

JULY 2005

# PRIMALUNA

## PROLOGUE 3 & 5



**Reviewer:** Srajan Ebaen

**Source:** Zanden Audio Model 2000P/5000S

**Preamp/Integrated:** ModWright SWL 9.0SE; Bel Canto Design PRe2; Eastern Electric MiniMax; *PrimaLuna Prologue 3* [on review]

**Amp:** First Watt F1; *First Watt F 2* [on review]; *PrimaLuna Prologue 5* [on review]

**Speakers:** Zu Cable Druid Mk4; *Zu Cable Method* [on review]

**Cables:** Zanden Audio proprietary I<sup>2</sup>S digital cable; Stealth Audio Indra; Zu Cable Ibis; Crystal Cable Reference power cords; Z-Cable Reference Cyclone power cords on both powerline conditioner

**Stands:** 1 x Grand Prix Audio Monaco four-tier

**Powerline conditioning:** 2 x Walker Audio Velocitor S

**Sundry accessories:** GPA Formula Carbon/Kevlar shelf for tube amps; GPA Apex footers underneath DAC and amp; Walker Audio SST on all connections; Walker Audio Vivid CD cleaner; Furutech RD-2 CD demagnetizer; WorldPower cryo'd Hubbell and IsoClean wall sockets

**Room size:** 30' w x 18' d x 10' h [sloping ceiling] in long-wall setup in one half, with open adjoining living room for a total of ca.1000 squ.ft floor plan and significant 'active' cubic air volume of essentially the entire (small) house

**Review component retail:** \$1,295 for preamp; \$1,295 for amp



Says Herman van den Dungen about his brand name: "In Italian, it of course means *First Moon*. My grandmother, an aristocratic lady in a small Dutch village, called my grandfather Herman *Maantje*, meaning *Little Moon*. The name stuck with the villagers and me." (And for those suspicious of the name's true Italian roots, there is a small town 50 kilometers north of Milano called Primaluna, near Lake Como.) Adds Kevin Deal, PrimaLuna's exclusive US distributor: "Herman is the Benelux importer for Krell, Conrad-Johnson, Sonus Faber and the man behind Ah! Tjoeb, a brand I'd imported from him for a while. For PrimaLuna, Herman commissioned Marcel Croese who was Goldmund's chief engineer and designer. Herman and Dominique bought a house in China and she is learning the language."





"Like them, Marcel is nothing but a perfectionist. We had the first production run of the new preamp ready to roll. Marcel grabs a sample and puts it on the bench. It checks out beautifully as does everything about the way it's built. What does he do? He takes a sensitive heat probe and measures every single part while he's stressing the unit. He discovers one part that runs a bit hotter than he likes. Herman shuts down the entire production and insists the part get changed."

"That's why this stuff is as good as it is. There are no shortcuts, no compromises. Our failure rate in the field, of our Component of the Year 2004 in HiFi+, the Prologue Two integrated? Nada. Zero. Listen, I love selling affordable stuff but not if it breaks. Since we're tube guys and many newbies are gun shy about valves, we insisted that our amps would be self-biased, wouldn't sacrifice parts should a tube go bad and run perfectly with non-matched bottles. And that's exactly what Marcel and Herman have accomplished. As an old veteran in the retail trenches, I had some input into certain features. Make sure you check out how these things are put together. There's *nobody* in the business right now who can beat us on how well our components are crafted."



Arriving *triple*-boxed, white gloves and owner's manual in their own foam insert recess, Kevin's enthusiasm translated from the moment the FedEx man left. Inspecting the midnight blue five coats of hand-rubbed (slightly metallic) lacquer and the

flawless fit of all external panels and connectors confirmed it. Looking inside killed a whole flock of birds with one stone. Close-ups anon. The ProLogue 3 is PrimaLuna's dedicated dual-mono, non-inverting tube preamp. It's valve-rectified, can take an optional MM phono board and runs two 12AX7s and 12AU7s each. With the power mains discretely tucked on the left side just behind the silver (or black) fascia, the rear offers four pairs of RCA inputs, one fixed out and two variable outs. Gain is a low 12dB for a superior S/N ratio of 93dB, A-weighted at 775mV. Frequency response is 4Hz - 110kHz +/- 3dB. Input Z is 100kOhm, input sensitivity 150mV, output Z 2.8kOhm. Weight is 23.5 lbs, dimensions are 15.5" x 11" x 7.5" D x Q x H.



Tube rollers can have fun with ECC83/803S, E83CC, 7025, CV4004 and low-gain 5751 in place of the stock 12AX7s; ECC82/802S, E82CC, 5814, 6189 and CV4003 in place of the stock 12AU7s; and GZ34, CV1377, 5V4G, 5T4 and 5Y3 instead of the stock 5AR4 rectifiers. An auto-mute soft-start feature turns the frontal power LED from red to green in about 30 seconds.



The chassis is heavy-gauge steel, fully vented at the bottom. Separate toroidal power transformers feed each channel's choke-regulated power supply for true dual-mono geometry. Parts goodies include Nichicon, Solen and Swelling capacitors; an Alps attenuator; ceramic tube sockets; and panel-mounted gold-plated connectors.



