

SAM'S by SAM TELLIG SPACE

THIS ISSUE: Sam finds an amp that's happy with almost any type of output tube, and considers what he'd do with his e-stuff, if he had any to keep in the Cloud.

By the Light of a PrimaLuna Moon

Author Scott Turow, novelist and president of the Authors Guild, “sees immediate peril in the prospect of a secondhand digital thrift shop.” I got this information secondhand myself, from an article in the March 7, 2013, edition of the *New York Times*: “Imagining a Swap Meet for E-Books and Music,” by David Streitfeld. I downloaded it for free.¹

“The paperback of ‘Fifty Shades of Gray’ is exactly like the digital version except for this: If you hate the paperback, you can give it away or resell it,” Streitfeld reminded readers. “If you hate the e-book, you’re stuck with it.”

“The retailer’s button might say ‘buy now,’ but you are in effect only renting an e-book—or an iTunes song—and your rights are severely limited.”

You can’t resell it on Amazon or eBay. You can’t trade it with a friend. You can’t even give it to your kids. And when you croak, your e-book croaks. Assuming you haven’t already lost it in the Cloud.

This January, according to Streitfeld, Amazon “received a patent to set up an exchange for all sorts of digital material.” In March, Apple applied with the US Patent and Trademark Office for its own digital marketplace system.

Good luck with the lawyers.

Billions of dollars in wealth unlocked!

As this column’s deadline loomed, a New York federal district court was mulling the matter of ReDigi, a startup launched in October 2011. (Check the status of the case on Wikipedia, or Google it.) ReDigi sounds like a disease. To record labels, it is a disease. EMI brought the suit.

“Most lawful users of music and books have hundreds of dollars of lawfully obtained things on their computers and right now the value of that is zero dollars,” ReDigi’s chief executive, John Ossenmacher, told the BBC last October. “ReDigi takes zero dollars and we create billions of dollars in wealth overnight.”²

As with Apple’s patent application, ReDigi’s system allows only one user at a time to own a copy he or she has purchased.

Oh, really? How might they accomplish that? By having the seller install what looks to me like spyware on his or her computer? Thanks, but no thanks. Not that I have any digital downloads to resell; I never bought any.

My daughter publishes both real books and e-books.³ Boy, does she love raking in the e-sales. No books to print and mail, no inventory, no returns from booksellers. Cash in a flash, and that’s it. E-Z money. But what about someone buying a “used” or secondhand e-copy from Amazon, Apple, ReDigi, or anyone else? Amy sang her me-Tune:

“Dad! This reselling is crap,” she e-mailed me, after reading the *Times* article. “It really screws the producer. You sell one copy and it recirculates endlessly. The original owner comes up with a workaround to keep the original file, while supposedly reselling it.”



PrimaLuna’s Dialogue Premium is happy with almost any type of output tube.

Libraries and schools needn’t reorder. “When a library has a printed book, it gets worn out after enough people borrow it,” Amy pointed out. “Obviously, this does not happen with an e-book. Good as new with every repurchase.” Or each new borrower.

I can sympathize with authors, small publishers, and independent record labels. As for big-conglomerate publishers and major record labels, Amazon came to their rescue with the Kindle and Apple with the iPod. That was fine for publishers and record labels then, but what eventually happens when you swim with sharks?

Are e-books good for consumers? I dunno; I just don’t like them. I don’t worry about cashing out since I never bought in.

My young friend Josef goes to his local library and has a

¹ <http://tinyurl.com/amwm4ve>.

² www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-19842851

³ Amy is an author for and a publisher of Language Success Press, in Ann Arbor, Michigan, which specializes in books on learning English as a second language.

librarian load e-books onto his laptop. All quite kosher. But the selection is severely limited, and each e-book disappears in 21 days or so, whether Josef has finished it or not. (Another Josef—Stalin—was fond of disappearing ink.)

Disappearing books! I call them flee-books. Well, you don't have to renew them. But what happens when books disappear forever?

My accountant was grouching the other day about the new library that had opened down the street from his office. "There aren't any books!" he thundered. "There are all these screens, computers, keyboards, meeting rooms, media rooms. But I have to travel 30 miles for a library with real books."

May you live in interesting times, as the Chinese curse goes. I must admit, I do enjoy the turmoil. And free podcasts. And Internet radio. And the obituaries from my hometown.

PrimaLuna DiaLogue Premium integrated amplifier

Meanwhile, as you wait for Amazon, Apple, and eBay to open their digital thrift shops, how about an integrated tube amp that's happy with almost any output tube, including most of those in your tube closet?

