

Primaluna EVO 300 Hybrid integrated amplifier



Back in January 2021 our esteemed editor reviewed the Primaluna EVO400 integrated amplifier, which is currently the largest of the the Dutch brand's all valve (or tube, depending on your locale) amplifiers. He was most complimentary about it and gave it our five star award. I had also had a chance to review the next model down and found it an addictive listening experience. However, valve amplifiers are not for everyone - common complaints are that they don't offer the power of their solid state counterparts, that valves have a finite life and are expensive to replace and that they are more expensive to run. The good people at Primaluna realised that there would be a strong appeal in a hybrid amplifier, with smaller and longer-lasting 12AU7 valves taking care of the preamplifier duties with a more traditional solid state design stage used for the power amplification. This was achieved by combining Primaluna's valve expertise with the solid state expertise of Jan de Groot, head of Floyd Design, which is another part of parent company Durob's portfolio. With 26 years of experience in solid state design to call on, Mr deGroot was the ideal candidate to work on the Hybrid design. The fascia of the EVO 300 Hybrid thus sports the names of both Primaluna and Floyd Design.

In other respects, the EVO 300 Hybrid is unmistakably a member of the EVO family. It looks like its siblings, with beautifully finished casework in black or silver and a similar array of RCA inputs on the

rear, along with a pair of speaker terminals for each channel, although the four or eight Ohm terminals have gone as they are not necessary. On the left side is the on/off rocker switch and on the right a switch to select output to loudspeakers or to headphones. The auto-bias switch is not required with the solid state amplifier so that has been removed. An elegant but functional removable guard is supplied to keep little fingers or curious pets from touching the six preamplifier tubes. A full-sized headphone jack on the front is driven by the main amplifier and is by no means an afterthought tacked on at the behest of a product manager.

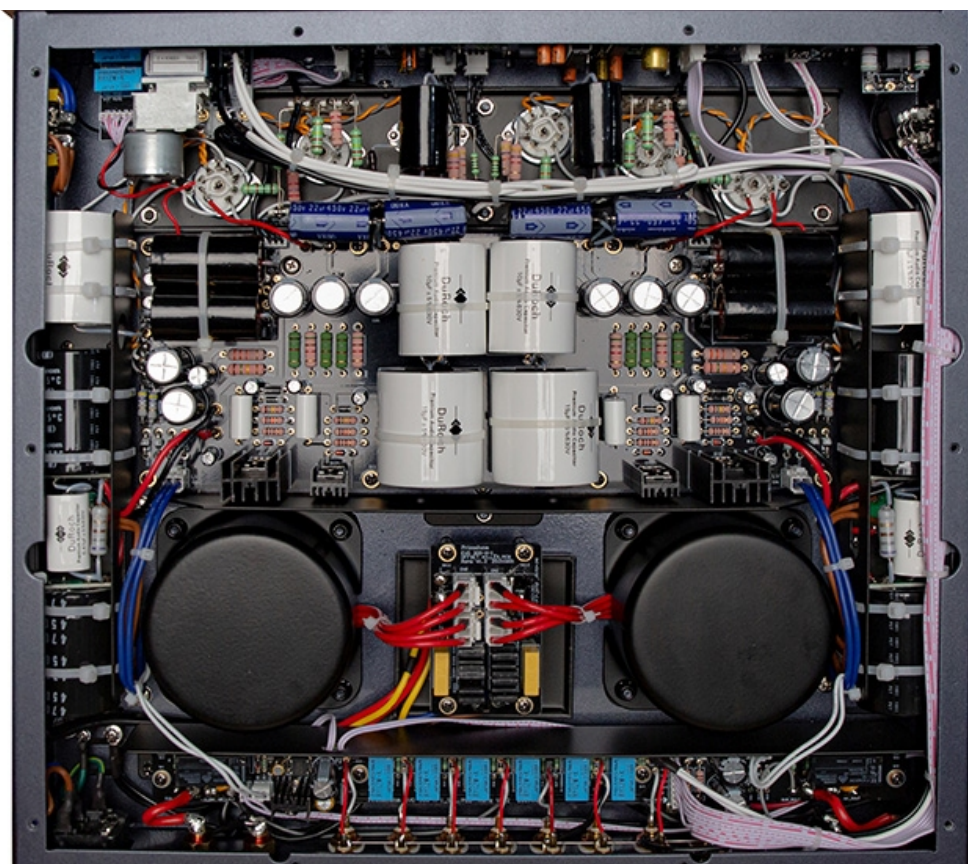


The RCA connections offer a sub out pair with a mono or stereo selector switch, a pair marked Tape Out, five pairs marked Aux, which allow the connection of source devices and finally a pair marked HT, which allows the Hybrid to be incorporated into a home theatre system. The review model also had the optional phono stage attached, which sits below the main chassis with a pair of RCA terminals and an earthing peg for the connection of a turntable with a moving magnet cartridge. I was unable to test this during the review as I have a moving coil attached to my Linn Sondek LP12's Akito arm, but given the high quality of everything else in the Hybrid, and indeed in the wider Primaluna product portfolio, I have no reason to doubt that this is more than adequate for its task. This is a pure analogue device, so there is no onboard DAC.

For this review I attached my Gold Note PH10 phono stage and Yamaha CD-S3000 SACD/CD player, which also did DAC duties, with the television connected via optical and the Auralic Aries Mini streamer via coaxial.