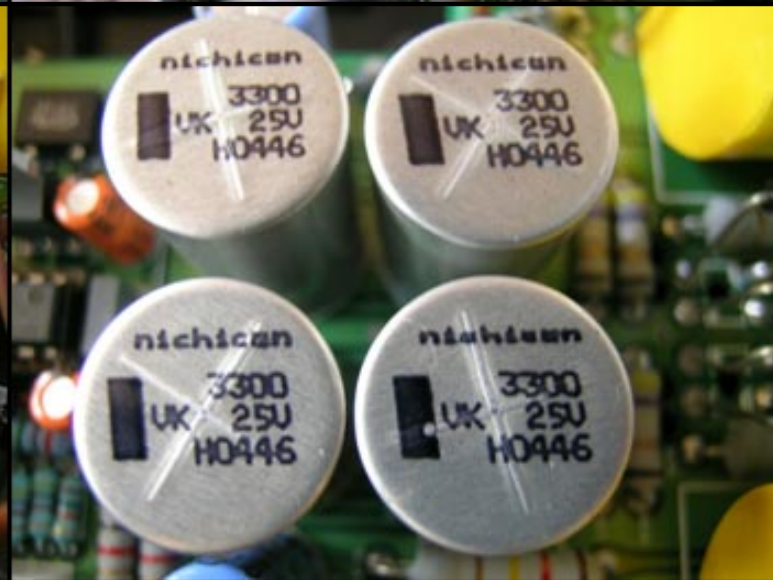
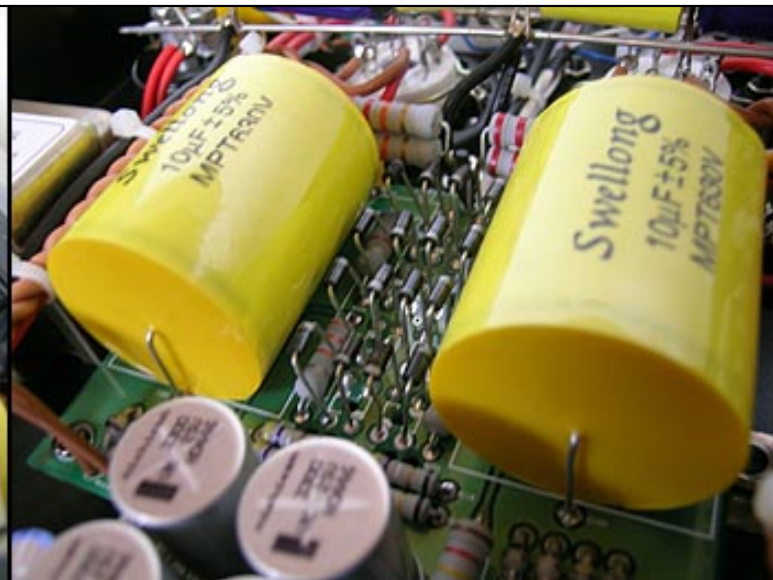
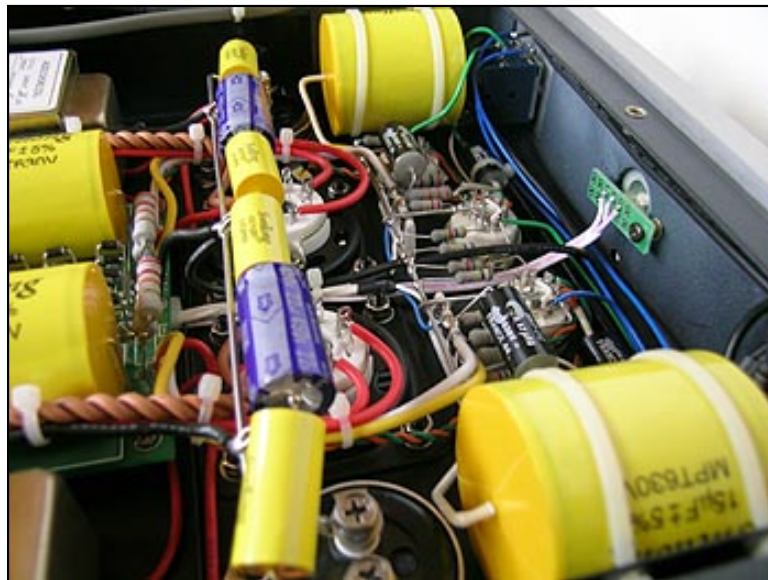


The innards clearly show the dual-mono layout with the two transformers and chokes.



The execution of the point-to-point wiring is text-book perfect. Ditto for the precision of the wire routing. The last time I've seen this level of workmanship was with the Onix/Melody SP3 and the Eastern Electric components. It really doesn't get any better. If you charge more and don't look as good? Well, times, standards and price points are a'changing...



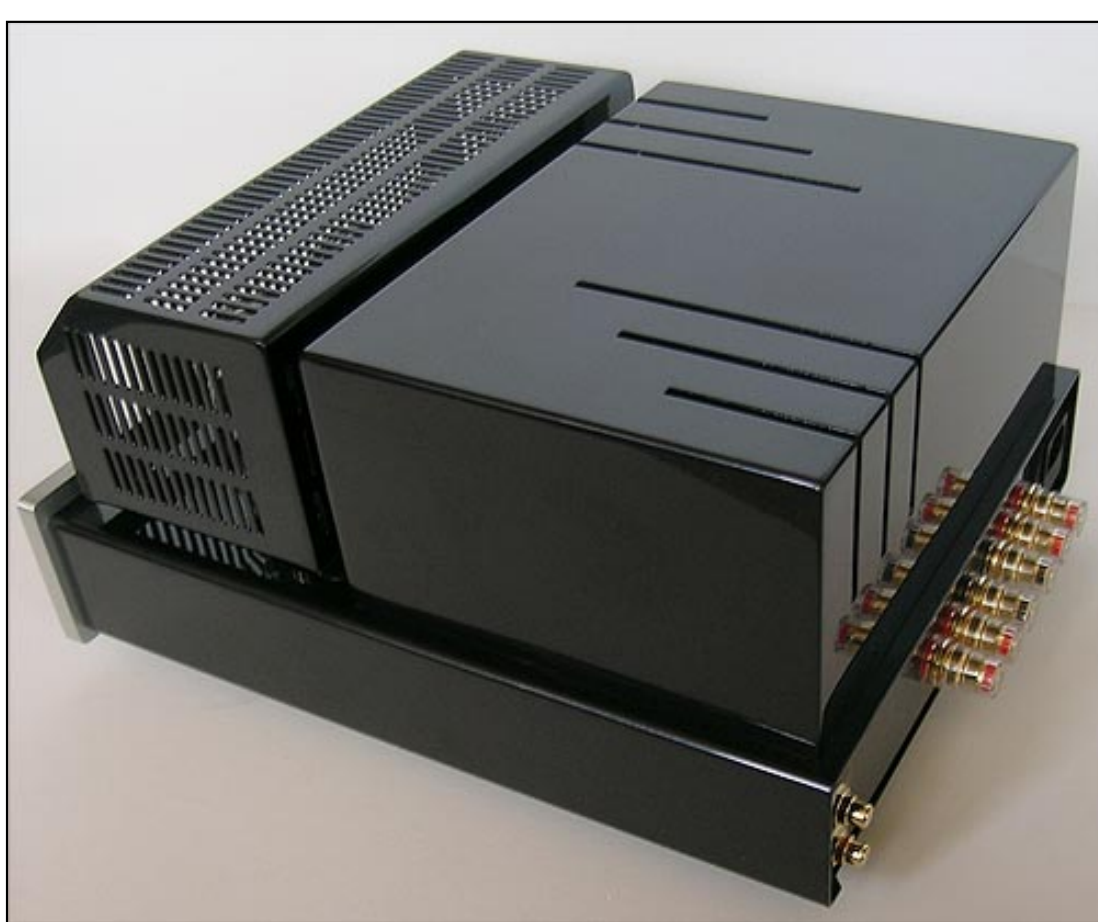




The ProLogue 5 is the upscale version of PrimaLuna's two current stand-alone power amplifiers. Non-inverting, it uses the same small tube complement as the preamp but then adds four KT-88s for 36 watts of Class AB push/pull output power over a bandwidth of 4Hz to 110kHz -3dB. Input impedance is 100 kOhm, input sensitivity 600mV, gain 29dB. Net weight is 37.5 lbs, dimensions are identical to the preamp. Ditto for the removable, banana-fitted tube cage.



