

PrimaLuna EVO400 integrated amplifier

Rogier van Bakel | May 18, 2022



National pride is the damndest thing. When I was growing up in the Netherlands, schoolchildren were taught that the inventor of the printing press was a Dutchman named Laurens Janszoon Coster. Germany's Johannes Gutenberg was waved away as an also-ran, if he was mentioned at all.

Since then, the Dutch have claimed other engineering and technology triumphs that aren't quite so dicey. Take the world of audio. Dutch innovators at Philips gave us the audio cassette (for which I beg your forgiveness). Two decades later, they and their Sony colleagues upped the game with the Compact Disc—and randomly decided on the diameter of the center hole by making it exactly the size of the pre-Euro Dutch dime. A Dutchman came up with Bluetooth. Top high-end brands like Mola Mola and Hypex hail from the Netherlands (footnote 1).

So does PrimaLuna. For almost 20 years, the company has built a solid reputation making high-quality tube gear—that *still* offers remarkable value, even after the price of its cheapest products rose from \$1095 in 2003 to \$2795.

I own the [PrimaLuna DiaLogue Premium HP](#) power amplifier. It's superb. So I didn't need much convincing when *Stereophile* Editor Jim Austin tasked me with reviewing the company's top-of-the-line integrated tube amplifier, the EVO 400. After it spent almost three months in my system, I can safely say that in contrast to the story about Mr. Coster and the printing press, there's nothing hyped or sus about the praise this product has received.

Care and feeding

I have a checkered history with tube amplifiers, and some of that is my own fault. One morning two years ago, when I was reviewing for a different publication, an amp arrived for audition. I plugged it in, and only when a wisp of smoke accompanied the puzzling absence of sound did I realize that, while I'd neatly rolled out the speaker cables, I hadn't actually connected them to the binding posts. The replacement fared better, and the sonics were enjoyable, but frequent fluttering noises made for a mixed experience. I never did write that review.



For me, choosing sides in the old tubes-vs-solid state debate is a Solomonic ordeal. I often love the *sound* of tubes (in the right system), but that soothing, seductive signature is offset by the care and feeding that tube technology seems to require. Plug in a solid state amplifier and you're good to go, probably for decades. Plug in and turn on a tube amp and you've got *responsibilities*. Depending on the particular model, you may have to make sure there's always a load on the

terminals before plugging it in and remind yourself to adjust the bias from time to time (although PrimaLunas, admirably, are truly autobiasing). You also can't help but listen for tubes that are possibly sputtering toward death. You'd best have spares on hand when they finally croak, and be prepared to spring for an entire fresh set every so often. Which, especially in times of tube scarcity—I'm looking at you, Russia—can tax budgets.

In my experience, which goes back 25 years to an otherwise very fine Mesa Baron power amplifier, tube components are also more susceptible to hum and other unwanted noises than their solid state counterparts. I've even seen disquieting arcing in a factory-fresh tube preamp. Then again, my PrimaLuna DiaLogue power amp, ca. 2016, has never exhibited the slightest bit of trouble; there may be truth to the company's claim that its products are built to last a lifetime. I've also had zero issues with my Black Ice (formerly Jolida) FX10, a pint-sized, wallet-friendly little tube (ch)amp that has no business sounding as pleasant as it does.



