



The PrimaLuna DiaLogue Sevens

CAN WE TALK?

By Hood McTiernan

haven't had a tube amp in my system for quite a while, and I was looking forward to revisiting bottle heaven with the arrival of the PrimaLuna DiaLogue Seven monoblocks. My last pair of tube monos were Audio Research VTM-120s, which have been sorely missed. And while I haven't ever lusted after a Chinese-made component for my system, I had no qualms regarding expected quality, as PrimaLuna has an excellent reputation of six years.

However, it is a slightly different story with these amplifiers: they are designed in the Netherlands and built in China, with Upscale Audio as the U.S. distributor. And what a design they are. First off, the fit and finish is first rate. The painting on the chassis, the look of the metalwork and the stylish cages make for an interesting presentation indeed. Throw in the fact that they have some unusual and innovative features to go along with their more-than-impressive performance, and you have a formula for success from a music lover's perspective.

All the Right Qualities

There's a lot of goodness in the build sheet here. Four modern production copies of the revered Genelex KT88 output tube plus two each of 12AX7s and 12 AU7s adorn the front of each chassis. There are some specially designed wide-band, low-loss output transformers residing at the back of the chassis covered by a steel enclosure. These transformers are good enough to enable the amp to deliver rated output into a 2-ohm load. Add point-to-point wiring, premium Solen caps and fast-recovery diodes, and the value-for-money factor gets better and better.

Using four KT88s to deliver 70 watts makes for an unstressed output stage. I remember years back when I had Quicksilver Monos that extracted 90 watts from a single pair. Did I mention that they weigh a hefty 64 pounds apiece? Now that's heavy metal. *(continued)*



But wait, there's more! These amplifiers feature an innovative Adaptive Autobias (TM) circuit that continually monitors the output tubes and keeps them in peak operating range. No matched quads required here; the amp takes care of itself in that regard. For you tube rollers out there (and you know who you are), this amp allows for just about any output tube to be plugged in and enjoyed. If your favorite output tube flavor runs toward EL-34s, 6550s, 6L6s, or 7581s, you're good to go. This handy circuit will automatically adjust for the new tube's characteristics and automatically set bias. Whether you are new to tubes or a veteran, it doesn't get any easier than this.

Tube Magic and a Few Tweaks

The PrimaLunas are a pleasure to listen to. These amps are the polar opposite of my Jeff Rowland 201s. The 201s manage to extract excellent performance from ice-Power modules while the DiaLogue Sevens rely on ancient technology with some clever modern twists to create their magic. The first thing you'll notice is the lush dimensionality of the midrange, a characteristic of most tube amps. Being a lover of horns in jazz and classical music, I was very taken with their ability to reproduce the roundness and the blat of certain instruments without any annoying glare or blare.

The tweeter on the Diablo Utopias is very revealing, but I could not find anything at all to take issue with at the top end. Cymbals had the requisite splash but they also had beautifully rendered shimmering decay. At the bottom end, the pluck of stand-up bass and the slap and pop of an electric bass were delivered in a more weighty manner than I thought possible on my speakers.

(continued)

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As with the horns, vocals were lush yet detailed and never annoying or in your face. Add to all of these great attributes a huge sound stage and ole Hood was a very happy camper.

You often hear reviewers refer to rhythm and pace when reviewing products but never groove. Well I'm here to attest that these amplifiers find the pocket and hold down the groove in a most seductive manner.