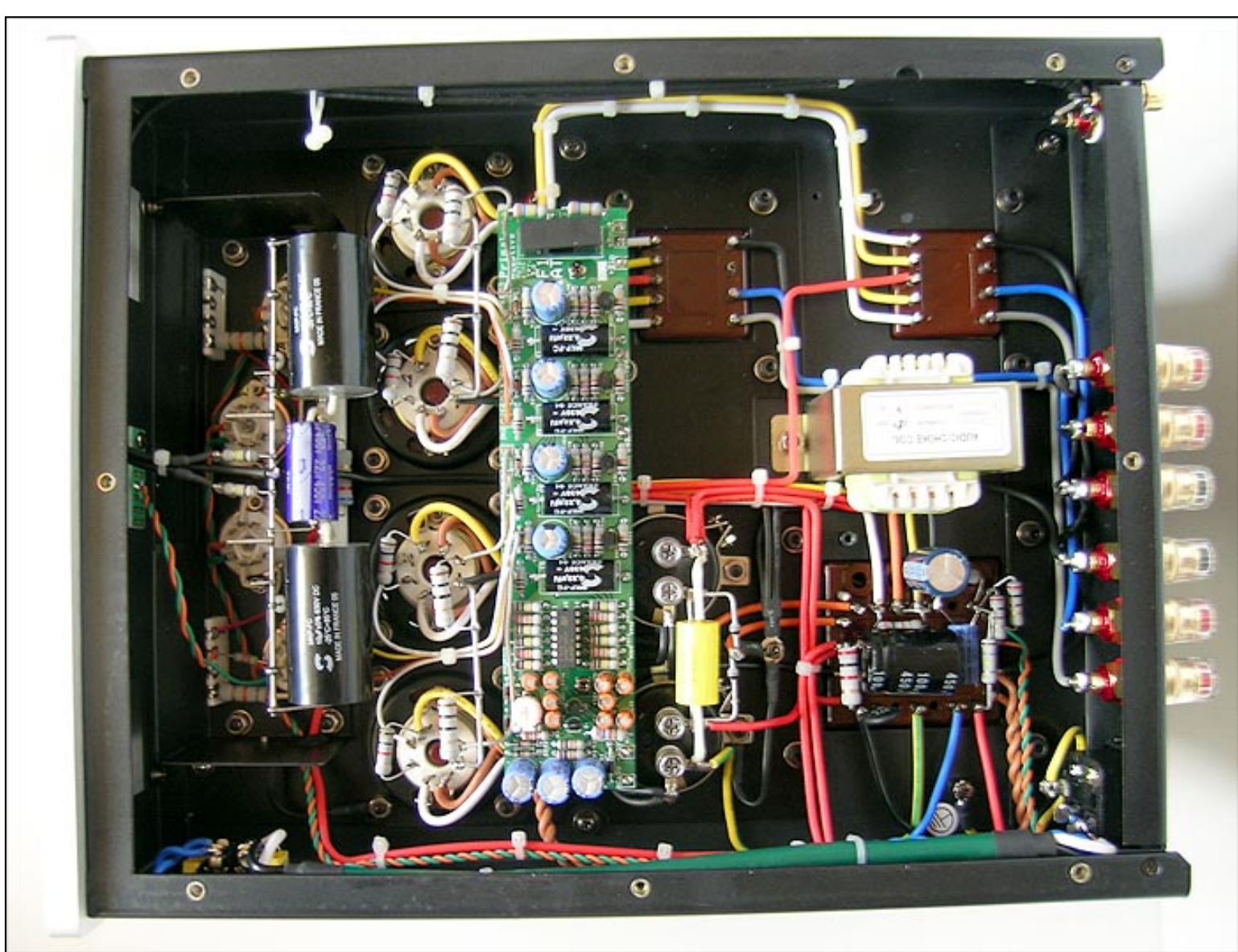
With 8/4-ohm WBT-style bindings posts and a pair of RCA inputs plus the ubiquitous power IEC, the back is just what you would expect. Under the substantial hood resides a toroidal power transformer and two US-made Marcel co-designed custom output transformers that are fully encapsulated for lowest hum. Nichicon and Solen caps; "super-fast Philips-diode



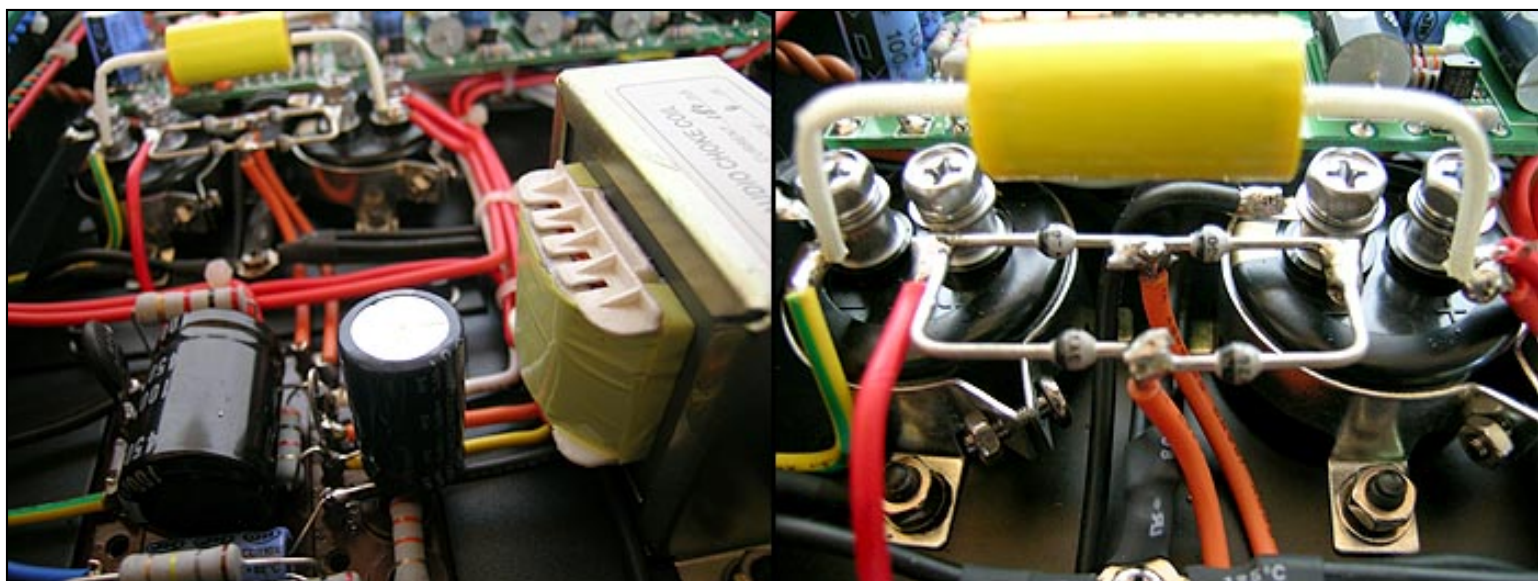
circuitry"; soft start; tube plate fuse protection for the output tubes; and *Adaptive AutoBias* make up the highlights of the innards. Besides constantly monitoring and adjusting the output bias, the proprietary AAB circuit is said to also reduce distortion between 12 and 30 watts by as much as 40%, adding not merely peace of mind but superior audible performance [board below].



