and that famous voice, front and center, with the orchestra surrounding it. After the first couple of cuts, I recall sitting there, shaking my head, and saying "WOW" over and over. I noticed no glare, etch, or anything else that would interfere with my enjoyment of the Primaluna's wonderfully open top end, and the bass was, even through my moderately efficient Mirages, deep, tight, and the antithesis of "muddy." Kevin had expressed a little concern with the 86Db efficiency of my speakers, but I found the Primaluna amp was able to drive them to levels far higher than those at which I would ever listen with no sense of strain at all. As the units accumulated hours and began to break in, all I really noticed was more of the same, that is, the sound became smoother, sound-stage expanded even more, and "musicality (there's that word again) increased along with my admiration for what Primaluna had wrought. The phono stage seemed to benefit most from break-in time, the stage opening up even further, revealing things I had never heard in my LP's, and proving, at least to me, that the LP is the original, and still best "high-rez" format.

My listening sessions usually take place in the wee hours of the morning, as I am a nurse, and work the swing shift. I return home from work at 11:30 or so, and listen for a few hours, usually quitting at around 2AM (a benefit of being single, I suppose) With the Primaluna gear in the system, I found myself listening further into the night, one LP or CD leading into another, and then another, until finally, I would realize that it was 5AM or so, and I had to go to work the next day. During one memorable session, I had put Elvis Costello's "All This

Useless Beauty" onto the VPI, which led me to Costello's "Almost Blue," his album of country classics. This in turn led into Emmylou Harris, Gram Parsons, Karl Shifflet ... on and on. I finally had to quit when I noticed the sun coming up as I was listening to Emmylou and Mark Knopfler's new collaboration, "All the Roadrunning." The music and (especially) the sound were just so great; I didn't want to stop.

Following Kevin's suggestion that I try out different tube types in the amp, I pulled the EL34's out of my Sound Valves VTA70, and installed them in the Prologue 5. I wasn't sure what to expect when the unit was turned on, but to my relief, there were no fireworks, just beautiful sound. Discretion being the better part of valor, I didn't try the KT88's in the Sound Valves. Bass was, with the EL34's, a bit looser, seemingly not quite as deep. When pushed, there seemed to be a bit of congestion on complex classical pieces, which was not surprising, considering the slight power drop with these tubes. The sound was, however, eminently listenable, if not quite to the level of the amp with the original KT88's.

Do I have any criticisms of the Primaluna pair? Of the amp, none. As far as the preamp, I wish it included a true tape monitor circuit, rather than a tape loop; but that's it. I'm keeping this stuff! We've all heard of that "point of diminishing returns," where the amount of money one spends gives less and less improvement in sound quality and satisfaction. That point varies, of course, with each individual audiophile, depending upon income, listening acuity, and to a rather annoying degree, snob appeal. The Primaluna gear should hit that point precisely for many audiophiles with real-world budgets and concerns, like food and rent. Great job!