

NOVO

PrimaLuna EVO 200 Integrated Amplifier Review



Over the years, I've been able to hear PrimaLuna products at both shows and dealer showrooms and have always been impressed, yet, I've never had the chance to bring one home. Living now in Dublin, I reached out to Absolute Sounds, the U.K distributor and was thrilled that they could provide me with an EVO 200 integrated amplifier, for my review. Being a first review of PrimaLuna products for NOVO, I'm going to first introduce the company and their EVO Series, before telling you about my listening experiences with the PrimaLuna EVO 200 integrated amplifier.

PrimaLuna is based out of the Netherlands and was founded by Herman van den Dungen. 2003 saw the release of its first products – the ProLogue One and ProLogue Two tube integrated amplifiers. These products came to fill what Herman saw as being a market for high-value tube audio components, which PrimaLuna continues to specialize in. Over the years, PrimaLuna has built a strong brand reputation for both quality and performance, supported by numerous accolades from renowned audio publications.

The latest iteration of PrimaLuna's products is embodied under their new EVO Series, launched in the first half of 2019. With the EVO Series, PrimaLuna has simplified their offering by consolidating their previous ProLogue and DiaLogue series under one umbrella. PrimaLuna's EVO Series, continues to include integrated amplifiers, preamplifiers and powers amplifiers and adds their first vacuum tube DAC. The new EVO Series is, as its name suggests, an evolution of the company's product offerings; carrying over all that was great in the previous generation yet lifting the performance bar by incorporating upgraded transformers and various internal components. In addition, this EVO-lution of PrimaLuna products includes refinements to aesthetics and additional features, such as headphone amplification within all integrated amplifiers and true-balanced transformer-coupled XLR inputs and outputs on upper-end models. Meticulous hand assembly; point-to-point wiring, and the company's proprietary and industry-leading Adaptive Auto-Bias circuitry, all continue on in the new EVO Series from the previous generation. Some of the most distinguishing design features of PrimaLuna amplifiers are:



Custom Super-Wide Bandwidth Toroidal Transformers: PrimaLuna uses toroidal transformers due to their inherent lower noise characteristics, despite their higher costs. In addition, PrimaLuna over-sizes, custom designs and pots their toroidal transformers in metal housings containing non-microphonic resin to ensure noise is minimized, while offering the highest protection from moisture, for longevity. **SuperQuiet Inputs:** Instead of using common noise prone switches, PrimaLuna uses premium quality sealed relays, mounted in the rear, nearest to the plugs. Relays only close when the input is selected, while other inputs remain open, thus, eliminating cross-talk across inputs. And, since the relays are adjacent to the plugs, signal paths are minimized along with associated noise.

Adaptive AutoBias: PrimaLuna's proprietary Adaptive AudioBias uses sensors to monitor tubes and make adjustments automatically in real time, adapting and addressing "tube pinch off" at higher volumes to reduce distortion by greater than fifty percent. The benefits...? Virtually no maintenance, greatly extended tube life, lowest distortion, auto-protection and maximized tube compatibility that allows the use of factory installed EL34 tubes as well as many other choices, including: 6L6G, 6L6GC, 7581A, EL34, EL37, 6550, KT66, KT77, KT88, KT90, KT120, and even the KT150.

Point-to-Point Wiring: Though very rare, given the cost and need for hand assembly, PrimaLuna uses Point to Point Wiring on all its products, across the entire audio signal path. This ensures the highest quality and performance of the audio circuit, along with longevity and ease of servicing.

SmartWatts: Generally, higher wattage ratings on tube amplifiers are achieved by running higher voltage through the tubes but this can drastically reduce tube reliability and life. However, PrimaLuna, runs the tubes in its amplifiers at as low a voltage as necessary to optimize performance, i.e. 417 V for the plates and screen, maximizing tube performance, lifespan and reliability.

The EVO 200 integrated amplifier, the subject of this review, sits within the EVO Series, along with three other integrated amplifier models: the EVO 100, 300 and 400. Moving up from the 100 to 200 and then on to the 300 model, the key difference is larger output and toroidal power transformers. The EVO 300 also adds higher quality / performance parts (Swiss-made wiring, Takman resistors, DuRoch Tinfoil capacitors) as well as features including: subwoofer output, AC offset killer and the option to run triode as well as ultra-linear.

