

PrimaLuna ProLogue Six Tube Monoblock Power Amplifiers

By Tom Lyle

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Price: \$2,599 a pair

There are many options when it comes to powering two-channel systems when using separates. However, the preponderance of options involves solid-state amplifiers, and if you choose a tube amp and are at all concerned about how much green you need to lay out, you aren't going to be able to procure that much wattage. Thanks to the Dutch company PrimaLuna, their Chinese-built ProLogue and Dialogue series amplifiers make acquiring a relatively high-powered tube amp a reality. Not only do these amps have more than enough wattage to drive most speakers,



PHOTO 1: PrimaLuna's ProLogue tube amp.

FIRST IMPRESSIONS AND BASICS

Each amp arrived at my doorstep triple-boxed and packaged with the tubes installed. The large main power tubes (four EL-34s in each) were wrapped in soft Styrofoam, and white cloth gloves were supplied to check the seating of the tubes and handle the glossy finished, nearly 38 lb units. My samples had silver faceplates,

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but also they are of extremely high build quality, are easy to maintain, and have exceptional sound quality (Photo 1).

Most of PrimaLuna's integrated and power amps have been more than positively reviewed in the mainstream audio magazines. I wondered whether a pair of their 70W ProLogue Six monoblocks could drive a pair of power hungry, low impedance hybrid electrostats. Of course, I was willing to start out using them in a smaller system using stand-mounted two-way speakers. It would be a better representation of how a good number of audiophiles will use these amps.

which are also available in black. You can easily remove the tube cage, which is held in place with pegs that fit the cage snugly into place corresponding to the exemplary external fit and finish of the amps. The internal fit and finish was also exemplary, with soldering work and layout designed as though the owner of these amps was going to use them upside down with the covers removed and their innards displayed for all to see (Photo 2).

On the rear of each amp are a gold-plated RCA single-ended input, four heavy-duty speaker terminals, one common, and terminals for 2, 4, and 8Ω loads. I tried

both the 2 and 4Ω outputs when powering the electrostatics, and really didn't hear any difference between the two, but ended up using the 2Ω tap recommended in the manual. I used the 4Ω taps for the small speakers. There is an IEC AC power socket for the detachable power cord and a place for the 5A fuse. The large power switch is on the left side of the amp near the front.

In addition to the quartet of EL-34 output tubes, each amp has a pair of trusty small 12AX7s and 12AU7s in its input section (PrimaLuna buys their tubes from a Chinese supplier, but rejects about 40% of these because they don't meet their standards). PrimaLuna claims that tube life is extended because of their soft-start circuit, which powers up the tubes slowly when the power switch is turned on. The manual recommends turning the amp off when not in use, with no need to run up your electric bill to keep the amps warm when you are not listening to them.

PrimaLuna also claims that these amps are of the “plug and play” variety—an “adaptive autobias” circuit monitors and adjusts the tube's bias automatically. This makes it possible to use unmatched sets of tubes, possibly saving you some money when eventually you need to replace the tubes. This circuit also makes it possible to experiment with different types of tubes. On the

distributor's website, they claim you can use 6550, KT88, KT90, 6L6GC, KT66, 7581, or even 6V6GT tubes instead of the EL-34s. [Manufacturer's note: Though the PrimaLuna is fine with 6V6GT tubes, we are no longer recommending those because there are some low quality ones out there, and instead, we recommend EL-37—Kevin Deal, PrimaLuna USA].

The custom output transformers were designed by an American engineer, then the final design was done by Marcel Croese, who supposedly is a very renowned transformer designer. A good transformer design should lower the noise floor and extend the frequency response.

PrimaLuna says that the ProLogue Sixes have a "dual-feedback topology" which is a cross-coupled current feedback for superior impulse behavior and gain stability. A slight amount of negative feedback is used to achieve exact gain setting, low distortion, and low output impedance. PrimaLuna claims that this effectively cancels the negative side effects associated with both feedback circuits. The end result utilizes all the benefits of feedback without the drawbacks.

The ProLogue Six is made with many quality parts. For example, no plastic tube sockets here, only ceramic sockets are mounted on the chassis. Internally, PrimaLuna uses Nichicon and Realcap capacitors, a toroidal transformer, and the amp is handmade with non-cost-effective point-to-point wiring throughout.

LISTENING—SYSTEM ONE

The smaller of the two systems consists

of a digital front end (Arcam) and an analog front end of an old FM tuner (AR), either a solid-state (Jeff Rowland Designs) or tube (Balance Audio Technologies) preamp. The speakers I used were Dynaudio Focus 110.

