PrimaLuna
ProLogue Three & Seven
TUBE PREAMPLIFIER & MONOBLOCK AMPLIFIER

Robert Deutsch

PROLOGUE THREE Tube line-stage preamplifier. Tube complement: two 5AR4, two 12AX7, two 12AU7. Maximum gain: 12dB. Frequency response: 4Hz–110kHz, ±3dB. THD: <0.2% at 775mV RMS output. Signal/noise: >93dB(A) ref. 775mV. Input impedance: 110k ohms. Output impedance: 2800 ohms. Power consumption: 46W.
WEIGHT 23.5 lbs (10.7kg).
SERIAL NUMBER OF UNIT REVIEWED 05060314.
PRICE $1395.
PROLOGUE SEVEN Tube monoblock power amplifier. Tube complement: four KT88, two 12AX7, two 12AU7. Power output: 70W (18.45dBW). Frequency response: 20Hz–85kHz, ±1dB at rated power; 11Hz–120kHz, –3dB at 1W. THD: <0.1% at 1W, 10W; 1.5% at rated power into resistive load. Signal/noise: 101dB. Maximum gain: 28.5dB. Power consumption: 125W at idle, 225W at rated maximum power.
WEIGHT 37.5 lbs (17kg).
SERIAL NUMBERS OF UNITS REVIEWED 05100043, 05100044.
PRICE $2695/pair.
BOTH
DIMENSIONS Each: 11" (280mm) W by 7.5" (190mm) H by 15.5" (400mm) D. **WARRANTY** 2 years limited, 6 months on stock tubes. Approximate number of dealers: Sold direct.
MANUFACTURER Dorob Audio BV, P.O. Box 109, 5250 AC Vlijmen, The Netherlands. Web: www.primaluna.nl. US distributor: Upscale Audio, 2504 Spring Terrace, Upland, CA 91784. Tel: (909) 931-9686. Fax: (909) 985-6968. Web: www.upscaleaudio.com.

PrimaLuna ProLogue Three & Seven tube preamplifier & monoblock amplifier

Everybody loves a bargain. No—make that: *Most* people love a bargain. Some just want the best, and they don't care about the cost. Some even distrust and reject out of hand any product that's not expensive enough. If you're one of these people, you might as well stop reading this review right now—the PrimaLuna ProLogue Three and ProLogue Seven are not for you. $1395 for a tube preamp? $2695 for a pair of 70Wpc tube monoblocks equipped with four KT88 tubes each? Must be based on old designs in the public domain using cheap parts carelessly assembled…

But in fact—and putting sound quality aside for the moment—these PrimaLuna products are serious, well-thought-out designs of considerable originality, in which are found such high-quality parts as Solen capacitors, Alps potentiometers, and fast-recovery diodes. The ProLogue Three and ProLogue Seven are claimed to have been made with "workmanship equal to or better than any product that you can buy at any price, period," and I'm not about to refute that claim.

As for the sound…well, I'll get to that shortly.

Some background

PrimaLuna products represent true international cooperation. The company was founded by Herman van den Dungen, a high-end audio distributor in the Netherlands;

the designer is Marcel Croese, who held that position with Goldmund in Switzerland. The products are made in the People's Republic of China (at these prices, did you think they'd be Swiss-made?). International marketing and liaison with the Chinese manufacturing facility is handled by Dominique Chenet, who hails from France, where she worked for Jadis. US distribution is by Kevin Deal of Upscale Audio, known in some quarters as the "tube guru."

As Herman van den Dungen tells the story, his grandfather, also named Herman, was given the nickname "Maontje," which means "Little Moon" in Dutch, by his wife, and that's also now the name of van den Dungen's little dog. Herman's father's name was Cor, so he is called "Herman from Cor from Maontje van den Dungen." And so—I hope you're following all this—"that's why I thought of *First Moon* as a brand name."

And why an *Italian* name? Well, that's not really explained, except to say that there *is* a small town near Lake Como called Primaluna—but it has nothing to do with the audio business. My theory is that Herman van den Dungen just liked the sound of *PrimaLuna*, which does roll off the tongue in a very musical way.

Description and design

The ProLogue Three and ProLogue Seven share certain characteristics. They're exactly the same size and are built by hand with point-to-point wiring; the fully vented chassis are of heavy-gauge steel with five coats of finish, each coat hand-rubbed and polished. Premium parts are used throughout; supplier names include Alps, Nichicon, Solen, Swellong, and WBT. The ProLogue Three and Seven both have a SoftStart circuit to extend the life of components and reduce

MEASUREMENTS

The Prologue Three's maximum gain was to specification at 12.2dB, and the preamplifier preserved absolute polarity; *ie*, it was noninverting. The input impedance was usefully high, at around 100k ohms in the bass and midrange. It dropped, slightly but inconsequentially, to 77k ohms at 20kHz. The output impedance was also to specification in the midrange and treble at 2.7k ohms, which is higher than usual, but rose to a high figure of 11.5k ohms at 20Hz. This preamplifier really does need to be used with an amplifier having an input of 50k ohms or more if the bass is not to sound lightweight. At 77k ohms, the Prologue Seven's input impedance will be sufficiently high, I feel. DC offset was negligible.

