

hi-fi+

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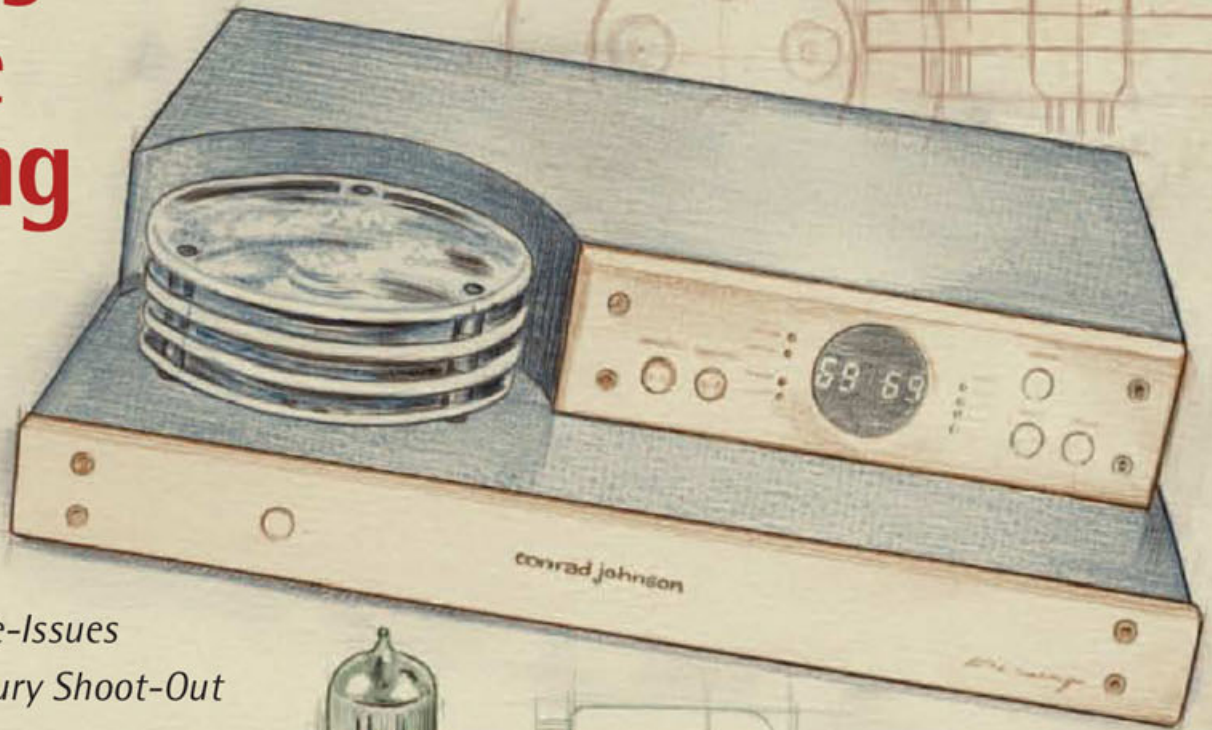
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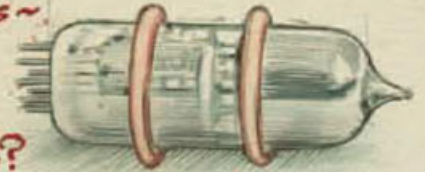
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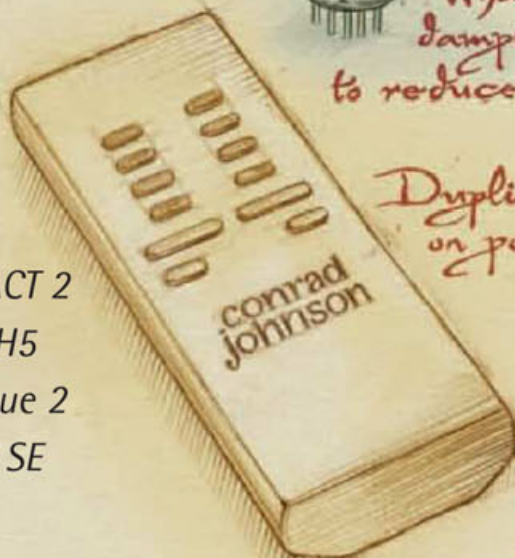
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KT88

12AU7

12AX7

12AX7

KT88

12AX7

PrimaLuna Prologue Two Integrated Valve Amplifier

by Jimmy Hughes

Appearances can be deceptive. Outwardly it's little more than a fairly unassuming black box; compact, and rather stubby, but (at 1kg) unexpectedly weighty. Because large mains and output transformers are used, the weight is concentrated towards the back – something that makes the amplifier feel even heavier. Small and perfectly formed it might be, but genteel and reserved it ain't.

