

PrimaLuna EVO 200 Integrated Amplifier Review

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Back in the nineteen-eighties, almost no one – aside from known eccentrics and contrarians, often with curious dress sense and social skills – would admit to any sort of fondness for tube amplifiers. Most audiophiles of that age could not see the point – they were regarded as underpowered, soft, fat, and coloured sounding by most ‘in the know.’ And of course, there was the question mark about reliability...

Yet in the following decade, the tide began to turn, and a new wave of tube amps sprang up. Suddenly, it was possible to get that unique warm sound without first having to fix up an ageing basket case you bought from a junk shop. Launching in 2003, PrimaLuna rode this first wave of the tube renaissance. By the mid-noughties, I noticed that people were beginning to sell their often quite high-end solid-state gear, to get a completely different listening experience via thermionic valves.

That first wave of tube amps was patchy – some brands were good, others not. Most were relatively inexpensive, though, and certainly sounded strikingly different to an ageing eighties Naim NAC32.5/NAP250. The first PrimaLuna I reviewed impressed me with its decent build and excellent value, and the name stayed on my radar. Since then, founder Herman van den Dungen has pushed hard. The new thirteen-strong EvoLution series is

the result, and is what I would call ‘tubes without tears.’ By this, I mean that they’re pretty mainstream designs, made to be as user-friendly as such products can be. To own one, you won’t need to dress like a mad professor, live in a laboratory, and sleep with a soldering iron under your bed.

RANGE FINDER

The new EvoLution range spans £2,198 for the EVO 100 integrated to £8,300 for the EVO 400 pre/power. What we’re looking at here is the £2,698 EVO 200 integrated, which to my mind, is just about affordable for average mid-fi buyers. It’s far less agricultural looking than many price rivals and has a professional finish that – if not quite US high end – certainly doesn’t feel like you’re sitting in the cheap seats.

The EVO 200 is supplied with EL34 power valves as standard – although KT88, KT120, or KT150 can be used thanks to the amp’s Adaptive AutoBias circuit. I’ll not get into the



politics of valves here, but suffice to say that, in my opinion, the EL34 can sound lovely if implemented properly. It has a classic sweetness and smoothness that’s never not nice to hear. This amp gives an impressive quoted 44W RMS per channel with EL34s (45W with KT88s), a claimed frequency response of 10Hz–65kHz +/-1dB, and a THD figure of less than 0.2% @1W, or less than 2% at rated power.

With a kerb weight of 24kg, taking the EVO 200 out of its box is more manageable than some tube amps I’ve reviewed, and it’s a pleasingly compact 405x365x205mm, meaning it won’t take over your house. It comes with a protective tube cover, underneath which you can clearly see four PrimaLuna Silver Label 12AU7 input tubes and as many EL34 power tubes. Behind this, the two output transformers and single mains transformer sit within the case and undercover.

Round the back, there are four pairs of unbalanced stereo RCA line inputs, plus a pair of home theatre inputs and the speaker outputs, which include taps for 4 and 8 ohm loads. A pair of RCA phonos and a ground terminal sit on an underslung module, giving moving magnet turntable connectivity, though this is an optional extra. Upfront, the brushed aluminium fascia is a clean and neat affair, with metal knobs for volume and input selection. A headphone socket is also fitted, and this works with a rocker switch (loudspeakers/headphones) on the right side of the case. Next to this is a bias switch (high/low); it should be set to low for EL34s (or equivalent tubes) or high for KT88s, KT120s, or KT150s. A power switch on the left side of the casing completes the picture.



BIASED REPORTING

One of the features that make the EVO 200 integrated a particularly user-friendly product is the company's 'Adaptive Auto Bias' circuit. Many rivals have manual tube biasing, meaning you need to set the bias for each one – usually by means of a meter that's fitted to the front of the amp, and a bias trim control. Some purists claim this is the best way to do the job, yet there are many amps that use auto biasing successfully. PrimaLuna says

that its system monitors and adjusts the bias levels for all the tubes constantly and on-the-fly. It negates the need for tube matching and compensates for the natural ageing process that these little glass bottles go through. This is tied to robust output stage protection circuitry that intervenes to protect output transformers, resistors, and the high voltage power supply should a tube go bang. If this does happen, an LED kindly lights up next to the offending object to tell you which one to replace – nice.

One of the myths of tube amplifiers is that those little glass bottles are always blowing up. Having run one for twenty-five years, this is simply not the case; I think I've had one K5881 fail on my own kit-made power amp, in all that time. Ultimately it comes down to how the amplifier is used – is it constantly switched on and off or left on all day and night? Personally, I switch my unit on at the beginning of the listening session and turn it off at the end, simple as that. That's good advice for the EVO 200 too, but because it runs the tubes at lower voltages than many such designs, they should last a good long time. Whereas some rivals run their tubes at over 600 volts, Prima Luna powers them at 417V for the plates and screens, the company says.

A key influencer of tube amplifier sound quality is the choice of output transformers. They're the most expensive components in any such design and make or break the performance. PrimaLuna's are custom-designed and wound in-house, and are unusually large. Unexpected in an affordable design such as this, is a toroidal power transformer rather than a frame type; the former radiate less intense magnetic fields and aren't as noisy. This one is enclosed in a metal housing, then potted in a non-microphonic resin – pure high end best practice. Sealed relays are used to switch between inputs, mounted at the back of the amp close to the input sockets. This cuts down noise and reduces the signal path. Speaking of which, point-to-point wiring is used inside, with everything being neatly hand-wired with heavy-gauge cable.



