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Photo by PRIMALUNA

PRIMALUNA EVO 100 TUBE PHONO PREAMPLIFIER

...and the circle is complete again

Within a reasonably short time, I got acquainted with several products from PrimaLuna. I've been impressed by the concept and quality, but especially the sound quality significantly impressed and enchanted me. I have become, perhaps uncritically strong, a fan of this brand. However, my enthusiasm was constantly dampened by the absence of a phonograph preamplifier in its portfolio. Tubes somehow subconsciously fit me better with analog than with digital. They were having a D/A converter on offer, but not a phono preamp. Strange. However, at the beginning of the year, they contacted me through the Slovak importer of the brand, and I received information about the preparation of the missing device, which should be available shortly for the first test. And so it happened, at the end of May, that the EVO 100 Tube Phono Preamplifier arrived in my listening room.

Again, the looks leave no one in doubt that this is an instrument from the PrimaLuna "stable." The overall impression is once again excellent, and the quality of the individual parts is impeccable. The solid aluminum anodized front panel (black or silver finish), in combination with the other parts of the cabinet in a dark grey metallic lacquered finish, gives the instrument elegance; the subtle golden lettering on the black finish also gives a touch of ostentation or grandeur. The front panel contains two distinctive rotary switches; the left one adjusts the load impedance for the MC transmission, and the right one adjusts the gain in three values - small, medium, and large. Between the controls are switches for selecting the type of transmission (MM and MC) and activating or deactivating the Mute function. The equipment of the individual setting parameters is more than sufficient. From the overall design, the instrument strongly prefers just and only the MC system, which serves it to its credit. The top panel is equipped under a removable ribbed cover with a battery of tubes - two source rectifier 5AR4, two source stabilizers and filter EL34, and four pieces of 12AX7 hidden in anti-resonance in anti-resonance shielding housings. These serve as primary amplification for the MM and secondary amplification for the MC section. In the rear stepped section, behind a removable door, there are two tubes for the primary amplification of the MC, marked 6922. The solid sheet metal cover gives them sufficient strong shielding against electromagnetic smog and all the other ills that could be mixed into the active signal. The rear panel is straightforward and austere, featuring a pair of RCA input and output jacks and a connection for the power cord.

The internal quality is again exemplary, dominated by their choice of components (e.g., capacitors Nichicon, DuRoch) and handmade quality. All interconnections are made with a point-to-point system, i.e., direct interconnection without a printed circuit board. The advantages of this method are unquestionable (signal paths through shielded cables with a large cross-section, use of solder with a high silver content, transition resistance reduced to a minimum). The disadvantage is the multiply higher labor intensity and, therefore, the resulting cost.

In terms of dimensions, the device is more of a "midi" design, which, despite its more compact volume, impresses with its weight, which exceeds 13kg. With this weight, which results from the overall construction of the device, it contributes significantly to the shielding of the active signal parts of the instrument, which, as a result, is perfectly resistant to any interference, which any listener will appreciate when using it.

To review the sound quality of the preamplifier I used, as always a SPDV mk3 turntable with Hana Umami Blue and E.A.T. Jo. No 8 cartridges, an Ayre K1xe preamplifier, an Ayre V5xe power amplifier, and Avalon Acoustics Arcus loudspeakers. Cables from XLO Signature, Cardas Neutral Reference, and Nirvana Audio Systems. As a comparative phono preamplifier, I used a Parasound JC3 Jr.



Since the unit had only been playing for about 8 hours, I needed to give it some time to become familiar with the space and acclimate. So, I approached my listening very cautiously and without significant expectations. However, from the beginning, the unit made it clear to me with its sound that we would get along as well as possible. From the first notes of the first LP, it presented a mature and precise expression based on an exceptional purity of detail, the right relationship to the overall musical picture, and a rare balance of tonality - indicating the elements of an extraordinary experience! Sometime later, when the process of unfolding the instrument had finally passed those first imaginary steps and had reached the only slightly rising level of sonic maturation, I could proceed to critical listening and comparison.

In the first place, by its fundamental character, it is typically PrimaLuna, which I consider a significant compliment. Again, the overall sound construction seems to be built on a rock-solid and precise foundation, which is defined by a high degree of detail, neutrality and an overall naturalness of expression - these characteristics always come at the forefront. In some cases, such a situation appears drier, less plastical, perhaps more sterile because it has everything it should have, while still something is missing. In the case of EVO 100 Tube Phono, however, we are playing with tubes. And tubes, that is immediately obvious on first hearing. In this case, they add character, color, emotion, life, and plasticity to the sound. However, this elementary "tube" character is very light, and it is impossible to say if it is crucial. Such a minor ingredient makes listening to the reproduced sound a musical experience.

Over the long weeks of working with each other, I've spun all my favorite LPs through the EVO 100 Tube Phono many times, and each one has left a distinctly exciting experience in me. The presentation of the Buena Vista Social Club album was excellent, with meticulously rendered detail, including all the subtle reverberations, bustles, and studio echoes, all backed by predatory dynamics and speed. The rendering of the space was holographically accurate; one could follow everything happening in the recording with one's eyes closed. Not to forget to mention the perfect rendering of the colors of the musical instruments and vocals.

A similar situation occurred in electronic music reproduction, specifically by J.M. Jarre and his Rendez-Vous (US release). A recording from when even electronic music was "treading" on pure analog was one huge emotional journey without the possibility to breathe even for a moment. The analog basis of the work was evident in every single moment and tone; all those oscillators, emulators, effects, and what do I know what else this electronic wizard used to create this monumental work were clear, distinct, and palpable until finally physically merged with the listener's body in the form of reverberating vibrations. The pure essence of emotion!

The pure essence of emotion! Slavonic Dances by Antonín Dvořák under the direction of Rafael Kubelik (Deutsche Grammo phone, Japanese edition), the rhythmic arches trial storm will give every component of the audio chain a workout and mercilessly reveal what it can no longer handle. Since I know mine can do this without losing its dignity, I focused solely on how the EVO 100 Tube Phono would sign off on the result. PrimaLuna gave the opus an ethos of its own, strictly adhering to its firm and unchanging sonic principles, so the result was in the best order. Moreover, the lightning speed, response, and drive here went, or instead ran, hand in hand with exemplary control of the entire musical spectrum. A masterful experience!

The PrimaLuna EVO 100 Tube Phono is, in every respect, a magnificent preamplifier, which reaches very high standards with its sound quality and is not far from the highest ones at all. Its strong point is the highly mature, intensely experiential, and emotional expression with a hint of "tube track", free from all possible and impossible modern sound trends. Traditional and natural are the most telling characteristics to be valued most in these strangely warped times.

Positive: Excellent, today's typical PrimaLuna sound
Negative: Nothing

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MM stage:
Gain: 40 dB
Input impedance: 47 kΩ
Input capacitance (selectable): 47 pF/100 pF
Input Sensitivity: 2.5 mV (200 mVrms@1 kHz)
Channel Separation: (@1 KHz) 180 mVrms >75 dB
S/N Ratio: @ 23.8 dBV >90 dB

MC Stage:
H/M/L Gain: 60 dB/56 dB/52 dB
Input impedance (selectable): 50/100/200/500/1 000 Ω
Input Sensitivity: 0.104 mVrms (200 mVrms@1 kHz)
Channel Separation: (@1 KHz) >60 dB
S/N Ratio: 26.3 dBV >80 dB
Frequency Range: 0 Hz - 20 kHz +/- 3dB
Power Consumption: 86 Watt
Dimensions (h x w x d): 190 x 280 x 405 mm
Weight: 12.7 kg
Price: 3 950 euro
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