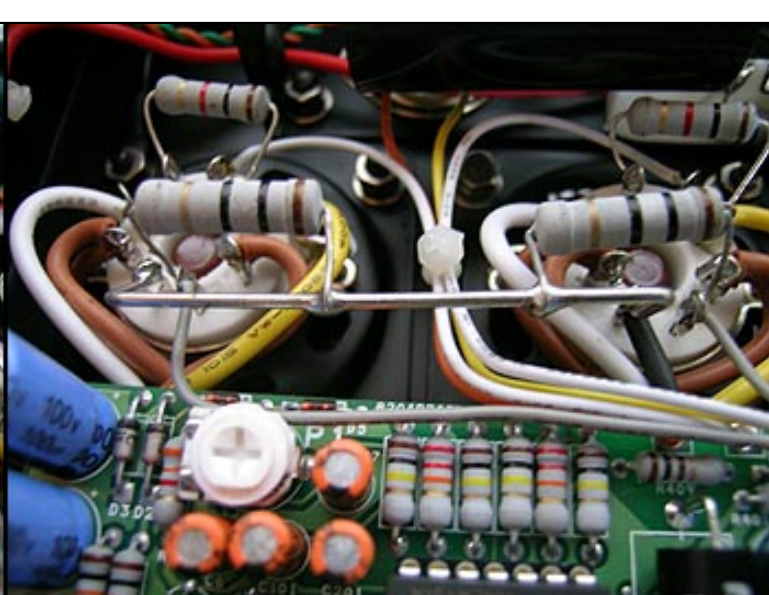




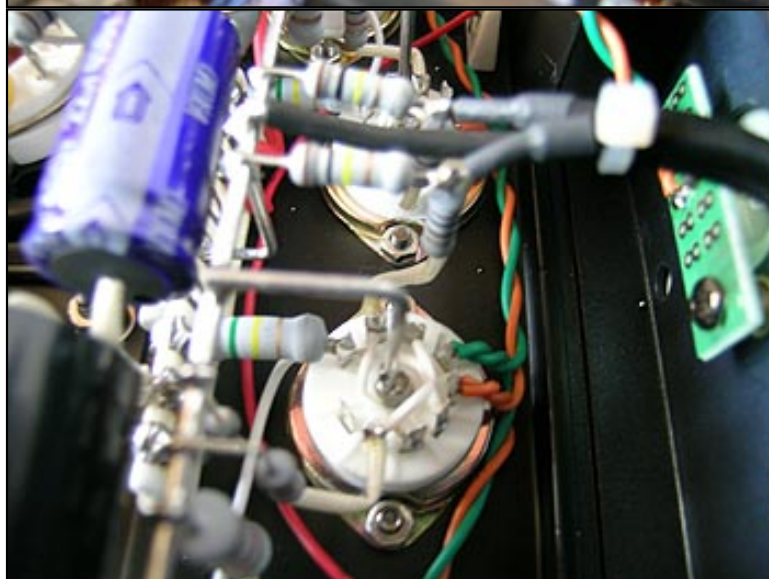
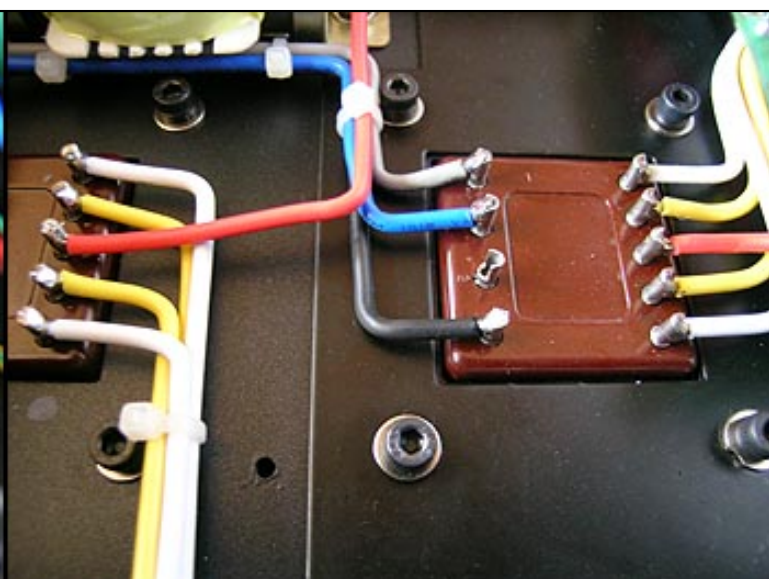
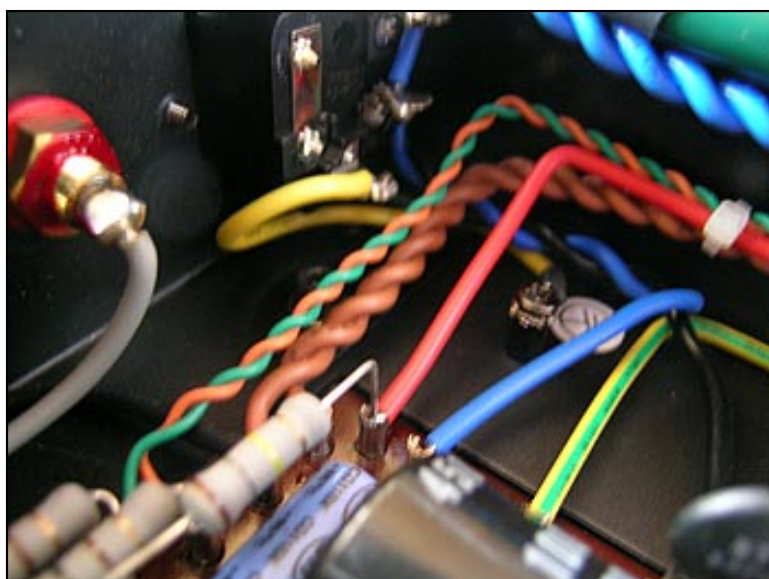
The innards are once again a poster child for precision execution in what we must now call the very best handcrafter's tradition of the *New World* of fastidiously executed tubed designs.





