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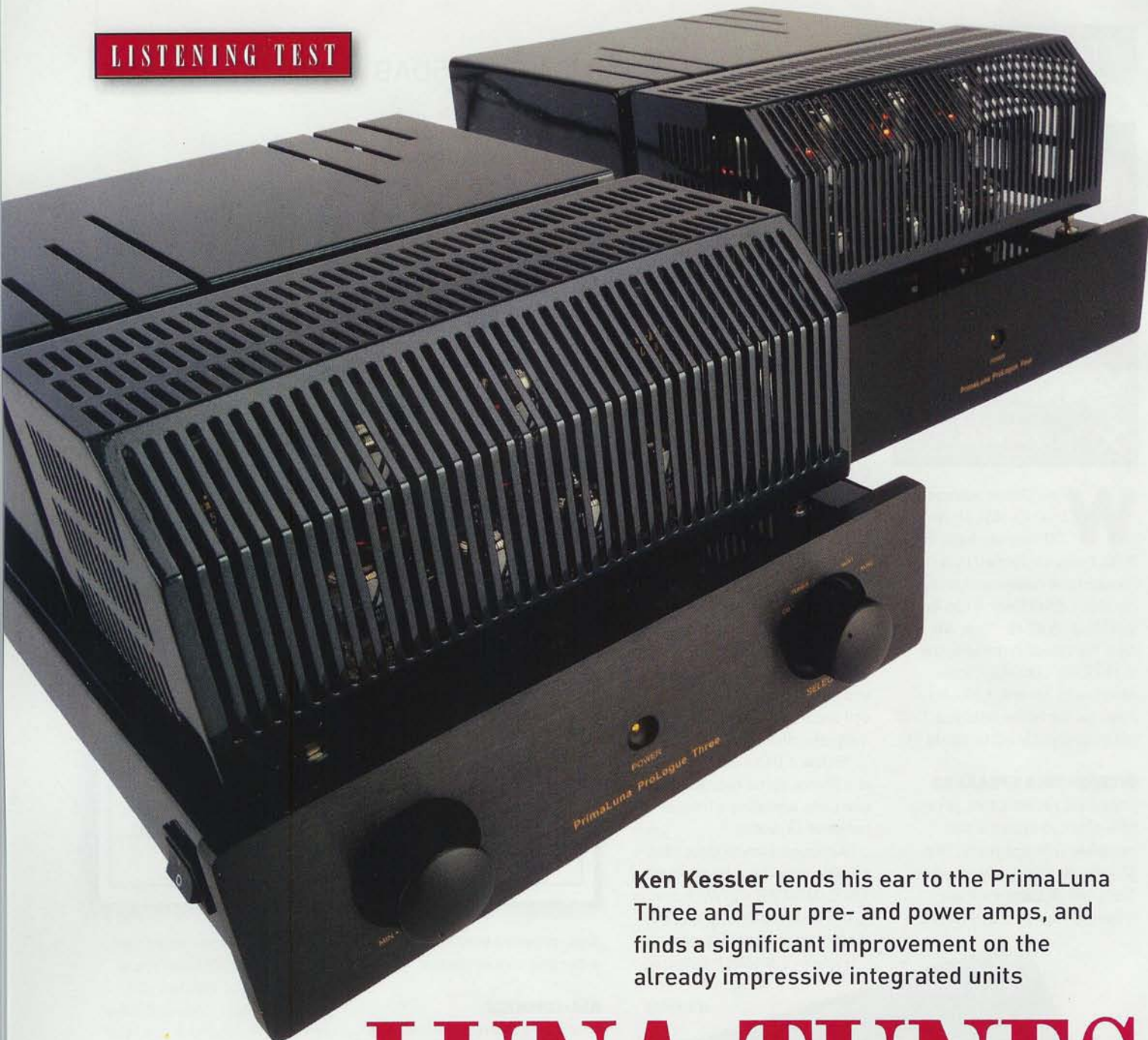


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Ken Kessler lends his ear to the PrimaLuna Three and Four pre- and power amps, and finds a significant improvement on the already impressive integrated units

LUNA TUNES

DETAILS



PrimaLuna ProLogue 3 & 4



£1099/£799



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Great valve sound at a great low price



Home audition with speakers recommended

Sneaking admiration is something I'm more than willing to offer the wily Herman van den Dungen. The crafty old dog has finessed the PrimaLuna ProLogue line into a comprehensive seven-model range using just one main circuit and the same 11.5 x 7.75 x 15in (whd) chassis.

