

PrimaLuna EVO 200 Pre/ Power Amplifier Review

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Every manufacturer says it makes the best products – be it the best value, best looking, the best built, or maybe just (just!) the best sounding – and PrimaLuna is no different. Interestingly though, this Dutch company specialises in tube amplifiers whilst not aiming its designs solely at committed tube fans. The company's message is to the effect that “our amplifiers are for everyone interested in the highest quality, be it tube or transistor”.

To this end, PrimaLuna sells an extensive range of relatively affordable designs. There are nine models in its EvoLution tube amplifier range – four integrated and four pre/power combinations, plus the new EVO 300-1 tube/solid-state hybrid, which will appear on StereoNET soon. Each model is line-level, with the option of a moving magnet phono stage if required.

On a value for money, 'bang for your buck' basis, the integrated amps are your best bet as they give a lot of amplifier for your money. The pre/power combos cost almost double their integrated equivalents but offer improved sound quality. While I never believe in 'listening with your eyes' when evaluating hi-fi, just look at the build quality and weight – an EVO 200 pre/power weighs in at 39.6lbs/50.6lbs and 17.9kg/22.6kg – and you'll appreciate what goes into each item.

The EVO 200 power amplifier (below) offers 44W RMS per channel, using the much-loved EL34 output tubes. Together with the matching EVO 200 preamp (above), it costs roughly twice the price of the EVO 200 integrated that we reviewed, for the same on-paper performance. But the preamp features several improvements over the integrated, including tube rectification using two 5AR4s, plus two 330uF



Nichicon capacitors. Tube rectifiers cost far more than solid-state types but offer reduced noise and superior sound. Moreover, in line with the company's dual-mono construction philosophy, two rectifier tubes are employed rather than just one. The EVO 200 preamp features four 12AU7 driver tubes, as does the power amp, which employs four EL34 output tubes.



Thanks to PrimaLuna's auto-biasing, other output tube types can also be used, as the amplifier automatically adjusts accordingly. Point-to-point internal wiring is employed rather than printed circuit boards like nearly everyone else – this is more expensive and time-consuming but delivers superior sound. Large, high-quality transformers are fitted, designed and hand-wound in-house. An expensive

motorised Alps Blue Velvet potentiometer has been chosen for volume control rather than an electronic type. I could continue, but the list is long, so go to PrimaLuna's website for more info.

THE LISTENING

Interestingly, the performance specs of the integrated amplifiers and pre/power combos don't seem radically different, but you do hear noticeable improvements in sound as you go through the range. Before the EVO 200 pre/power arrived, I'd been trying the EVO 200 integrated and enjoying it immensely. All PrimaLuna amplifiers deliver a listenable sound that's warm, detailed and easy on the ear. Musically, the end results are engaging, exciting, involving and yet comfortable. There's an attractive warmth, richness, and glow that sounds natural and right, especially for classical music or acoustic jazz. On rock, there's plenty of power, weight and attack. Bass has firmness and control, as well as a nice full-bodied roundness and depth.

Given that the integrated EVO 200 sounded so beguiling, how might the EVO 200 pre/power differ? Would it really be that much better? I wasn't quite sure what to expect, but the pre/power immediately conveyed gorgeous sweet liquidity that the integrated didn't quite deliver. Don't get me wrong. The integrated sounded great and impressed me hugely. It's just that the pre/power offered even greater transparency and detail. In addition, there was a relaxed, effortless clarity that allowed the music to flow more smoothly.



Given their relatively modest power output (the all-tube EvoLution 100 to 300 series offers between 40W to 44W), the amplifiers deliver a surprisingly big sound. Without needing to be played loudly, they create impressive scale and weight with seemingly unlimited dynamics. While the EVO 200 pre/power's musical presentation has a gorgeous warmth and lushness, don't be fooled – we're talking iron fists in velvet gloves here. The overall effect might seem smooth and beguiling, but – like a great dancer – power and strength are disguised by grace and finesse.

During my audition period, I briefly replaced the EVO 200 pre with my old reference Herron VTSP-2A tube preamp, and immediately the sound lost some of its warmth and richness. For a short while, I quite

liked the leaner, more immediate presentation of the Herron. Or, at least I thought I did until I went back to the EVO 200 pre when I fully appreciated what I'd sacrificed. The PrimaLuna pre sounded warmer, yet at the same time more dynamic and transparent.

Playing Billy Joel's Storm Front on CD, the recording gained extra space and depth, with a firmer, more powerful bass. Via the EVO 200 pre, the album didn't just sound better in superficial hi-fi terms. Instead, the whole production seemed more sophisticated – almost like listening to a new audiophile remix that added extra space and depth to create a more believable soundstage.



Playing the new BIS recording of Arvo Part's austere choral work Passio, I first listened using the Herron preamp and felt that some of the vocal textures seemed almost a little too spare and lean – as though the solo singers' voices couldn't quite convey the line of the music. The same SACD, using the EVO 200 pre, sounded fuller and weightier. The ambience of the church used for the recording was more convincingly portrayed, helping the voices to project more powerfully. The sound was crisp yet rich and velvety, plus more solidly focused and dynamic too.

And those deep organ pedals! They sounded solid and weighty, wafting and billowing into the room as if from a vast subterranean chasm. Impressive! The Prima Luna EVO 200 pre/power conveyed a palpable sense of being there in the church as the musicians performed live in front of me. Again, the sound wasn't just better in hi-fi terms; the whole production seemed more sophisticated, while the music itself was more engaging and communicative. Passio lasts 71 minutes, and its quiet archaic simplicity creates a hypnotic effect – or should do when reproduced really well!