The PrimaLuna Prologue Two sounds remarkably gutsy and powerful. It produces a big, big sound that has real presence and weight gain is very high; Subjectively, I found volume levels were ample with the control about a quarter advanced. Turn the volume knob halfway, and the sound increases to a point where the music gets pretty loud – certainly a lot louder than I'd ever want it. Yet the sound retains its clarity and control – the amp doesn't sound strained.

More to the point, because the sound is tonally rich and powerful, you don't actually feel the need to play music at excessive volume levels in order to achieve a proper sense of presence. The amplifier offers around 40W output, but sounds much bigger in ways that perhaps only a tube amp can. If it was a transistor design you might mistakenly think it had 200W+ under the bonnet. It really does sound that gutsy and dynamic. But no – the actual Wattage is surprisingly modest.

Tonally, the Prologue Two gives a very warm/rich sort of balance. Bass is very deep and powerful – almost as if the lower frequencies were slightly

boosted. This is most definitely not a lean-sounding amplifier! While treble and mid-band remain crisp and detailed, overall the impression is one of weight and sonority. The bottom end is clean and full, but distinctly rounder and more ample than you'd typically find with a direct-coupled transistor amplifier. A veritable J-Lo among amplifiers!

I found bass quality very satisfying with my Impulse H-1 horns. The bottom end was full and rich, with a lovely resonant bloom. If hi-fi were a building, Bass would be its foundation. But although the bottom end sounded fine with my H-1s, it's possible that the lower frequencies may prove a little too ample with some smaller, infinite baffle or poorly positioned speakers that benefit from tighter control. If that is the case, try using the 4 Ohm speaker tap – more on this later.

Here I must confess to laziness. Having quickly hooked up the amplifier to get a taste of its how it sounded, I didn't complete the installation by connecting my REL sub-woofers. I know – I should have done it... However, it hardly seemed to matter; if I didn't know, I'd have thought they were working - the bass was so full and weighty. Going from

the superbly clean lucid-sounding Chord pre/power to the PrimaLuna proved something of a culture shock. I'm still recovering...

Of course, valves are supposed to sound rich and warm. But, how often do you find a tube amplifier that really does have the tonal fullness



and golden glow of legend? In my experience, all too rarely. I reckon it's part of a world-wide conspiracy. It's long been my belief that audio designers actually strive to avoid making their products sound true to their origins. A lush warm-sounding valve amplifier? Whatever next!

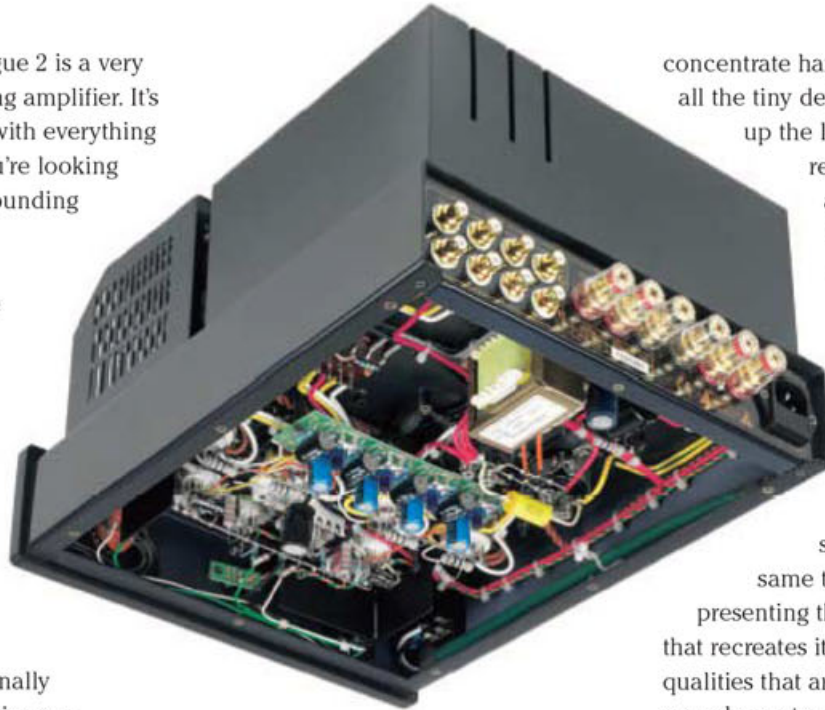
Thus you get valve amps that sound bright and tightly focussed, and trannie amps that are smooth and laid-back. CD players try to sound like analogue LP; while vinyl strives for CD's neutrality and crisp precision. Whether any of that's true or not, ►

▶ the PrimaLuna Prologue 2 is a very rich and lush sounding amplifier. It's unmistakably tube, with everything that implies. So, if you're looking for a warm friendly-sounding amplifier that glows sonically as well as physically, believe me you've found it.

