



A question of EVolution

THE EVO 400 ISN'T CHRIS KELLY'S FIRST ENCOUNTER WITH PRIMALUNA'S AMPLIFICATION, BUT IT LOOKS SET TO BE A LASTING ONE, SO MUCH DOES HE FIND TO ADMIRE

Regular readers of HIFICRITIC may recall that, back in issue 59, I wrote a review of the PrimaLuna EVO 300 integrated amplifier. To save you digging it out I was absolutely smitten with it. It was my first foray into valve (tube if you are in other parts of the world than the UK) amplification since I owned an Emille K70 back in the 1990s, and it reignited my fascination for this distinctly 20th century technology.

Actually it did more than that: ever since the EVO 300 and 6 12AU7 valves in the preamplifier, all of which are was here, whatever loudspeakers or sources I have branded with the PrimaLuna name. The hand-made had here to review I have wondered to myself how chassis is constructed of heavy gauge, fully vented they would have sounded with the PrimaLuna. Then, steel which sports a five coat paint finish, which looks in the manner typical of an obsessive, I started to gorgeous and adds to the feeling that one is dealing wonder how much better the 70 watts per channel with a genuinely high end product.

EVO 400 would sound compared with the 40 watts The valves all sit in ceramic sockets and everything of the EVO300. I watched the YouTube explanation within the chassis is point-to-point wired, the only of the EVO 400 by Kevin Deal of Upscale Audio in printed circuitboard inside the chassis being for the California, who is the US distributor of PrimaLuna AutoBias system, which constantly monitors the products but who is also involved in the design and condition of each valve and which makes owning and specification of the PrimaLuna products. Eventually using the amplifier no more onerous than a solid state my desire to hear the EVO 400 became too strong device. For someone who is new to the world of valves to ignore, so I gave in and asked Absolute Sounds, this is an absolute boon, removing as it does the need the UK distributors, if they would be kind enough to for the user to bias the valves by hand. If the system send one to Kelly Towers for review.detects that there is an issue with a valve it illuminates

The EVO 400 as shipped from the factory carries a a red LED in front of the valve holder so that the user complement of 8 EL34 valves in the power amplifier can replace the failed or failing valve.

There are three rocker switches on the chassis. On the left hand side (as seen from the front) is the power on/off control. On the right hand side, one switch allows the user to switch the auto bias system from the EL34 setting to the KT setting. What does this mean? In the world of valve aficionados there is an activity often called “tube rolling”, which means swapping one type of valve for another. Thanks to the PrimaLuna auto biasing system, a user can remove the supplied EL34 power valves and install one of the KT Series - 88, 120 or 150 for example. Since each of these offers increased power output of 72, 85 or 88 watts per channel in the UltraLinear mode, as well as subtly changing the sound characteristics of the amplifier. I do not have a stash of alternative valves so I have not tried this. One word of caution, according to PrimaLuna the KT150 is too large to fit under the supplied removable safety cover which helps to prevent the unwary (children, pets, partners etc) from touching the valves, which are of course very hot indeed when the power is on. The valves are all installed at the factory, with a protective sleeve over each of the EL34s.

The third rocker switch, also on the right hand side, allows the user to turn the EVO 400 into a headphone amplifier. This is not some marketer’s afterthought, using (as some designs do) an inexpensive op amp to drive the headphones. It diverts the main amplifier to headphone use instead - so the EVO 400 doubles as a very high quality valve headphone amplifier too.

On the back of the chassis there are two sets of loudspeaker binding posts, with 8ohm and 4ohm outputs, a pair of RCA outputs for attaching a subwoofer, with a mono/stereo switch alongside, and then 7 pairs of RCA input sockets, including one marked HT, which allows the EVO 400 to be integrated seamlessly into a home cinema set-up if that is required. There is no provision for using balanced XLRs here. The last feature on the back is the IEC mains power input socket.

Fuss-free design

The front panel is very fuss-free. Towards the left is the rotary volume control, which an ALPS analogue device. The centre has a small cluster of LEDs. At power up a bright red lamp signals that the amplifier is warming up, and this switches to green once all the valves have reached operating temperature, which takes about a minute.

Just above this light is another LED which glows red when the amplifier is in its default UltraLinear mode or green when the Triode mode is selected via the supplied all metal remote control (the only way that this can be done). On the right hand side is the input selector dial, with a green LED showing

which input is active. There is an audible click when inputs are changed, explained in part by the fact that only one input relay is ever open at one time, which helps to minimise any crosstalk between inputs – another example of PrimaLuna not cutting any corners to ensure optimum performance from the amplifier.

As the manual explains, ‘All PrimaLuna power transformers include the PTP™ (Power Transformer Protection) circuit. When the power transformer overheats due to environmental circumstances, overloading or some problem in the unit, an internal thermal switch breaks the primary, allowing the unit to cool down before harm is done. After it’s cooled, contact is restored and if nothing is broken, the amp will repower and function properly.’ This is an important feature and is reassuring – my Emille K70 was badly damaged when a family member used it when I was away on business and forgot to switch it off after the listening session.

