



PrimaLuna Prologue Two integrated tube amplifier

The PrimaLuna was delivered via courier service in the late afternoon. Not that big the cardboard box was rather tall than wide and its weight caught me by surprise (I am not that young anymore). Moving it up and down on the staircase I was assumed to carry wine crates - this was what the neighbors thought. Such an assumption is not necessarily out of place for the small tube beauty is like a good wine in a sense - the wine with sparkle, that is worthwhile trying.

With the dimensions of an open-wide schoolbook and its faultless finish (multiple layers of hand-rubbed deep blue enamel that looks like black at the first sight) the PrimaLuna is difficult to resist. I also liked the note that had been e-mailed by the distributor: „She’s brand new. Give her some time for burning-in“. Just like this - he had referred to *her*. The PrimaLuna *is* like a girl. You need to pamper her, you need to fall in love with her and she will never let you down (it is not like that in reality but it’d be nice, wouldn’t it?). Having been said so I gave *her* some considerable time to warm up.

Prologue

The Prologue Two is quite logically the successor of the model One, the smallest representative of the PrimaLuna family, which has been awarded on many occasions. The Dutch company concentrated on functional simplicity, careful manufacturing and high quality electronic components - all of these is to be found in PrimaLuna gear. The overall construction is simple but solid and elegant: steel chassis finished in deep blue gloss would not be out of place on Bentley limo. The surface of the box is shared by tubes and shielded power transformer that is responsible for the significant weight of the amplifier (17kg). There is one 12AX7 dual triode per channel, that is tied in parallel to get higher current gain, 12AU7 as a driver and four pentodes KT88 in the power part. Thanks to the Chinese assembly outsourcing we can enjoy point-to-point hand-soldered wiring (neat job here) and electronic components bolted rather than glued *without* any price-up. All tube sockets are ceramic ones, PP capacitors and Alps volume control speak also of the quality. There is a PrimaLuna logo printed on the tubes - nice finishing touch indicating that you cannot get more at the given price.

The volume control and input selection is possible through 2 knobs on the aluminium faceplate (silver finish is optional). The inputs are 4xRCA with identical topology, in the rear you will also see 2x3 speaker binding posts resembling reputable WBT terminals for connecting whatever wire termination you wish for. They are not WBTs but the construction is the same so who cares. By combination of appropriate binding

posts you may connect loudspeakers with the impedances of 4 or 8 ohms. Actually, it requires some experimentation with the selection of the correct binding posts. With some manufacturers the measured impedance equals the nominal one whereas it is not true with others. There are many speakers (some even in the highest high-end) that despite being declared as 8 ohm speakers measure as low as 2-3 ohms. Therefore I recommend to rely upon what *you hear*.

Not even PrimaLuna designers could not ignore the fact, that even the best tubes have to be replaced from time to time (more on this was written on opportunity of the review of hybrid [Audio Research HD220](#) amplifier). However, they should be applauded for the effort to minimise maintenance and adjustment needs necessarily connected with tube amplifiers.

Plug & Play

Everything is easy with the PrimaLuna ProLogue Two: you plug it to the electric circuit, connect the loudspeakers and a signal source, switch it on (on the left side of the chassis) and 15 seconds later you can listen to the music. The rest is arranged by 'Soft Start' electronics that informs you with the green LED on the faceplate of the readiness of the amplifier to play and by very convenient circuitry of Adaptive AutoBias.

To have the bias right is necessary for the performance of any tube amplifier. It is the bias that input music signal modulates and which varies the tube current so that changes in output high voltage copy changes in input low voltage (this is how I understand it - if you know more, please excuse my ignorance). The problem is that even when we have values of the bias right it is not the victory: tubes wear out with time, their parameters are changing with temperature etc. This all may result into different types of distortion. The PrimaLuna's Adaptive AutoBias circuitry is continuously monitoring the input signal and the inner temperature conditions to automatically adjust the bias. The adjustment happens within safe and narrow margins and enables the tubes to operate with the lowest possible distortion (the manufacturer says 0,25% at 1W and <1% at full output). The secondary effect is avoiding clipping due to unexpected input signal peaks. The final benefit is in the possibility to use different type of tubes to further enhance the performance of the amplifier - we did not try this during the review, however.

Before and after...

PrimaLuna ProLogue Two arrived just in time for pairing with other reviewed equipment - reliable Pioneer PD-S904 TM and Vincent CD-S5 being the sources, Kudos Cardea C1, Mirage Omni Series 150 a Aurum Cantus Melody M-102 in the place of loudspeakers and with the slightly more expensive competitors as amplifiers: apart of tubed T.A.C. I used integrated Accuphase E-210A (not produced anymore) and hybrid Copland CSA 29 (the model from Copland's current catalogue). The cables were provided by Monster Cable and Vincent.

Coincidentally I found the Japan edition CD of *The Best of Sissel* (the remarkable female voice of Sissel Kyrkjebo as edited by Universal/Nichion, UCM-1001) in the mail box on the arrival of PrimaLuna so it was naturally the first choice for music material. The amplifier had been warmed-up for 30 minutes and then I switched to it from Accuphase E-210. I was immediately struck by the difference. The sound was not good at all. The music lacked the rhythm and drive, it was confined in loudspeakers, soundstage was compressed and vocal parts bordered with aggressivity. The sound reminded me of that of cheap Denon (the cheapest model being the exception as it is so cheap that the performance/price ration is becoming sensational with it). Of course, I was warned before that the PrimaLuna had been new and should have been burnt-in well. So I did so and gave the ProLogue Two 50 hours to get into condition. After that, on Sunday evening, it was paired with Kudos Cardea C1 again.