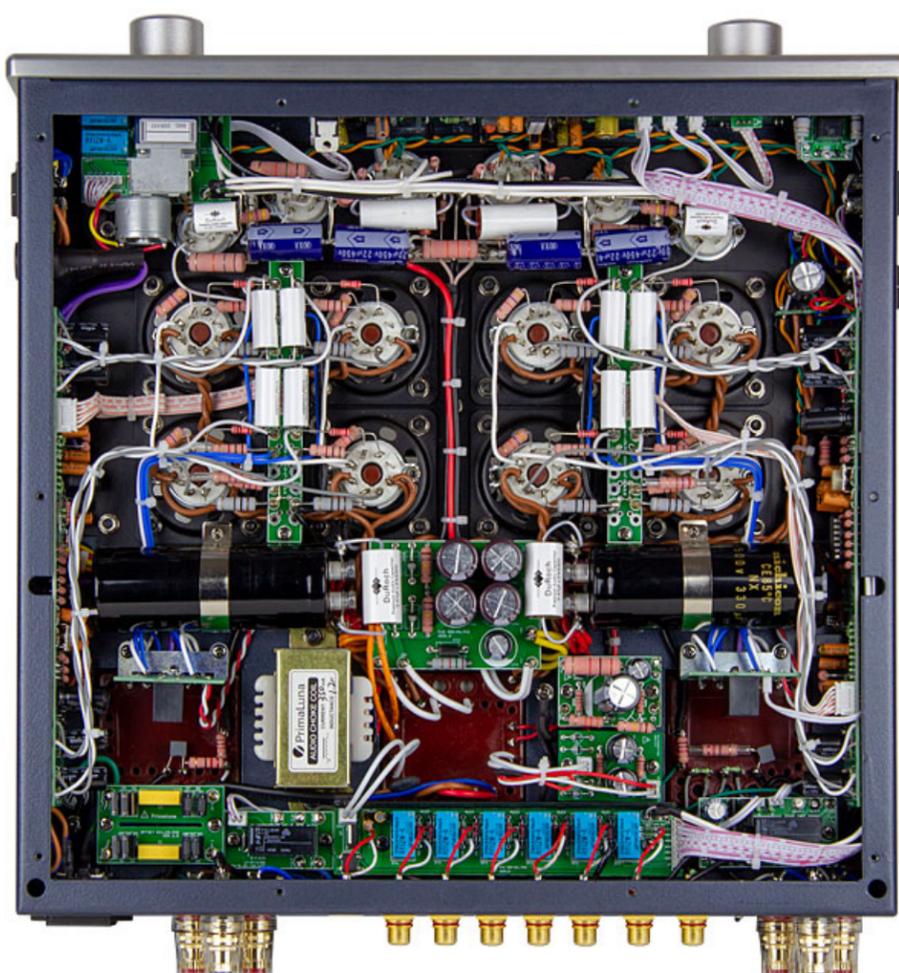
About now you might expect me to write a paragraph about how my time with the EVO 400 was *also* puppies and roses. Well, not quite, but close. No excessive drama transpired, but a few weeks in, first one and then another of the amp's six stock Psvane 12AU7 tubes started making fluttering noises through the speakers, so I swapped in new ones. Luckily for doubters, PrimaLuna warrants the tubes for six months, the amps themselves for three years.

When I asked California tube guru and PrimaLuna importer Kevin Deal about the duo of uncooperative 12AU7s, he said it could simply have been a break-in issue: "Sometimes a new tube that gets a little noisy just needs to be reinserted or moved." He added that his company, Upscale Audio, has retubed about 75,000 components and that many tubes that people send in as faulty test fine. "A tube that's noisy in a gain stage may be perfectly quiet as a driver or phase splitter."

Everything else about the EVO 400 was hunky dory. No hum emanated from the speakers or directly from the amplifier, not even when the room was dead quiet and I placed my ear practically against the drivers of my Tekton Moab speakers, which have a specified sensitivity of 98dB.

That's not happenstance, explained PrimaLuna founder Herman van den Dungen after I emailed him to ask about his design approach. "We're not the best salespeople, so we need good products to still make sales. High reliability and good aftersales service help us do that. I'm not a masochist—if necessary, we'll repair with a smile—but we'd rather smile because a repair isn't necessary."

PrimaLuna claims its tube gear has "a negligible defect rate of just one-half of one percent—unheard of in the industry—which makes it more reliable than a lot of solid-state gear."



The EVO 400, priced at \$5595, sits at the top of PrimaLuna's integrated amplifier line, lording over the EVO 100 (\$2795), the EVO 200 (\$3395), and the EVO 300 (\$4695). The 400 costs about \$1400 more than its predecessor, the DiaLogue Premium HP integrated, did when that amp was introduced eight years ago. About half of that increase is inflation; the other half is attributable to higher-quality parts and extra features, including fatter transformers, upgraded diodes, higher-end Takman resistors and DuRoch tinfoil capacitors, a tape-monitor circuit, stereo subwoofer outputs, plus the fact that the EVO 400 is prewired for an optional PrimaLuna moving magnet phono stage (\$249; not tested).

Getting an up-close look

Weighing in at 68lb, the imposing EVO 400 is a marriage of gleam and substance. A black or silver fascia—your choice—fronts a chassis with an attractive gray-blue automotive finish, applied in five coats. On the left, a volume control operates an analog Japanese ALPS Blue Velvet potentiometer. On the right is an input-selector knob with positions AUX 1 through 5 plus a sixth marked HT, which lets you turn the EVO 400 into a power amp for driving the left and right speakers in a home theater. Up top, an arched array of six 12AU7 mini triodes forms the front row of tubes. The two center valves do preamp duty, while the other four are the drivers for the two rows of EL34s (eight in total). Each EL34 has a red LED next to it that will light up when that tube goes bad, removing some guesswork.

