

PrimaLuna EVO 100 phono preamplifier

REVIEW — Chris Kelly | Apr 22, 2024



Let me start with a disclosure. I have owned and used a PrimaLuna EVO 400 integrated amplifier for about a year now, and I think it is a very fine piece of equipment. It is the first all-valve (or tube, depending on your geography) amplifier I have owned since the 1990s and the sound it produces has a ‘rightness’ to it that I have come to enjoy very much daily. Thus, it was that I clamoured for an opportunity to hear and write about the PrimaLuna EVO 100 Tube Phono Preamplifier when it was announced, and a few weeks ago, my wish was granted by the fine folk at Absolute Sounds, who distribute this family of products here in the UK. In my own system, I use a Gold Note PH10/PSU two-box phono stage.

PrimaLuna is a Dutch company, that celebrates its twentieth year in business in 2023. Founded by Herman van den Dungen, who had 30 years of high-end audio behind him – he had experience in design, manufacturing, export, import, retail, and after-sales service. He was committed to the notion of building a range of high-quality valve-based equipment and to this end, he was joined by Marcel Croese (formerly of Goldmund) and Dominique Chenet (formerly of Jadis), with significant input from the American valve guru Kevin Deal, to bring his plan to fruition. Mr Deal owns the retailer Upscale Audio in California and appears regularly on YouTube talking about the products that he represents, including PrimaLuna. His enthusiasm for the brand helped to shape my buying decision last year.

Line up

The current PrimaLuna product line-up includes integrated amplifiers, pre-amplifiers, power amplifiers, a digital-to-analogue converter and now a phono stage. All these are totally valve-driven designs. In 2021 the company announced its first hybrid integrated, the EVO 300, which has garnered rave reviews worldwide.

Although PrimaLuna has offered a solid-state moving magnet phono stage as an option on their amplifiers, the EVO 100 Phono Preamplifier marks their first foray into a fully featured, standalone Moving Magnet and Moving Coil device. With twenty years of

valve designs behind the brand, this new piece has hit the ground running.



Physically, it is unmistakably a PrimaLuna. Built on a heavy gauge, fully vented steel chassis with a five coat finish it looks like and has the heft of a high-end product, weighing it at 127kg. Just as with the amplifiers, the EVO 100 Phono Preamplifier boasts point-to-point wiring, with ceramic tube sockets, Nichicon and DuRoch capacitors. There is a trademarked SoftStart circuit, designed to extend the life of sensitive components while reducing the chance of premature valve failure due to thermal shock. Another trade-marked technology in all PrimaLuna power transformers is the PTP (Power Transformer Protect) circuit. If this detects that, for any reason, a transformer should overheat, an internal thermal switch cuts in, allowing the unit to cool down before any harm is done. Once the unit has cooled down, if nothing has broken, the unit will power up again and continue to function properly. These details gave me the confidence to purchase my PrimaLuna amplifier and should also reassure those contemplating becoming a PrimaLuna customer.

The front of the unit offers, from the left, a rotary dial for selecting the loading for a Moving Coil cartridge, with stops for 50, 100, 200, 500 and 1000 Ohms, which should be sufficient for most modern cartridges. Next are a pair of soft touch buttons for selecting MM or MC, the central LED that glows red as the unit is warming up and changes to green when the unit is ready to play. To the right of the light is another pair of soft-touch buttons for muting and unmuting the unit. Finally there is another rotary knob which allows the user to select three different levels of gain, marked as low, medium and high. On the left-hand side of the chassis, at the front, is the on/off rocker switch and on the other side is the rocker switch to change between MM and MC mode.

The rear is very uncluttered. Looking from the left there is a ground peg with a knurled knob to grip securely the ground wire from the turntable. Next is a pair of gold-plated RCA sockets marked "input:" and to the right of that another pair of RCA sockets marked "output". Finally there is the IEC mains input socket. Compared with my phono stage, the PrimaLuna lacks the option of balanced XLR outputs and the provision for plugging in a second turntable, which might deter some potential buyers. As I only ever have one player in use at a time and my EVO 400 amp only accepts RCA inputs these have no negative impact on me, but potential purchasers need to make sure that the EVO 100 Phono Preamplifier is suitable for their needs.