He's achieved this by offering the ProLogue One integrated amplifier with KT88 in place of the EL34s to create the ProLogue Two. He then spun off a stand-alone pre-amp, the

ProLogue Three, while creating no fewer than four separate power amps: two stereo models and two monoblocks that differ only in the choice of EL34s or KT88s tubes.

Pistol Music – a division of Absolute Sounds – supplied the line-level version of the Three and the less-expensive of the two stereo power amps, the ProLogue Four (the one with EL34s). They cost £1099 and £799 respectively. I use the ProLogue Two integrated as my entry-level yardstick and have

total faith in it, but I wasn't quite prepared for the leap in performance that was evinced by the separate units.

CLASSIC AMPS

PrimaLuna's debut integrated amps revived the decades' old confrontation between the EL34 and KT88 valves (see *Hi-Fi News*, June 2004 and March 2005). Readers with experience of classic amps able to use either tube, or 6550s, for that matter, will have already formed their opinions of the two, and settled

on general preferences of one over the other. To spare you searching for the back issues, let's recap on the primary differences in their power amp sections due to valve choice, which will also apply to the ProLogues Four and Five. I wrote that, '...it's about the valves' actual sonic character and even the uninterested would immediately note that EL34s are slightly warmer, more lush, while KT88s are more robust and commanding, and certainly more 'modern-sounding' in the lower registers. These two amplifiers do not alter that relationship, and if you already have leanings toward either tube type, then you need read no further.'

So, although that inspires you to choose between EL34s

EL34s absolutely thrashes the KT88-equipped Prologue Two integrated amp, including in the areas you'd expect to attribute superiority of KT88 over an EL34. So there's more to separating the PrimaLuna integrations into their constituent parts than meets the eye/ear: it's not just what serves as the output valves, nor the fact that separate power amps and pre-amps don't have to share power supplies. In this case, it's due in no small measure to the Prologue Three being something more than merely the pre-amp section of either integrated amp: PrimaLuna has upgraded the pre-amp extensively.

Most obviously, PrimaLuna upped the ante by adding a brace of 5AR4s for full valve

'The Prologue Four with EL34s valves absolutely thrashes the KT88-equipped Prologue Two'

and KT88s not on the obvious basis of wattage but according to actual sound, you will also know that – with the PrimaLunas – the KT88's behaviour is not intrinsically superior to the lower-powered, lower-priced EL34. You really do have to audition the Four and Five with the loudspeakers you'd use at home. And as the KT88-equipped Five costs £300 more just for the valve change, you could find yourself saving a chunk of money. So choose with care, not just on assumptions.

To complicate matters – or make them simpler, depending on your faith in my observations – the Prologue Four with

rectification; the rest of the valve complements for both the pre-amp and the driver section of the power amps remain pairs of 12AU7s and 12AX7s.

TRUE DUAL MONO

Additionally, they made the Three a true dual mono design, with twin toroidal transformers, and it boasts choke regulation. Add that to familiar PrimaLuna practice including designer components like Solen capacitors and ALPS Blue Velvet potentiometers, point-to-point wiring, superb connectors (including two sets of outputs for bi-amping or adding a sub) and you have a seriously well-

endowed pre-amplifier by any standards.

