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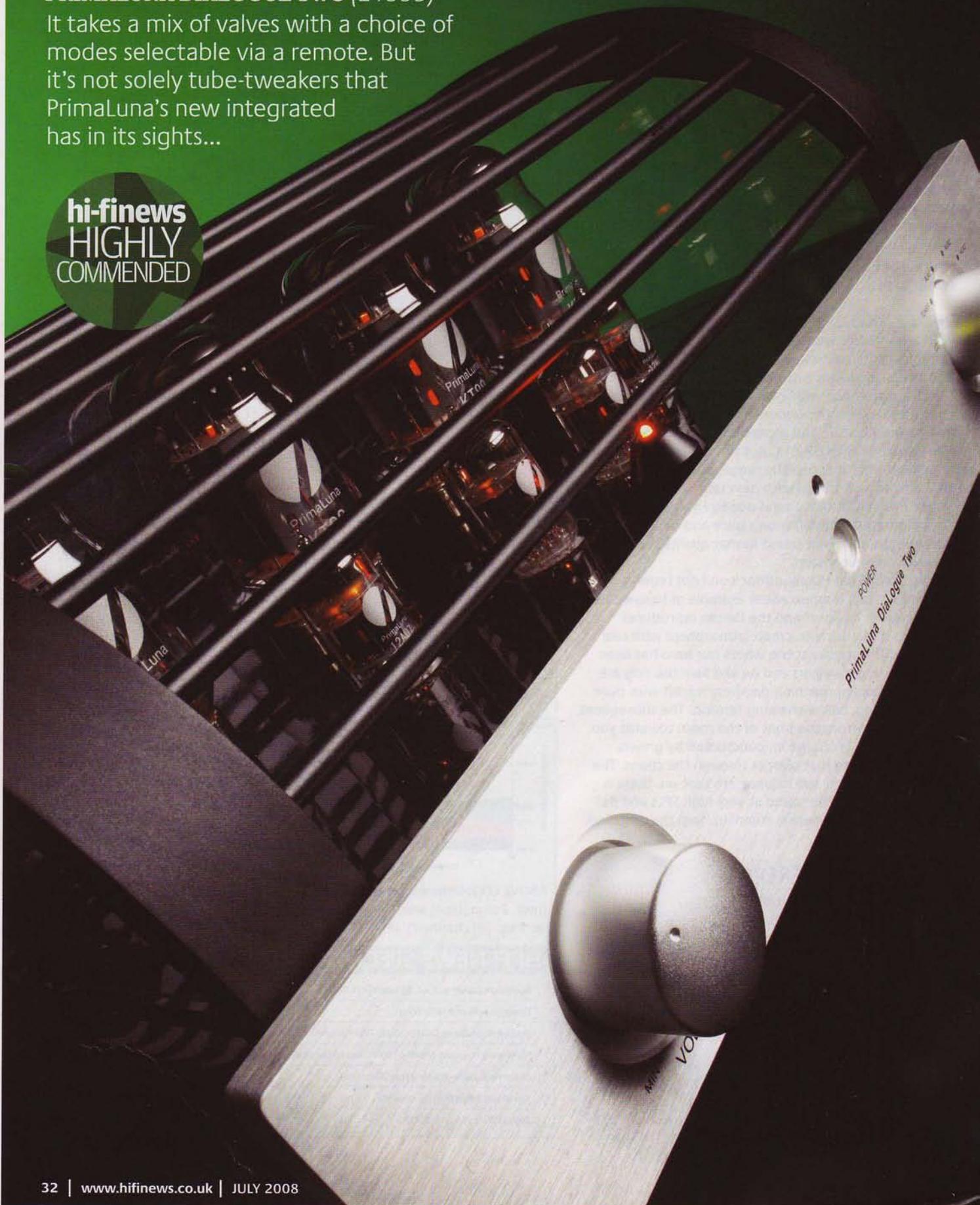


# Prima Mover

**PRIMALUNA DIALOGUE TWO** (£1999)

It takes a mix of valves with a choice of modes selectable via a remote. But it's not solely tube-tweakers that PrimaLuna's new integrated has in its sights...