If you are interested, the preamp-to-amp interconnects are Cardas, the CD to preamp is Monster Cable, and the tuner is connected with out-of-the-box-type cable. The speaker cable is sometimes Kimber, sometimes Monster. I use the stock power cords and no power conditioner. The PSB speaker stands are filled with marble gravel, and all the other equipment sits on the hardwood floor atop and separated by antique Audio-Technica pucks.

While the amps were in either system, I heard no complaints—there were no buzzes, hiccups, static, or any extraneous noises at any time. I could hear no background noise other than a slight hiss when I turned up the volume on the preamp and put my ears up to the speakers. Other components could have contributed to this background noise.

After they were just about fully broken in, which took about two weeks of on and off use, the PrimaLuna ProLogue Sixes sounded magnificent in this system—even when listening to the FM tuner, which was usually set to the local jazz station WBGO in Newark, N.J. (terrestrial out-and-out jazz stations are very scarce these days). On one occasion there was a solo tenor sax playing (I think it was a recent Sonny Rollins release). Its sound entered the room with such a pure tone it was disquieting.

When using the CD player, of course, things became better. One high point was Wilco's *Yankee Hotel Foxtrot*. When playing this CD the system sounded *alive*: the treble had a natural timbre, and both the mids and highs had a rightness that made this disc sound as good as it ever has—with a tube sweetness that was addictive. This tube sweetness was not a euphonic coloration, but it included as one of its features a less forward sound

that diminished listening fatigue to a point that made for some very long listening sessions.

When I played orchestral discs such as Sibelius' symphonies with Colin Davis conducting the LSO on RCA, the string sound was luscious in large part because midrange was so accurately portrayed. There was no loss in resolution anywhere in any frequency, and there was an abundance of what I like to call "dynamic distance" between sounds—that is, the separation of two or more instruments playing simultaneously but at different volumes.

I could kick out the jams, too, playing "Wasted Years '99" from Iron Maiden's *Best of the B-Sides*, which was included in the Iron Maiden box set (packaged in a metal casket, by the way). There was plenty of power displayed in the crunching guitars and thunderous rhythm section. The non-pumped-up midbass shook the air, which says a lot for the superb speakers, at least from 40Hz on up.

When I came back to earth, I played the Kronos Quartet's album *Pieces of Africa*, and reveled in the sound of the individual strings and percussion instruments clearly portrayed in the space of the proportionally scaled soundstage. I'm not going to say that the instruments sounded indistinguishable from the real thing—that's ridiculous—but it sure was impressive how lifelike this CD sounded in this relatively modest system. The PrimaLunas and the Dynaudios were a perfect match.

LISTENING—SYSTEM TWO

This system is in my main listening room and consists of analog (Basis/Tri-planar/Lyra turntable setup and an NAD FM tuner) and digital (Arcam and Oppo) front ends, a tube preamp (Balance Audio Technologies), and Sound Lab Dynastat hybrid electrostatic speakers, sometimes augmented by a Velodyne sub. If you care, the interconnects are either MIT or Virtual Dynamics, the speaker cable MIT, power cables Virtual Dynamics and MIT, and all the equipment is plugged into either PS Audio Power Plants or a Chang Lightspeed conditioner. Then these are plugged into Virtual Dynamics wall receptacles with two

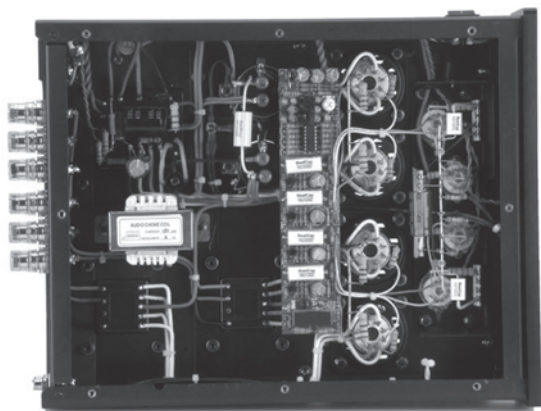


PHOTO 2: Inside the ProLogue amp.

dedicated 15A lines. Most of the equipment rests on an Arcici Suspense equipment rack, and the room is treated with Echo Busters acoustical panels.

When I first had the amps in this system, I was careful. I didn't want to judge the amps too harshly with complex material, so along with some other small combo recordings, I played an LP of Julliard String Quartet's version of Bartok's *String Quartet No. 6*. The amps sounded good, but they had a more burnished, laid-back sound than I was used to. But they were reasonably neutral sounding, a little rolled off in the highs (which as a benefit reduced the background noise on the old record), and a little less defined in the midrange and mid-bass than absolute, but the overall sound was very good.

