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The Prima Luna Prologue 3 Pre-amp and Prologue 5 Power Amp

by Jimmy Hughes

It was back in Issue 35 that I reviewed the Prima Luna Prologue 2 integrated valve amplifier. And very good it was too. I loved its warm lush sound and smooth mellow richness. Sonically, it was unmistakably 'tube' in the best sense of the word, with all that implies. Not only was it an excellent amplifier in terms of sound quality, build, and finish, it was reasonably priced and very good value. I really liked it, and was sad to see it go.

The Prologue 3 pre-amp and Prologue 5 power amp represent the next stage on, so to speak, and (without thinking) I just assumed a two-box version would be more powerful. In actual fact, the difference in specification is not so great. Both models offer around 40W per channel, and more or less similar bandwidth and distortion figures. The difference is a new Driver and Phase-Splitter circuit, which allows the Prologue 5 to operate without global negative feedback.

Most amplifiers have a degree of negative feedback to help reduce distortion. The idea is to feed back a part of the signal so that additive distortions are cancelled out. It works superbly well on steady-state predictable signals (like test tones), and greatly improves measured

performance. Trouble is, music is not steady-state and predictable! While negative feedback can be used to make a poor amplifier look good on paper, it definitely won't create an amp that sounds as good as it measures.



The Prologue 3 pre-amp also runs without negative feedback, and does not have the usual Cathode Follower outputs – it's Anode out. It also features tube rectifiers, rather than solid state ones. While the difference on paper between the integrated Prologue 2 and the separate pre/power Prologue 3 and 5 is quite small, the net result sonically seems to be a noticeably bigger and more holographic musical

presentation, with increased depth and spaciousness.

Like the Prologue 2, the Prologue 3 and 5 produce an exceptionally rich tonality. The bottom end is full and weighty, with an unusually rich mid-band and smooth sweet treble. The presentation is distinctly warm and honeyed – the classic way a tube

amp is supposed to sound, but all too rarely does.

This may take a little getting used to – especially if you're more accustomed to listening to tight well-damped transistor amplifiers – the sonic equivalent of moving from Canada to Florida!

Once you do get used to it, there's little doubt as to which sounds more real and true-to-life. At least that's my take on it. You get more of that weighty woody warmth and bloom on instruments like acoustic double bass, and the result is very believable. There's something very inviting and beguiling about this amplifier. It's so smooth and refined. Note the beautifully sweet top-end and deliciously liquid mid-range – absolutely gorgeous. In short, extremely clean and effortless, yet not without point or incident.

For all its warmth and refinement, the musical presentation is

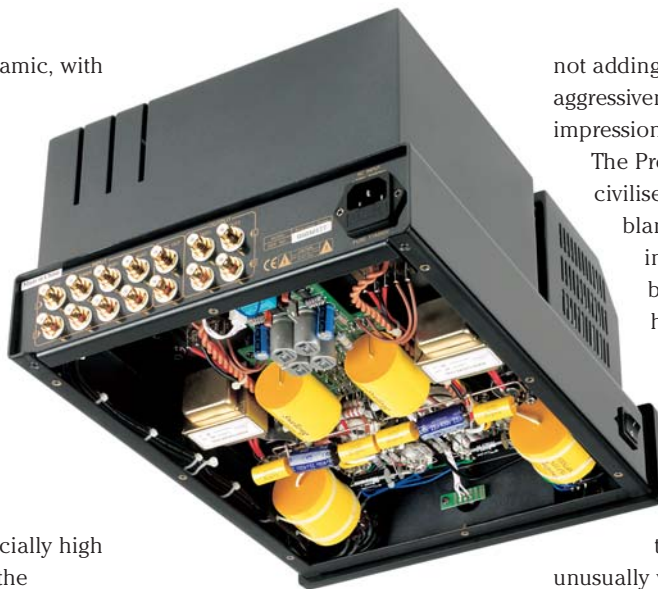


▶ actually quite vivid and dynamic, with excellent attack and immediacy. As the Prologue 2 was no longer around, I couldn't directly compare it to the Prologue 3 and 5 combination. But my sense is that the two-box amps sound noticeably more three-dimensional and holographic. There's a much greater depth and range to the sound, with increased width and spaciousness.

Now 40W is not an especially high output. But don't pre-judge the Prologue 5; it actually sounds very gutsy and powerful – as though it had a couple of hundred Watts in reserve and was just idling along. My Impulse H-1 horns are fairly efficient, but by no means exceptionally so. Yet the Prologue 5 had power in reserve to drive them as hard as I would ever want – or so it seemed. There was that sense of ease and effortlessness one associates with big amplifiers.

And, because the musical presentation had such holographic dimensional qualities, voices and instruments were projected into the room with a tangibility that didn't rely on muscle alone to create a big room-filling effect. The sound was big and full-bodied. Even when played quietly the music had a commanding presence and energy. Clarity was excellent, and so too was pitch definition. Even during complex pieces, the Prologue 3 and 5 retained poise and control.

Although there's no more power available, the two-box amp definitely sounds as though it has more in reserve than the Prologue 2. As well as appearing subjectively more powerful, the Prologue 3 and 5 also



sounds more delicate – more finely nuanced - with a lovely honeyed richness that's very attractive. You can hear these qualities on pretty much all types of music.