Yet despite its warmth, the Prologue Two actually sounds quite crisp and lucid. Once you get used to the rich tonal balance, you realise the sound is exceptionally clear. The high treble is very clean and not too exposed; and this, coupled with the full bottom end, creates an impression of integrated smoothness and weight. It's a difficult amplifier to 'upset'; even quite brash nasty recordings fail to antagonise it.

Sonically, it's something of a paradox: at once, sweet and cultured, yet powerful and gutsy. There's nothing genteel about the Prologue Two for all its effortless refinement. It's very much a case of iron fists in velvet gloves. As time went on, I warmed (literally) to its sound more and more. Pitch rendition is exceptionally good. Put on some music with lots going on and you'll notice how easy it is to follow the layering of individual voices and instruments.

But, not only are voices kept separate, you're also made more aware of specific pitch values. When (say) two singers harmonise, you can really hear the individuality of the two voices. Yet the musical result



remains blended and harmonious – it's not a case of the music being desiccated or stripped to its bare bones. Detail tells, but in a manner that's very integrated and beguiling. It's a curious mix of opposites...



On a superficial level, the basic sound produced by the Prologue Two is tonally attractive and very easy on the ear. The presentation is exceptionally coherent. So you don't need to

concentrate hard to make sense of all the tiny details that go to make up the larger picture. In this respect it's a relaxing amplifier to listen to. Yet at the same time it's also a very involving and stimulating one. I found the Prologue Two pleasing (in the sense of making a nice attractive sound), and at the

same time rewarding (by presenting the music in a way that recreates its spirit and drama); qualities that are opposed yet also complementary. After all, why can't an amplifier sound involving and soothing? Does a detailed informative presentation invariably mean a sound that's brash, forward, and unpleasant?

Spatially, the amplifier produces a nice sense of ambience and depth. Its warm tonal balance creates a believable impression of space, as though the music were coming from a place somewhere between, behind, and beyond the speakers. It was very satisfying on classical music, giving accurate timbres and a proper sense of tonal richness. At the same time it impressed on rock and pop, sounding rhythmically cohesive and together.

Build quality is extremely good and hard-wired throughout. I feel certain this contributes a great deal to the fine end result. There's an engaging lucidity that remains apparent even during the most complex pieces of music. It's something you tend to get with hard-wired transformer-coupled

► amplifiers – an impressive coherence and control regardless of how ‘busy’ the music becomes. Your ears are never assaulted by a welter of fast but unrelated leading edges. That’s what I mean by coherence and control.

Residual noise is low, but – ear close to the speaker – a trace of mains buzz is just apparent. But it really is completely inaudible through my



fairly efficient Impulse H-1 horns, unless you put your ear to the drive units. But those using ridiculously efficient speakers (like Lowthers) might notice it if sat close by. All I can say is – serves you bloody right... Mechanically, there’s a small amount of mains transformer buzz that becomes audible when sat close to the amplifier – nothing serious though.

Four line level inputs are offered, plus 4 and 8 Ohm loudspeaker outputs. Although the ‘correct’ speaker output impedance is strictly-speaking the one that delivers the

higher volume (with most speakers, probably the 8 Ohm option), you should find the lower impedance 4 Ohm output actually sounds slightly tighter and better focussed. Myself, I always go for the 4 Ohm setting, and most of my listening was done thus.

However, with the Prologue Two, the difference between the two did not seem massively significant.

All the same, I felt the lower impedance outputs did sound a shade ‘darker’ and slightly better controlled. So that’s what I used. Since we’re talking about impedance matching, results will be greatly influenced by the speakers used. However, bear in mind that the 4 Ohm option always means your speakers are being driven from a slightly lower source impedance. So this should improve tightness and control.

Valve compliment consists of four KT-88 output tubes, plus two 12AU7s and two 12AX7s. During use the amplifier gets reasonably warm, but not excessively so. For safety reasons there’s a removable cover over the eight valves. This

concentrates the heat a little, despite the ventilation slots, but keeps the tubes safe from prying fingers. If you like, this cover can be dispensed with, but I preferred to keep it on. The amp sounds very good from ‘cold’, and reaches it’s optimum after about 15 minutes.

If you’ve read this far you’ll hopefully have gathered that the Prologue Two left me deeply impressed. It’s a great little amplifier, made all the more attractive and desirable by having a very reasonable price tag. I think it’s a terrific bargain, and on sound quality alone could command a far higher price. I loved it, and strongly recommend you try one at the earliest opportunity. ➤+

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Integrated line amplifier
Valve Complement:	2x 12AU7 2x 12AX7 4x KT88
Inputs:	4x line (RCA Phono)
Input Sensitivity:	300mV
Input Impedance:	65 K Ohm
Outputs:	4 and 8 Ohm taps
Rated Output Power:	40 Watts/Ch.
Valve Cover:	Yes, removable
Dimensions (WxHxD):	280 x 190 x 395mm
Weight:	16kg
Price:	£999

UK Distributor:

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