The Prologue Three's frequency response didn't vary at all at high frequencies at different volume-control settings, but did extend a little lower in frequency—0.5dB down at 12Hz set to unity gain (2 o'clock) compared with –0.5dB at 20Hz at maximum volume. But as fig.1 shows, the high-frequency bandwidth increased significantly into low impedances. Note the premature low-frequency rolloff into the unrealistically low 600 ohm load in this graph, but also the excellent channel matching, which was equally good at other volume settings. Channel separation (fig.2) was good in the bass and midrange, at 69dB L–R and 77dB R–L, but worsened above that region due to the usual capacitive coupling.

With the volume control full but the input short-circuited, the Prologue Three's wideband, unweighted signal/noise ratio was a good 68.8dB, improving to 78.4dB when the measurement was restricted to the audioband, and to 94.7dB when A-weighted. Fig.3 plots the THD+noise percentage against output voltage into 100k ohms, 10k ohms, and 1k ohm. Into the higher imped-

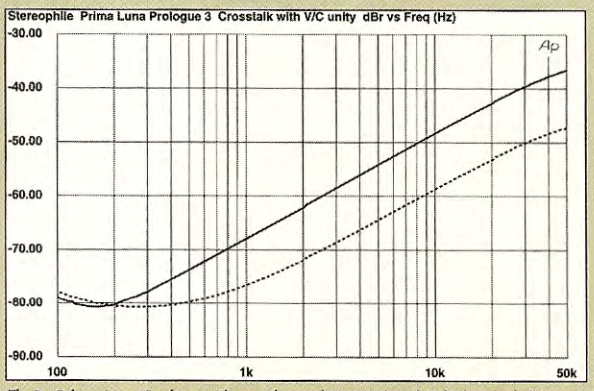

Fig.2 Prima Luna Prologue Three, channel separation (10dB/vertical div.).

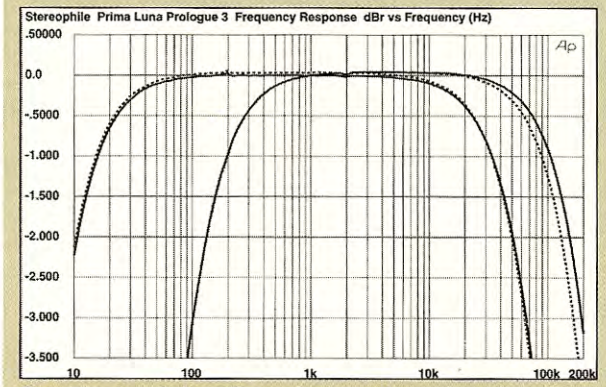

Fig.1 Prima Luna Prologue Three, volume control at maximum, frequency response at 1V into (from top to bottom at 100Hz, bottom to top at 100kHz): 100k, 600 ohms (0.5dB/vertical div., right channel dashed).

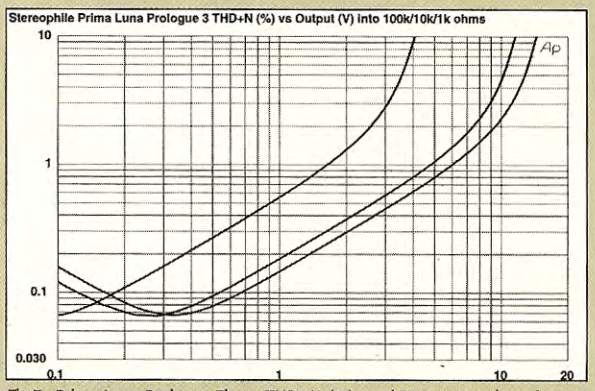

Fig.3 Prima Luna Prologue Three, THD+N (%) *vs* 1kHz output voltage into (from bottom to top at 1V): 100k, 10k, 1k ohms.

thermal shock, and there's a removable protective metal cage that fits over the tube compartment. I kept these on for all my listening.

The ProLogue Three is a dual-mono design, with separate toroidal transformers for the left and right channels. Two 5AR4 tubes are used for rectification; there is no loop negative feedback or cathode followers. The ProLogue Three uses a choke-regulated power supply and DC tube heaters, which is said to make it less picky about tube choices. The ProLogue Three sports four sets of line-level inputs, one of them optionally convertible to an internal moving-magnet photo stage ($159). There are two sets of main outputs—a useful feature when you want to add a supplemental subwoofer and don't want the signal for the main amplifiers to go through any sort of crossover or switches. Controls are in the minimalist tradition of source selection and volume—that's it. There is no balance control, no mute switch. The power switch is on the left side of the chassis, near the front.

The ProLogue Seven, at the top of PrimaLuna's amplifier line, produces a maximum output of 70W. Its circuitry is "classic ultralinear," with dual-feedback topology: cross-coupled current feedback for gain stability, then an additional small amount of negative feedback to obtain low distortion and low output impedance. This design is claimed to produce all the benefits of feedback without any of its drawbacks. An interesting feature of the Seven is that, in addition to the supplied KT88s, it accepts a wide range of other tubes as well, including EL34, 6L6GC, 7581A, and KT66, the power output dropping slightly when using any of these tubes. This flexibility is made possible by the action of a circuit called Adaptive AutoBias, which monitors bias, adjusting

ances, the actual distortion starts to rise out of the noise at a few hundred millivolts, and rises linearly with voltage, not actually clipping as such until well above the 1% THD mark, which is our usual definition of *clipping*. The output voltage into sensible loads at 1% THD was >5V, well above that required to drive the Prologue Seven to its maximum power. Into 1k ohm, however, the output voltage was significantly restricted and the distortion high, again suggesting that the Prologue Three needs to be used with power amplifiers having a high input impedance.