As far as the decrease in treble energy, nobody is going to describe the Sound Lab speakers I use as bright sounding; some might even say they are a little rolled off. I disagree. I find them to be extremely

transparent in the treble region, but I've used them as my reference for years, so I'm probably used to them.

Nevertheless, when I played the SACD layer of Stokowski's *Rhapsodies* album, a Living Stereo re-issued by BMG, the sound of the solo instruments on an excerpt from Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde* sounded rather lifelike—especially the English horn—and I could clearly sense the ambience of NYC's Manhattan Center. The amps were able to sort out more complex fare—even when I threw on some convoluted rock (or whatever you want to call it) such as Frank Zappa's *Weasels Ripped My Flesh*. The amps kept their composure (even when the musicians did not) while playing this thorny music.

But, even with all their positive traits, I wasn't totally blown away. They were just too rolled off in the highs for my taste, and the midrange was a tad too recessed. I could only chalk that up to a combination of the speaker's relatively soft highs (although, again, I'm prepared to debate

that fact), perhaps their demand for high power, and their challenging impedance characteristics.

TUBE SWITCH

When speaking to the US distributor of the PrimaLuna, Upscale Audio's Kevin Deal, I think he sensed my lack of enthusiasm for the combination of the ProLogue Sixes and the Sound Labs. He said he'd send me a set of PrimaLuna KT88 power tubes to try out instead of the stock EL-34s. They arrived about five days later, and I installed them forthwith.

The improvement in the sound of the amps was extraordinary. The midrange reached a more natural level and was much more defined, and the highs were restored to a point where their extension nearly rivaled a solid-state amp, yet instruments within both frequencies were rendered with what I can only describe as tube sweetness. It was a very lifelike sound, which included excellent separa-

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tion of individual instruments and groups of instruments. There was ample power in the bass, and the overall sound of the amps was extremely inviting.

I played a new favorite of mine—Nine Inch Nails' *Year Zero* CD. The album came across as aggressive and relentless, which was as it should be. Turned up nice and loud, the bass shook the walls. Synths and the hammering percussion sounds were upfront and distinct, yet incorporated into the dense mix to form the intense wall of sound. Wonderful stuff.

The sometimes raucous CD of Prokofiev's complete soundtrack of *Alexander Nevsky* with Uri Temirkanov conducting the St. Petersburg PO was superb. Like the NIN, this is a dense recording (*Romeo and Juliet*, it ain't), yet the Prologue Sixes had no problem sorting out the orchestra, chorus, and soloists. But in contrast to the NIN the participants and the space were real, and it was like I had a tenth row seat during the recording session. The highs were sweet and credible and the mids were well sorted out in the very intricate, large soundstage.

I loaded the Zappa disc again, and was reminded that the recording was a bit bright. But despite this, it was almost as though I was listening to a live mike feed in the studio rather than a CD. The drums, in particular, were outstanding, in part because the transient response was surprisingly good; there was a snap to the sound that I wasn't expecting from a tube amp.

I also spun the best pressing I have of Jimi Hendrix's *Axis Bold as Love* LP, a mono pressing reissued by Classic Records (vinyl, tubes, mono—please help me). This version, of course, disposes of the psychedelic hard left-right panning and presents the album in a much more listenable arrangement. I was able to follow and dissect all the overdubbed guitar and effects. But especially good was "Little Wing," which wasn't laden with overdubs and let me hear all that engineer Eddie Kramer dialed into the mix, particularly the goose-bump-raising flanged guitar. I admit that the recording quality isn't the greatest, and the PrimaLunas did not fail to disclose that fact.

Because I was stuck in the 1960s for much of my listening of late, I played "India"—the first cut on Coltrane's *Impressions* album on a Japanese Impulse pressing, recorded



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C'mon...You know you want to!

at the Village Vanguard in 1961. The track takes up most of side one (John Coltrane and Eric Dolphy together—it doesn't get much better than this).

Even though the highs were a smidge softer than I'm used to, they were very revealing, and there was lots of air around the horns. The low end and mid-bass were also fine; the dual basses of Reggie Workman and Jimmy Garrison weren't too meshed together, so it was possible to identify each instrument. The recording quality is very good; I just wish McCoy Tyner's piano wasn't mixed so low. The vinyl is silent, with the only background noise being the tape hiss which the PrimaLunas made clearly evident. (Depending on how you look at it this was or was not a good thing.)