The only optional extra which can be ordered with the EVO 400 is a moving magnet phono stage, a solid state device which sits externally on the bottom of the chassis. It was not fitted to the review unit so I cannot comment on it. I suspect that most purchasers will already have their preferred external phono amplifier but it is good that PrimaLuna have the provision if required.

When the unit arrived, even the strapping young courier was huffing and puffing as he brought the box from his van to the front door. The shipped weight is about 36kg, which puts it on the edge of what I can cope with single-handed, and even once unboxed it still weighs an impressive 31kg, but I was just about able to manhandle the heavy beast on to my venerable Quadraspire XL rack, and set about connecting the system.

TelluriumQ UltraBlackII speaker cable, running from my Harbeth C7ES3XD was plugged in, using the 80ohm option. For inputs Audioquest Earth from the GoldNote PH10 phono stage and Audioquest Yukon from the Yamaha CD-S3000 SACD/CD player were plugged into the inputs marked Aux1 and Aux2. The cable from the REL305SE was plugged in and that switch set to mono. Finally the optical cable for the television was plugged into the DAC on the Yamaha. A Shunyata Research Delta NR2 mains cable, fed from the same company’s Hydra mains block was plugged into the IEC socket.

Powering the unit on can only be done via the side-mounted rocker switch. Doing so one hears the EVO 400 coming to life as the electricity flows around and brings those 14 glass tubes to life. Once it is on the EVO 400 is silent, and even with an ear hard up against the loudspeakers there is no noise at all.



Sound Quality

I was expecting great things of the EVO 400, and wasn't to be disappointed. Even during the first few days, when it was bedding in, it produced a sound that even better than my memory of its smaller sibling, but my intention remained to play a few silver discs but not to sit and listen, so I loaded my Analog Productions SACD of Pink Floyd's *Wish You Were Here*, pressed play and walked out of the room.

For about five minutes, as it turned out: the sound coming from the room drew me back in and there I stayed, playing several different pieces of music, until Mrs Kelly returned from work. Even after a couple of hours it felt as if the amplifier was getting fully into its stride, and that evening we watched an action film, the EVO 400 handling the huge dynamic range of the soundtrack really well, with dialogue coming through with terrific clarity and realism. There was a real sense of being enveloped in a three dimensional aural world, even though it was all emanating from a single pair of loudspeakers. (At this point the REL was plugged in but not powered on).

The next few days were really an orgy of listening, mostly through the Linn/Gold Note vinyl system, and extended sessions were quite unflagging. I played my usual selection of test albums, and each of them sounded more involving than they have for a long while. Instead of playing one track I found myself listening to the whole side of an album, then turning the record over and listening to the second side. What valve amplifiers do especially well is project the midrange frequencies in such a way that vocals and guitars

really stand out from the mix, which suits my typical music selections very well. However, the EVO 400 also produces very high quality bass frequencies too - bass guitar and acoustic bass come through with great pace and tonality.

Listening to Osibisa's 1971 album *Woyaya* on my original MCA UK pressing, the contribution of their bassist Spartacus R is vividly portrayed without ever dominating proceedings or sounding too big and bloated. In fact this album proved to be a great way to hear just how accomplished the EVO 400 as a musical communicator, from ethereal flutes to pounding drums I was swept along by the sheer joy de vivre of the players.

Pace, rhythm and timing

This is not the woolly, warm, soft valve sound of myth and legend – *au contraire*, it has the much sought after pace, rhythm of timing of the finest solid state alternatives, but with that magical richness only a thermionic device seems to produce. Changing the mood, Gary Karr's masterful double bass is wonderfully captured on the Cisco Firebird pressing of *En Aranjuez Con Tu Amor*, on which he is accompanied on piano and organ by his long term collaborator Harmon Lewis. This 2005 recording captures the sound of these two gifted players beautifully, and through the EVO 400 provoked a very strong emotional response in this listener. The final track, Samuel Barber's *Adagio For Strings*, was absolutely spell-binding.

I've started to enjoy jazz in the last few years, though I'm still exploring and learning, and through the EVO 400 I started to revisit my rather modest collection of recordings on vinyl. A recent purchase is Christian McBride and Inside Straight's *Live at The Village Vanguard*, a 2021 double record release on the Mack Avenue label of gigs at the renowned New York venue back in 2014. The final track, 'Stick&Move', features a lot of interplay between McBride's double bass and the drums of Carl Allen – it sounded epic. Drums don't always sound this realistic but through the EVO 400 and Harbeths it felt as if one was in the venue with the band.

I've overheard audiophile conversations suggesting valves are only good for relatively easy-on-the-ear acoustic music, and that reproducing heavy rock is best left to powerful solid state amplifiers. If those gentlemen could have joined me when I played the 2015 Parlophone release of Iron Maiden's *The Book Of Souls* I suspect they would have had to recant: turning the volume up, Bruce Dickinson's voice came through loud and very clear, with his bandmates in hot pursuit. This system rocks.