At 1V output, the THD+N percentage remained around 0.2% into various loads, though the preamp was a little less happy driving low frequencies into low impedances (fig.4), this presumably associated with the LF rolloff. However, even into the 8k ohms input impedance of the Miller Analyzer, the distortion was predominantly second- and third-harmonic in nature (fig.5), which will tend to be subjectively benign. And even into this low impedance, the Prologue Three didn't do too badly on the high-frequency intermodulation test (fig.6), the difference component at 1kHz rising to –60dB (0.1%). This test was taken at 1V output, about the maximum level the preamp liked to put out with this demanding signal.

The input impedance of the Prologue Seven monoblock amplifier (fitted with KT88 output tubes, as noted above) was 77k ohms in the bass and midrange, this dropping to 53k ohms at 20kHz. The Seven was noninverting from all output transformer taps, and the voltage gain into 8 ohms was 27.2dB from the 8 ohm tap, 26.5dB from the 4 ohm tap, and 25dB from the 2 ohm tap.

The Prologue Seven's output impedance was extremely high from the 8 ohm tap, at 8.5 ohms at treble and midrange frequencies, and rising to 9.1 ohms at 20Hz. It

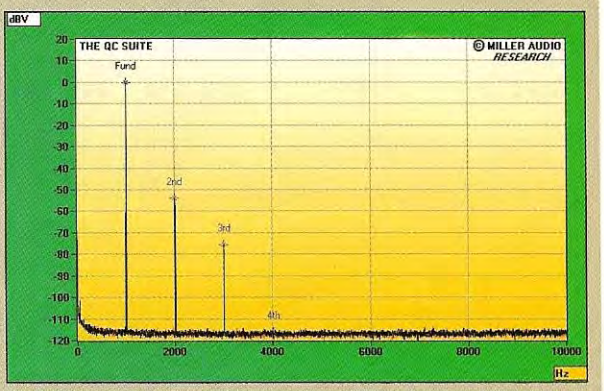

Fig.5 Prima Luna Prologue Three, spectrum of 1kHz sinewave, DC–10kHz, at 1V into 8k ohms (linear frequency scale).

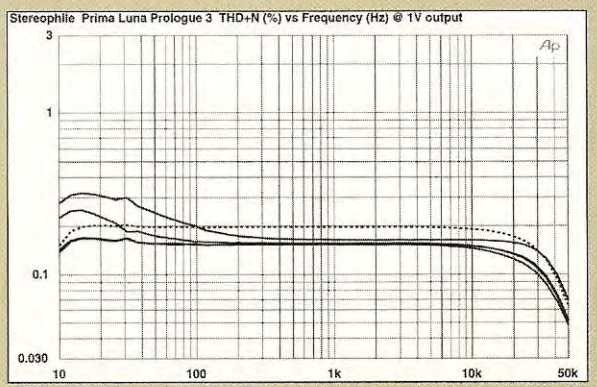

Fig.4 Prima Luna Prologue Three, THD+N (%) *vs* frequency at 1V into (from bottom to top): 100k, 10k, 1k ohms (right channel dashed into 100k ohms only).

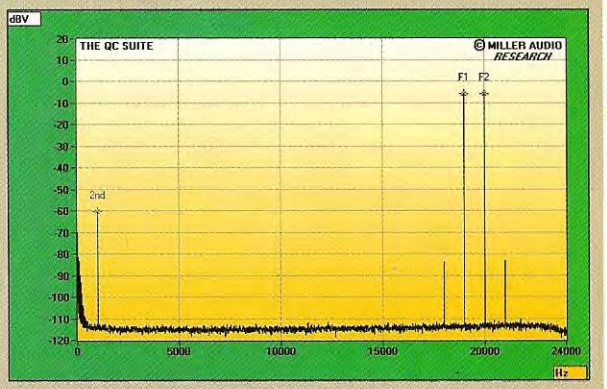

Fig.6 Prima Luna Prologue Three, HF intermodulation spectrum, DC–24kHz, 19+20kHz at 1V peak into 8k ohms (linear frequency scale).

it as necessary to reduce distortion and to compensate for tube aging. Kevin Deal sent me a set of EL34s to try in addition to the stock KT88s.

There are separate output terminals for speakers with impedances of 2, 4, or 8 ohms. My Avantgarde Acoustic Unos are an easy load, their impedance hardly dipping below 8 ohms, so that was the setting I used. Like the ProLogue Three, the ProLogue Seven's power switch is on the left side, near the front, which is more convenient than having a switch on the rear panel, as some other amps do.

Examining the ProLogue Three and Seven, I was impressed with the quality of their construction and the general presentation. Nothing ostentatious, no sense that a major part of the cost was spent on flashy industrial design—just an understated feel of quality, with no rough edges or poorly fitted bolts. The package includes a pair of white gloves for handling the tubes and to prevent fingerprint smudges on the finish.

Sound

As is my practice, my initial listening to the PrimaLunas was informal: I plugged them in, made the appropriate connections, ensured that everything worked, and started playing CDs. At this early stage, I try not to be analytical or critical in any way; after all, the equipment may need some breaking in before reaching its potential, so it would be unfair to evaluate it at this point. It also might need some tweaking to optimize the sound quality. So I just listened to the music. As it turned out, in addition to my Avantgarde Unos, I had on hand two pairs of speakers to be reviewed: the Silverline Audio Preludes and the Fujitsu Eclipse TD-712zs. They, too, were in need of break-in, so I spent some time listening to them as well.

