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Mystère ia21 Integrated Amplifier

By Marc Phillips

It still surprises me when I encounter people who don't know that Acura is merely the luxury marque of Honda, or that Lexus is Toyota's premium division or that Infinitis are nothing more than gussied-up Nissans. In most cases this is by design, however, with the marketing executives at each division aiming for an identity separate from the more common automotive brethren.

By the same token I've been surprised to hear audiophiles declare that Mystère, a new brand of push-pull pentode tube amplifiers, is nothing more than an upscale product line from PrimaLuna, as if they'd uncovered some vast conspiracy. (*Upscale* is the operative word here, with Mystère being marketed and distributed by Kevin Deal of Upscale Audio.) First of all, there's no shame in being related to the fine line of affordable, high-performance, high-value tubed products from Durob Audio in the Netherlands, just as there is no shame in being a cousin to a Honda, Toyota or Nissan. If the pedigree is strong to start with, there's nowhere to go but up.



So let's get it over with—if you want to be an audio cynic, you can say that the Mystère integrated amplifiers are just another step above PrimaLuna's entry-level ProLogue and the intermediate DiaLogue product lines. There...feel better? However, while the Mystère ia11 and ia21 integrations do roughly approximate the same layout and dimensions as the PrimaLunas, you'd be ignoring the extraordinary fit-and-finish, build quality and, of course, the sound.

I've Got The Big One

We received both the ia11 and ia21 integrated amplifiers for review, which we ended up referring to as “the little one” and the “big one.” The ia21 is step over the ia11 in a few key areas, such as power output (50wpc vs. 40), and the ia21's ability to optimize the amplifier for KT88s and EL34 output tubes through Durob's proprietary Adaptive Auto-Bias board, which constantly monitors and adjusts the bias of each power tube. By pushing a rocker switch on the side of the ia21 and swapping out the tubes, you can choose between two fairly different sonic presentations in just a few minutes.

Just like the PrimaLuna amps, you can use any one of the compatible tubes (EL34, 6L6, 6550 or KT88) and do not require matching in either amplifier, thanks to their AutoBias system. The ia21 takes this a step further by allowing you to slightly fine tune the auto bias for the EL34 or

6550/KT88 tubes to take advantage of the higher power dissipation in those tubes. When I talked to Kevin Deal, he told me “You can still take advantage of the different tubes in both amplifiers due to the AutoBias, but by being able to further optimize the AutoBias for the two tube types in the ia21, we were able to get a bit more power in the larger version”.

In addition to these useful features, the ia21 also uses larger power transformers than its little brother. Both models, however, feature a high-quality 24-step volume knob and soft-start circuitry that preserves the life of the tubes over the long haul. Overall, the ia21 is a substantial beast, weighing in at approximately 60 pounds. With its beautiful piano-black gloss finish and its extraordinary build quality, the ia21 accomplishes quite a bit at its relatively low price of \$3000.

Serve Me Up A Set Of EL-34s Please

I started listening to the ia21 with the KT88s installed. After letting everything break in for a few weeks, I felt that the ia21 retained many of the same qualities as the PrimaLuna amps I've heard, such as the ProLogue One and DiaLogue One, with just a touch more refinement. *(continued)*

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In other words, the ia21 with the KT88s offered a warm, immediate and slightly forward presentation that made an excellent first impression. My only reservations concerned a lack of real power and authority in deep bass performance, and a slight loss in detail in the treble. I also noted a little bit of shallowness in overall soundstage depth as well. But none of these minor flaws were deal-breakers, and after two or three weeks, I felt that the Mystère ia21 was a solid performer and a good deal.

When I swapped out the KT88s for the EL34s, however, my opinion of the ia21 changed radically. The soundstage expanded in every direction, creating a sonic presentation that was more suited to my personal preferences. The immediacy in the midrange, for instance, reminded me of my days as an SET enthusiast, especially in the way that solo voices would just hang eerily in the air between speakers. With the KT88s in place, the voices sounded similar, yet crowded into a smaller space. The EL34s allowed those voices to roam around freely, almost leisurely.

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These sonic qualities suited more intimate types of music, such as Jakob Dylan's solo CD, *Seeing Things*. The ia21 really underlined Rick

Rubin's participation in this recording, maintaining the same spare and haunted sensibilities that characterized his work with Johnny Cash. In the opening cut, "Evil Is Alive and Well," Dylan's voice was so well-rounded and present that I felt like I could get up from the couch and walk around him a few times as he sat there. I had the same impression listening to Bonnie "Prince" Billy's latest recording, *Lie Down in the Light*, feeling as if I could tell Will Oldham was in much better spirits since 2006's melancholy *The Letting Go*. Through the immediacy of the presentation, I could hear his mood change from one recording to the next as if a headache had slowly subsided.