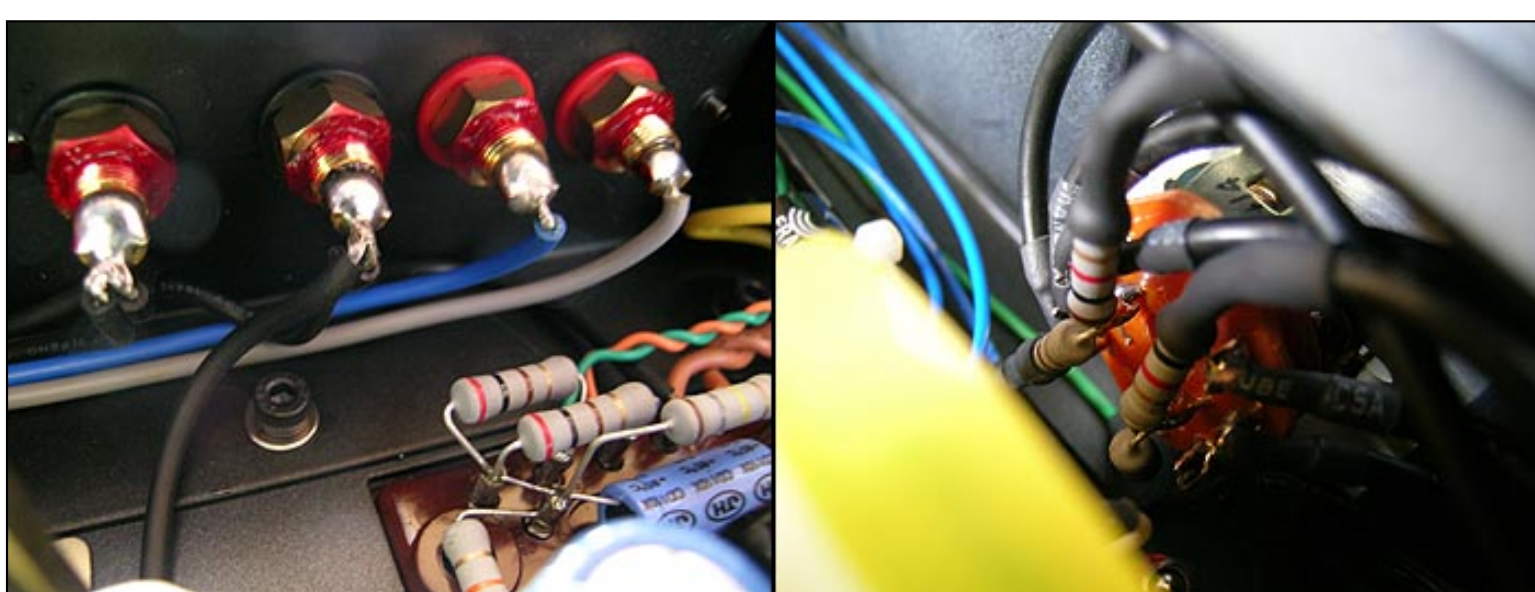


Anyone with patriotic notions -- as much as it may hurt -- will have to admit that our domestic HighEnd audio valve brands have nothing on newcomer PrimaLuna when it comes to assembly and immaculate handiwork.



Anyone with patriotic notions will also have to feel sorry for our domestic brands the moment they realize that each of today's components sells for a mere \$1,295.





Tube rollers are once again encouraged to party just as they were with the preamp. For the power tubes, you here can pick between 6550, KT90, EL34, 6L6CC, 7581A and KT66, sacrificing a bit of output power depending on choice.

It's seemingly très chic these days to dumpster-dive for audio oysters - er, haggle for deep discounts. Part of that is our zeitgeist, part of it misplaced rebellion against escalating prices. Why misplaced? Because high-performance value-priced goods are plainly available. Those do not warrant or justify haggling. PrimaLuna's new components are prime examples of this breed.



As Rogue Audio's new Titan series proves, one doesn't have to go off-shore to play in these leagues. Conversely, going offshore is just as viable a solution. In the context of performance reviews, audio writers must judge products solely on their merit to the consumer. We are not to disguise as market analysts to speculate on the long-term economic impact this burgeoning trend predicts for our domestic cottage industry called HighEnd audio. That's what Editorials are good for.



According to a recent reader E-mail, princess Diana's sad death can be viewed as an example for this *polyglot* trend: "An English princess with an Egyptian boyfriend crashes in a French tunnel, driving a German car with a Dutch engine, driven by a Belgian who was drunk on Scottish whisky (check the bottle before you change the spelling). They are followed closely by Italian paparazzi on Japanese motorcycles and treated by an American doctor using Brazilian medicines. This note is sent to you by an American using Bill Gates' technology and you're probably reading this on your computer with Taiwanese chips and a Korean monitor, assembled by Bangladeshi workers in a Singapore plant, transported by Indian lorry drivers, hijacked by Indonesians, unloaded by Sicilian longshoremen and trucked to you by Mexican illegals..."

Listening notes to follow in due course. For now, my visual inspection of these Dutch/Chinese components leaves me clearly impressed. This is smartly executed, fully thought-thru kit at bargain basement tickets for what's on offer. Using an existing Cayin/Spark Audio/Zhuhai Electronics platform for their first product kicked off enthusiastic press reactions from none other than Ken Kessler who considered the ProLogue Two *the* affordable integrated to beat, displacing the famed Unison Research Unico in his personal pantheon of overachievers. With the new releases of ProLogue 3 through 5 (one preamp, two amplifiers), the brand goes more upscale yet pricing per component remains firmly where it was before. For PrimaLuna acquisitions, international customers will deal with Herman's firm [HiFi-Notes](#) in Holland while US punters already know to contact Kevin at Upscale Audio. Added Kevin: "HighEnd audio is shooting itself in the foot like no other industry I can think of. We need transitional product that's reliable, attractive, affordable and offers a serious taste of what we're about. It's the only way to attract new blood. And *that's* the whole raison d'être for PrimaLuna. It's a brand with a mission. That's why we'll have a few select dealers too so people can see and hear these components for themselves."



The best people to review affordable stuff are, naturally, people who *own* affordable stuff. They have the proper context to recognize true overachievers. The problem is, some readers don't believe them as much as they believe high-end writer/owners whose context is informed by exposure to the state-of-the-art shit. Say you're one such reviewer of the deep pockets. Do you worry about what other people think? Then reviewing overtly value-oriented high-performance products like PrimaLuna's can cause a few scary reactions. The obvious one is to *overwrite* as though one were faced with the Second Coming. Since most reviewers have seconds a few times a year, multiply their sightings with the numbers of audio writers working. The name JC suddenly becomes more ubiquitous than the ordinary Joe. To avoid undue hyperbole, many writers pursue the opposite approach. They *underwrite*. Each and every complimentary observation on the affordable subject is qualified. "But" becomes the omniscient equalizer. It's a subset of the Messianic faith. The Lord giveth, the Lord taketh away. "The Superior Amp does an excellent job of resolving spatial cues but compared to my Reference, it falls short in the rear of the recording venue and is guilty of lateral compression." As a prospective buyer of the Superior Amp, you soon feel cheated. Are you reading about hand-me-downs? It's likely true that the affordable amp isn't the equal of the reviewer's darling. Still, something about a blow-by-blow comparison feels like watching an amateur underdog get beaten to a bloody pulp by a disguised pro. It's no fun. The referee should long since have stepped in and disqualified the match.