The EVO 200 comes equipped with eight tubes from the factory: four 12A7 tubes in the preamp section and four EL34 tubes in the output section. With this tube complement, the EVO 200 is rated 44 Wpc @ 8 Ohms with 1% THD; however, more output can be achieved by swapping-out the output tubes. Given the aforementioned PrimaLuna Adaptive AutoBias, changing the tube is as simple as plug and play and even KT150's are an option on the output side of things. The built-in headphone amplifier is not discrete nor an op-amp design but rather, emulates some of the most expensive headphone amplifier designs around by utilizing a voltage divider network that lowers the direct amplifier output to a useable level for headphones. Hence, the headphone output is simply an attenuated main amplifier output, thus allowing the integrated amplifier itself to optimally drive connected headphones.

The EVO 200 comes finished with a silver or black faceplate and control knobs, yet, in both cases the main chassis remains finished in a lovely slate grey metallic finish. A removable, cast aluminum roll cage with glass side-inserts protects the valves, while adding to the overall charm and retro-contemporary styling. Paint quality and build is faultless, with a heft of over 50 lbs. out of the box! All switches and controls feel solid and function confidently. I was also happy to see that the quality focus even extended to

the key function IR wand remote – billet aluminum with metal buttons. Though the overall design of the EVO 200 is function over form; however, I have no doubt the EVO 200's austere beauty will instill pride-of-ownership with any tube aficionado.

The EVO 200 houses rocker switches for power, speaker / headphone output selection and high / low bias selection. There are two control knobs on the front for volume and input selection. LED indicators are provided on the front for power and input selection as well as on the top deck for indicate any bad output tube. The ¼" headphone jack is found on the front, as well. At the back are 4 Ohm & 8 Ohm taps with five-way binding posts and single-ended RCA jacks all four inputs, the tape-out and home-theatre bypass. An optional moving-magnet phono stage adds another set of RCA jacks and ground. I reviewed the PrimaLuna EVO 200 with my current reference components, including: DALI Oberon 3 bookshelf speakers on Atacama 6i carbon steel stands; an ADL by Furutech Esprit DAC; Logitech Squeezebox Touch streaming Tidal HiFi; Atlas cables (Hyper Integra RCA, Hyper dd Integra S/PDIF, EOS dd Power, Hyper 2.0 Speaker) and; a Marantz PM6006 integrated amplifier.



To get a baseline, I began with comparing the PrimaLuna EVO 200 with my current Marantz PM6006 integrated. Though the Marantz PM6006 is at a much lower price point, near ten times less, given it punches well above its price point and is also solid-state, I thought the contrast might be interesting. The Marantz surprisingly produced comparable sized soundstages, both in breadth and depth but didn't deliver nearly the same image clarity as the PrimaLuna, nor could it come close to the EVO 200's sense of dimensionality and image density. Listening to the famous track "The Girl in the Other Room" by Diana Krall, vocals were significantly more embodied and tangible with the PrimaLuna EVO 200. Though the Marantz is no slouch in midrange warmth, the fine detail

in voices was ever more evident with the EVO 200. I did some comparative listening with the track "Message In a Bottle" by The Police. Here, the PM6006 demonstrated its strength conveying speed and pace, perhaps due in part to its leading edge emphasis; however, the PrimaLuna EVO 200 delivered a much more rhythmic bounce and flow to the music. More so, the EVO 200 was a clear leader in providing presence, palpability, timbre, tone and dynamic punch, over the Marantz. No question was left on the PrimaLuna EVO 200's superiority in overall musical engagement and realism.



Bass with the EVO 200, within the limits of my Oberon 3 bookshelf speakers, was full and aplenty. On the track, "Flight of the Cosmic Hippo", the grunt and growl of the PrimaLuna EVO 200 was wonderful in a downright primal way. I found myself shaking my head in disbelief; after all, the EVO 200 is only a modest powered amplifier, yet, there were no tell-tale signs of smallness or softness in the bass it was letting loose. Ballsy, full, fleshy and articulate would be the appropriate descriptors here. On the track "Killing the Blues" from Plant's and Krauss' fabulous Raising Sand album, the drone of the resonating bass notes were very impressively delivered. The EVO 200 balanced the attributes of control with weight, in a most captivating manner, delivering a most assured sense of tangible tension, accompanied with texture and solid dynamics. Some amplifiers lean the way of ultimate control and in so doing come across as lean and lacking warmth, while other amplifiers lean to the other side, having a stereotypical 'tubey' sound that is overly ripe, soft and syrupy. The PrimaLuna EVO 200 does not sit in either of these camps; rather it treads a Zen-like middle ground, balancing the best characteristics of both sides, sitting in a Goldilocks position with respect to its bass character.