I was sitting in the armchair editing a document on my laptop while listening to the usual compilation CD of well-recorded tracks which I already know by heart through multiple listening sessions. The change in sound of PrimaLuna was apparent from the very beginning - *now* I was listening to *music*. Concentrating on my work I suddenly found myself being attracted by the spanish guitarwork of John Williams. I looked up, listening for a while and looking down to the glowing tubes. Then I stood up, moved my armchair to a sweeter spot and let the music speak for another 20 minutes. And it was long after the John Williams' track was over, being replaced by charismatic Joe Cocker's *You Can Leave Your Hat On*. When you do not pay enough attention to *her*, PrimaLuna perfectly knows how to get your attention, just like clever woman does. I stayed up till late that night.

Putting back *The Best of Sissel* CD was the first thing I did. At that time I had not been decided yet if I liked it or not, despite giving at least 20th rotation to it. I still had the initial sonic failure of PrimaLuna with this particular music in memory when I hit the PLAY button. Well, now it was different. The

stridency and one-dimensionality had been gone being replaced by liquid textures with correct timing and drive. The spatial information was detailed and natural with unforced mid and treble region that was clean and extended at its upper range with no hint of aggressivity or grain, with slight emphasis towards sweetness. Also the bass was powerful and deep (not that precise I was used to but excellent for the tube design). Across the all frequencies the amplifier was balanced with a little emphasis on midbass giving the sound fullness and saturation - the instruments of symphonic orchestra showed good separation and proportionality, however. I would say that PrimaLuna fits into among the gear that rather synthesizes than analyzes: it is not freak about the details, it is not 'technical' enough (do not forget the PrimaLuna is a woman) so it is more into emotions. However, not that emotional you would expect from a tube amplifier - it is just too good for it. To be honest there was hardly any difference between solid state Accuphase E-210A and PrimaLuna ProLogue Two. And Kudos Cardea C1 would not definitely mask anything. I assume that it is because Accuphase is not 'technical' either and transforms sound a bit into comfortable and pleasing refinement - this is the typical signature of Accuphase family. It is again up to the listener to decide.

Comparisons

It was not easy to get an equal competitor for PrimaLuna. First, you can hardly find any amplifier in this category with the electric components of such quality. Second, the Chinese origin moves the ProLogue Two downstream into a different price category. Third, it does not suffer from typical tube amplifier artifacts which makes the tube-to-tube comparison difficult. In the end the challenger had been found in the slightly more expensive category.

T.A.C. V60 (Tube Amp Company) is the result of joint venture between German designers and Chinese manufacturers and it looks gorgeous. The designers of T.A.C. know how to make tube fetishists happy: glass, aluminum, glossy black and glowing logo to underline the warmth of tubes. The concept of the T.A.C. is not far away from PrimaLuna including the automatic bias adjustment. The tubes to be found here are from Electro Harmonix and the price tag is almost 50% higher as is the output power (2x60W).

So here we are, with the comparable fighters in the Asian ring (Vincent CD-S5 as the source component, ditto cabling and Aurum Cantus Melody M-102 speakers), both with the same hours of training (T.A.C. a few less) and warm-up.

Though the sonic differences were apparent immediately they were not huge and it took some time before we were able to define them. PrimaLuna goes easily deeper, deeper than any comparable tube amplifier. Such a bass fundament is not common even with solid-state designs. The bass is penetrating, with body and weight and makes the music rock. It is slightly smeared and ill-defined, however. The T.A.C. is lighter in nature, in fact you lack the bass a tiny bit, but its lows are better defined and controlled. The mids and highs are comparable with both amplifiers, I liked voices better with T.A.C. for their definition and articulation whereas PrimaLuna excelled with the acoustic guitar and plucked strings (I missed the fingers with the T.A.C. - it paid bigger attention to the strings). The major difference between the two contenders was in transients and correlated spatial information. The T.A.C. was better in conveying transient edges including the decay (space reverberation, audience and ambient clues and spicy details like breathing of the musicians were part of it). Prima Luna had the tendency to round the sharp transient edge (the sharp attack of a string was softened) and it extended the basic tone a moment longer than the T.A.C. cutting off some of the ambient clues. As a result PrimaLuna showed less 'air' and a tad less information, but also exhibited quieter and darker background and better bass fundament.

It was not possible to choose between the two. If I would be forced to, I would look for another amplifier that would be a combination of the two. The problem is that such an amplifier would cost more than PrimaLuna and T.A.C. altogether. This is the high-end reality and both machines are high-end definitely. In such a case it is perhaps wiser to buy both amplifiers and use one or another depending on the mood or source material. You can also try and have a baby from them...

Epilogue...

Prima Luna ProLogue Two is a very good amplifier that elegantly overcomes issues tied with tube equipment and does not leave any significant imprint on the sound. For the lack of signature I am not confident with recommending it to the typical tube sound lovers (at least in this price category). They may be disappointed as the PrimaLuna is just too much honest - it does not distort and resembles rather an excellent solid-state amplifier playing on the slightly sweeter (rather than warmer) side eliminating risk of listening fatigue. Though I wouldn't say it is a diamond among the less expensive tube gear, I am sure it is a sapphire at least (considering the deep blue finish). The output of 2x40W is sufficient,

workmanship excellent and the sonics outstanding. With the respect to its market price I see no reason why not to buy it..

A note from the distributor: (Marek Kohut, Kohut Audio): The tubes used in the amplifier are of Chinese origin. For example KT88 is a resurrected version of KT88 from Genalex, reputable for their reliability. With the use of high-quality tubes like the Russian ElectroHarmonix 12AU7 and 12AX7 it is assumed that the sound would improve further. We encourage listeners to evaluate such an option for themselves...

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