The PrimaLuna DiaLogue Premium was designed in the Netherlands by Herman van den Dungen and his team at Duorb Audio, BV. Of course, it's made in China. It can take EL34, KT66, KT77, 6L6 KT88, KT120, 6550, and several other types of output tube. (An exception is the 8417, with its own peculiar pin configuration.) A switch on the side of the amplifier lets you choose between two settings: one for EL34s and the like, the other for KT88/KT120s. It needs two output tubes per channel.

As supplied to me with EL34s, PrimaLuna-branded and handpicked from Shuguang, the DiaLogue Premium retails for \$3299. Add \$80 for KT120s. The power output depends on the tube type. The manual states 32W for EL34s, 43.2W for KT120s, etc.

"The stock EL34s have been wonderful," enthused Kevin Deal by



The DiaLogue Premium has both 4 ohm and 8 ohm output transformer taps.

e-mail. Kevin, of Upscale Audio, is the US distributor. He knows a deal! Magnificent tubes. These Shuguang EL34s might overturn any notions you may have—warm, fuzzy, phasey, lacking power and punch—about the EL34 sound.

The rear of the DiaLogue Premium offers 8 and 4 ohm connections. (Even with a nominal 8 ohm speaker, you might prefer the sound from the 4 ohm tap, which has a lower source impedance.) From the remote control (but not from the faceplate), you can choose between Ultralinear and Triode modes on the fly, while music is playing. (A red light atop the plinth indicates Ultralinear (UL), a green light indicates Triode (TR).) There are five line-level stereo RCA inputs and one home-theater input. The manual describes the latter as a "true pass-through circuit": the volume is fixed, and the preamp section is removed from the signal path. (The first printing of the manual does not make this clear.)

All six 12AU7 tubes have gain. That's three gain stages per channel. Here's the Deal, per Kevin: The DiaLogue Premium "is internally wired in a rather slick way in that the tubes are wired in parallel internally, and in parallel to each other, so that if one triode gets droopy, the owner won't hear it."

Kevin points out that there are more new old stock (NOS) 12AU7 tubes on the market than any other type. Kevin himself stocks more than 10,000 vintage 12AU7s, including tubes from Mullard and La Radiotechnique. He's one of my prime sources of NOS tubes.

I'm grateful to my colleague Art Dudley, who understands stuff

I don't always grasp. As Artie wrote in his review of the DiaLogue Seven monoblock in the December 2009 *Stereophile*, PrimaLuna's "calling card is a circuit . . . called Adaptive AutoBias." With conventional autobias, "the signal grid of a power tube is referenced to ground, and the potential of the cathode is raised above ground through a cathode resistor, thus prompting the tube to adjust itself under operating conditions."

Thanks, Arthur.

Kevin dealt this hand: "The problem [with cathode-bias] is that you run the bejesus out of the tubes and most of the power goes up in heat. . . . [Adaptive AutoBias] is a real piece of engineering. It is not in the signal path, so there is no sonic downside. Its job is to look at each tube in real time, with the demands of the music signal, and keep the idle current in an optimal range."

The DiaLogue Premium is a fixed-bias amp, in which the voltage applied to the signal grid is adjusted in response to operating temperature, input-signal amplitude, and other parameters. If I'm not mistaken, a few other manufacturers have devised something similar.

PrimaLuna's Adaptive AutoBias is what makes it possible to mix and match tube types. Would you like one EL34 and one 6550 per channel? It can be done! Do you love both the KT66 and KT77? Try one of each per channel. I don't recommend that you do this, but if an output tube goes down, you *can*, in a pinch, substitute another type, so long as it's not a forbidden tube like the 8417, which anyway is unobtainable. The DiaLogue Premium has a light in front of each tube to indicate when Adaptive AutoBias can no longer "adapt" to that tube.

But Kevin cautions against excessive tube rolling—the constant switching of output tubes will loosen socket connections, which could lead to disaster. And with sound this good, why would you twitch and switch? In any event, this amplifier does *not* run the bejesus out of each tube: 35.7Wpc from a pair of KT88s

is way conservative.

I experienced two misadventures with the DiaLogue Premium. Its source selector knob (which you probably won't use anyway) was wobbly. I think a nut may have come loose (like me), but the knob still worked okay; I used the remote to change sources. Maybe PrimaLuna should pay closer attention to packing—the DiaLogue's two knobs, for Volume and Source, are exposed. Protect them in shipping with some kind of jockstrap.