As much as I try to put any critical attitude aside in this sort of informal listening, I can't avoid forming some impressions, and it quickly became apparent that I was dealing with some very good components. Determining exactly *how* good, as well as evaluating the respective contributions to the sound of preamp and amps, would take some analytical listening and comparisons with other compo-

measurements, *continued*

was around 4.5 ohms from the 4 ohm tap, and still 2.6 ohms from the 2 ohm tap. These impedances will maximize power transfer into loads that equal the transformer-tap rating, but will introduce large variations in frequency response with real-word loudspeakers. Into our standard simulated loudspeaker, for example, there were ±2.2dB variations in response from the 4 ohm tap (fig.7), rising to ±3dB variations from the 8 ohm tap (not shown), and even ±1.6dB changes from the 2 ohm tap (not shown).

Also apparent in this graph is the amplifier's very wide small-signal bandwidth: low frequencies that are flat to 20Hz and ultrasonic frequencies that are not down 3dB until 110kHz. Though there is the start of some parasitic peaking evident, this doesn't reach its maximum until above the 200kHz limit of my measurement. Other than its high secondary impedance, the Prologue Seven's output transformer is obviously an impressive component. Note the excellent shape of the 1kHz squarewave (fig.8), and that while the ultrasonic resonance results in some overshoot, the 10kHz squarewave (fig.9) reveals that the ringing is relatively mild.

The unweighted, wideband S/N ratio (ref. 2.83V into 8 ohms with the input shorted) depended on the transformer tap used, ranging from 85dB (8 ohm tap) through 87.1dB (4 ohm tap) to 88.7dB (2 ohm tap). These are good figures, and the Prima Luna amplifiers did not seem sensitive to grounding issues (though I must admit I didn't

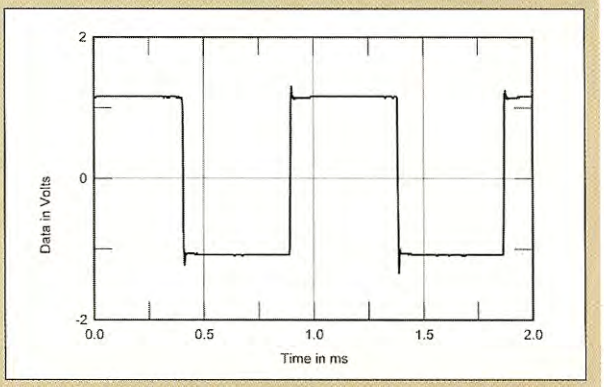

Fig.8 Prima Luna Prologue Seven, 8 ohm tap, small-signal 1kHz squarewave into 8 ohms.

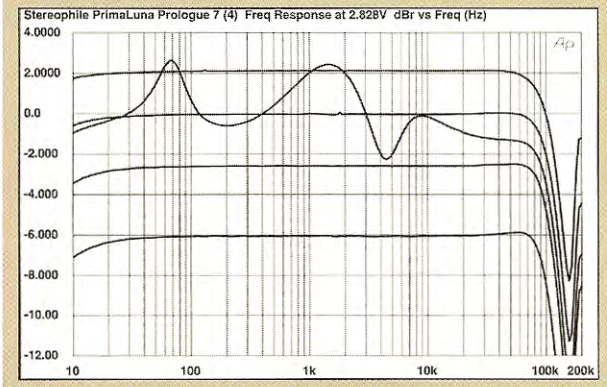

Fig.7 Prima Luna Prologue Seven, 4 ohm tap, frequency response at 2.83V into (from top to bottom at 2kHz): simulated loudspeaker load, 8, 4, 2 ohms (0.5dB/vertical div.).

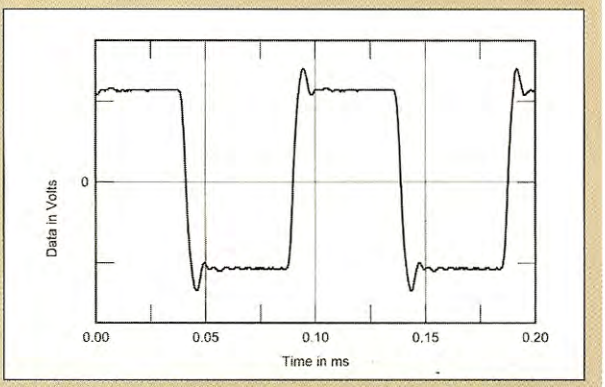

Fig.9 Prima Luna Prologue Seven, 8 ohm tap, small-signal 10kHz squarewave into 8 ohms.

nents—but I already knew that this was going to be anything but a chore.

Before trying any new component, I like to "calibrate my ears" by listening to my usual system: CAT SL-1 Ultimate preamp, Audiopax Model Eighty Eight monoblocks (reviewed in the May 2003 issue, now in Mk.II configuration), and Avantgarde Uno 3.0 speakers. Apart from a remnant of horn coloration, this system has almost everything: a fundamentally neutral tonal balance (excellent bass extension obtained with its powered subwoofers), natural-sounding harmonics, great dynamics, and precise imaging. Not as good as the sounds of real instruments and voices, mind you, but a pretty good facsimile thereof. I also make it a practice to use familiar recordings, some of them audiophile favorites and others classics (though not necessarily classical). These may be boring to talk about (and sometimes to listen to), but for me they have the great advantage of being highly familiar; I've heard them many times in a variety of systems, so I have a good idea of what they can sound like with different pieces of equipment. (Having direct experience with making the recordings, as John Atkinson does, would be even better, but not all of us are that fortunate.)