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HIGHLY  
COMMENDED



Tested by Ken Kessler

**H**aving played with a number of PrimaLuna ProLogue products, I'm safe in saying that each and every one represents astonishing value because 1) they're made in China, but 2) to European standards. They single-handedly established and provided credibility for the lower entry-level price point for rock-solid valve products, and showed that China was ready to compete with the rest of the world in hardware manufacture, if the proper structure was applied. With DiaLogue, PrimaLuna is attacking the next price point, with the same vigour.

That in itself should be enough to make the DiaLogue Two a fascinating prospect for those with up to £2000 to spend on amplification. Provided it could pull off the same coup at £1999 as its predecessors did for under or around a grand, it would be a boon for the middle market. But then Prima Luna had to go and introduce Adaptive AutoBias, which positively encourages you to mess around.

### CAN'T STOP MESSIN'

Not that this is the first amplifier to allow tube changes without manual re-biasing. Additionally, plenty of others have allowed users to swap tube types within a given category; AudioValve's amps even let you mix tube types in the same channel, eg you can run a mix of KT88s, 6550s or EL34s in its bigger power amps.

Be that as it may, PrimaLuna has made valve changing a feature of the DiaLogue Two, with proprietor Herman van den Dungen informing me that I could also use KT66s, KT77s, 6550s and a bunch of others in addition to the KT88s and EL34s supplied for review. Even better, and multiplying the possibilities, is the choice of triode or ultralinear operation (and I use italics to emphasise this) *switchable with the remote control*. So, not only do you get to swap valves, you get to A/B triode vs ultralinear from the listening seat, with



a green/red LED telling you which mode is playing. And the differences are not subtle.

This meant that the DiaLogue Two required four times the listening, as I had to audition both sets of valves, and in both modes. It almost begged four conclusions, because each mode sounded quite distinct from the others. And while experience will lead most of you to anticipate certain traits, eg added warmth in triode mode, choosing among the four possibilities is not that straightforward. Power, by the way, was never an issue with any of the four set-ups.

If there's any consolation should this plethora of choices overwhelm you, the triode vs ultralinear element is less difficult to deal with than one tube against another. The ease with which you can flick from triode to ultralinear – which you will do with much regularity when you discover how each deals with different recordings – makes for a perfect and

ABOVE: Swapping out an EL34 output tube for an alternative valve is easy as the amplifier offers automatic re-biasing; a choice of triode or ultralinear operation can be selected via the remote control handset



### DECIDE WITH YOUR EARS...

Like PrimaLuna, I want to cop-out here, repeating the company's instructions: 'Decide with your ears.' I tried KT88s and EL34s in both triode and ultralinear modes, preferring the KT88s in triode above all because of the warmth and the scale. Yet equally, I found the EL34s in ultralinear mode to be both punchier and more neutral. Devilishly, everything changed when going from Sonus fabers to PMCs to LS3/5As: your speakers will have as much a role in making your choice as any prejudices you may harbour. My only regret is that I didn't have a set of KT77s to hand!

'The PrimaLuna delivered a flood of schmaltz that would render even Mahmoud Ahmadinejad philo-semitic'

instantaneous selection process. But let me also say this: triode vs ultralinear is just as empowering a choice as one valve against another. PrimaLuna really is letting you tune this to your heart's delight.

### MIXING 'N' MATCHING

So let me spare you some of the suspense: although I used this amp with LS3/5As and PMC DB1i speakers, the majority of my listening involved the Sonus faber Cremona Auditor Elipsa. And with that loudspeaker, the KT88s certainly had the edge over the EL34s: greater coherence, command and force. Conversely, I preferred the EL34s when using the LS3/5As, and in ultralinear mode: this choice tightened up the bass, added some mass and left the vocals intact.