My listening brought me to “House of the Rising Sun” from the Sons of Anarchy soundtrack, sung by the White Buffalo. This track digs deep into the lower vocal midrange. The EVO 200 showed it could deliver the chesty low depths of the White Buffalo’s voice with elegance. Not only was there the required natural weight and fullness but along with this the EVO 200 mustered up the articulation and definition that makes the track so engaging. Expertly done, the EVO 200 tracked the lower midrange with no sense of sluggishness or over ripeness. Next, I put on one of my favorite tracks, “Gaia”, by James Taylor, off his album Hourglass. The opening background vocals were expansive, wide and deep and the detail the EVO 200 provided allowed easy discernment of individual voices within the massed background vocals. James Taylor’s voice can come across sounding overly nasal if not properly rendered; here the EVO 200 had no such problem, in fact, the smooth warm and soothing character of James’ voice was skillfully developed. As the soprano sax played, I relished in the beautiful warmth and richness that the EVO 200 was able to impart, while preserving the signature brassy personality of the instrument.

I thoroughly enjoyed listening to some of my favourite female vocalists tracks with the EVO 200. With Shelby Lynn’s, “Just A Little Lovin’” track, the PrimaLuna EVO 200 gloriously revealed the glow and resonance and roundness of Shelby’s voice, providing enough detail and insight for me to hear the tape bleed that exists in the original master. The sense of space within the recording was apparent, though perhaps not with quite the same level of air and openness that I’ve heard it at its best. And, I can’t ignore the surprising level of weight and body that the opening kick-drum had. The body and scale of the opening piano on Sade’s “Morning Bird” via the EVO 200 was just mesmerizing, wrapped up with oodles of tonal richness, while the massed strings possessed their sinewy and woody nature. Bass notes were both full and incredibly solid and the EVO 200 conveyed the raspy sweetness of Sade’s voice in a most delicious and dimensional manner. Norah Jones’s voice on her track “Come Away With Me” had a mellifluous beauty and the EVO 200 capably expressed the somber emotion in her singing through sweet tone and delicate inflection.

As I spent more time listening to the PrimaLuna EVO 200, I was continually bowled over by its manner with acoustic instruments, from guitar, to cello, to violin and most especially with piano. For example on the opening track “It Was You” from Charlie Haden’s Land of the Sun album the opening piano keys were played with most impressive energy and impact and I marveled at the weight and resonance that this integrated delivered the hammer strikes on the strings.

Moving to the treble of the EVO 200, I didn’t hear the last degree of top-end extension that provides a sense of openness, effervescence, and air; at least in the case of the stock EL34 tubes provided. I’m sure that some tube experimentation might yield different results, so take that perception with a grain of salt. Putting that aside, in terms of musicality and the rendering of the high frequencies in an authentic and realistic manner, the PrimaLuna did more than a fine job. Going back to a couple aforementioned tracks, I noted the very realistic shimmer, ring and bite of cymbal strikes on “Message In a Bottle”

as well as the burnished and grainy texture of the cymbal in Norah Jones' "Come Away With Me". On Anne Drummond's track, "Harold Land" the PrimaLuna EVO 200 most compellingly expressed the crystalline luster of cymbal strikes, the texture and tone of shakers and the honey sweetness of the flute, while Anne's breaths were most apparent. The PrimaLuna EVO 200 time and time again proved its worth by presenting the highs in a truly believable and engaging manner, never sounding thin or ragged and consistently sounding impressively beautiful.

I did spend a little time evaluating the headphone capabilities of the EVO 200 using my Grado 325e headphones. It was immediately evident that PrimaLuna accomplished what few designs can: preserving the virtues and sonic characteristics of the integrated amplifier in the headphone output. At the lowest volumes, there is some noise but nothing that gets in the way at any normal listening level. Those who love the sound of this integrated with speakers will be most impressed with how the same voicing carries through via headphones. Tonal richness, intrinsic warmth, wonderful bloom, glow and a sense of holography were all present for my appreciation.

The PrimaLuna EVO 200 has been a pleasure to review. It delivers a tuneful musicality, with body and fluidity that makes music listening more addictive than you thought it could be. Music is painted with slightly warmer than neutral strokes, which makes listening to a wider array of recording that much more enjoyable. Sounding consistently solid, firm and bigger than its power rating might suggest, the EVO 200 integrated amplifier from PrimaLuna offers tremendous value and I can see it being an end-game for many enthusiasts. Then again, PrimaLuna does have a couple more models to move up to within its integrated amplifier lineup. Easy to get along with, lovely to look at and a pleasure to listen to, the PrimaLuna EVO 200 integrated is a lovely music partner.