

PrimaLuna Evo 400 integrated amplifier

REVIEW — Rafael Todes | May 2022



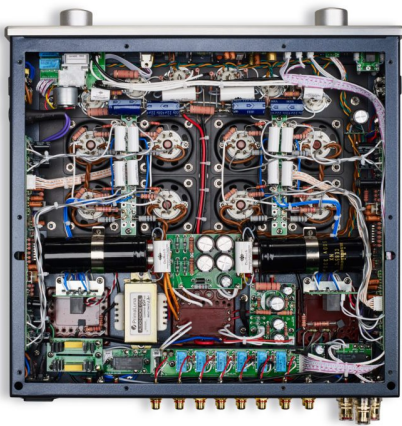
At first glance, you could be forgiven for thinking that PrimaLuna is an Italian brand, after all, it means “first moon” in Italian. In fact, the brand hails from the Netherlands, launched in 2003, its founder and Director being Herman van den Dungen. This integrated amplifier is actually built in China like so many brands these days, and occupies the “my first valve amplifier” segment of the thermionic market. Chinese manufacture enables audio companies to offer more for less, and in this case quite a bit more.

The Evo 400 amplifier sports something called ‘Adaptive Auto-bias’; this simply means that the amplifier biases itself virtually instantly, which avoids the hassle of a monthly tube check that can be easily forgotten, and is kinder to the valves in the early stages of warm up, after the amplifier is switched on. The biasing system (Bad Tube Indicator) will also spot a defective tube before it can take the amplifier with it, and anyone who has made frequent visits to a repairer for this reason will no doubt appreciate this hugely. I have on more than one occasion had to spend hours driving across London to repair a valve amplifier taken down by a failed tube, and this type of protection takes the hassle out of valves. There are also protection mechanisms to safeguard the output transformer should the temperature rise too high or from high-voltage transients. It is the top of the range of integrated amplifiers, with Evos 100, 200, and 300 sitting below in the offering.

The amplifier comes furnished with eight EL34 valves, and six 12AU7’s as driver/preamp valves, it will put out 70 Wpc in Ultra-Linear mode and 38 Wpc in the purer sounding Triode mode, achievable by handset control.

There is a switch on the right hand side of the amp which enables the user to change over KT88's, or indeed KT120's. On the rear panel there are six RCA inputs, one for a fixed level tape output, three line-level inputs, two XLR inputs as well as a home theatre bypass which avoids the preamp section altogether, with a choice of both 4 and 8ohm speaker taps. On the front panel, there are two rotary switches, one for choice of input, the other a high-quality motorised Alps pot for volume. The amplifier is denser to pick up than the sort of amp of this size I've picked up in the past, it weighs in at just under 24Kg, which whilst being shocking, is also an indicator of quality. The output transformers on a valve amplifier are always the thing that foretell quality, these transformers are made in-house, custom-wound toroidal, and together with DuRoch tinfoil capacitors, Takman resistors from Japan, this is an amplifier which cuts no corners!

A solid aluminium remote-control unit is included. There's also a removable cage for protection against children and dogs supplied, which probably doesn't do much for the sonics of the amplifier. So, for the purposes of listening, I removed it... and no dogs or children were harmed.



I began by listening to Sir Simon Rattle conducting the Berlin Philharmonic in Haydn's 88th Symphony, on my B&W 802d3's, with a PS10 power regenerator and Townshend F1 Fractal speaker cables, I'm fascinated by the triode/ultralinear switch, and the ability to make virtually instantaneous comparisons. I have had amplifiers which do both, but rarely so effortlessly. It is really enlightening to be able to see two totally different musical personalities existing in the same space. Listening initially to the ultralinear configuration, I am impressed by the quality of the overall sound, and in particular how the amplifier is producing bass. It reminds me of a more expensive Audio Research amplifier of the last decade, or even a good transistor amplifier. There is a grippiness to the sound, fast, immediate and immaculately timed. The sound stage isn't as cavernous as I normally hear on my (considerably more expensive) VAC Phi's, but it sounds more impressive than the equivalently priced transistor amplifier I've recently come into contact with. The orchestra sounds dynamic, weighty and the musical intention of the phrasing in this Haydn Symphony is crystal clear. The midrange isn't the sweetest I've heard: my VAC's are much more liquid in the midrange, but it falls somewhere liquidity-wise between a good transistor amplifier and my VAC reference amps.

