



Power to the people!

Ditching its all-tube focus with the EVO 300 Hybrid integrated, PrimaLuna follows up with this bridgeable power amp version

Simplicity itself, the concept behind Floyd – PrimaLuna’s name for its hybrid series – envisioned by designer Jan de Groot, is: “We want the warmth of tube sound, but with more power, so we begin by shaping the music in a tube environment – the preamp stage and the MOSFETs carry it from there”.

The 12AU7 triode tubes, a total of six in this instance, represent a very practical choice – PrimaLuna has always demonstrated a knack for selecting hard-to-criticise valves. With two-decades-plus in China, the company knows how to source the good stuff. That said, we have yet to mess around with one of its amps by replacing the valves with ‘selected’, ‘matched’ or even NOS classic valves for a worthwhile improvement. This observation might not stop inveterate tweekers from ‘tube rolling’ for the thrill of it, but it might be a waste of time.

PL founder Herman van den Dungen points out that the MOSFET power amp stage is better suited to driving: “more demanding loudspeakers,” and it handles Wilson’s The WATT Puppy, DeVore O/93 and BBC LS3/5As with equal disdain: nothing seems to ruffle it. Also important for some, a hybrid amp costs so much less money to run than an all-valve equivalent – you should see the electricity bills for our listening room...

The price of the hybrid power amp is higher than that of the EVO 300 integrated, which shares the same chassis design – but the former offers extra functionality. Switches on the rear enable a mono/bridging circuit for those who need more power as well as ‘High’ and ‘Low’ gain (sensitivity) settings. The power amp also includes a transformer-coupled XLR input while the PSU transformer includes multiple secondaries in this model.

As with most power amps, setup is all but self-explanatory. The amplifier

weighs a hefty 31kg and occupies 385 x 205 x 405mm (WxHxD), so take that into consideration if you’re planning to place it on a shelf. Also, the FET power amp runs warm – we measure 38°C on the lid and 46°C on the side-mounted heatsinks after a few hours’ playing time – so adequate ventilation is vital.

On the left side is the on/off rocker switch, the front panel bearing only the power-on LED, which changes from red to green after one minute of a muted warm-up period. The rear panel includes a selector for the XLR or RCA input, ‘high’ or ‘low’ gain and stereo or bridged-mono operation.

Sound quality

Listening reveals that two of these extra features need specific comment, especially for anyone planning to have a demo of the EVO 300 integrated. The ‘High’ gain mode, for example, is simply too high for our Audio Research REF 6SE preamp, or when fed directly by our PS Audio Direct Stream DAC MK2 – in both cases we barely have to turn up the volume on the preamp before blasting ourselves out of the room. Via the PS Audio DAC, we have to reduce its output by 60 percent from its usual setting.

It isn’t just about having enough usable scope for precise level setting, as anyone knows if they’ve used a preamp with only a tiny arc of play before it’s too loud. The EVO 300 Hybrid sounds better with sensitivity set to ‘Low’, making it quieter, less brash and more valve-like. And this amp does sound deliciously tube-y.

So, too, the XLR-vs-RCA inputs. Their behaviour is quite different, but not as

DETAILS

PRODUCT
PrimaLuna EVO 300 Hybrid Poweramplifier

ORIGIN
Netherlands

TYPE
Hybrid power amplifier

WEIGHT
31kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
385 x 205 x 405mm

FEATURES
• Quoted power output: 100W (8ohm)
• 6x 12AU7 tubes
• Inputs: stereo RCA; stereo XLR

DISTRIBUTOR
Absolute Sounds

WEBSITE
primalun.nl
absolutesounds.com

one would expect from an amplifier with actual balanced XLR inputs to compare with RCAs. While single-ended-vs-balanced sounds marginally if audibly different, gain variances aside, the overall character is (usually) fundamentally the same. With this amplifier, the RCA input sounds more transistor-esque and the XLR more valve-like.

Feeding it a healthy diet of SACDs, vinyl and open-reel tape, the overall impression is one of balance between its tube and FET technologies. We kick off proceedings with the reel-to-reel of The Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* and it takes all of five seconds to appreciate two fundamental aspects of the EVO 300

Voices are so natural sounding that it actually refocuses one's attention

Hybrid's behaviour. Overall, it can form and fill a massive soundstage with precise positioning and stage depth. Bass, too, will bring a smile to anyone who craves the extension and snap of transistor amps, but with freedom from the overly damped artifice some designs are apt to impart.

Instead, especially on Macca's bass work on *When I'm 64*, the music flows with a naturalness that is impossible to ignore. It is finely detailed, precise, loping along with the lyrics. Indeed, its presence throughout the entire album is exemplary, but the clincher is not the bass so much as the detail.

Being For The Benefit Of Mr Kite and *Lucy In The Sky With Diamonds* remain exemplars of The Beatles' studio



inventiveness, but they're tricky to use for reviewing purposes as many of the sounds are studio-generated effects. It makes no difference, however, when your ears tell you that you are hearing what George Martin and the Fab Four intended. Indeed, the most revealing element is that long sustain at the end of *A Day In The Life*: smooth, consistent, imposing – nay, majestic.

At the opposite end of the scale, we play the lean, wholly naturalistic blues of Lonnie Johnson with Elmer Snowden on *Blues & Ballads*. This offers two trials for the EVO 300 Hybrid, both of which are passed with flying colours. The first is the ultra-wide, extreme left/right stereo of the era while the second is the mainly unplugged instruments.

So lifelike is the recreation of the studio, with vocals so far to the left that it's possible to believe that a wall has vanished. The guitars have the kind of presence that fools you for those fleeting moments where you swear it's real. But that's nothing compared with the vocals where the textures are the defining qualities, as distinctive as Joe Cocker's or Paolo Conte's growls.

Despite the mildly distracting (to modern ears) far-left location, the voices are so natural sounding that it actually refocuses one's attention – which is probably the way it should be. The wry, saucy *Jelly Roll Blues* is delivered with an abundance of feeling, all the better to illustrate what audiophiles mean when they claim a system can reproduce emotion. And that's also as it should be.

For all the satisfaction the EVO 300 Hybrid provides for pro-valve listeners, we can imagine those diametrically opposed purist audiophile species – tubes versus transistors – finding grounds for criticism because the two have been weighed equally, exactly as

the mission statement required. But perhaps this is an academic debate, for purists of either discipline might not contemplate a hybrid design. For those undecided or who like both, the EVO 300 Hybrid is one of the best examples of cross pollination we've heard.

If choosing an amp is a matter of tubes-only-versus-solid-state-only-versus-I'm-not-bothered, your own predisposition will influence your reaction to this remarkable amp. Via the RCA it sounds just like the EVO 300 Hybrid Integrated, but via the XLR – even if you resort to an RCA-to-XLR adapter – the EVO 300 Hybrid 'Poweramplifier' embraces the hybrid concept, perfectly blending tube colour with solid-state grip. For the undecided, this might be the best of both worlds.

Conclusion

The EVO 300 Hybrid Poweramplifier acts like it has three times its power. As far as PrimaLuna is concerned, it is 'mission accomplished' as it delivers all its force with the aplomb of a massive transistor amp, but with the warmth tube fans demand. It's neither as fat nor rich as the all-tube EVO 300 amp, nor hyper-etched à la all-solid-state. Instead, it's just right ●

Hi-FiChoice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



LIKE: Decent bass extension, soundstage and detail

VALUE FOR MONEY



DISLIKE: It gets hot!

BUILD QUALITY



WE SAY: A best of both worlds hybrid option that blends tube colour with solid-state grip

FEATURES



OVERALL