PrimaLuna's EVO 200 pre/power does its job so effortlessly well that you can easily take it for granted and underestimate it. It's a bit like going to a live concert and being less than blown away by the sound. Sure, things sound good, but you're not that impressed. Then you go back home, listen to the same music on your hi-fi, and realise it isn't anywhere near as good as what you've just heard live. The live sound didn't wow you; it wasn't flashy or impressive, nor did it overwhelm you – it was just effortlessly natural and real.

Playing Paul Creston's Invocation and Dance, with the Seattle Symphony under Gerard Schwartz on Delos, I was beguiled by silky-smooth, rich-sounding violins, then shocked and surprised by the depth and power of the bass drum, which had a massive heft that was quite unexpected. It's this ability to reproduce extremes of high and low, loud and soft, smooth and sharp, that marks out really great hi-fi from run-of-the-mill stuff. I was very pleased with how the EVO 200 pre/power was able to deliver such contrasts to my loudspeakers.



I like PrimaLuna's practical approach to tube amp design. The previously-mentioned auto-bias, for example, lets you substitute other types of tube without needing to make adjustments. I also like that they don't run the tubes hard, which increases reliability and extends life. Typically, they have a working life of around two thousand-plus hours. But one PrimaLuna owner left his amps running day and night for over six months, chalking up some five thousand hours. When tested, the tubes were still delivering ninety percent of their new performance. That's impressive and reassuring.

Given that no fewer than fourteen valves are used (six in the preamp and eight in the power amp), both PrimaLuna units ran far cooler than expected. I own a small, simple four-tube integrated amp using two KT88s, and amazingly that produces significantly more heat!

The EVO 200 power amp delivered a solid, commanding sound that subjectively seems vastly more powerful than its 44W rating would indicate. Given fairly efficient speakers, it will play as loudly as you will probably ever want or need, without clipping or sounding strained. There are 4, 8, and 16-ohm taps around the back, and the correct one is the one that sounds loudest, indicating optimum matching. However, I have always preferred the lowest impedance setting because it usually imparts greater control and firmness. The sonic difference between output options seemed fairly small with both the EVO 200 integrated and the pre/power. Maybe this is down to the Klipsch Cornwall IV loudspeakers I used, which are a very light burden on a power amplifier. I still chose the 4-ohm setting, but the other taps all sounded fine.

A further option with separate power amps is the possibility of adding a second one and using them paired in bridged mode. This doubles output power and gives you an even bigger and more strongly projected sound. More expense, but well worth considering. Using efficient speakers like the Cornwalls, I listened with the volume control set around the 9 o'clock position for a big, room-filling sound. Alas, at this setting, the volume knob proved quite sensitive; a slight movement produced noticeable changes in loudness.



A light press on the volume button could sometimes produce a greater change in level than I wanted when using the remote. For me, an electronic volume control with a front-panel readout of level in decibels, and fixed-changes in half dB steps, would be ideal. This arrangement makes it easier to set volume levels precisely and repeatably. Recordings often vary in level, and some classical CDs/SACDs are transferred at a reduced mean level because the transient peaks are so high.

Conversely, some pop recordings are highly compressed and sound very loud at regular volume settings because there are no peaks, and the mean level is very high. Having a readout of volume level in decibels means you know exactly where you are and lets you adjust levels precisely. Yet PrimaLuna is adamant about the sonic superiority of conventional analogue potentiometers, so although not ideal for me, I can accept this sensitive volume control. It's only likely to be an issue for those using very efficient speakers. And, despite what I said, I'd rather have better sound with a conventional potentiometer than an electronic control that doesn't sound as good.

One more gripe is that the remote control is not supplied with a battery. It takes a round flat type – but nowhere does it say which one! The remote itself is very nice. It's beautifully finished and housed in a svelte alloy case that looks like it was cut from a solid billet. The lower-priced EVO 100/200 items have PrimaLuna's slim remote, which gives volume and input selection. In contrast, EVO 300/400 products have a larger remote with more options, including remote switching between Pentode and Triode operation.

THE VERDICT

A few minor grumbles aside, I ended up deeply impressed by PrimaLuna's EVO 200 pre/power amplifier combination – and could very happily live with one. That said, my curiosity is primed. How much better might an EVO 300 pre/power sound? Would spending the extra be worth it? The EVO 300/400 series (both integrated and pre/power) are improved by the use of special Swiss wiring, Takman resistors, DuRoch tinfoil capacitors. They incorporate Prima Luna's AC Offset Killer, larger mains/output transformers, plus the full-size remote already mentioned. As Oscar Wilde once said, "I can resist anything except temptation"!



Still, there's an awful lot right with the EVO 200 pre/power. I couldn't really think of any aspect in which it might be considered wanting. It fulfils the highest expectations, sounding wonderfully natural and lifelike. Musically, it's engaging and highly rewarding to listen to. It really put my Klipsch Cornwall IV loudspeakers through their paces, highlighting their wide dynamic contrasts and crisp transient attack while minimising harshness without losing detail or immediacy. PrimaLuna amps really partner with these speakers well. With such fine build quality, this combo represents great value for money and should provide a lifetime of enjoyment without easily being superseded.