Of course classical music and naturally-recorded acoustic jazz are perfectly



served. But so too are recordings of electronically-created sounds and aggressive brightly-recorded pop albums. With the latter, there's no lack of brilliance or bite, but at the same time the amplifier - by

not adding its own edge and aggressiveness – helps create an impression of refinement and control.

The Prologue 3 and 5 sound very civilised without being boring or bland. The top-end is very well integrated with the mid-band, meaning that sources have to be really rough and abrasive to provoke harshness. Yet there's no sense of things being artificially smoothed-over or prettied up.

Indeed, the opposite is true – the sound is unusually vibrant and colourful, with vivid detail and brilliant clarity.

Timing is excellent, and there's good rhythmic drive and forward momentum. I liked the way the Prologue 3 and 5 gave you 'time' - time to listen and assimilate the music. I'm not sure you'd call this a fast amplifier; the full bottom end makes sure that bass lines are

properly weighty so they really underpin the music, as they should. This in turn can give the impression of things happening with greater poise and deliberation.

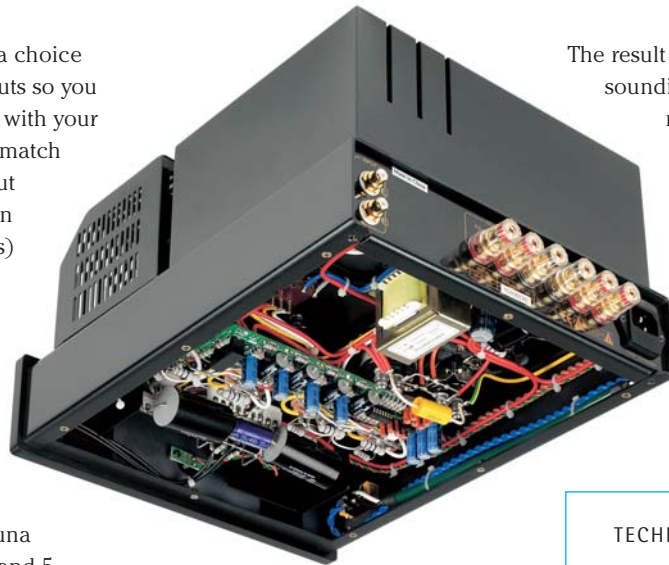
The 'speed' of an amplifier is a contentious issue anyway, since no one has ever related measurable things like transient rise time with the subjective impression of the music moving quickly. In my experience, the absence of bass is the main thing that creates a (false) impression of speed. Put another way, the Prologue 3 and 5 do not create a welter of fast but unrelated leading edges that can sound superficially impressive, but soon tires the ear. Presentation is always coherent and integrated. ▶

► The power amp offers a choice of 4 Ohm and 8 Ohm outputs so you can achieve a good match with your loudspeakers. The correct match gives the highest output, but I selected the 4 Ohm option because (with my speakers) this gave a slightly 'darker' richer tonality, with better control. You lose a small amount of power as a result, but this is not serious. Try both yourself before deciding.

Like the other Prima Luna amplifiers, the Prologue 3 and 5 feature something called Soft Start, which reduces stress to the tubes when the amp is first switched on. The circuits do not run to the tubes to the edge, meaning longer tube life and less deterioration over long periods of use. When the time comes to replace the tubes,



there's no problem with biasing thanks to something called Adaptive Auto Biasing, which individually monitors each tube and makes the necessary adjustments.



The result is natural and real-sounding, yet friendly and relaxing. It may not be as big a bargain as the integrated, but it more than justifies the difference in cost. If you thought the Prologue 2 was good, wait until you hear these... ➤

Prima Luna claim the Prologue 3 and 5 are unusually quiet in terms of residual noise, and this seems to be the case. While I could just detect a little hum and buzz with my ear close to the speakers when testing the Prologue 2, I could hear nothing with the Prologue 3 and 5. It seems to be pin-drop silent – or thereabouts! Problems with residual noise can be an issue for those with abnormally efficient speakers like Lowthers. But on this showing the Prologue 3 and 5 will pass even this stiff test. Good, affordable tube amps are becoming something of a Chinese speciality. This is one I could certainly see out the rest of my days with. It's a gorgeous amplifier that soothes, charms and beguiles, while stimulating the senses. What's more important, its qualities grow on you; the more you hear it, the more you like it. There's never any sense of the amp drawing attention to itself and away from the music.

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Prologue 3 Pre-amp

Type:	Valve rectified, vacuum tube line-stage
Valve Complement:	2x 12AX7 2x 12AU7 2x 5AR4
Inputs:	4 x single-ended line-level
Input Sensitivity:	200mV
Outputs:	2 x single-ended line-level 1 x single-ended tape out
Output Impedance:	3.5KOhm
Overall Gain:	11.5dB
Dimensions (WxHxD):	280 x 190 x 395mm
Weight:	10.6Kg
Finishes:	Black, Silver, Champagne
Price:	£1099

Prologue 5 Power Amp

Type:	Push-pull, zero-feedback vacuum tube power amp
Valve Complement:	2x 12AX7 2x 12AU7 4x KT88
Input Sensitivity:	810mV
Input Impedance:	100 KOhms
Power Output:	40 Watts/8 Ohms
Dimensions (WxHxD):	280 x 190 x 395mm
Finishes:	Black, Silver, Champagne
Price:	£1099

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