Practically speaking, mismatches are nearly par for the course when a reviewer of expensive stuff gets the occasional affordable stuff. Review protocol means you change one component at a time. In that context, whatever the reviewer replaced will have been a lot more expensive and thus, presumably, *unfairly* superior. Hell, a pair of his interconnects could cost more than the component under review. All this by way of setting the stage for today's contenders in an attempt to neither over- nor underwrite but stay the middle. They've very good for the money. Does that make them giant killers? Not necessarily. Spend more and you *can* get better. How much more and how much better depends on not just individual components but what speakers you wish to drive, what you listen for and how much you care about particulars. In his review of the Horn Shoppe's Model 1, [Stereophile's Art Dudley](#) differentiated between speaker sensitivity and efficiency to make an important point.

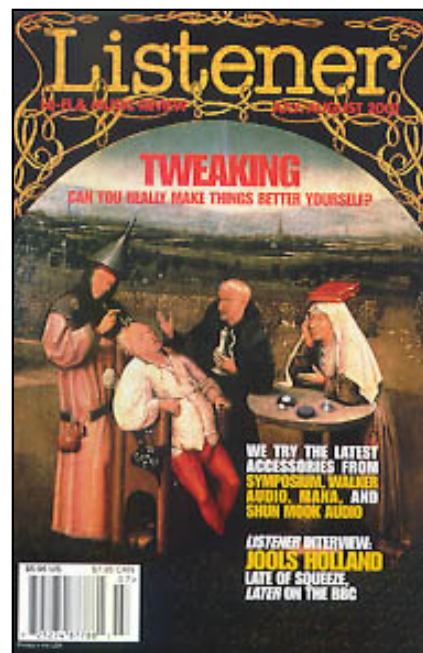
Though these terms are interchangeable in common parlance, Dudley differentiated between them to mean decibel output for a given input voltage (sensitivity) and load behavior complexity (efficiency). The latter includes phase angles, back EMF and impedance stability. A nominal 87dB 4-ohm impedance that operates within a +2/-1 window represents a higher efficiency than a nominal 90dB 8-ohm load that includes



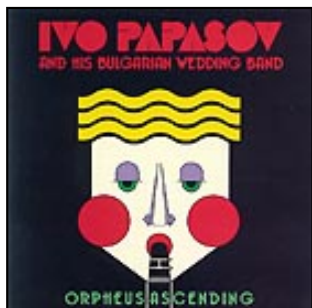
1.3 ohms at 40Hz and 50 ohms at 20kHz and adds 120°+ phase angles. This speaker efficiency consideration becomes relevant with affordable amplifiers. Excessively overbuilt power supplies as found in very expensive amplifiers account for what-if scenarios of dastardly loads and high SPLs. While such strapping amps may not necessarily be sonically superior into cushy loads, they absolutely *will* be when things get rough.

Bottom line? To get the best out of an affordable amp, don't mate it to an inefficient speaker the way Art Dudley defined efficiency. 88dB as represented by my Gallo Reference 3s could be gravy whereas a higher-sensitivity humdinger could show up drive limitations and dynamic compression. That's common sense. The PrimaLuna ProLogue 5 is capable of very fine performance if you don't ask it to do what a \$6,000 amp of equal output power would manhandle with ease. Don't think big Thiels, Aerials, Magnepans. It's not just power delivery that does the job. It's current delivery, it's capacitive reserves, it's power supply stiffness. That's where more money spent tends to buy more. (Though many people buy far more emergency headroom than they ever need. They waste money where it only makes a *theoretical* difference, i.e. none that's actually audible in how they use their systems).

With preamps, think on how much gain you need. Buying a 26dB-gain preamp when your 200wpc amp can be driven to full output by 0.38V and your speakers are 94dB sensitive is madness. You'll barely be able to open the volume pot before your system screams at you. (Gain is defined as a given ratio between input and output voltage. That's just like a fixed multiplier. Put in x, multiply by z to get your output voltage. A hi-gain device has a higher "z".) The ProLogue 3 is a low-gain 12dB design of extremely low noise (something that's very hard to do with hi-gain tube designs). It's perfectly matched to the ProLogue 4 and 5 amps and suitable even in the context of high-efficiency systems precisely because of its low gain structure and excellent S/N performance. As delivered with the stock tubes, the Logue 3's on the slightly soft and somewhat ephemeral/airy side when compared to my hard-driving 5687-fitted ModWright. The options to tube-roll 12AX/AU7s are astronomical. With Kevin Deal the king of tube rollers, I'd have to assume quite a window of sonic variability with this PrimaLuna pre. As with the amp, the following comments will thus concern themselves solely over the stock tubes. We'll get baseline pronouncements for these components' core signatures. You keep in mind that minor *cosmetic surgery* is readily available. Swap valves for Angelina Jolie lips, a sharper chin or whatever minor alteration you favor. The rest is intrinsic to circuit genetics. Onward ho.



Of the two PrimaLunas, it's the preamp that will surprise most punters. We've all become a bit inured to high-performance affordable valve amps or integrateds. That attitude stems from the oft-recited belief that it's really hard to bollocks up the sound of a tube amp (though making a truly *great* one is a separate matter). But how often have you come across a truly noteworthy valve pre around the +/- \$1,000 mark? The last one in recent memory was the Eastern Electric MiniMax. As a low-gain design, the ProLogue 3 is quieter -- very quiet in fact -- something hi-eff users will appreciate. As a dual-mono design, separation down the middle way back into the soundstage is even better. Likely due to the 12AX/AU7 tube choices, visibility deep into the soundstage and the little details that paint the space is very good. Vocal lock -- that extreme palpability or heightened contrast -- is less than the MiniMax whose color temperature is higher and whose 3D grip is harder.



Texturally, the ProLogue 3 is more neutral than overt tube. However, it's airiness and smoothness even in the face of edgy and non-pretty music like Ivo Papasov's glue-sniffing *Orpheus Ascending* [Hannibal 1346] with the occasional mike overload and clarinet shrieks could nearly be mistaken for a texture of silkiness. I don't hear it as additive behavior at all but simply a very welcome absence of grit or grunge. Where I do suspect just a skoch of subtractive action is in the minor softening of transients which the more expensive ModWright doesn't smooth over. What's most impressive about the ProLogue 3? It doesn't veil, thicken or slow things down. It's slightly soft but not at all boring or trite. It releases the innate energy of music rather than restrain or interpret it. It has far more than just respectable resolution while



giving you the organic sense of things hanging together properly. Outside of consideration about tone, that's perhaps the most addictive aspect of valves for those who fancy these characteristics.

