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Music Illuminated



PrimaLuna EVO 300 Hybrid

The sound of tube amplifiers has fascinated the true believers of faithful reproduction for decades. It is a bit of a world of nostalgic technology, but above all, of thoughtful and thoroughly engineered design.

But all this is done in pursuit of the highest possible level of accurate sound reproduction. There are not many traditional "tube companies" in the hi-fi sector, and I think they pride themselves on their excellence. They don't like to let anyone new into their club, and certainly rightly so. However, I believe that in the case of PrimaLuna, this elite club was happy to make an exception.

PrimaLuna is relatively new on the market of lamp amplifiers, also called tube amplifiers. It was founded in 2003 in the Netherlands by Herman van den Dungen. The company's name contains a powerful story that dates back to 495 AD. PrimaLuna - "first moon" - is the name of a small Italian village about 50 km from Milan. The presumed original historical name was Prima Lumen, which translates as "first light", a reference to the early Christian history of the village. The name is also a family legacy of the founder - his grandfather had the nickname Maantje, which means "little moon" in English.

The story of these amplifiers began with the Prologue series, which was immediately described by critics and reviewers as highly respected and appreciated. Gradual development and refinement led to the current Evolution series, including the EVO 300 Hybrid. Conceptually, it is a hybrid integrated amplifier, i.e. a combination of tube and transistor technology. The main problem with tubes is the relatively low power output, especially when used in the unit's power section.

It brings the complication of synergy with speakers that require more power, and the low lifespan and high cost of power tubes are not negligible either. PrimaLuna has combined the world of tubes and transistors in the EVO 300 Hybrid, taking the positive from each area - subtlety, colour, detail from tubes and performance from transistors. So the EVO 300 Hybrid consists of a tube preamplifier and transistor output stages.

The amplifier's front is dominated by an anodised aluminium panel (available in silver or black) and two rotary knobs, one for volume control and the other for input switching. Above it is a removable, elegantly ribbed cover, under which the tubes of the preamp stage.

The power section is developed in collaboration with Floyd Design and its designer Jan van Groot, who has been involved in transistor amplifier development for over 26 years. His original circuits use components that have similar properties to tubes. The dual-mono solid-state power section contains coupled JFET transistors from Linear Systems and specially manufactured 20N20/20P20 MOSFET transistors from Exicon, providing more than 2 x 100 W at 8 Ω . A massive 500 VA toroidal transformer feeds the power stages.

Red LED light penetrates through the ventilation holes, fulfilling the role of a low-noise power supply for individual circuits. The rear panel has high-quality gold-plated RCA connectors for - 5 x line input, 1 x HT. As an option, the amplifier can be supplied with a high-quality preamplifier for MM transmission. Speaker terminals are from WBT.

Despite its relatively compact dimensions, the amplifier is impressively heavy - 29 kg, which only shows the sense of responsibility for the construction. The unit comes with an elegant, all-metal remote control. The amplifier's sound quality test took place in a moderately darkened listening room with natural acoustics. The signal source was an Electrocompaniet ECM 1 MK II streamer and a Rega Planar 10 turntable equipped with a Rega Apheta 3 MC cartridge in combination with a Rega NEO PSU. The MC pre-amplification was provided by Electrocompaniet's ECP 2 MK II. The Dynaudio Contour 60i and Dynaudio Heritage Special speakers were connected via XLO Signature cabling.

I started listening with streaming digital, more or less to let the system warm-up and cool down. However, the Cafe Blue album by American jazz and blues singer Patricia Barber made it clear to me from the first moment that this was going to be a sonic experience that would be truly rewarding. The female vocals were beautifully modelled, sounding tuneful and present, the keyboards sounded virtuosic, the drumsticks and snare pads added a strange irregular rhythm to the music. The atmosphere of the half-empty jazz club was perfectly evoked

But in the same vein was everything I programmed after that, whether it was Norah Jones, Suzanne Vega, Ben Webster, or even Pink Floyd. One word in particular was repeated in my notes - atmosphere, atmosphere, atmosphere... The EVO 300 Hybrid can capture this in an incredibly captivating and natural way. The listening experience is pleasant and relaxing, but at the same time, when it comes down to it, the amp can get really exciting.