On the back of the unit are 4 ohm and 8 ohm speaker taps, an IEC C-14 power receptacle, all the aforementioned inputs, plus the tape and stereo subwoofer outputs.



A fat, two-way power switch protrudes from the amplifier's left flank. On the right are two more switches: one for moving from speakers to headphones (there's a ¼", single-ended headphone output on the front), the other to accommodate either the stock EL34 tubes or aftermarket high-bias valves like those from the KT family. (I found the Tung-Sol KT150s especially enchanting when I tried them for a few weeks.)

Inside the chassis are massive toroidal power transformers that the company encases in a non-microphonic resin for noise reduction. The equally beefy output transformers are wound in-house, and the entire signal path is wired by hand using Swiss-made, silver-plated oxygen-free copper wire. The hyper-tidy layout looks like it's done by someone who *really* likes Marie Kondo.

Footnote 1: It's not a coincidence. Dutchman Jan-Peter van Amerongen, who died late last year, founded Hypex in 1996 and later hired [Bruno Putzeys](#) as the company's head of R&D. Amerongen and Putzeys later cofounded Mola Mola.

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No printed circuit boards are in the signal path, which might be a relief for tube rollers who've suffered the heartache of thin copper traces on tube-heated PCBs cracking, necessitating repair.

Van den Dungen told me that he hates to compromise on quality. These days, he sources tinfoil capacitors from Switzerland, made to his specs, and has them sent to the Netherlands. "Here, we sample for quality, and then they go on transport to China. In China," where PrimaLuna's products are built, "each capacitor is tested, which in fact we do with *all* our parts: resistors, caps, transistors, FETs, MOSFETs, and tubes of course. If they're not good enough, we send them back to the manufacturer."



List(en)ing surprises

I fed the EVO 400 a signal from my Bluesound Node 2i streamer connected by S/PDIF to the German-made, second-generation RME ADI-2 DAC FS. There was very good synergy between the RME and the PrimaLuna. The smooth but clinically revealing RME, which banishes noise, distortion, and jitter to far beyond the audible range, boasts an admirable, just-the-facts quality that comes from being designed by Teutonic boffins. (It even *looks* like a piece of lab equipment.) I used it without engaging its bevy of built-in filters or its parametric equalizer. Later, I played music from my 16" MacBook Pro M1 Max running Roon 1.8 into a Roon ROCK via USB, and from there to an Auralic Vega DAC. Speakers were my trusty references: MartinLogan Odyssey electrostats and a pair of Tekton Moabs.

In honor of PrimaLuna's birthplace, I decided to start my 12 weeks of almost-nightly listening with an improvised playlist of Dutch music. First up: Sweet d'Buster's "Bread" (16/44.1 FLAC, Tidal), a fine piece of mid-'70s polderfunk. World-class bassist Herman Deinum lays down a propulsive riff that, through the extraordinary clarity the EVO 400 provides, reveals his instrument unmistakably as a Fender Precision bass.



I soon discovered that this perspicuity is a defining characteristic of the amp, perhaps even more than with the DiaLogue Premium HP, whose treble sometimes sounded a trifle closed in by comparison. When I played the title song from Luwten's 2021 album *Draft* (24/96 FLAC, Qobuz), the EVO 400 made me aware that *delicate* and *delectable* have

the same root. For the intro, singer Tessa Douwstra hums a single note and through multitracking adds a second and a third identical one—same pitch, same voice. Through the PrimaLuna, each part was easy to distinguish from its doppelgangers on the neighboring tracks.

On "The Goodbye Look" by Donald Fagen (24/96 FLAC, Tidal), a de facto test track I've played easily more than 500 times, I noticed something that had previously escaped my attention: In the final syllable of the last line of the chorus, on the word *look*, there's an extra voice in the right channel.

This kind of detail retrieval made for an Easter egg hunt of sorts, an exciting one. What else would the EVO 400 reveal?

Among the surprises: When I listened to Paquito D'Rivera's megafamiliar (to me) "Afro" (16/44.1 FLAC, Tidal), at 3:09, I heard something crinkling or rustling—sheet music, most likely. Another example: On David Bowie's "Bring Me the Disco King" from *Reality* (16/44.1 FLAC, Qobuz), one vocal note seems off. In the line "stab you from the city spires," on the second syllable of "city," Bowie hits an A where the scale dictates an A-flat. It's not that you can't hear this minor (ha!) flub on other equipment; it's that the PrimaLuna renders it with an elevated, dissective clarity.



