

PrimaLuna EVO 300 Hybrid

REVIEW

Alan Sircom | Oct 2022



PrimaLuna's mission to deliver high-end valves without the high-end price tag continues unabated, but when it came to hybrid designs, the company was famously silent on the subject. Not any more... with the EVO 300 Hybrid integrated amplifier, PrimaLuna hasn't just grasped the hybrid nettle, it's pulled up the nettle and brewed up a delicious concoction as a result.

But why go hybrid at all? While all-valve designs are frequently wonderful, sometimes more power is more, er, wonderful-er. It's possible to make high-power all-valve designs, but generally it's extremely difficult to produce such products without a lot of transformer iron and a plethora of output valves. That makes them expensive, and even more expensive to do properly. This puts high-power, all-valve designs outside of PrimaLuna's core ethos. The problem then becomes how to do hybrid 'right' and while there are many hybrid successes there are many examples of hybrid designs falling short in one or more aspect of performance.

Floyd makes an entrance

The 'Floyd Design' on the PrimaLuna EVO 300 Hybrid's front panel isn't just there as a sop to audio's obsession with Dark Side of the Moon; Floyd Design is an independent company run by ex-Sphinx engineer Jan de Groot. In the background, de Groot has been PrimaLuna's go-to solid-state engineer for its digital devices for the last 20 years, so he knows the PrimaLuna sound well. Recently, de Groot has teamed up with tube-amp virtuoso Marcel Croese (formerly of Goldmund fame), Kevin Deal of Durob Audio and PrimaLuna's Herman van de Dungen to create a handy brains-trust/listening team in order to build a device that leverages Jan de Groot's expertise with JFET power amplifiers without sacrificing what PrimaLuna stands for and how it sounds.



Looking past the 'Hybrid' part of the name gives you some clues about the amp itself. The 'EVO 300' part is there because this is effectively almost all of an all-valve EVO 300 preamplifier that has grown into an integrated design by virtue of a

JFET/MOSFET power amplifier capable of delivering a healthy 100W per channel into eight ohms and 150W per channel into four ohms. To mix these two amplifiers into one chassis, the EVO 300 preamplifier stage loses its valve rectification and choke-regulated power supply, but it retains its sextet of selected, double-triode 12AU7 valves, with two valves used for driver, cathode-follower and gain stages. These then meet high-performance Linear Systems JFETs and custom-built MOSFETs in a dual-mono Class AB power amp layout.

From the exterior, however, you could be forgiven for mistaking the Floyd as one of PrimaLuna's preamplifiers. The classic PrimaLuna rolled valve cage and basic two dial layout (complete with 6.35mm headphone jack) remains the same. It's only the absence of bigger power valves beneath the cage and the presence of two pairs of decent WBT terminals at the rear suggest anything out of the ordinary. Oh, and the weight; knocking in at a healthy 31kg, this matches the EL34 powered EVO 400 power amp in the heavy lifting category.

In all other areas this is classic PrimaLuna fare and one of the nice touches from the EVO range shared here is that switched headphone socket; where most autodetect the presence of a headphone jack inserted to the socket, PrimaLuna has a switch on the side that moves its operation from loudspeakers to headphones. This is because the PrimaLuna doesn't just use a standard headphone amp circuit and believes in sonic purity to such an extent that the inclusion of that detection circuit is something else to undermine the sound of an amp. While this may cause a few 'choice' words if that switch is thrown without your knowledge, I think this is a good way of making a great sounding amplifier, both in loudspeaker and headphone terms.

Sound Quality

This amplifier did take a little while to come on song; as it bedded in, the soundstage seemed to increase its width and depth slightly every day and then suddenly grew some height information. Around the same time, the treble – already well integrated with the mid and bass – just suddenly shifted gears and became the perfect partner for the rest of the tonal range. It just ties together better after a few days of settling down.