Encouraged by the progress of the test so far, I switched to LP analogue. The live recording of the Monty Alexander Trio at the Montreux Jazz Festival in Montreux, Switzerland, is one of the best the masters of sound have managed to produce. Our line-up delivered the bravura with great dynamics and rhythm, and the space was layered in width and depth.

The preamp stage is fitted with three custom-selected PrimaLuna 12AU7 tubes per channel, with low distortion and a wide pass bandwidth. At the same time, each trio has its dedicated separate power supply.

The power supply for the tube sections features patented filter circuitries called the AC Offset Killer, designed to eliminate the mechanical noise of the toroidal transformers and effectively prevent it from being transmitted into the signal path.

They use PCBs only where necessary (2.4 mm thick with gold-plated signal paths). The rest of the entire wiring topology is hand-wired with high-silver copper solder wires. A look inside the amplifier further reveals that it uses only the best that the world has to offer today for its various components and parts - Takman, DuRoch, Nichicon, Alps, Linear Systems, Rubycon and Kemet.

The rear completes the solid housing of the power amplifier. Finned heatsinks of the output stage characterise the sides of the unit.





Sound quality
power performance
attractive design



Considering the price of the device, nothing

PrimaLuna EVO 300 Hybrid

Number of Channels: 2

Output power: 2 x 100 W/8 Ω, 2 x 150 W/4 Ω

Frequency Response: 10 Hz - 80 kHz +/- 3dB

THD: less than 0.2% 100 W @ 8 Ω

Signal-to-Noise Ratio - 105 dB

Input sensitivity: 34 kΩ

Input impedance: 415 mV

Inputs: 5 x RCA line, 1 x HT

Dimensions (h x w x d): 205 x 405 x 385 mm

Weight: 25 kg

Optional accessories: MM pre-amplifier

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The atmosphere of the concert hall, the applause and other spontaneous reactions of the audience drew me into the middle of the musical action, in short, a concert in a listening room. The transition from the slow, quiet passages to the more dynamic and loud passages was solid, without fading or overwhelming. Unlike a large symphony orchestra, where it is always a bit difficult to keep track of the individual instruments, and we perceive them more in the context of the larger whole, here, one could literally feel each of them. Yes, that is precisely how I imagine it!

In the same spirit was Dick Hyman with his *From the Age Of Swing* from Reference Recordings. This studio recording of the jazz pianist and his colleagues presented itself with a sound of finely rendered detail. The colorful tone of the individual instruments and their physical dimension seemed realistic. Once again, the recording atmosphere brought into the listening room was striking.

Antonín Dvořák's *Slavonic Dances* - a Classic Records rarity on four 180-gram 45-rpm vinyl records - is a tough job, even for considerably more sophisticated equipment. The EVO 300 Hybrid handles them with amazing dynamics and speed. Alternating between quiet passages and overexposed - and those transitions are extremely punchy indeed - the amplifier took them without a hint of distortion and managed to keep the whole sound spectrum compact. The strings were presented with finesse. Even in the high octaves, they did not pull at the ears. The orchestra was layered in depth and width. In short, a great experience!

The combination of tubes and transistors in the form in which the EVO 300 Hybrid offers them deserves my greatest admiration and appreciation. In essence, PrimaLuna has managed to remove the fundamental issues of tubes and, in turn, preserve everything we love about tubes - the richness, plasticity, excellent dynamics and detail of the sound. Their patented circuitry in the power section suppresses the transistor effect to a minimum. We still feel we are listening to an "all-tube" amplifier, but at the output with power, punch and speed previously unheard of. In hi-fi, I have seen -till now- hybrid technology as a compromise and never an ideal solution. After listening to the EVO 300 Hybrid, I have to revise this opinion fundamentally. And I do it with enormous pleasure!!

