

AUDI 244
R E V I E W

RIVISTA DI ELETTROACUSTICA
MUSICA ED ALTA FEDELTA'

38 PAGINE DI MUSICA
SU CD, VINILE E DVD

Audioreview
R E V I E W

esclusiva!

T+A V10

**L'AMPLIFICATORE VALVOLARE AD
ALTA TECNOLOGIA**

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PRIMALUNA PROLOGUE ONE

Assembling a good hi-fi chain to your complete satisfaction has become ever more difficult, even if you spend a lot of money. This goes for experienced hi-fi lovers as well. It was already the case some years ago, when the Italian currency was the Lira, but now - with the Euro in our pockets - the dilemma seems more real than ever before. I do not mean to point at the Euro as the source of all our problems. After all, we live in a long-suffering society whose troubles originated many years ago, many of which remain unresolved. On the other hand, we have witnessed a huge, if not epochal, change of the very targets in audio component manufacturing in recent years. While it is no secret that the hi-fi sector needs big turnovers from its clientele, the current economic crisis, among other causes, has made them harder to realize. Moreover,

PrimaLuna Prologue One integrated amplifier

Price : Euro 1150

Distributed in Italy : Audio Natali

ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

The PrimaLuna Prologue One integrated amplifier has been auditioned in the following system:

CD Player: Cayin CDT 15 A

Turntable: Kuzma Stabi S

Tonearm: Kuzma Stogi S

Pickup: Van den Hul DDT II Special

Phono preamplifier: Klimo Lar Gold Plus

Preamplification: Graaf WFB One, Klimo Merlino P

Power amplifiers: Graaf GM 20, Klimo Tyne

Loudspeakers: AM Audio RM 4i, B&W 803 Series II

Acoustic treatments: Acustica Applicata Daad 4, Daad 3

Interconnects: Klimo Dis, Van den Hul The

Second, Van den Hul Thunderline Hybrid

Loudspeaker cables: Klimo Reference

Power cords: Klimo, Van den Hul The Mainstream

Tables: Audio Tech, Soundbase

people can spend their money in many ways in consumer electronics. There is, of course, also a cultural aspect to the art of audio reproduction, though it seems to be considered quite marginal: in today's world it's better to be seen with the latest, smartest cellular-videophone, the purchase and use of which cost half a monthly salary. All this, just so we can flash a status symbol of unrivalled importance at others who don't own this latest masterpiece of technology. Do you see the difference?

The information technology market, though stagnant, is another cause for the shift of interest of large and specific parts of the audience away from high-quality audio reproduction. The IT market is transforming too fast, causing the particularly fast ageing of any product within that market. This requires ever shorter replacement cycles to stay



up to date and meet the requirements of the latest version of our favorite software.

This produces a strange paradox: though we tend to invest as little as possible in products that don't keep their value, IT consumers accept a substantial value loss in the course of months or even weeks. The explanation for this could be the total dependence on computers among an even larger segment of IT users, including professionals and institutions. Nevertheless, I think that we should also look in other directions to explain the static situation in our own sector. The quest for new customers has become quite spasmodic at times. It has failed to pursue the main objective, focusing instead on a number of lesser issues that may have seemed to alleviate the situation, but turned out to be of minor importance. The search for more refined and attractive looks is one of these.

This wouldn't have been a bad thing, if it hadn't been accompanied by the steady and increasingly obvious decline of the very foundation of audio reproduction: sound quality. Looks alone don't get us anywhere, impressive though they might be to a less expert audience. The introduction of multi-channel audio has reinforced this trend: secondary features were given more importance, while the primary features, the basics of a gratifying sound experience, were discarded more and more.

Reaching new customers is as important as staying true to the inspiring principles of high-quality audio reproduction.

Discovering a truly good audio component has never been easy, and for the reasons explained above it is even more difficult today. Nevertheless, if you search carefully, you can find really good items, like those, very few to be honest, which have passed through our hands recently: not too expensive, yet capable of giving satisfaction of the qualitative, rather than the quantitative kind. This time, we can say that we struck the jackpot again, facing a small amplifier with graceful sound.

Calling it a small amplifier is not quite appropriate, considering the effort needed to get it out of its box. While doing so, we noticed an intense smell: it was probably the particular kind of paint used for finish;

a metallic blue, finely dotted with silvery particles. This finish gives the amplifier a pretty good appearance, even if it doesn't perfectly match the black anodized faceplate. Its dimensions are not too big, which facilitates its positioning and initial set-up.