Tubes everywhere

In terms of the tubes deployed, there are 10 in total. There are two 5AR4s, two EL34s, four 12AX7s and two 6922. The latter two are specified as "low noise" which is a good

thing as the 12AX7s handle the moving magnet inputs and the 6922 take care of moving coil duties. Power consumption in the 230VAC 60Hz world is 86Watts. For those of you in the 115VAC50Hz regions of the globe it is 77Watts.

In order to accommodate it in my venerable Quadraspire XL I had to reconfigure the rack with one shelf removed, in order to give the unit sufficient air around it when operating – valves do run hot!

I deployed it without the protective valve cover in place, as there are no animals or curious-fingered small people resident at Kelly Towers. Connection from the RCA output terminals was done with a pair of Audioquest Pegasus interconnects and the mains was supplied through a Shunyata Delta IEC cable. The turntable used for most of the review period was my own Linn Sondek LP12, which has been upgraded with Tangerine Audio hardware, and has a Linn Lingo4 power supply. It also sports a smart red Collaro mat. The arm is a Linn Akito and the cartridge fitted is a Dynavector XX2. Amplification was through my PrimaLuna EVO 400 integrated amplifier and the loudspeakers were my long-term favourites, Harbeth Compact 7 ESxDs.



I started by playing one of my current favourite albums, Dave Alvin's Eleven Eleven which was reissued by YepRoc in 2021. The first track of side one is Harlan County Line, which will be familiar to anyone who watched the FX television series Justified much of which is set in Harlan County, Kentucky. Alvin has a wonderful baritone growl but also plays his Stratocaster as if his life depended on it, and has conjured up an amalgam of country, rock, folk and blues that to me epitomises the Americana approach so well. Through this all PrimaLuna system the sheer musicality of Alvin and his band absolutely shone through, with a sense of realism that my normal solid state phono stage hints at but here was an overwhelming experience. So enamoured was I that I played all four sides of the album before coming up for air.

My next two album choices were drawn from my expanding selection of jazz, much of it recorded in the 1950s and 1960s. First up came another firm favourite of mine, Paul Chambers Quartet's Bass On Top (Blue Note Tone Poet BST-81569), recorded, as were an astonishing number of classic jazz albums, at Rudy Van Gelder's studio in Hackensack New Jersey. Produced by Alfred Lion, the entire album was recorded in one day, which seems astonishing. The musicians were Paul Chambers on bass, Kenny Burrell on guitar, Hank Jones on piano and Art Taylor on drums and my goodness, what a fantastic shift they all put in that day. Although Paul Chambers was

the instigator of the session (he used a day off from his primary gig, playing with Miles Davis), the other three were all at the peak of their powers. A sense of four fine players listening to each other and gaining energy and inspiration from their bandmates' spectacular playing came through, with an almost three-dimensional soundstage.

You say 'Patato'...

That selection inspired me to cue up another in the Blue Note Tone Poet series, this time it was Grant Green's *The Latin Bit* (ST-84111), recorded five years later in the same studio. The guitarist was joined for this session by Johnny Acea on piano, Wendell Marshall on bass, Willie Bobo on drums, Carlos 'Patato' Valdez on congas and Garvin Masseaux on chekere. The latter is, according to the sleeve notes, an African shaker. The music is infectiously rhythmical, the band plays with great panache, and the replay system makes them proud. It allows the listener to hear into every part of the recording without sacrificing the musical flow. Utterly enthralling from first note to last, this system was in its element with these old analogue recordings.

