

STILL BITCHIN' AFTER ALL THESE YEARS

# The PrimaLuna ProLogue One

By Jeff Dorgay

**I**T IS WELL-KNOWN THAT I'M A BIG FAN OF PRIMALUNA. They are one of the few HiFi companies that have done Chinese manufacturing right, without sacrificing quality to meet a price point. I have a warm fuzzy spot in particular for the ProLogue One because it launched my career as an audio reviewer.

About seven years ago, when I was about to write my first review for *The Absolute Sound* involving an integrated amplifier from NAD, I received a call from Robert Harley that the NAD review was being shelved because the company wasn't comfortable with the "new guy" writing about their amplifier. But he did have a tube amplifier from a new company called PrimaLuna, and he would give me my first shot at that. Honestly, I didn't really want to review the NAD anyway, hoping my first review for TAS would be a little more edgy. If I had only known...

For those of you that didn't read my original review in TAS, back in their December 2004 issue, I summed it up by saying, "How does it sound, it sounds bitchin'." Indeed, the ProLogue was a great little integrated amplifier, and for \$1,095 with a full compliment of EL-34 output tubes. Seven years later, the price has gone up somewhat, with the ProLogue One now having an MSRP of \$1,595. Considering that a gallon of gas has gone from \$1.39 a gallon to \$3.25 in my neighborhood, this amplifier is still a bargain for what it offers.

## FEATURE

### Built like a tank

Removing the bottom plate of the ProLogue reveals point-to-point wiring, meticulously done, much like the legendary Marantz or McIntosh tube amplifiers. PrimaLuna has kept a tight reign on its factory, and it's paid off in almost zero field failures. I purchased that original ProLogue One back in the fall of 2003, and while it's moved on to a former staff member's house, it's been playing music non-stop. It's also worth mentioning that the original set of tubes are working fine, so if you are curious about tube life, I think it's safe to say after seven years that the PrimaLuna amplifiers are easy on tubes.

The rest of the amplifier is equally well-built, with a thick chassis that features a quarter-inch front faceplate and a metal chassis that is coated with a deep-blue metallic finish (almost, but not quite black) that is polished to a high gloss. It is also available with a silver face plate should all-black not be your cup of tea. Separate speaker terminals are offered for 4- and 8-ohm speakers, and regardless of what your speakers have as a rated impedance, I would suggest experimenting with both taps. Listen for the combination that has the most open presentation and plays the loudest with ease; that's when you'll know you have it right.

Simplicity is the essence of the ProLogue One, with a volume control on the left and a four-position input selector on the right. The large toggle power switch is just on the left face of the chassis. While this amplifier is very compact, taking up only an 11-inch wide space on your equipment rack (15 inches deep and 7.5 inches high), it is hefty, weighing almost 40 pounds. PrimaLuna didn't scrimp on the transformers, so the ProLogue One feels like a vintage tube amplifier as well.

The ProLogue One ships with a cover for the vacuum tubes, but unless you have small children or pets, I highly suggest leaving it off so you can bask in the glow of the tubes when listening.

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### Easy to integrate into any system

On the rear panel of the ProLogue One, there are four sets of high-level inputs that are all identical electrically, though you can purchase an optional MM phono stage for \$199. Only basic soldering skills are required, so you should be able to install one in about half an hour. For those with a modest analog front end, this is definitely a great option, easily the equivalent of outboard phono stages I've heard in the \$400 range *and* there is no need for an extra pair of interconnects or a power cord.

Thanks to the PrimaLuna's *Adaptive Auto Bias* system, this amplifier does not require any adjustments or fiddling to enjoy tube sound. Most amplifiers require you to adjust a group of controls, or worse yet, adjust controls and use a multimeter to adjust bias. If not done correctly, too much bias voltage will eat up the tubes prematurely; not enough will flatten out the sound of the amplifier and increase distortion.

The autobias system not only allows you the comfort of not worrying about this aspect of operation, it frees you from having to buy power tubes as a matched pair or matched quad, saving a few bucks should the day come that you do need to retube the ProLogue One. An added benefit of autobias is that it also allows the use of different output tubes. While most of you will probably be more than happy with the stock EL-34 tubes, you can experiment with 6550/KT88's, 6L6 tubes as well as a few others.