The name PrimaLuna suggests Italian origins, but the Anglo-Saxon phonetics in ProLogue One raise some doubts. In reality it is a Dutch company employing various Swiss engineers and assembling in China. A good example of so-called globalization, aimed at success primarily by striking a good balance between price and quality. PrimaLuna wishes to offer tube audio equipment with optimal technical and sonic properties at very low cost, compared to its immediate competitors.

The man behind the initiative is Herman van den Dungen, a guy with over 30 years of experience in the field. In the past, he worked as a distributor for Kiseki, Milltek and other brands.

The PrimaLuna project team is led by Marcel Croese, a former project leader at the reputed hi-end brand Goldmund. Croese is assisted by other former Goldmund staff. The transformers are designed in collaboration with one of the major American experts, whose name remains unpublished.

The project team maintains close relationships with resellers and end-users, asking them to judge the choices of the engineers. Prototypes, alpha and beta releases, as well as final versions are submitted to severe 'in-field' listening tests before entering the production phase. During testing, the direct comparison with much more expensive audio items with almost the same features is important.

To minimize production costs, the assemblage of PrimaLuna products is delegated to a number of Chinese companies, chosen for their experience, the level of quality demonstrated in the past and, overall, their capability of respecting very strict production tolerances. The communication between the project team in Holland and the assembling companies in China is entrusted to Chinese personnel working at Durob Audio, of which the PrimaLuna trademark is a part. The assemblage factories are visited every four weeks to check the level of quality during production.

The reliability of the equipment and the ease of post-sales operations are of capital importance to the PrimaLuna project team. Starting from the position that a defective tube should never damage an electronic circuit, after-sales operations are very few in number and very easy to perform. To allow the end users to substitute tubes themselves, without further bias tuning, the ProLogue One is equipped with an auto-bias device, which is a servo-circuit using fuses for the protection of the active elements.

As for the assembling factories: international distributors were chosen based on their experience and ability to manage high-quality audio equipment sales, in order to assure the best after-sales support, also on affordable products.

The ProLogue One is the first PrimaLuna model, soon to be followed by another tube amplifier based on the KT88 tube, featuring 2 x 45 watt. The ProLogue One's front plate hosts just an on/off led and a couple of knobs. Strangely, the knobs are inverted compared to the usual position, with the input selector on the right and the volume control on the left. Another unusual aspect is the location of the power-on switch on the left-side panel near the front corner. The front plate represents only a small portion of the overall height, the rest is covered by the grid protecting the tubes. The cover protecting the transformers is located just behind the grid. A toroidal transformer delivers the power, and, like the output transformers, it was expressly designed for the ProLogue One, to match the specific characteristics of the circuitry. Like the chassis, both the grid and the transformer cover are finished in blue metallic.

The rear holds a number of outputs, with an extra element: connectors for both 4- and 8-Ohm speakers, with separate connectors for the positive pole. This is a feature often omitted in cheaper amplifiers, yet essential, given the growing number of low-impedance speakers available. Driving such speakers requires optimized output transformers to let tube equipment perform at its best. Without optimization, a flat and un-lively sound will probably be the result, the most common defect attributed to tube electronics. Unfortunately, this includes some products from famous brands that

seem untouchable in this business. However, if you had the opportunity to compare them with more carefully-designed equipment with less-ringing names, you might be very surprised.

Fortunately, the ProLogue One has sonic gifts that deserve our full interest. But let us first take a quick look at its technical features. The power-amp section uses two pairs of EL34. When used to their best, these tubes can drive even less-than-easy speakers, and, moreover, they can generate a remarkably powerful sound and an output that leaves nothing to complain about. The pre-amp section consists of two other well-known active elements: a pair of 12AX7 and a pair of 12AU7.

~~Some listeners reported a better sound when replacing 12AU7 tubes with 6922 which tends to be less microphonic.~~

The ProLogue One shows that it is a little gem, especially in its sonority. I must admit I was truly fascinated by the personality of this integrated amplifier.

In fact, the use of the same power tubes I've seen in other amplifiers that I know very well and that have impeccable sonics, determines its sonic behavior, similar in many respects to those other amplifiers. Most of all it is the crispness, transparency and the power in driving complex speakers even below 4 Ohms through the most critical intervals of the audio specter, by the

energetic release of signals.