It seemed logical to begin by comparing the ProLogue Three preamp with the CAT SL-1 Ultimate, keeping the Audiopax amps in the system. In evaluating preamps and power amps, I always do some matched-level comparisons, which in this case was complicated by the fact that the CAT preamp has a switched-resistor volume control with fairly large steps. What I did was to set the CAT's volume at a moderate level, measure the voltage at the amplifier speaker terminals when playing the 1000Hz tone on *Stereophile*'s original *Test CD* (Stereophile STPH-002-2), and set the ProLogue Three's continuously variable volume control to match the CAT's as closely as possible, which was just slightly greater than ±0.1dB.

Changing over from the CAT to the ProLogue Three, the first thing I noticed was that the sound was slightly softer, with the mid- to high treble less prominent—not muffled or rolled off in any obvious way, just somewhat on the laid-back side. The subtle percussive sounds on track 3 of the *Chesky Records Jazz Sampler & Audiophile Test Compact Disc, Vol.1* (Chesky JD37) had a crispness as well as delicacy, but they had just a bit more in-the-room presence when reproduced through the CAT. In other respects, the sound of the ProLogue Three was what I'd call "typically tubelike," which to me means smooth, open, transparent, with an

measurements, *continued*

use the preamp and power amps together, as Bob Deutsch did, which was when he got some ground-loop buzz; I should also note that Bob's Avantgarde speakers use powered subwoofers, which introduces another grounding variable into the mix).

With its low negative feedback, it was not surprising to find that the distortion present in the Seven's output rose linearly with output power into all loads, whether the measurement was taken from the 8 ohm tap (fig.10), the 4 ohm tap (fig.11), or the 2 ohm tap (fig.12). But provided the load impedance was equal to or greater than the nominal transformer tap, the distortion can be seen to be respectably low at powers below a few watts. The actual "knees" in these graphs' traces, where true waveform clipping actually begins to occur, are all above our usual 1% THD definition of *clipping*. But even at 1% THD the Prologue gets close to its specified power, provided the load is twice the tap rating. For example, it delivers 58W into

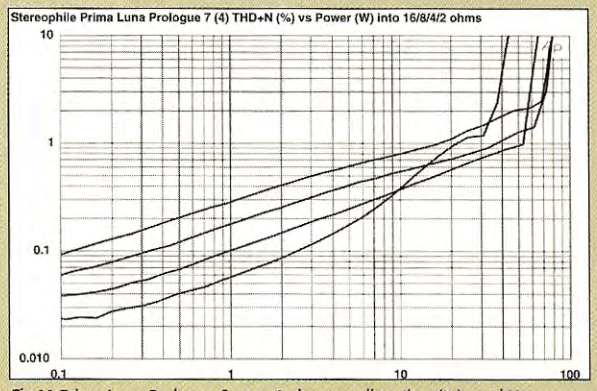

Fig.11 Prima Luna Prologue Seven, 4 ohm tap, distortion (%) *vs* 1kHz continuous output power into (from bottom to top at 10W): 16, 8, 4, 2 ohms.

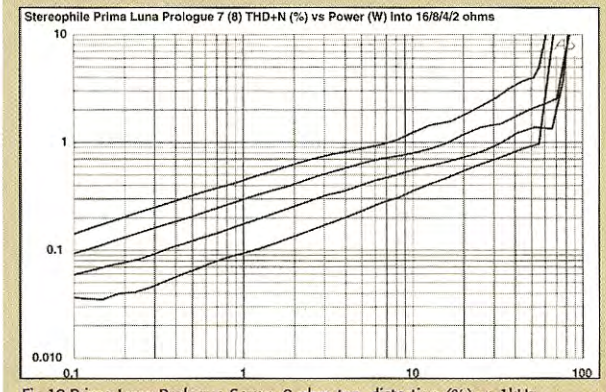

Fig.10 Prima Luna Prologue Seven, 8 ohm tap, distortion (%) *vs* 1kHz continuous output power into (from bottom to top at 10W): 16, 8, 4, 2 ohms.

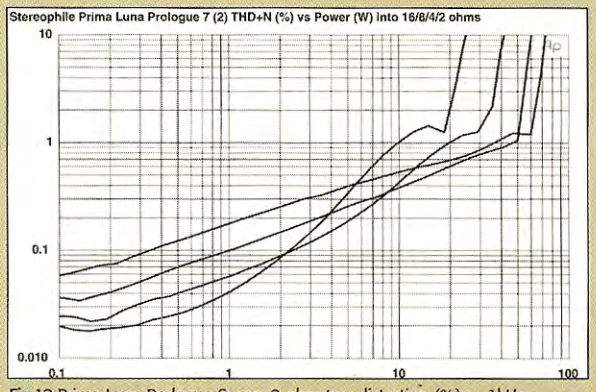

Fig.12 Prima Luna Prologue Seven, 2 ohm tap, distortion (%) *vs* 1kHz continuous output power into (from bottom to top at 10W): 16, 8, 4, 2 ohms.

easy-on-the-ears quality that does not exaggerate, and may even attenuate, harshness in the source material. Compared to the CAT, there was some enhancement of midbass warmth that would be welcome in a system that tends toward leanness.