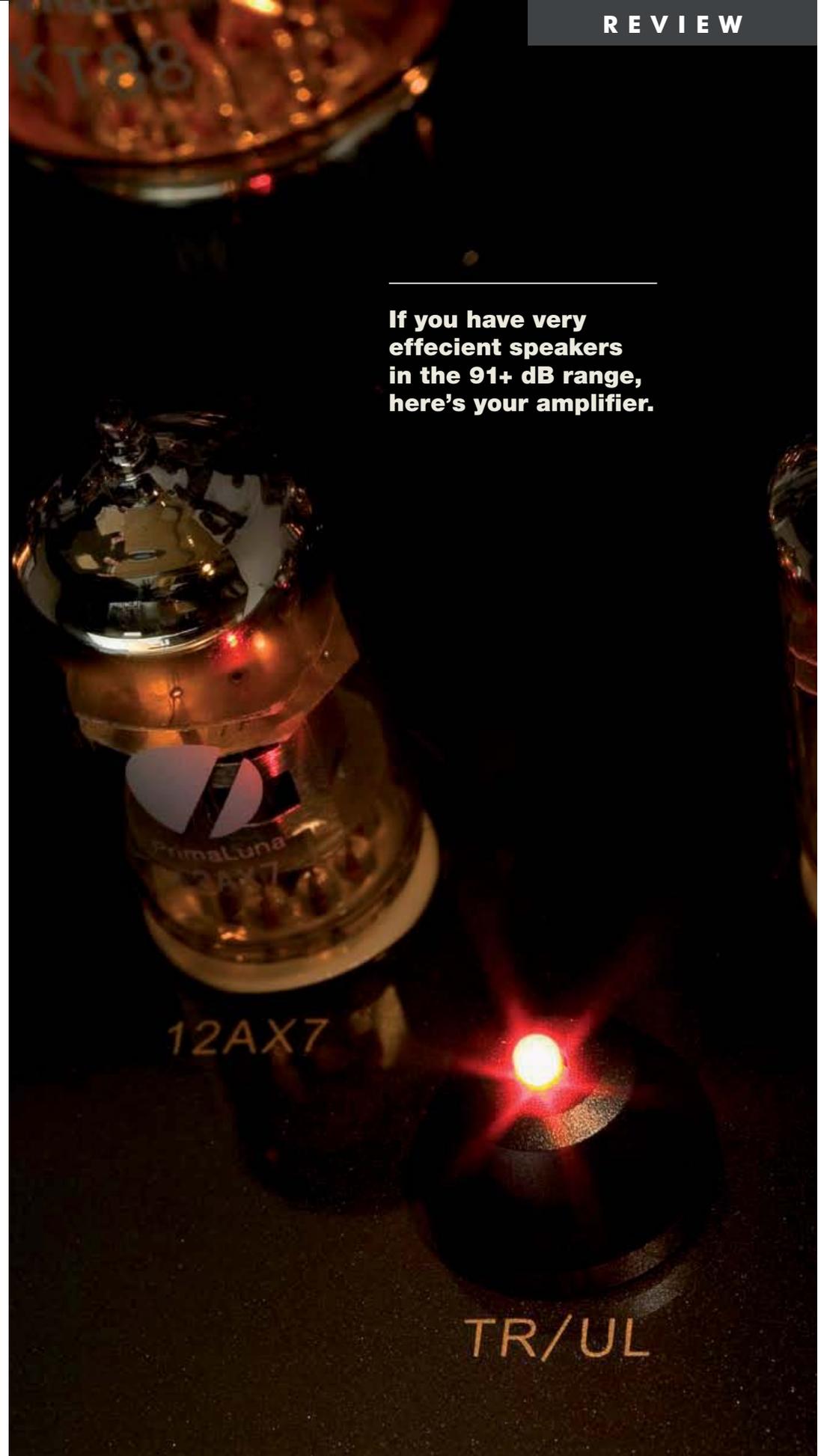
But in spite of all the enjoyment, I knew these amplifiers could provide even more performance. Not being able to leave well enough alone, I started with replacing the stock power chord with a lower-end Shunyata model. Things got marginally better from a noise standpoint and the music was a bit more focused. Stepping up to one of the big dogs in the Shunyata lineup, the Python CX, paid big dividends in the quietness of the background and the ability to see into recordings better with far more bottom-end slam.