Like most reviewers, I have my go-to recordings that are used to pick out aspects of performance, but they quickly came and went. I was enjoying what I heard from them and so much more. I will point to one new inclusion in the roster, there for a specific reason; 'Rejection' from Lady In Gold by Blues Pills [Nuclear Blast]. This album is almost a perfect inversion of an 'audiophile' recording because it tends to sound worse the better the system; lively yet warm like a pastiche of an early 70s rock album on cheaper equipment, the better the system, the more 'lively yet warm' gets pushed to the back while 'pastiche' becomes uppermost. Here, however, it achieves a fine balance; the album is still shut in and sibilant sounding, but not so flat and uninspiring as it so often sounds on good equipment. Given what the PrimaLuna EVO 300 Hybrid was doing elsewhere with other recordings, it was the amplifier's clarity and grain-free detail that shone through.

Like other PrimaLuna amplifiers, the EVO 300 Hybrid isn't 'tubey'; it's not overly lush or warm sounding. There is a spot of warmth to the sound, but the overall performance is one that's clean, detailed, dynamic and musically insightful. I couldn't resist playing some Pink Floyd through an amplifier from 'Floyd Design', but I managed to hold it in check enough to make it 'Money' from The Flaming Lips and Stardeath and White Dwarfs with Henry Rollins and Peaches Doing Dark Side of the Moon [Warner Brothers]... and 'Comfortably Numb' from Pink Floyd's The Wall [Harvest]. The Floyd took on all the malevolent angry whispered vocals and slightly crazed sounds of the former with aplomb, and gave all the size, space, and shape needed to play the latter beautifully. In fact, 'Money' said more about the Floyd's (the amp, not the band) sound; the shift from 7/8 time to 4/4 time is deliberately buried in this version, but is easy to detect, thanks to the amp's unswerving dedication to timing, soundstage spacing and good top-end detail without harshness (other amps will never get past the robotic spring-reverb noises).

Under-described

I think one of the most under-described parts of a good sounding amplifier is how it can affect you beyond the strictly audible. Listen to something emotive and you get goosebumps or even get misty eyed. Play something soulful and you feel

compelled to tap your feet. Play the soundtrack to *The Wicker Man* and you'll start sacrificing Scottish policemen to the corn gods. That kind of thing. The PrimaLuna EVO 300 Hybrid excels at putting your autonomous nervous system on notice. When you get goosebumps listening to 'Hurricane' by Bob Dylan [Desire, CBS] or 'Kashmir' by Led Zeppelin [Physical Graffiti, Swan Song] – despite playing those tracks for the millionth time – you know this amp is doing something special. A lot of that 'special' is down to the Floyd's soundstaging, the detail without brash and harsh edges, its richness of tone, overall balance and control over the bass, that is at once deep and rhythmically enjoyable. Yet, that also sums up many amplifiers, and the PrimaLuna EVO 300 Hybrid has something more up its sleeve.



Neologisms are often ugly little beasts, and my newly minted one is no different; punchinement. It's a portmanteau word describing that rare ability the PrimaLuna EVO 300 Hybrid has of combining dynamic 'punch' with a satisfying sense of extraordinary 'refinement' and I feel this both defines the sound of this amplifier and is its most unique feature. It's unique because it reads like a contradiction in terms; something described in terms best used for boxing isn't necessarily a good match with terms found in discussing lace. But it works; not like Ali's poetry outside the ring, but when he really did 'float like a butterfly, sting like a bee'.

Rachmaninov's *Symphonic Dances* [Zinman, Telarc] are a perfect example of this neologism in action: the music has energy, dynamism and 'punch' and to undermine this turns this powerful piece into something flat and pallid, but it's also refined and at times mannered and to undermine that refinement turns the piece into something with nothing more than fireworks. To portray both at once asks much of the system, and typically leaves it sounding a little wanting. The PrimaLuna EVO 300 Hybrid takes this difficult track in its stride, never once pulling back from the visceral sound it requires but always portraying that gutsy performance with all the legato filigree detail refined and intact. And once you unlock that combination in your head, you discover just how rare it is outside of the stereo stratosphere.