To change from ultralinear to triode can only be done with the help of the handset, and once the transformation is done, the red light (default when powering up and representing ultralinear) changes to green to show it's in triode mode. The changes range from subtle to pronounced, depending on the music you're listening to. On the same Haydn Symphony, the bass is slightly looser, but more generous in this case. The soundstage is deeper and more extensive, and the violins sound quite a bit sweeter. The sound is less grippy, less transistor and more the way of traditional valve sound, but the amp is capturing all the detail of this wittily written work, the interplay between instruments, the micro phrasing, and the emotion of the performance. The manual says the maximum power is roughly half as much in triode mode, though this isn't really that obvious.

Onto the “Rite of Spring”, Stravinsky’s shockingly modernist ballet score, Gergiev conducting the Kirov Opera orchestra [Philips] really illustrates the two different modes of operation. The ultralinear does the fireworks brilliantly, a dazzling display of rhythms and textures, the triode the more lyrical as well as spacial elements of the score. In the famous second track, (Dances of the young girls) I’m happy to sacrifice (no pun intended) the velvety sweetness of triode for the greater blast and rhythmic tightness of ultra linear. They are both excellent, but it gives the user more choice and control.

Moving on to some jazz, Kenny Burrell and ‘Chitlins Con Carne’ [Midnight Blue, Blue Note], I’m loving the percussion in ultralinear mode; the palpably real sense of being in the room when a drum skin is whacked, really dynamic punchy playing, the tail of percussion and Saxophone notes organically trailing off. Moving over to triode mode, a little of that bass thwack that is there in ultralinear is lost. The sound is a little more organic, a wider soundstage, but I find myself missing that rhythmic immediacy that was there with ultra linear. Not night and day, but once the ear is tuned to it... it’s very noticeable.



As an inveterate tweaker and an audiophile who is just plain curious, I relish the opportunity to swap the valves over to KT88’s. It again is rare to have an amplifier that can do EL34’s as well as KT88’s. I’ve always appreciated the differences, but never have been able to see them in the same place, as it were!

So armed with a set of Gold Lion KT88’s I made the swap, which thanks to the auto bias on the amplifier took less than three minutes.

Surprisingly, the differences weren’t quite as great as I’d have thought. There was a slight loss of the airiness that the EL34’s have, the pentode with KT88’s sounded a little closer to the ultralinear setting with EL34’s, more muscular but some of the spacial extravaganza curtailed. On ultralinear (KT88), the sound was big, but I was slightly bothered by a touch of nasality to the midrange, definitely the most ‘transistor’ of the four combinations. So for my money, an interesting and rather revelatory experiment, but give me the supplied EL34’s for the sweetness and depth, at a small cost of power.

Also of interest is the headphone socket, which I believe utilises the output section of the power amplifier. So with my Sennheiser HD 800's in hand, and listening to the same tracks as before, I notice a very high quality headphone amplifier, with all the liquidity of the best tube headphone amplifiers, spacial control and sweetness, almost as a throw-in. I've heard headphone amplifiers selling for the price of this integrated fail to reach this quality of sound. Very impressive for someone who takes headphone listening seriously.

Like other PrimaLuna models, the Evo 400 integrated amplifier is an extraordinary mixture of being low maintenance, and a great first valve amplifier, combined with a spot of tube-rolling audio nervosa paradise. The ability to change between ultralinear and triode at the flick of a remote control button, combined with the ability to use different valve types means that this amplifier can indeed be all things to all people, or 'cakeism' as the modern turn of phrase goes. But not only is this the ultimate 'cakeist' amplifier, it actually does the various options extremely well. It is not only an educational experience, it is also extremely satisfying to listen to. Well thought out, well executed, and creates a high bar for those few competitors at this price.

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

- Type: Integrated stereo valve amplifier
- Analogue inputs: 5× RCA, 1× HT bypass RCA
- Phono input: optional moving magnet
- Digital inputs: N/A
- Analogue outputs: tape out RCA, sub-out RCA
- Bluetooth: N/A
- Headphone output: 6.3mm jack
- Speaker outputs: 5-way binding posts, 4 & 8 Ohm taps
- Power output (EL34 valves): 70W Ultra-Linear; 38W triode with
- Dimensions (H×W×D): 205 × 405 × 385mm
- Weight: 31kg
- Warranty: 2 years (valves 90 days)
- Price: £4,598
- PhonoLogue MM phono stage: £155

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URL: primaluna.nl