For those not familiar with the "tube rolling" hobby: different tubes have different tonal qualities. Guitar players have been rolling tubes for years to get exactly the sound they want. You can do this to some extent in the ProLogue One. Briefly, the EL-34 tube is known for a lush midrange, while the 6550/KT88 tubes are more extended at the upper and lower end of the frequency range, sounding slightly more "modern." *(continued)*

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The 6L6 offers an even warmer tonal perspective, reminiscent of the older McIntosh tube amplifiers that use this tube, albeit with a few less watts per channel.

Swapping the output tubes in your ProLogue One will either allow you to fine tune your system's sound to perfection or drive you to madness. Investigate at your own risk! After coming full circle, I've ended up preferring the sound of the stock EL-34's more often than not, and it's much easier. But wasn't there a set of vintage EL-34 Bugle Boy's out there on Audiogon. Hmm...

#### Tonal quality

Having used a number of EL-34 style amplifiers over the years from Dynaco, Marantz, Conrad Johnson and others, the ProLogue One still remains one of my favorite medium-powered tube amplifiers, and I've had the opportunities to compare it to quite a few. While it doesn't have quite the exquisite tonality of my Marantz 8B, it is head and shoulders above the Dynaco stuff, even those heavily modified and upgraded.

In the world of digital imaging and magazine production, when trying to achieve the proper tonal quality and color balance of images for reproduction, there is a saying that any Photoshop jockey or press operator knows – "pleasing color." Not perfectly exact color, usually slightly on the warm side, but a reproduction that almost everyone will find agreeable. Much like music, most people like their color just slightly on the warm side rather than cool, it makes everyone look healthier.

The ProLogue One offers the same thing in regards to its sound. It's not

syrupy and lush like a Dynaco Stereo 70 or perhaps a vintage Scott or Fisher, but it's not as refined and neutral as, say, a piece of ARC Ref gear. For most of you just getting into the audiophile world, it's going to take you a long way because most of your music is going to sound great played through the ProLogue One; that splash of warmth and body will go a long way when paired up with a modest CD player or analog front end.

#### Plenty of power for most speakers

While you can't move mountains with 35 watts per channel, if your speakers have a sensitivity of at least about 88dB/1watt, you might be pleasantly surprised at just how well you can get by with this kind of power.

Most of this review was conducted with Verity Audio's newest floor-stander, The Finn. It has a sensitivity rating of 91dB/1watt and allowed the ProLogue One to play incredibly loud without distortion in my somewhat small (11 x 17 foot) living room. A few other big favorites with the ProLogue One have been the B&W 805S and the new 805D, the Harbeth Compact 7 and the Penaudio Rebel 3, to name a few.

The ProLogue One doesn't have the rock-solid grip of my reference solid-state amplifiers, but it does a better job controlling the woofer cone than any of my vintage tube amplifiers. The bass provided goes deep as well. If you've been living with moderately priced solid-state amplification for any length of time, the ProLogue One will probably seduce you straight away, leaving you to wonder how music can sound this good at this price point, and that's the Prima Luna magic.



#### It's still bitchin'

I've had the privilege of reviewing a lot of the world's best amplifiers during the past seven years, and the ProLogue One is still the one I always suggest to my friends that want to put together a modestly priced yet highly musical audio system. It remains one of the most musically fun components produced, and it now has the track record to back it up.

Grab your favorite pair of speakers, add a CD player (or perhaps a new Squeezebox Touch) and you should have great sound for about \$3,000 - \$4,000, less if you grab a few used bits. But don't expect to find a ProLogue One for sale used. Most people keep them forever.

Because of its stellar reputation and high performance for the dollar, we award the Prima Luna ProLogue One one of our Exceptional Value Awards for 2010. I can't recommend it highly enough. ●

**Ed. Note:** Upon completion of this review, Herman van den Dungen told me that when the present stock of ProLogue One and Two amplifiers (the ProLogue One with upgraded bits and KT88 tubes) are gone, they will be replaced by the new PrimaLuna ProLogue Classic, which features the upgraded parts of the Two, a newly designed adaptive bias board and some other goodies. If you just want the basics, I'd suggest grabbing a ProLogue One while they are still available.

**The PrimaLuna ProLogue One  
MSRP: \$1,599**

[www.upscaleaudio.com/  
ProLogue-Series\\_c\\_96.html](http://www.upscaleaudio.com/ProLogue-Series_c_96.html)