In the following weeks, I switched back and forth between the EL34s and the KT88s several times. I know the latter tube has its fans, and many listeners may appreciate its more authoritative and forward sound. The delicacy of the ia21 with the EL34s, however, was too compelling to ignore. For me, the choice is obvious.

Let's Not Forget the Little One

I did have a chance to listen to the ia21's little brother, the ia11, after I sent the ia21 home. For me, the smaller Mystère shared the same overall character with the ia21 with the KT88s in place. *(continued)*



The lack of truly deep bass was perhaps a bit more noticeable, as was the relatively shallow soundstage. But seeing how the ia11 is \$1000 cheaper, these shortcomings are more than reasonable, although my first instinct was to wonder how an EL34 option would transform this amplifier.

Both amps share the same gorgeous glossy finish. The “little one,” at 45 pounds, is still a substantial machine. The only problem I had with either amplifier from an aesthetic standpoint was their ability to attract dust. I do live on the edge of a forest, and it’s the time of year when you can see a lot of things floating around in the air. But owning either Mystère is tantamount to owning a black car – if you want them to look nice, you need to dust them off every couple of days. Or at least you do in my neck of the woods, pardon the pun.

It Takes a Village to Build an Amplifier

The only remaining consideration on whether or not to buy the ia21 depends upon your opinion on Chinese-built electronics. Indeed, while both Mystère and PrimaLuna are designed in The Netherlands by Durob Audio, the amps are manufactured in China. Both the folks at Durob Audio and Kevin Deal have taken great pains to ensure that all Mystère amps are submitted to the highest quality control and manufacturing oversight.

In fact, if you are familiar with PrimaLuna amplifiers, you’ll know that the reliability on these units are among the absolute highest in the audio industry.

Kevin Deal has reported a defect rate of one-half of one percent on PrimaLuna gear, the best he’s experienced in 33 years of business. He has the same high level of confidence in the new Mystère gear as well.

Everything about the Mystère integrated amplifiers has been designed around convenience, reliability and ease of use. It’s clear that both Upscale Audio and Durob Audio have targeted those audiophiles who want to take the tube amplifier plunge but are worried about tube replacement costs and the potential danger of tube failures, especially around kids and pets. The beautifully-finished tube cage will keep everything out of harm’s reach. With the Adaptive AutoBias circuit in place, you won’t have to worry about setting the bias on each individual output tube. You’ll also get thousands of hours of music before you have to replace those tubes. Finally, if you’ve ever dealt with Kevin before, you’ll know he has enough EL34s and KT88s in stock to get you through the next several decades of listening sessions.

In my opinion, however, bug Kevin for as many EL34s as possible. With these in place, the “big one” becomes a true giant in the world of integrated amplifiers.

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Second Opinion By Jeff Dorgay

As a testament to PrimaLuna's build quality, I still have my original ProLogue 1 that I reviewed for The Absolute Sound almost five years ago and it has performed without a hitch. Finally about ready for a retube, it has performed flawlessly in my system and that of a couple of friends that I have let borrow it. (only to become hooked on the tube thing, I might add)

I had the option to try both of the Mystère amplifiers (review on the ia11 soon) with an extremely wide range of speakers and I suspect Marc's lack of bass was due to an incompatibility with his Gibbon 9's. I had fantastic luck with the Harbeth Compact 7's and the Stirling Broadcast LS3/5a's. Heck, they even did an admirable job powering my MartinLogan Summits which are notorious for giving tube amplifiers a hard time.

I do agree with Marc however, on the EL34 vs. KT 88 thing. It's up to you in the end, but I really found the seductive nature of the EL34's hard to beat. A good compromise if you go with the KT88's to take a bit of the edge off that presentation is to swap out some NOS 6SN7's for the stock ones. This will bring you about half way between the two sounds. Similar to my experience with other PrimaLuna amplifiers, a great variation on the theme that works well with the Mystère amps is the 6L6GT. If you want that vintage McIntosh sound, there is a little less power on tap, but definitely a more syrupy, woody sound.

I borrowed my old JBL-L166's back from staff writer Jerold O'Brien and had a blast listening to 70's rock. I'm sure an old pair of Advents or even some Altec 19's might be very cool if you are in this kind of a mood. Just plug in a set of 6L6's and get in the time machine! The best part of the journey is that you don't need a 40 year old amp with questionable capacitors to get it! A quick peek under the chassis reveals point wiring, very good parts and a fanatic attention to detail. They never looked this good in the old days! When you are done, drop your tubes of choice and return to the present day. How much fun is that?

Extended listening with the Harbeths was a major treat. I was very excited about how musical this amplifier sounded, yet possessing more resolution than the ProLogue series does. I think for a lot of people, the Mystère ia21 could become the central hub of a very high quality music system on a reasonable budget. ●

The Mystere ia21
MSRP: \$2999

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