Did I say "typically tubelike"? Auditory memory is notoriously unreliable, but the ProLogue Three reminded me of the first tube preamp I owned, a Conrad-Johnson PV-2ar, which sounded so much more like music than the squeaky-clean solid-state unit with DC-to-light frequency response that it replaced in my system. I've heard some excellent-sounding solid-state preamps since then (the latest being the preamp section of the PS Audio GCC-100, which I reviewed in the January 2006 issue), but every time I listen to a tube preamp I'm drawn into that warm, engaging presentation that somehow puts the emphasis on the music rather than on the technology used to reproduce it. The ProLogue Three had this quality in spades.

Was the ProLogue Three as good as the CAT? No. The CAT combines this musical quality with a higher level of resolution, greater three-dimensionality of soundstage, and a sense of greater extension at the top and bottom of the frequency range. It also costs more than four times the price of the ProLogue Three. For $1395, the ProLogue Three turned in an outstandingly good performance.

If the ProLogue Three represents an excellent buy—and it *does*—the same can be said of the ProLogue Seven—doubled. In fact, somehow, the limitations of the ProLogue Three's performance in comparison with the CAT SL-1 Ultimate were much less in evidence when it was paired with the ProLogue Sevens rather than the Audiopax Eighty Eights. There really is something to this synergy business...

That is, once I'd managed to deal with a nasty ground-loop buzz/hum that appeared as soon as I connected the ProLogue Three to the ProLogue Seven. This had not shown up when I was comparing preamps using the Audiopax amps, but that didn't necessarily mean there was anything wrong with the PrimaLuna amps. In my experience, ground loops often involve idiosyncratic interactions between components, and floating the grounds of the ProLogue Sevens (the usual solution to a ground-loop problem) didn't get rid of the noise, which would suggest that the amps were not at fault. What *did* work was floating the grounds of *all* the components in the system, which completely eliminated the problem. The ProLogue Three-Seven combi-

16 ohms from the 8 ohm tap (20.65dBW), 57.2W into 8 ohms from the 4 ohm tap (17.6dBW), and 50W into 4 ohms from the 2 ohm tap (14dBW). It will deliver the full 70W (18.45dBW) into a matched load only if the clipping criterion is relaxed to 3% THD.

The low distortion into higher impedances was maintained across quite a wide bandwidth (fig.13), though some rise in THD can be seen in the very low bass and at ultrasonic frequencies. Fig.13 shows the behavior from the 4 ohm tap; the distortion was a little higher at all frequencies into all loads from the 8 ohm tap (not shown), a little lower from the 2 ohm tap (not shown).

Like the Prologue Three preamplifier's, the Prologue Seven's distortion at small-signal levels is heavily second-order (fig.14), though some higher-order harmonics can be seen at very low levels (fig.15). All the harmonics rise in level as the output power increases, and with the 4 ohm tap delivering 20W into 8 ohms (fig.16), the second harmonic lies at –48dB (0.4%). In addition, some sidebands at

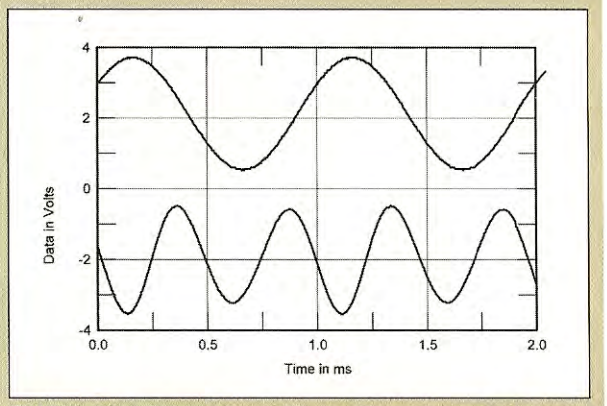

Fig.14 Prima Luna Prologue Seven, 8 ohm tap, 1kHz waveform at 1W into 8 ohms (top), 0.22% THD+N; distortion and noise waveform with fundamental notched out (bottom, not to scale).

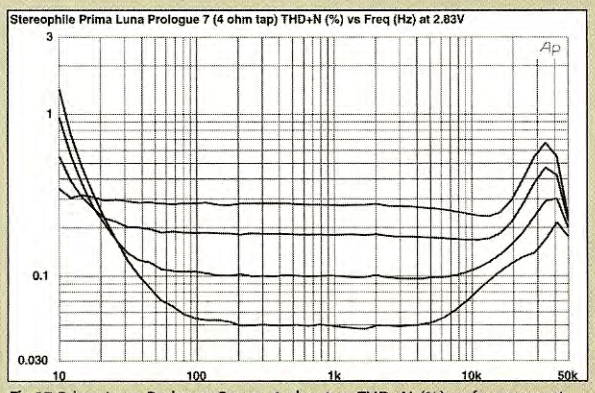

Fig.13 Prima Luna Prologue Seven, 4 ohm tap, THD+N (%) *vs* frequency at 2.83V into (from bottom to top): 16, 8, 4, 2 ohms.

