

PrimaLuna's EVO 300 Hybrid is a marriage made in heaven



I've given up on bucket lists, they tempt fate. I imagine the Grim Reaper letting me tick a few things off, then stepping in to cart me away, a wry 'gotcha' spread broadly across his face. Swimming with dolphins never did appeal anyway.

I've got a few audio brands I want to try before it's too late. Experience tells me some will meet expectations, some will fall short. But when the chance comes along to review something from the list I take it. PrimaLuna's top integrated, the EVO 300 Hybrid? Yes, please.

At £6498 / US\$7295 / €7150 it will really have to deliver the goods. My usual Cambridge / Gold Note setup costs about £2k less and sounds wonderful. That price difference would buy the excellent Rega Elicit Mk5 that I reviewed recently. Is it worth stretching to the PrimaLuna? Might it be different from (and not better than) my usual ride? Only one way to find out...

Hybrid

You'd be forgiven for thinking PrimaLuna is American, such is the online ubiquity of US distributor Kevin Deal. The light he's shone on the brand has certainly spread far and wide. But no, the company is Dutch, started in 2003 by audio distributor Herman van den Dungen. PrimaLuna sits underneath Durob, the umbrella company for his many audio interests.



PrimaLuna is known primarily for valve amplifiers (aka tube amplifiers). The EVO 300 Hybrid is the company's first foray into hybrid electronics, marrying a valve pre-amplifier to a solid-state power amplifier. The preamplifier stage is based closely on the circuitry of PrimaLuna's Evo 300/400 preamplifiers, minus the tube rectification. That still leaves six 12AU7 valves to shepherd the signal to the power amplifier – the EVO 300 Hybrid has serious valve-preamplifier chops.

A combination of solid-state JFETs and MOSFETs make up the power stage, which was developed by Jan de Groot of Floyd Design (another Durob company). He has considerable experience in MOSFET design; those in the EVO 300 Hybrid are custom-made for PrimaLuna.

The end result is an amplifier that delivers a conservative 100wpc and 160wpc into 8 and 4 Ohms respectively – enough clout for most real-world speakers. Side note: some valve power amplifiers are often low-ish power and can struggle with even 86-88dB sensitivity speaker).

Hybrid amplifiers aren't overly common. Nor is the EVO 300 Hybrid unique. The question is one of execution – how well has PrimaLuna married the two technologies? Does the EVO 300 Hybrid deliver the best of both worlds, the power and grip of solid-state matched to the delicacy of a valve preamplifier? Or is it a marriage of marketing convenience? Or perhaps a jack of all trades and a master of none? Let's see.

Functionality

The amplifier has five RCA inputs, a home theatre input that bypasses the volume control and a line-level output for headphone amplifiers or anything else requiring a fixed output (cassette recorder anyone?!). So far so normal.

A dual-RCA subwoofer output is switchable between mono and stereo. It takes the feed from the output transformers, the subwoofer seeing the same signal as the main speakers. PrimaLuna says it makes for better integration of the subwoofer and provides stronger dynamics. The downside is that the subwoofer output can't double as a variable line-out.



The EVO 300 Hybrid's headphone amplifier is also different in having been designed as a full-on tube amplifier. It's transformer-coupled for example. Its power output is just lower; commensurate with driving headphones rather than speakers. A switch toggles between speakers and headphones. Headphones must be plugged in before switching to them (similar to always running a valve power amplifier with speakers connected). An optional £150 MM phono input can be slung low under the rear of the amplifier. This is more of a convenience as purist vinylistas will want to use an external phono stage. PrimaLuna even says as much. Finally, the EVO 300 Hybrid has a single set of speaker terminals. Balanced connections would have been nice (that's the main difference between the EVO 300 and 400 pre-amplifiers). A pre-out would also have been useful, although that may be the reviewer in me speaking. The front panel is simple, with just a volume knob, status light, input control and the 6.3mm headphone socket. The headphone rocker is on the right side of the amplifier, the on/off rocker on the left. At switch-on, we have to wait 30 seconds for the LED to turn from red to green. A rather solid and stylish metal remote rounds out the package.