It was just as adept at replaying every other genre and generation of music that I put through its glowing grasp. Earlier this year I heard on Qobuz a new compilation album of contemporary country stars playing songs from the Rolling Stones almost infinite back catalogue, in tribute to the veteran British band's 60th anniversary (yes, the same Rolling Stones about whom my appalled mother said, "They won't last – dirty layabouts." However, I digress.). I liked it enough from the streamed version to plonk down my credit card and procure the double vinyl version. The PrimaLuna team lapped it up and delivered a rocking, raw and irresistibly singalong rendition of some of my favourite Jagger-Richards works. Eric Church's version of Gimme Shelter was one of many stand-out tracks. Any notion of valves being warm, cuddly, laid-back, understated – choose your own faint put-down adjective – were dispelled listening to this album.

Listening to a Japanese pressing of the Stones' own album, originally released on the London label in the US, I switched the EVO 400 amplifier to its triode mode, which can suit some older recordings, the EVO 100 Phono Preamplifier and LP12 team let me hear very clearly the difference between triode and what PrimaLuna calls UltraLinear. I think this mode suits some music, and I enjoyed hearing these early Stones recordings as they might have heard them on playback in the studio.



During the rest of the EVO 100 Phono Preamplifier's time on my rack I fed it an eclectic diet of musical genres, from choral, classical and solo piano, through the aforementioned jazz and rock and on into the world of electronica, and it never failed to draw me deep into the music. Pink Floyd's *Meddle* always features in any analogue

review playlist here, and from the menace of 'One Of These Days' to the ethereal otherworldliness of 'Echoes', I was simply pinned to my seat. This was music-making of a very high standard indeed.

Deeply impressed

If you have followed me this far you will have guessed that I was deeply impressed with the EVO 100 Phono Preamplifier. PrimaLuna has delivered another mini-masterpiece. The timing is spot on, and everything that courses through its intricate collection of glass tubes arrives at the listener's ear perfectly formed. It can handle the power of heavy metal in one instant and switch to solo acoustic guitar without a second thought.

Are there any downsides to living with valves? Well yes, there are. This system had 24 glass cylinders glowing in the semi-dark at the other end of the room, and even at that distance, the generated heat was not insignificant. Given that most of the review period was in one of the warmest Junes anyone in Devon can remember, it was a 'shorts and tee-shirt' dress code during extended listening sessions. And the listening sessions were usually extended because this system just made me want to play just one more track, or more usually, one more album. And where does all that heat come from? From electricity of course, and this system used a lot of it. However, if you can live with the running costs, a valve system like this will repay you by making you stay home and listen when you could have been out buying a beer or two at a fiver a pint.

The other thing one has to accept with a valve system is that it will from time to time need those valves to be replaced. However, this is not the scary proposition that one might fear. In general, the smaller pre-amp types valves should last a good 10,000 hours powered up usage and even the larger EL34s should give at least 3,000 hours of working life, which translates to a long time in most users' typical listening. Real valve people (I am a neophyte in this somewhat arcane world) talk to each other about "tube-rolling" and I am sure such a person might be tempted to try a little rolling should the mood take them. I know that in their pre, power and integrated amplifiers PrimaLuna make this relatively easy, and it may be possible with the phono stage. I think those clever designers chose the EL34s for a reason, and I would be loath to mess up such an excellent sound with such an experiment.

What about solid-state?

For those of you who wonder whether the EVO 100 Phono Preamplifier will work well with your solid-state amplifier, I would say this – why wouldn't it? I own a Lyngdorf TDAI3400 integrated amplifier and before I parted with the EVO 100 Phono Preamplifier, I swapped it for the EVO 400 integrated to answer that question. The TDAI3400 converts an incoming analogue signal to digital as soon as it is received and yet when the music issued forth from the Harbeths it still had that valve sound to it and still thrilled me.

Only rarely does equipment come here for a review that I do not want to send home at the end of its visit. The PrimaLuna EVO 100 Phono Preamplifier wrote its name on that list, winning both my head and my heart with its glorious glowing presence on the rack and magnificent musical performance. It deserves a place on every aspiring audiophile's list for an audition – it will take a remarkable phono stage at that price to get the better of it.