

The PrimaLuna EVO 100 DAC

Just tubey enough.

\$3,395
primaluna-usa.com
primaluna.com
upscaleaudio.com

When you hear the name PrimaLuna, the first thing that probably comes to mind is affordable, high quality tube amplifiers. Makes sense. After all, Prima Luna has a stellar reputation for their vacuum tube components. Comparing their gear to products costing twice as much, PrimaLuna easily holds its own. They're virtually synonymous high value tube-based amps. What they aren't as well known for are tube DACs, something they're hoping to change with the \$3,399 EVO 100 Tube Digital AnaLogue Converter.

Visually the EVO 100 Tube DAC shares its DNA with the rest of the EvoLution line. It sports the same clean, modern look with exposed tubes, looking classic and futuristic (available in either silver or black finishes).

The front panel is nice and simple. There are two LCD displays on the front; one revealing which of the four inputs are selected; the other displays the resolution of the currently playing music. There are four smaller buttons to toggle between the various inputs (AES/EBU, Coaxial, Optical, and USB). A magnetically attached tube cage that will keep out both prying little fingers and curious doggy snouts. On the left side, close to the front you will find the power switch which is easily accessible even with the DAC setup at the bottom of my cabinet. The back panel has an Analog Output section with unbalanced RCA-style left and right outputs (there are no balanced outputs here), a Digital Input section with inputs for AES/EBU, Coaxial, Optical, and USB, and the input for the AC cable.



PrimaLuna®

EvoLution

AES/EBU

COAXIAL

EVO 100 Tube Digital AnaLog

056

Down to business

The EVO 100 Tube DAC comes with two 12AX7 tubes, two 12AU7 tubes, and two 5AR4 rectifier tubes arranged in a dual mono configuration. There is a seventh tube inside and it is the “secret sauce” of the EVO 100 Tube DAC, called the SuperTubeClock™. PrimaLuna has replaced the typical solid-state oscillator that is typically found in the digital clocks of DACs and replaced it with a low-noise mini-triode vacuum tube which lowers jitter and noise while increasing detail and dynamics.

For the purpose of this review I kept the tubes stock but if you’re into tube rolling, there is plenty of opportunity for play here. The EVO 100 Tube DAC has a Burr Brown PCM1792A digital to analog converter and a Burr Brown SRC4192 upsampling converter, allowing it to handle PCM files from 16bit /44.1 kHz up to 24bit/192kHz and DSD64-DSD128. It does not play MQA encoded music.

Tidal users will need to use software like Roon to perform the first unfold before the EVO 100 can play it.

The first thing you’ll notice when opening up the box that it came in was how solid the EVO-100 is. The build quality is phenomenal. Setup was a breeze. Everything was hooked up and ready to go in under five minutes.

They even provide a high-quality USB cable in the box which I used to connect the EVO 100 to my Intel NUC running ROCK (Roon Optimized Core Kit). A small, sleek remote control for toggling through the various inputs, mute the audio, and turn off the display is also included. And the gloves. Every Prima Luna product comes with a pair of cloth gloves to keep that shiny finish shiny. A nice touch.

It is what it is

One thing to make clear before going any further is that the EVO 100 is simply a straight forward, no-frills DAC. That’s all. It’s not a pre-amp. It’s not a headphone amp. It’s not a streaming box. There’s absolutely nothing wrong with in all-in-one boxes like that, in fact I use one in my home office, but if you already have a serious HiFi, then you are better served by a DAC that’s purpose-built to give you the best digital playback for your buck. At least at this price point. Every single penny of the EVO 100’s \$3,000 price tag is spent on enhancing digital playback and it shows.



There's a 60 second countdown on the display letting you know when the tubes will be warmed up and ready to go. I was in an 80s mood, so Ultravox's *Vienna* on Qobuz (16/44) via Roon. The clarity and resolution this DAC provides hits you immediately, getting even better over the first 30-minutes of playback as the tubes warm up. The imaging with this DAC is just top notch. The soundstage during *Vienna* was downright panoramic, going far wider than my speakers and deeper than the back wall of my listening room. The experience was absolutely holographic, cinematic even. Every instrument was clearly articulated in space, and the sound was smooth lacking the sterility like you would expect from an old 80s synth pop record.