All this listening was done with the amplifier in its default Ultra Linear mode, but now it was time to experiment with the triode option. A press of the

top button on the nicely weighted remote control and the LED changed from red to green, indicating that the amplifier was now operating in the lower power mode. I spun up the 2014 Jimmy Page remastering of *Led Zeppelin II*, which I don't play very often because I find it a little too strident, and the EVO 400 in Triode mode reduced this to such an extent that I really enjoyed it. Switching back and forth between Triode and Ultra Linear as the record was playing was interesting: in the latter mode it was still more enjoyable than I remembered it, but the Triode option was even better.

After that I switched between the two modes on numerous albums, and there are some which definitely are more pleasurable in the lower-powered Triode setting. My early 1970s Rolling Stones albums all seemed better played that way, as did the Doors on SACD - *LA Woman* became almost a different album, with the warmth and intimacy of Jim Morrison's final recordings seeming to gain in poignancy and realism. Other albums did not benefit from leaving Ultra Linear, but the great thing with this is that the listener can experiment to their heart's content with the on-the-fly switching.

Vivid in-head pictures

Although I'm but a very occasional user of headphones, I did bring out my closed-back Audioquest NightOwls to see whether the EVO 400 could sound as good through as it does through loudspeakers. It does, to the extent that I chose this mode of listening for several days when I was home alone. There's an inky black background until the music starts, but once it does it creates a vivid sound picture within the head. I had enjoyed *LA Woman* through the loudspeakers – now it became even more intimate, and here again being able to switch to Triode at the touch of a button was really pleasing. If you are a regular headphone listener, the EVO 400 will serve you very well indeed.

Given that the EVO 400 is loaded with 14 valves, it does give off a fair amount of heat, but I've used it for extended listening sessions for several weeks now and it hasn't missed a beat. It will be more expensive to run than a solid state alternative, but it's only switched on when I want to listen and always switched off at night. With plenty of air around it on my open rack, the heat doesn't seem to affect the components on the shelves above.

I also tried the 4ohm loudspeaker output option (having started with the 8ohm on the advice of the distributor). There was not a huge difference in sound quality but for me the 8ohm option sounded slightly better so that's what I stuck with. I gave my smaller loudspeakers, the Harbeth P3ESRs, a run out with the EVO 400: these, although a very consistent 6ohm load right

across their frequency range, are only rated at 83.5dB efficiency, but the EVO 400 had no problem driving them to impressive volume levels without any audible distortion. In fact this made for an extremely enjoyable listening experience.

Conclusion

I have been fascinated (my wife might say obsessed!) with music for as long as I can remember and was lucky enough to be a teenager in the 1960s, so I have records in my collection that I purchased as far back as 1965. And like many of my generation, my aspirations were to get a job, buy a house and a car, find a partner to share them with and then to buy a "stereo" system on which to play my records. In those far-off days, valves were much more common than they are today – then came the widespread use of transistors and other solid state devices, and valves became sidelined, a throwback. But they didn't go away and a few keen audio designers kept the faith.

PrimaLuna was founded in 2003 by the Dutch audio engineer Herman Van Den Dungen, who along with a coterie of others, set out to bring to market twenty-first century versions of amplifiers using valve technology, and in the almost two decades since the brand has grown in terms of sales but also reputation, garnering many (forgive the pun) glowing reviews along the way.

The EVO 400 is the logical culmination of all that experience and knowledge, and is quite simply a magnificent single chassis implementation of the valve amplifier designer's art. Is it perfect? Of course not – I'd love to have a couple of pairs of balanced XLR inputs, for example – but there's very little I'd change. However, it'll be interesting to try different valves in it, although the current crisis with Russia has pushed the cost of replacement valves to an all time high, as well as severely limiting supplies, so that may have to wait a while.

When I started writing reviews of hi-fi equipment a few years ago a good friend of mine, who knows me too well, warned me that this could prove to be an expensive past-time. I've been very fortunate to have had many fine audio components pass through my listening room, from racks and cables, through source components and amplifiers to loudspeakers, and I have tried to do them justice by painting word pictures for those who take the time to read them. That done, the items have been boxed up and returned with gratitude, for just like you, I find this an endlessly fascinating hobby.

But this time, dear reader, the amplifier isn't being boxed up and going on its merry way. I have arranged to buy it, because I think I'd miss it too much once it was gone. I can think of no stronger recommendation than that.

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HIGHLY RECOMMENDED

Specifications

Prima Luna EVO 400

Type	Integrated amplifier
Price	£4998
Inputs	5 line plus home theatre bypass, optional MM phono module
Outputs	Speakers, tape out, sub out, headphones
Power output (with standard EL34 valves)	70W in ultralinear mode, 38W triode mode
Dimensions (WxHxD)	40.5x20.5x38.5cm

www.primaluna.nl

UK distribution

www.absolutesounds.com