Despite the technology change, the EVO 300 Hybrid still weighs in at a hefty 31kg, which is the same as the EVO 400 integrated, with its complement of 14 valves and very heavy output transformers. Inside the Hybrid are three separate power transformers – two for the preamplifier and a meaty 500Va one for the power amplifiers. I use the plural because this is a dual mono design. No corners have been cut inside the Hybrid and components from top companies such as Takman, DuRoch, Nichicon, Alps, Linear Systems, Rubycon and Kemet are employed. Power output is rated at 100 watts per channel into eight

Ohms, and incorporates paired JFETs from Linear Systems and specially made MOSFETs. Overall, the EVO 300 Hybrid looks and feels like a premium product.



The speakers used for the review were my Harbeth C7ES3XD, mounted on their HiFi Racks Fortis stands with Stillpoints Ultra SS vibration control devices on the corners between the stand and the loudspeaker cabinet. I did plug in my REL305SE subwoofer but in the end I never felt the need to bring it into action.

Listening to the EVO 300 Hybrid

If I was lazy, and if the editor would let me get away with it, I would simply say that the EVO 300 Hybrid sounds magnificent. But I am not, and he will not. So let me expand and give you a better idea of what I heard.

To warm the unit up after transit – it arrived with me from another reviewer so was definitely well run-in – I played albums from my Qobuz 'favourites' selection, starting with the classic 1967 album *Forever Changes* by Love, a 192kHz/24bit hi-res file. From the first notes of *Alone Again Or* I was completely drawn into Arthur Lee's magnum opus. I sat there completely captivated until the last notes of *You Set The Scene* faded. What I experienced was a perfect balance of rhythmic drive, exquisite detail and musicality, with a soundstage that was not unrealistically over-exaggerated but instead had an almost tangible three dimensional credibility. From that first 45 minutes or so I knew that I was in for a very happy few weeks. After that I spent the rest of the first day choosing albums from my favourites, trying the Hybrid with different genres of music, and not just high resolution versions but also those ripped at the more prosaic CD quality of 44.1KHz/16bit, such as Al Di Meola's 1980 epic *Splendid Hotel*, which I have owned on vinyl since its release, and which still gets regular play on the turntable. Once again, I

sat through the whole album, oblivious to the passing of time. On vinyl this is a double album, necessitating trips to the player to turn over the records but hearing it uninterrupted like this was a real pleasure.



Whatever I played through the EVO 300 Hybrid, and from whatever source, it never failed to impress. In the evenings, when the music stops and we usually enjoy a couple of hours of television after supper, movie soundtracks had great panache, with action scenes and explosions delivered with commendable realism, even in our simple two channel set up. We watched Saving Private Ryan on Blu-ray, and the long opening scene of the landing on Omaha Beach was conveyed with gut wrenching credibility. Bullets seemed to ricochet round our room and the Hybrid teased a terrific amount of bass from the Harbeth C7s. They have a specified frequency response of 45Hz-20kHz, whereas the claimed response of the Hybrid is from 10Hz to 80kHz, an astonishing range. Without the equipment to verify those parameters I can only report that within the range of my hearing the Hybrid never sound harsh or contrived, nor could I detect that any part of the frequency spectrum was exaggerated at the expense of another part. Bass was always deep and tuneful, the midrange was punchy or delicate depending on the needs of the music and the higher frequencies had a gorgeous airy, light quality.

When I switched to vinyl replay, things seemed even better. The 12AU7 valves in the pre-amplifier section give the Hybrid that special quality that the editor and I both enjoyed with the all-valve designs of the Hybrid's siblings. I played what has become one of my standard review albums, Paul Chambers Bass On Top, (Blue Note BST-81569) recorded in a single day in July 1957 by Rudy van Gelder. It features, of course, the double bass of Mr Chambers, ably supported by Kenny Burrell on guitar, Hank Jones on piano and Art Taylor on drums. The Hybrid's portrayal of all the instruments was incredibly life-like, and put us firmly in the recording studio all those decades ago. Wonderful stuff. Similarly, it created beautiful classical music and choral work with Mozart's Requiem In D Minor K.626 as performed by the Dunedin Consort under the direction John Butt on Linn Records (CKH549).



Although I am not a regular headphone user I did plug in my Audioquest Nightowls and as expected the EVO 300 Hybrid produced a wonderful aural experience. Listening to Pink Floyd's Dark Side Of The Moon and Wish You Were Here on SACD was very impressive. This is an exceptional headphone amplifier.

Conclusion

By now you will have deduced that I was smitten with EVO 300 Hybrid. Its combination of a brilliantly executed solid state power amplifier with the delicacy and special character of a valve front-end really gives the user the best of both worlds. It delivers a meaty 100 watts into an eight Ohm load, so it has the power and bandwidth to work with almost any domestic loudspeaker. Unlike its all-valve siblings it is a much more fit and forget device, as the six valves in the preamplifier should under normal conditions be good for at least 10,000 hours of play and the build quality of the whole thing seems exemplary. Primaluna's first foray into the Hybrid world has to be deemed an unqualified success.

Specifications

- Type: Integrated hybrid stereo amplifier
- Analogue inputs: 5x RCA, HT bypass RCA
- Phono input: moving magnet (optional)
- Digital inputs: N/A
- Analogue outputs: tape out RCA, sub-out RCA
- Bluetooth: N/A
- Headphone output: 6.3mm jack
- Speaker outputs: 5-way binding posts
- Power Output: 100W into 8 ohms; 150W into 4 ohms
- Dimensions (HxWxD): 205 x 405 x 385mm
- Weight: 31kg