

EQUIPMENT REPORT



PrimaLuna DiaLogue Three Preamplifier

Tube Seduction

Jim Hannon

How often have you loved a company's power amplifiers but been less enthusiastic about that same company's preamplifiers? I've bought into the one-brand electronics philosophy often enough to have accumulated my share of successes and disappointments—enough of the latter to no longer assume that just because I really like one product that a company makes I will automatically be bowled over by its companion pieces. Thus, having been quite taken with PrimaLuna's DiaLogue Seven monoblock amplifiers, I wondered whether the company's upgraded preamplifier, the \$2699 DiaLogue Three (DL3), would equal its sibling's fine performance. In short, would the DL3 prove a formidable switch-hitter or could it only bat from one side of the plate?

Physically, the DiaLogue Three preamplifier looks quite similar to the DiaLogue Series amplifiers, is built like a tank, and has a quite attractive polished finish. The DL3 is a true dual-mono design; only the power cord, power switch, and volume control are shared by both channels. When I first lifted the DL3, I thought it was as heavy as one of the DiaLogue amplifiers. Well, not quite, as the amplifiers weigh in at 63.8 pounds each

and the preamplifier at a mere 52.9 pounds. Why so much heft in a preamplifier? As with the DiaLogue amplifiers, the power transformers account for much of the unit's weight, but these separate toroidal units for the left and right channel power supplies are also keys to the preamp's ability to reproduce music effortlessly and with wonderful dimensionality. With these huge power reserves, the DiaLogue Three cruises through the music without any stress or strain, and is seemingly unflappable even in complex, dynamically challenging musical passages.

Like other DiaLogue components, the DL3 offers high-quality point-to-point wiring, a feature that I prefer in my tube electronics, not only for its sonic benefits but also for ease of servicing and modification over the long haul. Not that I think you'll need to worry about servicing, because in my experience with the DL3 and the other DiaLogue Series electronics I haven't had to change so much as a tube, perhaps owing to PrimaLuna's innovative SoftStart circuit that powers the unit up gently to help preserve tube life. The tubes are not driven hard in the DL3, which along with the massive power transformers, contributes to the unit's sense of ease and natural musical flow. The DL3 is also one of



the quietest tube preamplifiers I've auditioned, the result of using two 12AU7s per channel as inputs to produce a modest 12dB of gain, as well as other design elements like tube rectification, a high-quality volume control, sealed relays, and more.

The overall quietness of the DL3 helps contribute to one of its most salient sonic virtues. Music emerges from a silky-black background—no distracting tube rush here—with such beautiful timbre and harmonic richness that extended listening sessions are a real pleasure. While its timbre and richness are reminiscent of the magical midranges of some classic tube preamplifiers, the DL3 extends this timbral envelope to the bass and highs, avoids any vestiges of upper-midrange glare and bass sluggishness, lifts several veils, does not blunt the leading edges of transients, and significantly improves high-and-low frequency extension, inner detail, and dynamics.

When the DL3 was coupled with the remarkable UHA-HQ Phase 6 reel-to-reel deck and playing mastertape duplicates from The Tape Project, I was in sonic heaven! The massed strings in *Exotic Dances from the Opera* [TP-007] were sumptuous and finely detailed, and rode on a cushion of air across a soundstage of such tremendous width and depth that it came surprisingly close to the dimensionality of my highly-modified reference preamplifier. The highs were naturally extended and balanced without any grain or forwardness, allowing the timbre of instruments like woodwinds to remain seductive yet lifelike; at the same time, the DL3 tracked the demanding dynamics swings of the music with aplomb.

When I listened to Dave Alvin on *Blackjack David* [TP-002], his voice and guitar had such immediacy and palpability that I felt, at times, that I was listening to a live performance. It doesn't get much better than that! While the UHA-HQ deck is the best front

SPECS & PRICING

Frequency response: 10Hz to 130kHz (+0/-3dB)

Inputs: Five pair RCA, one pair HT bypass

Outputs: Two pairs of RCA main outputs, one pair RCA tape monitor out

Tube complement: Four 12AU7s, two 5AR4s

Input impedance: 220k ohm

Output impedance: 2500 ohm

Dimensions: 15.9" x 15.2" x 8.3"

Weight: 52.9 lbs.