But then we come to one other element of the integrated versus separates argument. While devotees of the former accept that

LEFT: Selector knob indicates line-level inputs, though optional phono board is available at £119 extra



DETAILS



ABOVE: The Prologue 3 is a fully dual-mono line pre-amplifier boasting twin toroidal transformers and choke regulation under the lid. It offers four line inputs, one tape output and twin stereo RCA outputs to enable biamping or the connection of a subwoofer. Meanwhile, point-to-point wiring, Solen capacitors and ALPS Blue Velvet potentiometers make the pre-amp a seriously well-endowed design



ABOVE: According to the company, the Prologue 4 stereo power amplifier is a 35W-per-channel design; inputs are RCA single-ended and there is a choice of both 4 and 8 ohm outputs. Behind that protective safety cage can be found four EL-34 valves, a set of 12AX7s, plus twin 12AU7s.

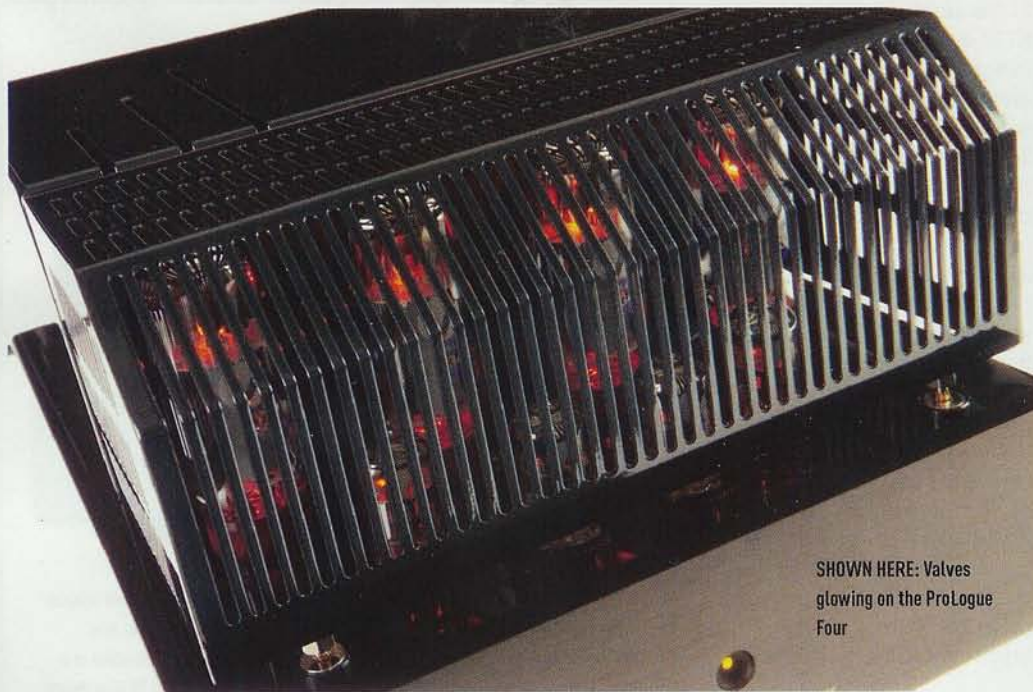
dedicated power supplies for the pre-amp and the power amp are bound to provide greater performance for the separates – dynamics, power, lower noise floor and more – they do point to something inescapably in favour of the integrated amp: in a single-chassis integrated, the pre-amp and power amp are both perfectly matched, and they talk to each other without a set of external cables tampering with the signal path.

Now I'm not interested in weighing the two, for I

REVIEW SYSTEM

- Sources – Musical Fidelity kW25, Quad 99CDP II and Marantz CD12/DA12 CD players
- Amps – McIntosh C2200 pre-amp, McIntosh MC2102 power amp, Rotel RB-1092 power amp
- Speakers – Quad ESL 57, Rogers LS3/5a speakers, PMC DB1+ speakers, Sonus Faber Guarneri speakers, Wilson PUPPY System 7 speakers
- Cables – Yter, Acrolink and Kimber interconnects; Yter speaker cables





SHOWN HERE: Valves glowing on the ProLogue Four

ALSO CONSIDER

- AudioValve Assistant (£1500): Integrated amp, but incredible sound and value
- Jadis Orchestra (£1599): Also integrated, from famous stable
- Unison Research S6 (£1850): Gorgeous sound AND Italian woodwork!

have always preferred the separates route just for the added headroom and dynamic behaviour provided by two power supplies over a shared one. Whatever the potential for diminished performance when set against an integrated, I used the Yter interconnects between the Three and the Four, and the units behaved as quietly and precisely as the integrated Two.