Low-level joy

There's another little joy to this amplifier; it sounds great at low levels. I need to temper this slightly by saying the volume control can get extremely sensitive at these lower points on the volume dial, so you need to be a bit of a safe-cracker in setting the perfect volume setting, but you are rewarded with the same tonal balance and combination of richness, speed, dynamics and punchiness the Floyd does so well. Interestingly, and I'm not sure why this happens, it sounds perceptually 'louder' than most amps when played quietly for late-night listening. This is not actually 'more volume', just that its dynamic range is so uncompromised at those lower volume levels, it seems like you are playing louder... but the tried and trusted combination of test protocols (checking with an SPL meter and detecting no whining sounds from a unfreshly awakened wife) confirmed that it was the same volume range.

Even the headphone amplifier – which is so often a bit of an afterthought in high-end amplifier circles – sounds great. It's got the same broad characteristics as the amplifier driving a pair of loudspeakers (although the soundstaging isn't quite as broad, but this is more down to the nature of headphone listening than the amp per se), and had that aforementioned 'punchinement' I heard throughout to a similar degree.



The PrimaLuna EVO 300 Hybrid isn't beyond criticism, but those criticisms are minor in the extreme. Sure, if you are using the EVO 300 Hybrid with a truly amp-crushing loudspeaker at ear-bending levels, you are going to need something even more powerful. And more powerful integrated amplifiers that also sound good do exist, albeit generally at a price above that of the EVO 300 Hybrid, and the Krell K-300i springs to mind. Staying with that integrated amp also shows two other observations; the absence of a built-in DAC or balanced inputs. In truth, I'd rather not have either of these included just to

tick a couple of boxes and I'd rather a sweet-singing single-ended design like the Floyd than an amp that sounded less good but came with built-in DAC and included some XLRs. But to get an amp that covers all these minor downsides and sounds as good as the PrimaLuna EVO 300 Hybrid, you are talking a major uptick in pricing. Often, you'll pay more and get less... that's long been the beauty of PrimaLuna products in general and it certainly is the case here.

Conclusion

I'd love to take claim for this, but the news is already out about how damn good the PrimaLuna EVO 300 Hybrid sounds. I was supposed to get one of these amps at the tail end of 2021, but the first batch sold out as they were being made. And so did the second, and it looks as if that trend is set to continue. It's not hard to see why though; a lot of those EVO 300 Hybrids go to distributors, dealers, and everyone else who gets to listen to them before they make it to the public. Everyone's trying on a few new excuses not to give the amp back once heard and I'm going with distractions and subject changes. I've even tried a few old homework excuses, but no one believes that I left the amp on the back seat of the bus. I don't know how long that will last but I am really reluctant to part company with this excellent sounding amplifier.

Technical specifications

- Type Integrated hybrid amplifier
- Inputs 5x RCA stereo pairs, 1x home theatre pass through RCA stereo pair
- Outputs 1x RCA stereo pair tape outputs, 2x subwoofer outputs RCA (stereo or dual mono), 6.35mm headphone jack, loudspeaker terminals
- Power output >100W per channel (typically 115W) into 8Ω, >150W per channel (typically 170W) into 4Ω
- Tube Complement 6x 12AU7
- Frequency Response 10Hz–80kHz ±3dB
- Damping factor 160 (1kHz)
- THD <0.2% 100W @ 8Ω
- S/N Ratio -105dB (A weighted)
- Input impedance 30kΩ
- Input sensitivity 415mV
- Total Gain (Pre+Power amp) 37.2dB (7dB+30.2db)
- Finish Black, brushed aluminium
- Dimension (LxWxH) 40.5 × 38.5 × 20.5cm
- Weight 31kg
- Price £6,498

PrimaLuna

Manufacturer

URL: primaluna.nl

UK Distributor

Tel: +44(0)20 8971 3909

Absolute Sounds

URL: absolutesounds.com