Warranty: Two year limited (six-months on stock vacuum tubes)

Price: \$2699

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ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

UHA-HQ Phase Six reel-to-reel Deck; Merrill Williams R.E.A.L 101 turntable with Ortofon AS-212S tonearm and MC Cadenza Black cartridge; VPI Aries turntable (TNT V platter & bearing), Graham 1.5 arm (w/2.2 bearing), and Koetsu Black cartridge; Esoteric SA-50 CA/SACD player; TL5.5 Series II Signature Preamplifier and MFA Venusian (Frankland modified) preamps; VTL MB-185 Series II Signature Monoblocks and PrimaLuna DiaLogue Seven and DiaLogue Five amplifiers; NOLA Metro Grand Reference and Quad ESL-57 (PK modified) loudspeakers; Silver Circle Audio Pure Power One 5.0; Nordost Valhalla interconnect and speaker cables, etc.

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end I've had in my system, the DiaLogue Three kept pace with this outstanding analog source on multiple levels.

Turning to digital sources, the DL3 had an appealing richness that made me appreciate it even more. Yes, there's a dollop of tube warmth here, but it helped many digital recordings sound more natural. Listening to the Water Lily SACD recording of Dmitri Shostakovich's Symphony No. 7, I was impressed by the lack of digital artifacts in the upper midrange and highs, which helped to narrow the gap between digital and analog. Here, too, the stage was very broad and deep, and the percussion had very nice transient quickness, without any rounding of the leading edges. In the lower registers this warmth made cellos and basses sound luscious and powerful. However, it proved to be a little too much of a good thing on solo piano recordings, like Nikolai Lugansky's Chopin Études [Erato], and I preferred the slight increase in clarity and the more neutral tonal balance in the lower registers of both my reference preamplifier and the VTL TL5.5 Series II Signature, units that cost much more than the DL3.

To further assess the DL3's sonic signature, I performed a bypass test with the Esoteric SA-50 CD/SACD player driving the DiaLogue Five stereo amplifier directly and the SA-50 going through the DL3 to the amplifier, using short lengths of Nordost Valhalla interconnects in both instances. While not a perfect test, it was illuminating. In his review of the SA-50 (TAS 203), RH concluded that the Esoteric sounded better without the intervention of a preamplifier stage, and praised its incisive, upfront, and vivid presentation driving amplifiers directly. I agree with his findings, but in my tests, the inclusion of the DL3 in the chain also produced some pleasing sonic results. Listening to the Reference Recordings recording of H. Owen Reed's "La Fiesta Mexicana" track on the excellent *Dallas Wind Symphony Sampler*, I could not hear a difference between the two test systems in dynamics, bass extension, or transients on percussion instruments, and both systems were highly palpable and engaging. While the direct-connect system offered a clearer window on the soundstage with slightly more transparency, detail, and bass articulation, the sound was harmonically richer and the soundstage was more expansive when the DL3 was added to the chain. Moreover, the overall presentation sounded more relaxed with less of that slight digital edge and forwardness in the upper midrange and highs that RH noted. I realize that these "additions" with the DL3 in the system are euphonic colorations, but I preferred them and did most of my digital listening with the DiaLogue Three in the chain. It made me feel more like I was listening to analog rather than digital—and that's a good thing in my opinion.

The DL3 sports a heavy-gauge steel chassis, premium parts (including high-quality Solen polystyrene and tin-foil capacitors), gold-plated RCA jacks, and a substantial metal remote with lots of useful

functionality, particularly with other DiaLogue Series amplifiers and CD players. I liked being able to switch the DiaLogue Series amplifiers from ultralinear to triode mode through a unified remote, while being able to change inputs and volume from the listening position. While the DL3 doesn't have a balance adjustment like the VTL preamplifier (via its remote) or the dual volume controls of my reference, it does use a single high-quality Alps Blue Velvet volume control to reduce noise—a very good tradeoff in this price class.

The DiaLogue Three does not offer balanced outputs, and while it can be configured with an optional moving-magnet phonostage, my unit was not equipped with one. (The optional internal phono-board, designed by Marcel Croese, in the DiaLogue Two integrated is both a solid performer and a great value. However, if you prefer low-output moving coils, you must go with a separate phonostage.)

With the addition of the DiaLogue Three preamplifier to its lineup, PrimaLuna clearly demonstrates that it can produce both stellar amplifiers *and* preamplifiers. Like its DiaLogue Series siblings, the DL3 has a tremendous *now* factor—it's difficult to believe that such engaging, gorgeous sound, coupled with a wonderfully expansive soundstage, can be had for such a relatively modest price. What the DL3 does that I found so compelling is let the music "breathe" effortlessly. Admittedly, it may make many recordings sound better than they should, and if you want to hear exactly what is on the mastertape, the DiaLogue Three may not be your cup of tea. But if you want to listen for hour on hour without any aural fatigue and be transfixed by the musical performances and the gorgeous timbres of instruments and voices, you've come to the right place. **tas**

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