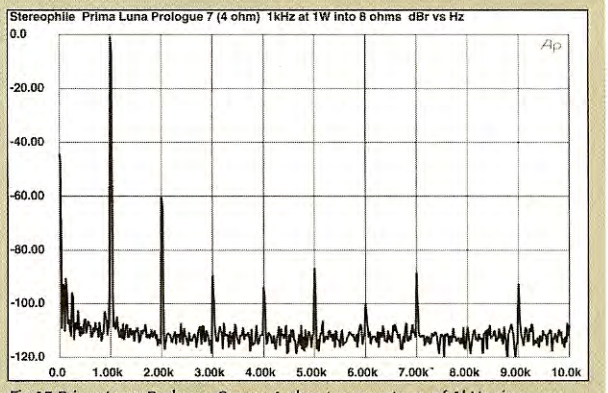

Fig.15 Prima Luna Prologue Seven, 4 ohm tap, spectrum of 1kHz sinewave, DC–10kHz, at 1W into 8 ohms (linear frequency scale).

nation *was* quite sensitive to interconnects, with the lowest noise level and overall best sound produced by the modestly priced PS Audio xStream Statement, a triple-shielded design. With the ground-loop noise fixed, and using the PS Audio interconnects, the noise level was very low—nearly as low as I've heard in my system.

Perhaps the most enduring debate in the audiophile world is the one between those who want reproduced sound to be "accurate" and those who want it to be "musical," with fans of solid-state equipment typically aligned with the former position and tubeophiles with the latter. And then, of course, there are people like me, who want the sound to be accurate *and* musical. (I like to think that we're in the majority.) Of course, if the sound produced by an audio system were, in fact, a 100% accurate reproduction of the original sound, the debate would have to be over, but I don't think we're anywhere close to that, even with the best systems. It's this failure to achieve 100% accuracy that results in audio designers and audiophiles opting for various subtly different approaches to that presently unobtainable ideal.

How did the sound of the ProLogue Three-Seven combo fit into this picture? Well, those aspects of the sound of the ProLogue Three that I described as being "typically tubelike" became less so when the Three was paired with the Seven; now the sound had a more optimal combination of accuracy and musicality. Assuredly, the ProLogue Seven didn't sound like a beefy solid-state amp, but it had less of the "typically tubelike" quality than, say, the Audiopax Model Eighty Eight. Combining the ProLogue Three with the ProLogue Sevens maintained the open, transparent quality that I had admired when the ProLogue Three was paired with the Audiopax, but the upper midrange and treble acquired a bit more presence. The result was that music became more exciting to listen to, with a greater sense of drama. Those percussion instruments on track 3 of Chesky's *Jazz Sampler* were now more in the room, the highs still staying well this side of shrill or exaggerated. Dynamics—a strong suit of the Avantgardes—were simply stupendous, with a "suddenness" and sense of unstrained power that made recordings of

measurements, *continued*

±120Hz appear around the fundamental tone at this power. Though they lie at –100dB, their appearance suggests that the power supply is starting to work hard. And at highish powers of low frequencies into a matched load, the distortion is definitely starting to reach levels I would have thought audible (fig.17). The amplifier's performance on the high-frequency intermodulation test, at levels below actual waveform clipping (fig.18), was also a little disappointing, the 1% difference component resulting from an equal mix of 19kHz and 20kHz tones reaching –38dB (1.2%).

In many ways, the Prima Luna Prologue Three and Seven are nicely engineered, considering their relatively affordable prices. But the preamplifier's decreasing linearity at low frequencies definitely mean that it should not be used with power amplifiers whose input impedance drops much below 50k ohms. And the power amplifier's high source impedance from all its output-transformer taps means that it will produce audible response changes with pretty much every speaker with which it is used. It does look as if the Prologue Seven's owner would be advised to use the output tap that is half the nominal impedance of his speakers. This will give the optimal tradeoff among nonlinearity, noise floor, and maximum power; *ie*, the amplifier will work best with 8 ohm speakers using its 4 ohm tap.

—John Atkinson

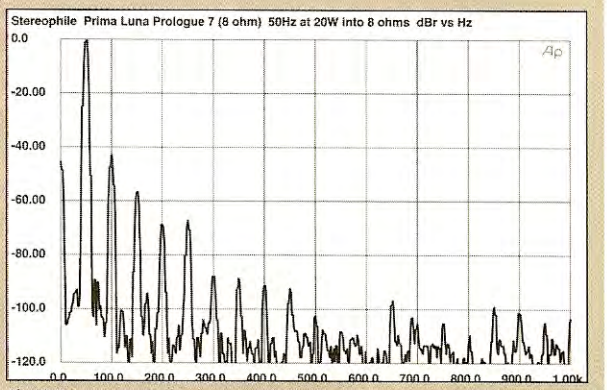

Fig.17 Prima Luna Prologue Seven, 8 ohm tap, spectrum of 50Hz sinewave, DC–1kHz, at 20W into 8 ohms (linear frequency scale).

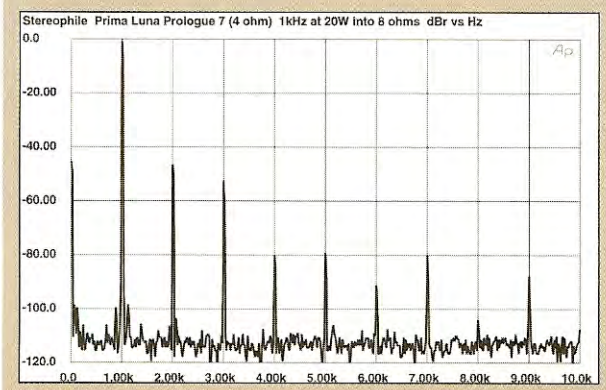

Fig.16 Prima Luna Prologue Seven, 4 ohm tap, spectrum of 1kHz sinewave, DC–10kHz, at 20W into 8 ohms (linear frequency scale).