Build

As a wander around its informative website shows, PrimaLuna showcases its build quality. For example:

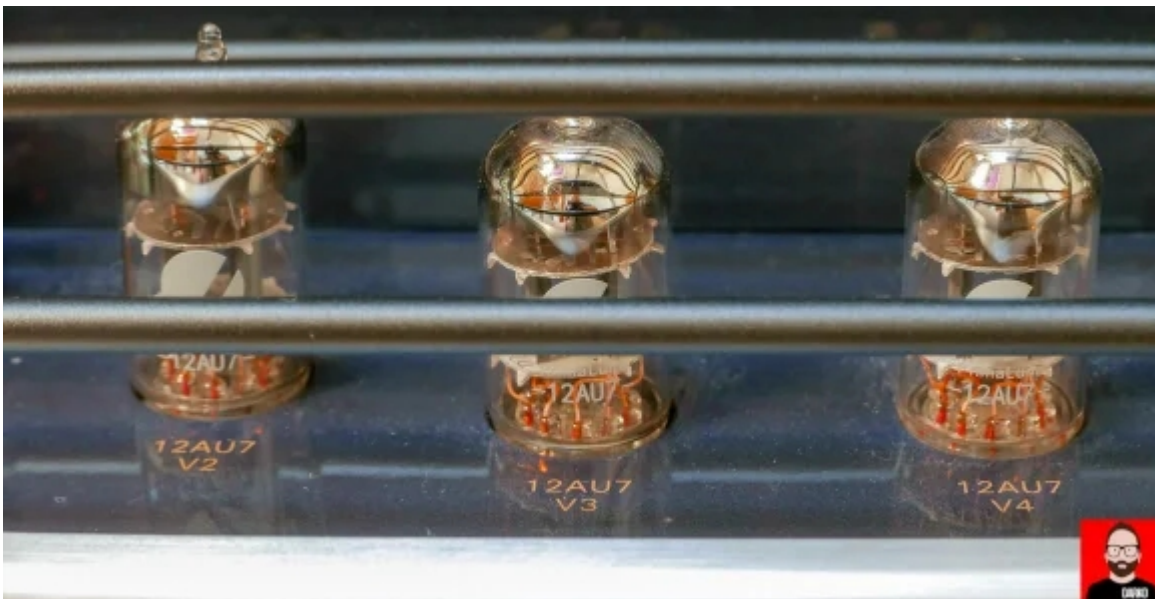
“Hardwiring is used extensively throughout the circuit design. Where PCBs are required, these are of the highest quality – 2.4mm thick with 105um gold-plated copper tracks.”

In the flesh, nothing undermines the confidence those words instill in you. Another example is the tube cage; beautifully built in itself, the grommets securing it in place also have just the right amount of resistance to keep it firmly in place yet still allow its removal. That’s attention to detail.

At 31kg the EVO 300 Hybrid is also a hefty unit. Rear-weighted with big transformers, it’s awkward to lift too.

Without the tube cage, the EVO 300 Hybrid’s look is a ‘standard tube amplifier’ – a row of valves fronting large transformers encased in metal. The curved tube cage serves to freshen up the look. It’s still retro-modern though, there’s no doubting that valves are the beating heart of the amplifier. Visitors who saw it were rather taken; glowing tubes do have a certain romance about them. I got quite attached too.

In use, the EVO 300 Hybrid runs warm – about 15°C above ambient room temperature – so good ventilation is essential. You can still rest your hand on the transformer cage though – just. Power consumption at idle was around 115W. I switched it off when not in use – less costly, easier on the valves and kinder to the environment. And it only takes about 20 minutes to warm up.



Review system

My usual system seemed broadly price appropriate so was pressed into service. Step forward the Cambridge Edge NQ (£5k but I only used its preamplifier), 2 x Gold Note PA-10 power amps (£2800/pair), Graham LS6 speakers (£2400/pair) and a REL T7/x subwoofer (£1000). Digital duties were handled by a Mytek Liberty II (£1295) and Pro-ject Stream Box S2 Ultra streamer (£629).

Listening

It was soon apparent the EVO 300 Hybrid sounded special. Really special. It was delivering a level of engagement that was captivating, the improvement over my normal setup slightly disconcerting.

Overall, it's a big sound that's uber-detailed whilst presenting music's textures beautifully. The latter two are not always natural bedfellows, no one told the PrimaLuna. It's also unassuming, almost nonchalant in the way it goes about its business. Think: 100m sprinter Usain Bolt smiling for the cameras as he obliterates his opponents.

The thing is, the sound doesn't appear overtly detailed at first. There's no sense of a spotlight being shone to illuminate detail. No hint of a party trick. And yet the PrimaLuna digs out detail like a pig in a truffle field. Yes, it's a cliché: but yes I was hearing new things in every piece of music played. Every. Single. One. Importantly, in all cases, the extra detail deepened the understanding and enjoyment of the piece.

In 'Great Gig in the Sky' (Live in Pompeii, David Gilmour) the three backing vocalists take centre stage (figuratively). Louise Marshall and Lucita Jules soared as usual. For the first time, I heard Bryan Chambers in the mix, subtly, from the beginning. Not joining halfway through. 'Bliss on Mushrooms' (by Infected Mushroom) is clearly so much more than a subwoofer workout – every listen surfaces something new. The bigger the forces at play, the more information the amplifier digs out. Well-recorded, large-scale orchestral works benefitted hugely from the EVO 300. Ivan Fischer's Mahler 1 enjoyed repeated plays, the finale sounding absolutely glorious.