Staying in the 80s I switched over to Tracy Chapman's self-titled album ripped to Flac from CD. This album is a more "proper" audiophile recording and the EVO 100 does not disappoint. The shimmer and texture on the acoustic guitar on "Fast Car," sounds life-like as if it were being played in the room. Chapman's vocals are smooth without any hint of brightness prevalent on recordings from that era. The bass is fat and tight, shaking the house but never becoming bloated and losing its definition. Compared to the operatic vista of *Vienna*, Chapman sounded like she was in a small, intimate club and the EVO-100 easily renders both kinds of spaces without missing a beat.

Queuing up some Beach Boys titles from Analogue Productions were the perfect test for the EVO 100's DSD playback capabilities. It decodes the DSD files perfectly, and after the majestic intro to *California Girls*, I was questioning the Beach Boys vinyl on hand. The EVO 100 sounds so analog-like that I haven't touched my turntable since it's been here.

Is it the tubes?

The tubes are no doubt responsible for the warm, lush sound that I was hearing, but don't think that they're a magical panacea. Bad recordings are still bad recordings. Streaming the 24/192 version of Kiss' *Hotter Than Hell* still sounds as bad today as it did on your turntable in 1974. The EVO-100 doesn't perform alchemy during playback creating gold from lead, but it will squeeze every single bit of performance out of whatever music you play, in whatever format that you have it in.



I've listened to a bunch of similarly priced DACs over the years. While I've certainly enjoyed listening to them, none of them floored me like the EVO 100 did. Straight out of the box the sound was richer and more saturated than what I had before. It's like when movies went from regular color to glorious Technicolor. The sounds are more vibrant, the textures are deeper, and the images presented more panoramic. This DAC is a great destination DAC. To do better than this you would easily have to spend more than double the money. I'd rather take that cash and go buy a ton of used CDs instead. Highly recommended.

Additional listening: Jeff Dorgay

Though I've been a PrimaLuna fan/owner for nearly 20 years, I've only spent time with the PrimaLuna CD player a number of years ago. Before streaming really came into play. Before sending the EVO100 DAC to Sean, I managed to spend a bit of time listening after the photos were taken. All of his comments are on the money, and in retrospect, this DAC is a huge problem solver, especially for that analog enthusiast that approaches digital begrudgingly. So many of the \$1,000 - \$3,000 range are very good, however, they still sound like DACs, if that makes sense. You don't really get the "I can't believe it's not digital" thing until you spend crazy money on a DAC, even today. Most DAC's under \$10k, even the really good ones sound great until you put a record on your turntable. Then you twist your head like a dog, or say, "it's pretty good for digital."

Let it roll

PrimaLuna gear comes out of the box sounding great with the factory tubes. You can visit their owners group on Facebook and drive yourself crazy, leave it stock, or perhaps find a little peace somewhere inbetween. Nearly every week, someone claims to find the perfect set of tubes. More often than not, tube rolling gives you more different, than better, so if you are new to this game, keep this in mind. If you aren't you probably think I'm nuts and just don't have enough patience to find the right tubes.

PrimaLuna always runs their tubes pretty easy, so should you decide to buy a mega pair of 12AX7s, and 12AU7s, it won't break the bank. Don't be surprised if you get 10,000 hours on a set of NOS tubes, maybe more. The rectifier tubes are another story. Swapping these tend to change the characteristic of the bass response slightly, and the ultimate noise floor of your DAC. Again, none of these differences are Earth-shattering, but once you've gotten used to your EVO100, you might want to make a change for fun. Don't say we didn't warn you.

Another winner from PrimaLuna

The PrimaLuna EVO 100 DAC nails it in the sense, that it offers great dynamic drive and lush tonality that you expect from tubes, without going soft, and rounded off, merely to take the digital edge away. Even some of the worlds finest DACs with five and six figure price tags can sound fatiguing after a while, which ultimately keeps you out of the listening chair. But it does have a tonal balance that is more saturated, and has a bit more ease, which makes it so lovely to listen to long term.

I'm with Sean, this is one I could easily live with, and he's actually going to make it part of his reference system, so this piece not only deserves an Exceptional Value Award, consider it #toneaudioapproved as well.