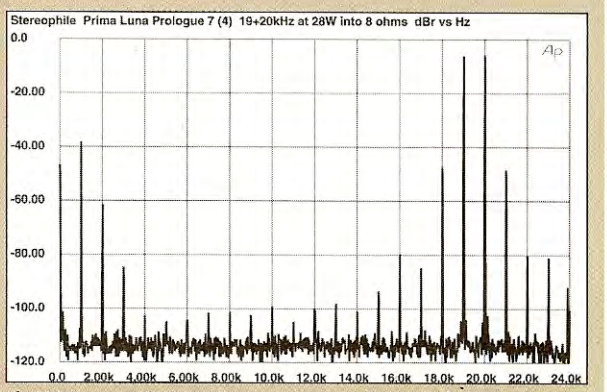

Fig.18 Prima Luna Prologue Seven, 4 ohm tap, HF intermodulation spectrum, DC–24kHz, 19+20kHz at 20W peak into 8 ohms (linear frequency scale).

large-scale orchestral works most exciting. Bass was firm and extended, and there was a good sense of rhythmic drive on appropriate recordings.

Two amps in one

The ProLogue Seven comes supplied with KT88 power tubes, but, as mentioned earlier, it will also take EL34s, in which case it becomes, more or less, the equivalent of PrimaLuna's ProLogue Six monoblock ($2295/pair). A set of eight EL34s can be had for as little as $16 each from Upscale Audio; the ones Kevin Deal sent me, bearing the PrimaLuna logo, sell for $20 each, for a total price of $160. Not bad for getting what is, in effect, a different amplifier!

Once I felt I had a handle on the sound of the standard ProLogue Seven-Three combo, I removed the KT88s, substituted the EL34s, and let them burn in for a couple of days before doing any serious listening. Matching levels with the listening sessions two days apart probably isn't too important, but I was interested in whether there was any change in gain with the EL34s, so I checked the amplifier's output voltage at my usual listening level. Although I hadn't touched the volume control, with the EL34s installed instead of the KT88s the output level was slightly higher (320mV instead of 300mV), which I then compensated for by turning down the volume slightly. Correspondingly, when I switched back to the KT88s, I had to turn up the volume control a bit to get the same output level.

With EL34s instead of KT88s, the ProLogue Sevens didn't sound all that different. The noise level remained low—maybe even lower than with the KT88s—and the sound had the open, dynamic quality that characterized the Sevens with the KT88s. Overall, I preferred the Sevens with KT88s: the sound had a greater sense of depth, the highs seemed more extended, and the dynamics seemed superior. But the differences were small, and it's possible that the EL34 tubes may not have had enough time on them to be at their best. And, of course, not all brands of EL34s are alike, and there may be some that sound distinctly superior to the stock KT88s. For folks who are inclined to tune the sounds of their amplifiers by trying various tubes, the ProLogue Seven's Adaptive AutoBias circuit lets you do this without the hassle of having to manually rebias them.

The sweet spot

As you ascend the price ladder of any product category—cameras, cars, refrigerators, golf clubs, what have you—you reach what some call the "sweet spot." This is where performance is at a high level but short of the very best available, and where any additional increments in performance will require spending disproportionately larger sums of money. For those in the market for a tube preamplifier-amplifier combination, the PrimaLuna ProLogue Three and ProLogue Seven hit this sweet spot head-on. With sound quality that gives up little to much more expensive products, the ProLogue Three and Seven are beautifully built, and, like the ProLogue One, reviewed by Art Dudley in the February 2006 issue, they represent outstanding value.

ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

DIGITAL SOURCES PS Audio Lambda II CD transport, Perpetual Technologies/ModWright P-1A/P-3A digital processors, Monolithic Sound P3 power supply.
PREAMPLIFIER Convergent Audio Technology SL-1 Ultimate
POWER AMPLIFIER Audiopax Model Eighty Eight Mk.II monoblocks.
LOUDSPEAKERS Avantgarde Acoustic Uno 3.0, Silverline Audio Prelude, Fujitsu Eclipse TD-712z.
CABLES Digital: Mystic Reference I^2S, Illuminati Orchid AES/EBU. Interconnect: Nordost Quattro Fils & Valhalla, AudioQuest Sky, PS Audio xStream Statement. Speaker: Nordost Valhalla. AC: PS Audio xStream Power, Shunyata Research Taipan, TARA Labs Decade.
ACCESSORIES PS Audio P-500 AC regenerator; Bright Star Little Rock atop CD transport, Shakti stone atop Monolithic Sound P3 power supply; Arcici Suspense Rack, Vistek Aurios 1.2 MIB & Aurios Pro MIB component supports, PolyCrystal amplifier stands; Furutech RD-2 CD demagnetizer. Digital source and preamplifier were plugged into the regenerated-AC outlets of the P-500 (sinewave 60Hz), power amplifiers into the passive high-power Ultimate Outlets.

—Robert Deutsch