As I continued to live with the amps, I realized there wasn't any type of music that could trip them up, and the more I used them, the more I appreciated their sound. CD after CD, record after record, the midrange had an impressive ability to separate out all the instruments in any mix, and both the mids and the highs exhibited the tube magic that I've come to expect from a great valve amp. This "tube magic" wasn't the old-school-type of tube sound—rolled off in the bass and highs, and their only strength the midrange—it was more that instruments had that dynamic distance I mentioned when using them in the smaller system, combined with less in-your-face forwardness than the majority of affordable solid-state amps.

I was skeptical; I've had other tube amps paired with these speakers before, all with less power than the PrimaLunas and with mixed results. But still, even with 70W per channel, I didn't think the Sixes would have enough power to drive a pair of these rather large electrostatic/dynamic speakers. I was wrong.

I needed to turn up the volume on the preamp higher than I did with a 250W per channel solid-state power amp, but this did not in any way increase the background noise. I had no trouble reaching the volume limits of the speakers, which was quite loud—loud enough for me to back off a little to prevent possible hearing damage. What I can't explain is why I

didn't *need* to turn up the volume so loud. I could listen to music at lower dBs with the Sixes than I was accustomed to, and still consider it to be an acceptable level.

CONCLUSION

I think many audiophiles will like the fact that simply swapping tubes can have such a dramatic effect on the sound; I could only imagine what a field day a tube roller would have swapping different brands and vintage. Others will not want to mess with such stuff, and I guess they'll just have to stick with the stock tubes or use a solid-state amp. I can appreciate both worlds. But I must admit that after replacing the KT88s with the stock EL-34 tubes and bringing the amps downstairs again to use with smaller speakers, it was a better match. They spent a lot of time in that system, and I could live with these amps forever.

Ultimately, I preferred the control and power of the solid-state muscle amp in the big system; I think that's a matter of taste more than which one was "better." There is a chance that you might prefer the PrimaLunas with your large electrostatic speakers, even with the warmer-sounding stock EL-34s installed. I preferred the tubed PrimaLunas by a wide margin in the smaller system.

But wait—if you have the money, the next step up is the PrimaLuna ProLogue *Seven* mono amps that come standard with KT88s and upgraded internal parts, also at 70W per channel, for \$3149. Loading up a pair of ProLogue Sixes with PrimaLuna KT88 tubes will cost you about \$280, so the price comes within shouting distance of the ProLogue Sevens. I'm not totally sure, but it seems that the Sevens might be the more sensible choice when used with large speakers.

Still, the majority of customers will use them with more efficient speakers, and to them I give the PrimaLuna ProLogue Sixes my highest recommendation. From my evaluations, using them with large speakers is not out of the question, and quite sensible if you have a hankering for tubes and don't want to take out a second mortgage to do so. I'm not going to pretend that \$2600 is pocket change, but the PrimaLuna ProLogue

Six monoblocks are worth every penny.

Manufacturer's response:

All of us associated with PrimaLuna wish to graciously thank Tom Lyle and *audioXpress* for the thorough and thoughtful review of the ProLogue Six Monoblock Power Amplifiers. When Tom writes that the amps "sounded magnificent," that "... there wasn't any type of music that could trip them up," and that his experience was "... like I had a tenth row seat during the recording session," we all can only smile because in a nutshell, he articulates exactly what we're all about.

We're especially pleased that Tom spent the time and effort to evaluate the amps in two systems. It comes as no surprise to us that the ProLogue Sixes performed magnificently in both.

We'd like to highlight one of those evaluations—his experience with the Dynastat electrostatic speakers—because it illustrates a wonderful point. Tom states that initially, he was not particularly thrilled with the EL34-based monoblocks pushing the Dynastats—the highs were "a little too rolled off" and the mid "a tad too recessed." He speculated that perhaps it was the speaker's demand for high power or maybe their challenging impedance characteristics. We suggested switching tubes and shipped him a set of stock PrimaLuna KT88s. And night turned to day. Tom writes that the improvement in sound "was extraordinary" and then spent the next 10 paragraphs raving about the amps' characteristics.

The point to be taken from this is that you never know what kind of speakers you may wind up with. All PrimaLuna products can be tweaked—nudged, if you will, in a particular direction and that gentle nudge can be exactly what turns a mundane experience into an extraordinary one.

We sincerely appreciate Tom's willingness to recommend these monoblocks for use with power-hungry speakers like the Dynastats; I have yet to find a speaker the ProLogue Sixes can't drive. I've paired it beautifully with my Sonus faber Guarneris and have heard raves from people who use it to drive difficult loads such as Martin Logan Vantage (impedance—4Ω, 1 at 20kHz).

Thanks again for the glowing evaluation. When a reviewer is moved from non-plussed to ecstatic by simply switching tubes, we know we've created something special.

Kevin Deal
PrimaLuna, USA

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