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SOUND QUALITY

The PrimaLuna EVO 200 needs to give a taste of 'tube magic' while avoiding as many of the pitfalls of entry-level tube amps as possible. The latter include the tendency for overbearing, flabby bass – often the result of poor output trannies – a lack of power –

again, more a function of the output transformers than the power valves – and a generally soft, sat-upon sound that lacks get-up-and-go. There's also colouration, which might sound superficially nice but makes every recording sound like it's been dipped in treacle...

By these criteria, the EVO 200 largely succeeds. Indeed it offers a sizeable portion of everything that's great about tube amps at a 'bitesize' price. I'm not claiming that it's anywhere near the best thing in the world, but it still gives something that you're simply not going to get from similarly priced solid-state amps. It has an expansive, warm, rhythmically engaging, and mellifluous sound that's not short of power – for most people's needs with modern loudspeakers, that is.

Take The Dolphin Brothers' Catch The Fall, for example; this is a slick, shiny, sounding late eighties production full of chiming Yamaha digital synthesisers and heavily sequenced percussion. Play it on most mid-price solid-state amps, and it sounds very clean and 'technical'; you can hear all the little percussive details in the mix, the dynamic swings, and the clearly delineating soundstage. Play it through the EVO 200, though, and you're into an entirely different world...

The first thing you notice is the soundstage – it's like someone has pressed a magic, invisible 'stereo wide' button. Suddenly my Yamaha NS-1000M speakers appeared to grow in size and stature as if I'd moved them a good deal further apart and turned the volume up. This amplifier just sounds big; vocals had a broader spread, the different strands of the mix appeared to be wider apart, and the soundstage seemed to fall back further behind the plane of the speakers, too. It's a night-and-day moment compared to my favourite affordable mid-price solid-state integrated, the Exposure 3010S2-d – as if someone had remixed the whole track.



This is a lovely thing to behold, but the real fun sets in with the tonality. The slightly 'clanky' late eighties production, which always seemed to me like it's been chromium-plated, took on a smoother and sweeter feel. There was a slight loss of openness and air right at the very top, with those drum machine hi-hat sounds appearing more sugary and having less bite, but in the midband, things seemed fuller and had better body. Vocals, in particular, had a more immediate, natural feel. In the bass, that walking bassline was also fuller, but it didn't present like a caricature of a valve amp; things stayed reasonably taut and tuneful, and there wasn't as much time-slurring overhang as I had feared. The overall result was lovely – this slightly brittle sounding track seemed richer, more full-bodied, and three dimensional.



It may sound nice, but is it more accurate than its solid-state rivals? That's a conversation for down the pub! Cue up some classic rock in the shape of Steve Hackett's Star of Sirius, and you certainly enjoy yourself, as it brings this slightly dry seventies recording out of its shell. Still, there's a certain opaqueness to the midband that will have solid-state fans pointing their fingers. It's not dramatic by any means; it's just that there's a soft, gentle haze to the recording that you can't help noticing. It's as if the leading edges of the notes have been ever-so-slightly softened, with the result that the sound isn't as sharp, incisive or penetrating as it can be. Not necessarily a bad thing, but audible nonetheless.

Fascinatingly, this has absolutely zero effect on the EVO 200's handling of rhythms. Cue up a banging nineties techno track like Nookie's Give a Little Love, and there's no sense of the flow the track being hampered – indeed, it's quite the reverse. This high tempo club classic comes over with a hypnotic groove; it's not just the wonderful sub-bass but the big lead piano sample that gets the joint jumping. Indeed the music felt quite euphoric, the EVO 200 pushing out serious sound levels with surprisingly few signs of distress, and managing stay in time despite that obstacle course of bass line. I've heard valve amps at

twice the price fall over their own feet, in a bid to keep up with this. That's the real strength of this little PrimaLuna – it gives much of what's great about 'the tube sound' without any of its obvious failings, particularly as far as products of this price.

Indeed whatever music you play, the PrimaLuna injects a sense of warmth and fun into it. Barroom hi-fi philosophers will debate whether this is strictly accurate, but listening to it, you don't need a PhD to realise it works. Indeed, it's especially evident on fairly gentle, acoustic music such as modern jazz. Herbie Hancock's *I Have a Dream* was delightfully subtle and soulful; the piece just sashayed along in a way that makes most solid-state amps look contrived or disinterested. If you have a mid-price system, then it's hard to argue against, given the happiness it brings; it's only when you start heading to the high end that you realise it's giving a partial and partisan reading of the music.

THE VERDICT

StereoNET Gold Applause Award PrimaLuna's EVO 200 really impressed me. I've seen too many bonkers tube amps that only thrive with one particular type of loudspeaker or music type in my time – yet this is a great, sensible, middle-of-the-road design that's obviously very well engineered. Of course, it's not perfect, but it does more than enough to justify its modest price tag and never shows a rough edge. That even goes for the actual build and finish, too; everything about it is quality. As such, this is well worth auditioning if you're 'tube curious', or have already got the t-shirt but want something that's more of a capable all-rounder than the amp you already have.