With either valve in triode mode through the LS3/5As, the midband grew too warm and almost (dare I say it?) gooey. Which is fine if you think Joss Stone should sound like Elaine Paige. ↪

## AUDIO FILE

Ultralinear/  
triode mode  
integrated valve  
amplifier. Rated  
at 38W/8ohm

Made by:  
PrimaLuna

Supplied by:  
Pistol Audio

Telephone:  
020 8971 3909

Web: [www.absolutesounds.com](http://www.absolutesounds.com)

## AMPLIFIER TEST



ABOVE: On the rear of the amp can be found five line-ins, a tape loop, a home theatre input that bypasses the preamp section, plus 4 and 8ohm speaker taps

Triode-vs-ultralinear challenges were more music-dependent rather than speaker-dependent. With hard rock, louder material, punchy brass, I opted for ultralinear. With fragile material, prominent vocals, acoustic strings, triode was preferred. This was consistent from speaker to speaker and valve to valve. So, please accept for the rest of this assessment that I stayed with the KT88s, flicking between triode and ultralinear as the music required. What needed aural detective work was finding out the intrinsic character of the amp regardless of valve choice or mode. And it genuinely sounds, blatantly, like a more robust yet more sophisticated Prologue. Which is how it should sound.

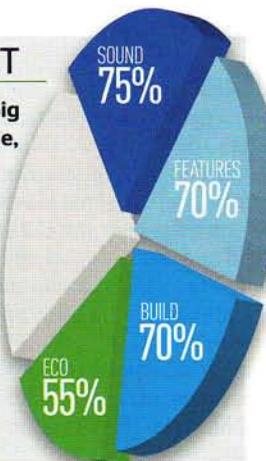
### RICH YET NATURAL

Fed some analogue from a fine US mono LP of *Connie Francis Sings Jewish Favorites*, the PrimaLuna delivered a flood of schmaltz that would render even Ahmadinejad philo-semitic. Francis' vocals always were a stunning balancing act: one track, emotional in the extreme, yet never sailing near the absurd bathos of Piaf, the next so poppy she could make the Spice Girls sound like the Staples Singers. Regardless of tube or setting, the PrimaLuna possesses a rich yet natural midband ideal for vocals of this calibre, and with detail that caresses every nuance. You want to put on some Toyah, just to savour the lisp, or Julie London to hear her breathe.

Better still, and certainly augmented by the KT88, is openness – both its recreation of three-dimensional space and its clarity/transparency. True, this is not the most wide-open of valve amps – it's certainly not as squeaky clean as a GRAAF or an Audio Research – but neither is it smudged. ☺

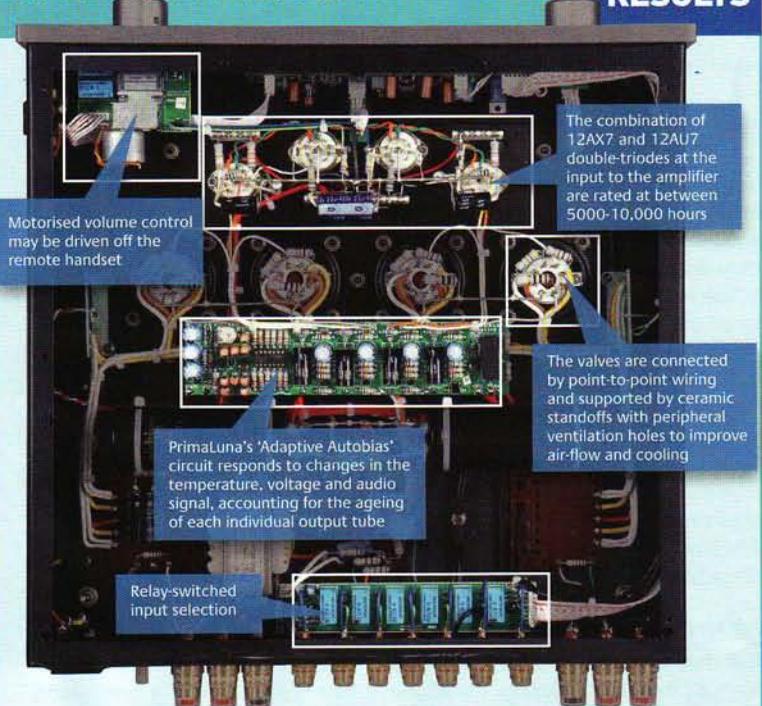
### HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