When I think "affordable tube preamp", I usually think slightly noisy, guilty of obscuring fine detail, pretty rather than accurate and possibly truncated in the frequency extremes. This Dutch/Chinese effort sidesteps *all* of these preconceptions. In fact, I don't believe it commits any errors. The power supply is clearly buff enough to throw one of those colossal and *solid* soundstages we often equate with stacked reserves. What the Three doesn't do is the full-blown treatment of timbral enhancements and body shaping one can get from octals. My SWL 9.0SE doesn't, either (though it has more apparent drive). That's why I bought it. I want tone but not at the expense of raw data. I get tone squared from the paper drivers of the Druids. The 2nd-order character and transconductance muscle of Nelson Pass' FirstWatt F2 merely adds to the fun. What I'm then looking for in a preamp is dynamics, treble elegance (not attenuation) and spatial magic. Those are all items the PrimaLuna delivers. Turning off the Method sub to check for bass grunt, I thought the ModWright had the upper hand but not by all that much. During climatic swells, I never felt the PrimaLuna prematurely hopped on a smaller wave instead of waiting for the monster breaker I knew was coming.



Is the PrimaLuna *suavé* - you know, that ineffable quality we admire with certain very expensive valve pres? This is where reality intrudes. For that, you have to spend a *lot* more. Some folks call it elegance or silk. Others use continuousness or some other hard-to-define term. Even for all that, you have to be lucky enough so it manifests fully, in the context of your personal system and to deliver on the extra money spent for it. It's no surprise that more remains possible past the ProLogue 3. What is a surprise? How big of a step this \$1,295 piece makes to get you *there*. What's ultimately left below the table becomes theoretical and abstract. What's served up is darn convincing. In conceptual parlance, that's called balance. It accounts for the big picture with a limited budget. Without comparisons and a dorky level of critical acuity, you buy into the picture that is presented as *is*. Balance is a sign of engineering excellence. It's also a bane for reviewers. It's easier to report on violations of balance -- and perhaps more interesting to read about -- than to not find anything that *sticks out* to become the key mark of character.

The MiniMax has more character but a bit less resolution. Readers who own it have shared what preamps the little guy from Hong Kong replaced in their rigs. Since it's second-hand hearsay, I won't divulge brand or model names except to say, some of the items sold (or decided against in favor of the mini) were 5 x as much. Considering the ProLogue's equivalent advantage of offshore manufacture, all of us can comfortably tally up a long list of direct domestic or Euro competitors at double and triple its price. That's plain going into this game. The question remained, would the PrimaLuna suffer any you-get-what-you-pay-for shortcomings? Clearly not. One of the smartest things its designer did was opting for a low-gain architecture. It solves a number of common tube preamp problems - high noise floor coupled to very limited practical volume range. Hand in hand with that decision is forsaking the last words in body or heft. Though likely a generality, high-gain preamplifiers like the Audiopax Model 5 often have higher mass and density. Let's next listen to the Prologue 5 as driven from my customary ModWright to only alter one variable at a time.



Unlike the 35wpc Onix/Melody SP3 integrated, the ProLogue 5 into 101dB speakers proved noisy. Steady-state power supply drone was readily audible in the listening seat when the refrigerator in the kitchen cycled off. Of course, nobody in their right mind would acquire an affordable 40-watt tube amp and drive ultra-efficiency speakers with it. For that, you'd pick a 6-watt Almarro, Decware, Fi or Yamamoto specifically bred for low noise. I'd transition to the 88dB Gallo Ref 3s to be fair to the PrimaLuna. But first, an interesting aside. FirstWatt's F1 and F2 (the two finned and stacked black boxes above) are in an entirely different class of drive, control and subsequent articulation and energy despite being a mere 10 and 5 watts respectively and not designed for conventional speakers at all. I'm not usually fond of the sonics of 200-watt monster amps that keep doubling power down into 1 ohm. However, these transconductance amps have made me come to appreciate the merit of tightfisted *control* (which muscle amps into the usual loads achieve with massive power supplies, silly current capabilities and kilowatt outputs). Current drive acts like those über amps. Alas, as implemented by Mr. Pass, current drive pursues ultimate simplicity rather than complex multi-stage endlessly paralleled architectures.

What's control *sound* like? More bounce and rebound. More tension and vitality. More projection power of the encoded energy. More bass definition, extension and leading-edge jump factor. As a result of all that, more clarity, immediacy and intensity as though one's attention had just moved forward multiple rows to be closer to a charismatic presenter. Of course, the FirstWatt amps are specialty products. Nothing really compares to them. Consider this a mere foot note then,



of rhetorical value to all but the few who'll ever experience a transconductance audio amplifier. But it is informative for what the PrimaLuna amp can't do. With the Gallos, it was in its native metier, i.e. the kind of speaker a prospective buyer would own or consider. Without the benefit of the Zu Method sub, I found the sound somewhat upshifted. The center was in the upper rather than lower midrange as with the Druids. This was partially due to the Gallo's ultra-dynamic tweeter. Still, even after getting readjusted to the CDT in this system, the Dutch amp still struck me as on the slightly lit-up end of the spectrum. Bass was good but not great (and the Gallos are capable of phenomenal bass if fed a current-rich diet). Occasionally, I even veered into glitters of brightness. That's something my rig usually is never guilty of. Time to go Dutch all the way and find out whether the ModWright wasn't simpatico.



Clearly, the Modright/PrimaLuna combo wasn't a happy one. The, - er *full moon* combo instantly resolved those issues. It sounded as though someone had just turned down the treble and sharpness controls back to default. I have no explanation for why or how but occasional weirdnesses do happen. This now was highly enjoyable music making. It had the Gallos sound again like the reason I bought 'em for in the first place. However, bass reach still wasn't what it could be nor was bass *control* spectacular - good but not the reason you'd buy this combo for these speakers.