The other misadventure concerned the four grommets that stop the DiaLogue's tube cage from rattling against its plinth. One by one, I lost them. I think they fell into the amp.

Actually, my review sample came with *two* tube cages: the ugly European cage has very narrow slats. The other, far more handsome, non-EU cage has wider slats, between which a kid or a cat might poke a paw. You don't need a cage at all, of course. In Europe, just don't tell the authorities. Our own cat, Maksim, loved sitting on the DiaLogue, atop the transformers. Occasionally, he'd swoop his tail down inside the cage. Fortunately, he's smart enough not to get singled.

Gad, this thing is heavy: 66lbs, or 30kg. That's why it took me so long to get it from the garage up to my listening room. I needed help lifting it. It's 14.4" wide by 8" high by 15.4" deep.

I used the PrimaLuna with my Denon DCD-1650R CD player as transport, and a Musical Fidelity Tri-Vista DAC. Speakers included the Opera Mezza 2012s and the Triangle Comète 30th Anniversaires. The PrimaLuna DiaLogue hit it off with both.

Do you need to spend more money than this for an amplifier? No.

Kevin Deal nailed this one: The PrimaLuna DiaLogue is a tube amplifier that does not try to sound like solid-state. It completely avoids the sterility I associate with many

solid-state amps. It also avoids the foibles—or, as my late friend Lars called them, *fweebles*—I commonly associate with tubes.

The EL34's fweebles are well known: fuzzy, phasey, and the rest. So are the tube's strong points: richness, ripeness, truth of timbre, dimensionality. Of course, not all EL34s are the same, but the PrimaLuna-branded EL34s from Shuguang are among the best I've heard. If and when I get a chance to try other tube types, I'll let you know how *they* sound.

**If you want to
screw up the sound,
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DiaLogue from
Ultralinear to
Triode mode.
Only kidding,
sort of.**

I won't give you the usual audiophile song and dance, since my CD listening was all over the lot: mainly American popular standards, Broadway show tunes, 1950s and '60s jazz, and chamber music.

Nail the timbres and you get the timing right. I also surmise that getting the notes right—internally or individually, if you will—has much to do with timing and toe-tapping. Arthur Dudley and I seem to have much in common. If the music coheres within each note, it then marches on to the next note with all the precision of the North Korean army.

The DiaLogue Premium was extremely quiet, letting music emerge from “black backgrounds,” etc. I heard no hum, no buzz, no “snoring” of transformers (as the French like to say). The instruction manual refers to an

“AC Offset Killer circuit.”

With my Triangle Comète 30th Anniversaire speakers, the sound was almost startling: not just the midrange and treble, but also the quality and extension of the bass. I heard this with large orchestral pieces—such as Paavo Järvi's recording, with the Cincinnati Symphony, of Holst's *The Planets* (CD, Telarc CD-80743). This is *not* an SACD, though it was probably recorded with SACD in mind before Telarc gave up. (You can often find Telarc CDs and SACDs on the cheap from Berkshire Record Outlet: broinc.com.)

This was one of the glories of the PrimaLuna DiaLogue: It sounded, to me, much bigger than its power rating might suggest. Well, what do you want—specs or sound? It had an organic quality: a wholeness, a cohesion, an ability to bring everything together to the point where trying to pick apart the performance seems ludicrous.

If you want to screw up the sound, just switch the DiaLogue from Ultralinear to Triode mode. Only kidding, sort of. It reduced the volume, diminished the dynamics; the amp now sounded rolled off on top and mushy, like so many amps that use the EL34. If you want that sort of sound, be my guest.

Curiously, the Ultralinear setting applies more feedback than Triode. Ultralinear forms a negative-feedback loop around the output stage, permitting larger voltage swings and more output power. I felt that Ultralinear cleaned up and tightened the sound.

The DiaLogue Premium will be a dream come true for anyone who has a closetful of output tubes. But *don't* overdo it—and maybe first settle in with the supplied EL34s. I'm certain I could change the sonic flavor with KT66s or KT77s, for instance. Your PrimaLuna dealer may have some thoughts on this matter. Kevin Deal surely does.

I think the PrimaLuna DiaLogue Premium is one swell amplifier. I could easily live with it and spend all my extra dough on digital downloads that I store in the Cloud. Unlike much of the bullshit reviewed and recommended in *Stereophile* and elsewhere, this amplifier is down to earth. ■

Sam Tellig (sam.tellig@src.com) refrains from rolling amplifier tubes in deepest, darkest Connecticut.

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