The next step was to add a Shunyata Hydra 2 at the back of each amp. Now we're talkin'! That was followed by placing each amplifier on a nice chunk of spiked and damped granite. Finally, I added an HRS damping plate to each of the steel enclosures on the amps. This might sound like a lot of trouble and expense to go through for amps that sound quite excellent on their own, but for the intrepid tweeker, there's more to be had in this dialog, much more. After all of these tweaks, I was totally enamored of what I was hearing from these amplifiers. Then ... there was the one thing left to try.



Exploring Triode Mode

The DiaLogue Seven can operate either in 70-watt Ultralinear mode or 40-watt Triode mode. The user can change modes via the cool little remote supplied with the amplifiers. For the first three weeks of this review, the amps operated solely in the Ultralinear mode. I had assumed that the Triode mode just couldn't deliver the goods in my situation. And mostly, I was right. But my, oh my, pushing that little button was a revelation. As long as I kept the volume at a reasonable level, the pure musical enjoyment delivered by these amplifiers was mighty fine. The sound stage became wider and deeper, transparency increased and from the mid-treble region on up, there was a seductive rightness that was certainly attention grabbing. If you have very efficient speakers in the 91+ dB range, here's your amplifier. Every time I pressed the button, I was reminded of the machine in Woody Allen's *Sleeper* called the Orgasmatron. Step into the machine, press the button and, well, you know. *(continued)*



If you have very efficient speakers in the 91+ dB range, here's your amplifier.



The only tweak left was to experiment with tubes in the input stage. I didn't go there but was sorely tempted. But I do wonder what nos Mullard or Amperex tubes could do in that part of the circuit. Maybe some other time.

Try as I might, I could find little to criticize about the sound of these amplifiers. Are they the most transparent amps ever? No. Do they have a strangle hold on the woofers? No. Blackest background? No. But to be honest, I didn't really care about these minor quibbles because the whole presentation was so enjoyable. During my time with these amplifiers, I found myself asking over and over how PrimaLuna can deliver so much greatness for such a reasonable price. I would guess that savvy design, savvy production techniques, unique circuitry, cost-effective production-site choice and other intelligent decisions yield a compelling product. Time and again,, my better half overheard me asking, "How do they do that"? When prompted, I just explained that these amplifiers had me talking to myself. Very highly recommended.

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Further Listening:

Did someone say tube rolling? Having used various PrimaLuna amplifiers over the years (And my ProLogue 1 runs flawlessly since day one, with only one recent set of fresh tubes after six years), I ran the DiaLogue monos through a few more scenarios, with excellent results.

If you haven't read any of our past reviews on PrimaLuna amplifiers over the years, I'm a big fan of the marque. The build quality is excellent, the failure rate is zero and these amplifiers are easy to customize to your system and/or listening tastes. If you desire the sound of a contemporary tube amplifier, go with the stock KT-88's to get punch and bass extension. If you are willing to sacrifice a few watts for scrumptious midrange, roll in a set of EL-34 tubes. And for those of you that still love the sound of your McIntosh MC-30's and MC-40's, go for broke with a set of 6L6GT's and replace all of the driver tubes with your favorite Mullards, and you'll swear you went back in time.

Versatile Performers

I kept the DiaLogues much longer than the usual week to take photos, so I could thoroughly break them in as well as try them with about 15 different speakers. The DiaLogue Sevens would drive everything I threw at them, from the 84db ACI Sapphire XL's up to the 100db ZU Presence. The Zu's were absolute magic in Triode mode; I probably never used more than about 3 of those 40 watts per channel driving the Zu's.

Thanks to the 2-ohm tap that McT mentioned, you can even drive a pair of MartinLogans with them fairly well. The CLX, Spire and Summit X were no problem at modest levels, without the highs being rolled off as they do with some of my favorite tube amplifiers.

With their high build quality, great sound and versatility, we are happy to give the PrimaLuna DiaLogue Sevens one of our Exceptional Value Awards for 2009. – **Jeff Dorgay**