EXTENDED BASS

But what we're looking for is £700's worth of performance above that of the Two. And, oh, do you get it. Not only does the combination seem perceptibly louder, with more robust and extended bass, it also seems to produce a soundstage bigger in every dimension. This isn't a subtle evolution: it's massive.

Whether with my current fave big band release, Kenny Ellis' *Hanukkah Swings!*, or the majestic swelling of Mendelssohn's 'The Hebrides',

the PrimaLuna combo was able to track the dynamic swings without altering scale, suffering clipping or inducing any compression. It even managed this with the rather hungry Sonus Faber Guarneris, but the comfort zone for this combination is something slightly easier to drive. To nail down the sound of the two products, I also used the Three with the Rotel RB-1092

'The PrimaLuna combo was able to track the dynamic swings without suffering clipping or compression'

and McIntosh MC2102 power amps, while I drove the Four with the McIntosh C2200 and Quad 99CDP II. No mismatches occurred, and I was able to confirm that there's an element of universality to the PrimaLunas that will let you buy either or both with confidence. But it was in tandem where they worked a special magic, the kind of performance that lifts them above the competition.

In addition to the aforementioned sense of scale and, yes, grandeur, the two pieces together produce a silky sound that's emphatically tubey without lapsing into the saccharine, chocolate box goininess of SETs, or of old amps

in need of an overhaul. The ProLogues are seriously quick, punchy, but absolutely non-aggressive and able to caress even the most delicate sounds with complete finesse. While vocals were simply authentic enough to convince the listener of their 'reality', it was the reproduction of the harmonics of acoustic instruments that were positively breathtaking. I suspect that sales staff will quickly learn

to demonstrate this pairing with unamplified guitar and piano.

But for me, it's always the vocals, and – having just heard Ray Davies live – it was to his EP *Thanksgiving Day* that I returned. There's a distinct,

WE LISTENED TO

Claudio Abbado/London Symphony Orchestra: *Mendelssohn Overtures* (Deutsche Grammophon 423 104-20)

Candido & Graciela: *Inolvidable* (Chesky JD249)

Ray Davies: *Thanksgiving Day* (V2 Music 63881-27286-2)

Kenny Ellis: *Hanukkah Swings!* (Favored Nations FNC7040-2)

Neil Diamond: *In My Lifetime* (Columbia 504501-2)

? & the Mysterians: *The Best of* (ABKCO/Cameo-Parkway 18771-92322)

unique nasality to ol' Ray's voice, and an expressiveness that's part wistfulness, part cynicism, that the ProLogues captured to perfection. Then again, they managed the textures of Neil Diamond – tracking the maturing of his voice over three decades – and breezed through the complex Latino vocal rhythms of Candido & Graciela.

Was I expecting anything less? Well, yes, but only because a sub-£2000 price tag does not make the sort of promises that would have me yanking the boxes out of the deliveryman's hands. So maybe I owe Herman van den Dungen something more than sneaking admiration. After all, PrimaLuna's successes are becoming something of a habit. ■

THE REPORT

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

PrimaLuna has done it again, this time raising the bar for sub-£2000 all-valve pre/power combos the way it took over sub-£1000 integrations. Indeed, its main rivals by price are all integrated, not separates; you simply can't escape the cost benefits of Chinese manufacture.

So – unfair advantage or not – there's reason to rejoice if you're after genuine valve sound without the worry of maintaining vintage gear. As for the EL34-vs-KT88 contretemps, well, only your ears and your loudspeakers can drive you to prise another £300 from your wallet. Me? I'd spend that extra money on the optional phono board (£119) and some EAT Cool Dampers at £15 each.