The ProLogue One comes with four line level analogue inputs. It lacks an output for a recorder, the only fault I have been able to find regarding its features. Apart from that, nothing at all is missing, certainly not the typical dark sound of tubes: the absence of harsh and glassy sound is just exemplary. At the same time, the ProLogue One is capable of fast execution and follows even the more complex musical passages surprisingly well. As a consequence, it is remarkably quick at following dynamic contrasts, managing even the most articulated orchestral sounds. It does so without losing any of its transparency and clarity, thereby highlighting its sonority.

When called for, the ProLogue One is capable of reproducing the lower regions with unexpected impact, power and extension. Not to belittle its gifts, they are used only when they are called for. More generally, I can say that this piece of equipment is capable, like few others, of adapting itself to the input signal. It adds nothing, or just an absolutely marginal fraction, of its own sound. And this is the clearest, most recognizable sign of sonic excellence in an amplifier that is capable of adapting promptly to the most different of situations. In fact, every piece of audio equipment, more or less, tends to insert its own sound characteristics into sound reproduction,

as a result of its specific way of signal treatment. Some pieces darken everything, some create a more ethereal soundstage, whereas others seem to sound particularly bright. With the ProLogue One the colors change with every disc, following the characteristics of the recording. At first, you may think that this amplifier tends to highlight the low frequencies, when you listen to a disc that does, only to find yourself completely deceived as you listen to discs with opposite sound characteristics. And this goes on and on, with the PrimaLuna creating specific settings for every reproduction in every kind of repertory. It does so in a most surprising way, even for the most experienced listeners. It is hard to find audio equipment that conveys the timbre so well and, at the same time, doesn't color the signal with its own characteristics. The ProLogue One offers great transparency and crispness, with a substantial absence of limitations in terms of frequency extension. At the same time it greatly highlights the most interesting feature of tubes: to confer an openness and clearness of sound, while perfectly controlling the mid and mid-high regions. Furthermore, the ProLogue One seems to demonstrate a particular attitude in so doing, offering a lightness of reproduction that is first class. This is simply out of the ordinary. Even digital sources are sweetened in a clever way, without any veiling or closing of the sound. Of course, we had to give analogue material a try too. Frankly it was a bit more than a try, as we tested the ProLogue One on an absolutely huge repertory. We obtained extremely positive results in every situation, in particular with Classic Records'



Power-amp section implements EL34 tubes which provides sufficient power in most applications. They are foregone by a pair of 12AX7 and a pair of 12AU7.



On the rear you can see connectors for both 4- and 8-Ohm speakers with separate connectors for the positive pole. The 4 line level inputs come with Teflon-insulated connectors

recently-released “Procol Harum”. The Hammond organ in the second record, with a 33 and 45 rpm version of “A whiter shade of pale” on either side, sounds highly consistent. It just pops up from the speakers and materializes in our listening room with a particular sense of realism. Listeners are so gripped by the harmonics that they feel like listening again and again, simply wishing it would never end. The rest of this double album, a slightly-modified version of the original edition, so full of captivating moments, is warmly recommended to all vinyl lovers. A completely opposite atmosphere and a very direct sound can be heard on “Led Zeppelin II”. The album of this hard-rock icon seems to suggest a recording technique of strict minimalism between source and master tape, the best way of obtaining superior realism. Though rated at “only” 35 watts, the ProLogue One handles the music

surprisingly well, especially since this sort of repertory asks for, or rather, demands lots of power and no shyness. Once more, this shows that a good valve amplifier defies the law of Watt, being as good as solid state amps with three times the power.

The guitars and voices in “Crosby, Stills & Nash”, yet another audiophile’s must-have from Classic Records, assumed magical contours. The reduced number of instruments in this recording does justice to special vinyl albums like this one, highlighting its virtues.

“Wooden ships” and “Guinnevere” are amongst the best tracks on the album, particularly the latter, where the poetry coming from the groove leaves us breathless.

To have these songs interpreted, one couldn’t wish for better qualifications than those offered by the ProLogue One: delicious and light sonority, along with an extremely

fast response to the dynamics of the signal.

At this point, it has become absolutely needless to say that we highly recommend this amplifier to everyone looking for first-class sound at an affordable price. In short, combined with well-chosen partner components, this is a piece of equipment that can sound as good as much more expensive hi-fi chains, at a feasible price.

The owners of expensive equipment, facing these facts, can only turn pale and regret having followed others who, regardless of where they come from, seem anything but disinterested parties.

A little champ of price/quality ratio: available at an affordable price, especially for a tube amplifier of more-than-usual power.

Italian review by Claudio Checchi