And now PrimaLuna joins the big boys. The value is still incredible, but performance, build and styling (the world's best valve cage!) take things up a notch. More than that, this amp makes hi-fi fun again, especially if you get a kick out of valve swapping. PrimaLuna for grown-ups, with added refinement, grunt, detail, and transparency. Yummy.



## PRIMALUNA DIALOGUE TWO / £1999

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**LAB**  
RESULTS



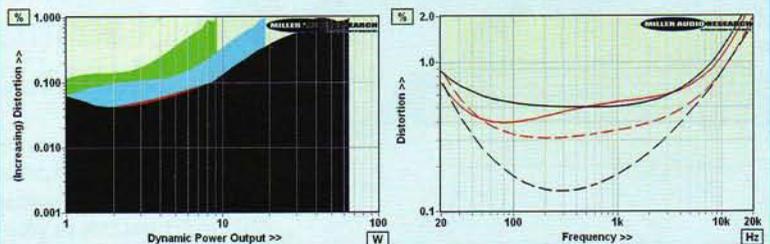
### HI-FI NEWS LAB REPORT

Whatever your choice of output valves, PrimaLuna's rated 38W (ultralinear) and 21W (triode) specification is well met in practice at 50W and 30W (8 or 4ohm taps at <2% THD). There's a slight increase under dynamic conditions to ~65W into 8/4ohm loads in ultralinear mode. The amplifier idles at 155W and draws 270W for 2x40W/8ohm, so it'll not be causing sleepiness nights for any Class D competition!

While the Dialogue is no powerhouse, its performance with different loudspeakers is otherwise governed by the high 4-5ohm output impedance. Sure enough, this is still gratifyingly lower than the 30-odd ohm that belabours older PrimaLuna amplifiers but it's still more than sufficient to influence LF damping in addition to modifying the overall system response in line with the impedance trend of the speakers.

Otherwise, both the choice of operating mode and valve influences the overall S/N ratio and trend of distortion versus frequency [see graph, below right]. The highest 86dB A-wtd S/N ratio is achieved with KT88 valves in triode mode down to 83dB with EL34s in ultralinear mode, all else being equal. The lowest distortion (at 10W/8ohm) is achieved with the EL34s in ultralinear mode at 0.135%/1kHz rising to 0.5%/1kHz with the same EL34s in triode mode. The KT88 valve performance is more consistent between modes [see red traces, below] although all four permutations see an increase to 1.7–2.9% distortion at 20kHz.

Readers may view comparative QC Suite test reports for both EL34/KT88 valve and ultralinear/triode configurations by navigating to [www.hifinews.co.uk](http://www.hifinews.co.uk) and clicking on the red 'Download' button. PM



ABOVE LEFT: Dynamic power output vs. distortion into 8ohm (black trace), 4ohm (red), 2ohm (blue) and 1ohm (green); ABOVE RIGHT: Distortion vs. freq. at 10W/8ohm (EL34 = black/KT88 = red; ultralinear mode = dashed)

### HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Power Output, 8/4ohm (<2% THD, EL34 ultra/triode)	50W/50W   30W/30W
Dynamic Power, 8/4/2/1ohm (EL34 ultralinear)	65W/63W/19W/9W
Output Impedance (20Hz–20kHz)	4.7–4.35ohm
Frequency Response (20Hz–100kHz, 8ohm)	–0.3dB to –5.4dB
Input Sensitivity (for 0dBW/38W)	44mV/269mV
A-wtd S/N ratio (for 0dBW/38W)	82.2dB/98.2dB
Distortion (10W/8ohm, 20Hz–20kHz, EL34 ultra/triode)	0.14–1.79%   0.50–2.9%