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The Beatles LP Remasters: To Buy or Not To Buy and Why

New Gear from PrimaLuna, Audio Research, Dynaudio and More
A Different Approach

PrimaLuna ProLogue Premium CD Player
By Jeff Dongay

Whenever I’m asked to suggest a CD player that’s warm, romantic, and “anti-digital,” I always recommend a player with a vacuum-tube output stage. I nominate the same player TONEAudio contributors Bob Gandlron and Jerold O’Brien use—the PrimaLuna Prologue 8, now labeled the Classic. It takes the harsh, digital sting out of CDs. Sure, some digital players are more accurate and refined. But if you are a hardcore analog nut, many end up sounding thin in comparison. PrimaLuna recently took its vacuum-tube digital disc player a step further with the improved Premium.

For those not familiar with the name, PrimaLuna has been in business for more than a decade and boasts a fantastic reputation for sonics, build quality, and wonderful fusion of old-school and modern aesthetics. Available with satin black or silver faceplates, the new player’s chassis is covered in a deep metallic-blue finish that’s hand-polished to display a mirror finish—a PrimaLuna hallmark.
Setup is also a snap, and at 73 pounds each, the RE F250s are not too difficult to move. As with any tube amplifier, they require adequate ventilation. The REF 250s are fan-cooled and extremely silent in operation. They use the same 20-amp IEC connector as other ARC Reference gear, so keep this in mind if you are thinking of upgrading power cords. ARC claims power usage as 700 watts at 250-watt output, and “maximum.” While you can use both on a 15-amp circuit, listeners pumping up the volume at high levels will be benefit from a 20-amp dedicated circuit for the amplifiers.

Configuration

Along with doubling the power supply from the REF 210 it replaces, the REF 250 utilizes a design very similar to the REF 150, with eight KT120 power tubes per channel (instead of four) being driven by another pair of KT120s and the 6H30 that seems to be universal in current ARC amplifiers. A 6550C is employed as a voltage regulator. In a nod to past ARC designs, a traditional analog meter replaces the fluorescent display. The KT120 tube proves excellent across the range. In addition to the increased power dissipation (which translates into increased power output), the KT120-based ARC amplifiers have more aural ease than earlier amplifiers using the 6550. Depth and air are more abundant, with speakers disappearing in the room more convincingly. And nobody’s going to complain about that.

My only complaint with the Classic? It lacks a digital input. But PrimaLuna addresses this and more with the Premium. To its credit, the company has not simply tacked a vacuum-tube buffer onto the end of a traditional CD player to soften things up. All the gain stages utilize vacuum tubes, and the Premium is the only player we’ve seen that uses a tube for the clock circuit, as well.

Arguments about system synergy and tonal coloration aside, the approach works well, and in much the same way an analog enthusiast would choose a Grado Statement or Koetsu Urushi photo cartridge over a Lyra Titan for Ortofon Winfield. It’s not better or worse, but it’s a specific flavor, and if it’s the one you crave, nothing else will do.

Beginning listening sessions with discs on the harsh side of the spectrum. It takes only a few minutes to see the brilliance of this approach. No, the Premium still can’t make the brightest CD ever made, Stevie Wonder’s In Square Circles, sound like an LP, but everything else on my toxic list becomes considerably more palatable. Tinkly percussion sets in “Thunder,” from Prince’s Diamonds and Pearls, float around the soundstage as they should, with the electronic drums now slightly subdued, and making all the difference in the world. (Continued)
REVIEW

While I won’t define what this instrument produces as a tone control, it is a different set of tonal values, and even on the best CDs, an enjoyable presentation. For those new to TONEAudio, my listening bias favors an overall tonal balance just a touch on the warm side of neutral. So if you possess a system to allow and want to experience the potential of a well-made piece of equipment, you know where I stand.

New Versus Old

Costing $1,000 more than the Classic, the Premium adds a larger, dual mono power supply, upgraded active and passive parts, and a different analog stage featuring four 12AU7 tubes (the original used a pair of 12AX7s and a pair of 12AU7As). The dual 5AR4 rectifiers are retained to excellent effect. One of the biggest improvements arrives via the incorporation of a second Tube Clock, further reducing jitter and increasing low-level resolution.

Berwyn O’Brien’s Classic for a side-by-side comparison proves illuminating. Where the original player sounds more like a Dynaco Stereo 70, i.e., “classic tube sound,” the Premium sounds more like a modern tube amplifier, think BAT or ARC. It still possesses a wonderful and tubey midrange, but also greater extension at the top and bottom end of the frequency range, and stronger inner detail and punchier dynamics.

Brian Eno’s latest work, Lux, illustrates the aforementioned characteristics. Another of his ambient works, reminiscent of Tuesday Afternoon, the composition rolls along gently with bell-like keyboard sounds that ease in and out of consciousness. Where the Classic cuts the decay short, the music lingers longer and fades further out before going black via the Premium. A similar experience manifests on the title track of Jack White’s current Blunderbuss.
One Input Makes All the Difference

When Primaluna introduced its first CD player about three years ago, computers were not the ubiquitous music sources they are today, and the company’s players had a closed architecture. The Premium’s USB Input allows for a computer to be directly plugged in and utilizes an M2Tech HiFace USB/SPDIF converter internally, a touch that tremendously increases the player’s value.

Feeding high-resolution files into the Premium’s USB reveals the DAC’s merits. The bass riffs in Charlie Haden’s The Private Collection instantly disclose the advantage of extra resolution from the HD download versus the excellently recorded CD. Texture abounds, and the player sounds more neutral when playing high-resolution files, with the slight bit of upper-bass warmth fading further into the background.

Comparison listening puts music played from the tray on equal footing with the same 16/44.1 files played via USB input. Still, high-res files via the server gain the edge in clarity and dynamics. All digital files are upsamplied via a Burr Brown SRC4192 24bit/192kHz upsampling circuit and converted to analog via Burr Brown PCM1792 DACs. While some audiophiles condemn upsampling, it works splendidly here. (continued)
**Ticking the Remaining Boxes**

Since it’s a tube player, the Premium takes about an hour to stabilize. It sounds a bit slow with some upper bass boloat for the first 15 minutes, but within an hour, the issue completely dissipates. The Premium comes triple-boxed and includes a tube cage and pair of white gloves to keep the player’s smooth finish free of fingerprints—or provide amusement when you play Thriller. The push-aluminum remote also controls any PrimaLuna preamplifier or integrated amplifier, keeping room clutter to a minimum. But don’t lose it. You can’t access the USB input or change phase without it.

I appreciate that the Premium only has a 2-volt output from its RCA jacks (instead of the more common 4-volt output), allowing the average linesstage to stay in the sweet spot of its operating range and offer a wider range of volume adjustment.

No, PrimaLuna’s strategy isn’t for everyone. Detail fanatics demanding razor-sharp leading edges on transients might be better served by a solid-state player. But if digital still leaves you cold after all these years, and you’re wondering why you still aren’t enjoying your CD collection (or digital files) as much as you should, give the Prologue Premium CD player a spin.