How freshly retrieved detail was presented proved to be the real kicker. Subtle differences in shading were apparent, instruments and voices displaying tonal differences within as well as between themselves. The same was true of the soundstage. Yes it was cavernous, yes performers were clearly identified within it – that's to be expected from a good amplifier – but the EVO 300 Hybrid moves things onto a different plane (figuratively and literally). How so? By presenting individual performers in their own 3D space. A soundstage within a sound stage, the micro-detail and dynamics make it easier to picture the performers in the mind's eye.

And again, every increment in audible performance wrought by the PrimaLuna hybrid had musical relevance. Attention was focused on the music, not the sound of the system. The walking bass line in 'Talk To Your Daughter' (Theessink & Evans) was slightly less prominent for example, allowing more of

the interplay between guitarists to emerge, all without losing the impact of the bass line. Everything sounded more composed.

Don't read that as 'bass light' by the way. The EVO 300 Hybrid produced one of the most powerful low ends I've heard at home. The balance between bass control and the freedom for it to breathe was perfectly judged. And when heft was required it was delivered. For those saying the EVO 300 Hybrid lacks drive (one review has) try Porcupine Tree's new Closure / Continuation. There's a tsunami-like solidity to the sound through the PrimaLuna. One of the many times I edged the volume ever higher in order to revel in the sound of music.

Overall yes, the EVO 300 Hybrid is voiced ever so slightly warm. That plays to my preferences; outside of the reviewing role, I choose refinement over accuracy, which can mean sacrificing the nth degree of detail. Not here though, the PrimaLuna is the most resolving component I've had in my system. Ever. It's also the most refined. And yet as Porcupine Tree, ZZ Top, Metallica, The Who and many others showed, it ain't short of wallop when needed. Its 'best of all worlds' ability means it should appeal to a broad spectrum of listeners.



Side-by-side comparisons

I was nervous going back to the Edge NQ / 2 x PA-10 setup. But itching to try the Edge NQ with the PrimaLuna's power amplifier (is the valve pre-amplifier central to the magic?) A shame the lack of a suitable output on the EVO 300 Hybrid nixed any mating of its pre-amplifier to the PA-10 monoblocks.

The Edge NQ pre-amplifier driving the EVO 300 Hybrid's power amplifier came first. Cue Lady Blackbird's 'Did Somebody Make A Fool Out Of You' (a single). An intimate smoky jazz club vibe with Lady Blackbird, a piano and a double bass holding court. Long instrumental sections, Jonathan Flaucher (bass) and Deron Johnson (piano) almost prescient in their playing. The Edge / Evo combination nails it, everything in its place, the deliberately raw sound clear to all.

I then reverted to the EVO 300 Hybrid as an integrated amplifier and hit play on the Lady Blackbird track again. Sweet mother. The track came alive. The acoustic was bigger, the musicians significantly more palpable within it. It was also a cleaner sound that let more detail through. When Johnson lets rip in one section Flaugher's bass matches him in the background. Gone is a slight sheen that, with hindsight, the Edge NQ added to the sound, masking some of the detail. Through the EVO 300 Hybrid's pre-amplifier you really hear the intensity of the supporting bass player.

Over to the Edge NQ driving the PA-10 monoblocks. Disappointment ensued. A thinner sound emerged, more studio-like, ostensibly cleaner. It wasn't though, it had just lost the harmonic richness of the PrimaLuna. Palpability nose-dived in comparison. There was also less detail coming through the Graham loudspeakers. An altogether cooler – nay colder – sound. The EVO 300 Hybrid sounded plain better than the Edge NQ / PA-10 combination. Considerably better.



Headphone amplifier

I don't know about PrimaLuna's "best in the world" claim for the EVO 300's headphone amplifier but I do know my faithful Schiit Jotunheim has finally met its match. The Prima Luna bested it, with a slightly cleaner sound that let a touch more detail through. In comparison, the Schiit was both warmer and less composed. We're talking Federer / Djokovic / Nadal levels of difference though. Minor. Both headphone stages sounded absolutely wonderful, any differences having a minimal musical impact. I can also imagine a different interconnect between the Schiit and the EVO 300 Hybrid changing things.

Nevertheless, the EVO 300 Hybrid's headphone stage came out on top. As it did against the headphone output of the Mytek Liberty II DAC, which had a similar tonal balance to the PrimaLuna but slightly less control over proceedings. There is a slight hash to the Mytek's sound in comparison.

Were it staying, I'd rely on the EVO 300 Hybrid for headphone duties as well as loudspeaker listening. The only downside is the need to plug headphones in before switching over to them. That's a reminder for me as much as you.