Heart vs head

Despite that precise character, the EVO 400 plays to the heart, not the head. I had listening sessions where not a single new remark appeared on the pages of my notepad—not because there wasn't anything to write about but because the PrimaLuna guided me to immersion, not analysis. Case in point: the track "Samhain Labs" from *Here Be Dragons* (24/44.1 FLAC, Qobuz) by the Kilimanjaro Darkjazz Ensemble. This is ambient noir reminiscent of Angelo Badalamenti, mood music evoking drizzle, fog, glistening streets, upturned collars, and vague menace. Via the PrimaLuna, no particular instrument elbowed to the fore. The amp just took the signal and reproduced it so that the sound came across as organic, holistic, and *alive*.

When I *did* manage to take notes, I ended up with phrases like *Rife with detail and dimensionality. Inviting, slightly warm, and opulent. Also, solid density of textures; plush.*

Headphones, bass, and triodes

One evening, I plugged my Monolith M1060 planar magnetic headphones into the PrimaLuna's headphone jack, mostly to keep from feeling guilty that I'd spent a perfectly good \$270 on them even though they're easily bested by several 'phones I own. Listening to Arturo O'Farrill's "The Offense of the Drum" from the album of the same name (24/44.1 FLAC, Qobuz) made me giddy. It was as if the headphones had received a free upgrade to Audeze LCD-2 or LCD-3 status. And when I switched to my [Audeze LCD-4s](#), they too sounded better than before. The weight of the kickdrum, the blattiness of the *muy picante* trombones—all was represented with panache and color. The PrimaLuna turns things vibrant with a sprinkling of warm pigments but without making a DayGlo, euphonic mess.



"Planners & Thinkers" from *Metropolis (Soundtrack)* by Metropolis (16/44.1 FLAC, Tidal, footnote 2) revealed a startling amount of tight, room-rattling bass, on a par with the best I've heard from my Moabs. With reggae and dub, I sometimes heard less *control* in the bass than I do with my solid state gear. Some overhang was present, with the deepest bass notes not as apt to stop on a dime. But the music chugged and jived in ways that left no room for disappointment. Always, 20–30 minutes after I fired it up, the EVO 400 became a glowing little contentment machine, ready to lay bare the soul of any music I threw at it.

In my description of the EVO 400, I failed to mention that you can switch it from Triode mode to Ultralinear on the fly with the included remote control. Which is best? To my ears, Ultralinear provided the clearest lens into the music, prioritizing near-scrupulous fidelity to the source material. But what if that source material needs a little help? Lots of terrific early-'70s pop with a tipped-up upper midrange—the Kinks, say, or Cockney Rebel, or ELO—can sound harsh and ultimately fatiguing. In Triode mode, the PrimaLuna is like a hit of Valium. It takes the edge off.



I had to force myself to refrain from flicking the Triode/Ultralinear switch back and forth on every recording. If the presence of the feature awakens the tweeker and worrier in you, it can become a double-edged sword.

Sounding solid

What of the nontubed competition? A great solid state amp like my Krell FPB 200c, or the [Pass Labs INT-60](#), will render individual performers as if they're standing in white, narrow-beamed aural spotlights, sharply delineated while the space just a foot or two away remains black. It's the kind of sonic treatment I love for its stark precision but that tube lovers may dismiss as clinical.

In contrast, the illumination produced by the PrimaLuna is more gold and amber in character. The spotlights' focus is wider and softer, lighting up the space between the players and letting you take in the whole stage at once. *That's* fantastic too. Which is better?

Abdullah Ibrahim & Ekaya: Sotho Blue



The three-horn interplay on the Bud Powell composition "Glass Enclosure" (16/44.1 FLAC, Qobuz), from *Sotho Blue* by Abdullah Ibrahim and Ekaya, was a standout on the EVO 400, besting the Krell in some ways. The alto sax sounded bright yet burnished, and the baritone displayed that exhilarating ochre-brown hue, that signature dark-colored *bzzz* that goes straight to the gut. The grand piano was as gorgeously expansive as I've ever heard it, although maybe lacking the cleanest leading-edge definition of each note. The Krell was better at rendering chords as a collection of discernable notes; the PrimaLuna tended toward an impressionistic, holistic picture. To borrow an analogy from the Dutch art world, the Krell painted with the geometrical precision of Johannes Vermeer; the PrimaLuna was more like Vincent van Gogh.

That clinches it: PrimaLuna's EVO 400 is a work of art. If you're on the hunt for a world-class integrated tube amp for less than five figures, it's hard to imagine how you could do better.

Footnote 2: This is an electronica album, not the "original motion-picture soundtrack" with Freddie Mercury and Pat Benatar.—**Jim Austin**