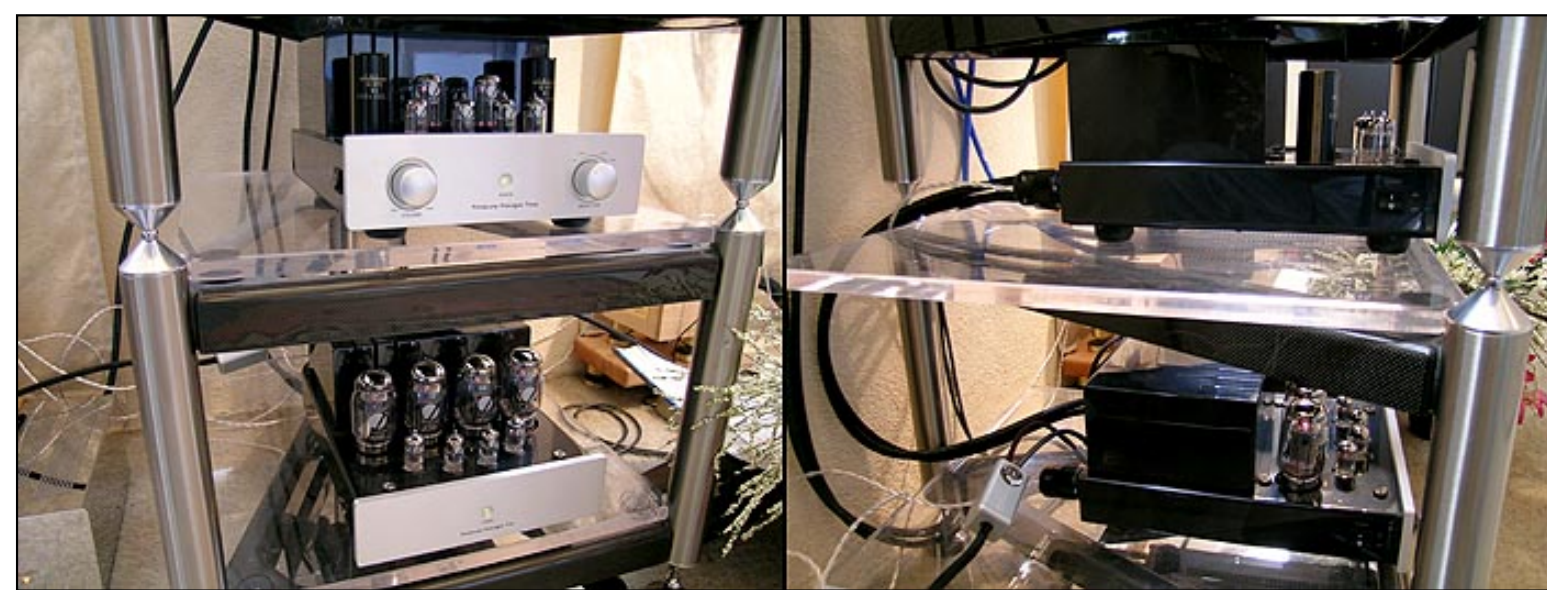
Rather than serve as foundation, the bass became accompaniment. It made vocals instead of bass the foundation of sung fare. It was a slight weighting or shift in prominence, not through unduly highlighting voices in deep-triode fashion but by being a bit less than endowed in the lower octaves. Clearly, the ProLogue 5 is designed to sound good but not to simultaneously act as pile driver. Unfortunately, I didn't have another conventional speaker on hand whose bass system is a less current-happy affair than the Reference 3s.

The minor softening action of the Prologue 3 translated intact through the ProLogue 5. This gear isn't flat-earth PRat focused. It's more about flow, color and mellifluousness - *round* earth.

As with the preamp itself, I was once again mightily impressed by the amount of fine inner detail retrieved. Remember, this is affordable gear. To boot, it will be sold through a few select dealers. Do the math. We're dealing with gear that by necessity needs to compromise *somewhere*. The question is simply where. I'd say here it's a conscious choice of finesse over brawn. Even into easier loads like the Gallos -- easy except for the full glory of those 10-inchers -- you'll subtract a certain amount of heat, pressure, energy and focus compared to more expensive gear that'll sport more pronounced transients and even heftier power supplies for more tension inside the tunes.

The flip side? By forgoing the muscle-bound route of *oomphosity*, we add sophistication and sheer listenability over most all kit that's priced transitionally, i.e. as stepping stones from receiver land into high-brow separates. The designer of PrimaLuna clearly used his test bench. He insisted on wide bandwidth linearity and low distortion into reasonable loads. Nothing here suggests interpretative contouring, darkness or vintage-style voicing. Musical minutiae you know from romps with expensive stuff aren't obscured or blotted out. The soundstage doesn't shrink. You don't run out of volume. Things don't get ugly or hairy. It's simply that the scale of intensity reduces somewhat. Think a version of reality that's a bit lighter in the loafers than the heavy-duty stuff, whose excitement level is a bit more relaxed. Let me put it another way. This isn't wannabe gear struggling upwards from below but never fully emerging into the light. This is gear that's trickling down from above (in this case precedents set by Goldmund, experience and high-level engineering). It dilutes certain

things just enough to get the price into the target range. It doesn't throw things out by claiming them inaudible as MP3 compression does. Instead, it backs off slightly on the throttle. In automobile terms, you're not going as fast and the wind doesn't blow as hard in your face but the scenery is all the same. (The SP3 integrated has superior drive and apparently more iron under its covers.)



The way it sounds to me from listening to the PrimaLunas? They're just what its people claim they aimed for during their development phase: Components that provide an attractive entry into the world of -- tubed -- HighEnd Audio. They are smartly positioned close to where the road of diminishing returns skirts off into the hinterlands. Nothing about appearance and build quality suggests anything other than high class. The -- relative -- limitations here (and really mostly with the amp rather than preamp) will materialize as you choose less and less friendly speaker loads. A smart match for example would be a Triangle floorstander. Its fast and dynamic nature makes it a natural complement to the fine-boned nimble mien of the Dutch. The feature set except for a lacking remote is comprehensive and especially the second pre-out is welcome for subwoofer or bi-amp applications. The preamp wouldn't be out of place mated to amplifiers rather more expensive than its siblings. Reliability -- and the requisite service support for those what-if occurrences -- as well as actual inventories all seem to be in place well before a full-blown marketing campaign and dealer network formation have ever been pursued. These are all excellent signs for how to do things right. I call 'em vital ingredients that go well beyond just how something sounds.

So let's tally up: Excellent packaging and comprehensive support literature. Great looks in two fascia color options. Set'n'forget fun with valves. Tube rolling encouraged and not expensive. Real-world power and features. Modern high-resolution sound. If perhaps a touch polite, surely the preferred direction to err in when it comes to the real world with the music played in it. No overt shortcomings that would limit use (except the non-issue of amplifier power supply noise into ultra-efficient speakers that don't even come close to needing its 40 watts). Strong points? The very low noise floor of the lo-gain preamplifier, making it copasetic into truly hi-rez systems, high-sensitivity speakers and beaucoup-gain amps.

Final verdict? For once, we have truth in advertising or promotional propaganda. Eastern Electric's MiniMax quartet and Onix/Melody's SP3 have just gained reinforcement in the sparse camp of bona fide value-priced high-performance kit that uses tubes and isn't accompanied by a long list of conditions that have to be met before you can enjoy. Even if your budget could double their respective costs, PrimaLuna's first separates belong on your shortlist. They'll surely be on mine when readers ask me for glow-in-the-dark recos. Kudos to Messrs. van den Dungen, Croese and Deal. They combined their various talents and resources to give "entry-level" music lovers a reason to come into our church and get more than just a tacky call to pitch into the collection plate. This is stuff you'd feel comfortable recommending to family members - you know, groove lovers who enjoy good music but couldn't -- and *shouldn't* -- be bothered with audiophile catch phrases and geeky tech talk. Just show 'em where the 'on' buttons are and the volume control. The rest speaks for itself. That's what affordable audio should be all about. That's *exactly* what the PrimaLuna ProLogue 3 and 5 are. I wouldn't call them giant killers but simply, very good values. That's more honest, realistic and believable and just what the world needed (said *without* the usual sly grin that you were just being facetious.)