

In last year's summer issue, I introduced a complete set of PrimaLuna components in combination with Dynaudio Confidence 30 loudspeakers. The listening experience was unique in its result, the defining impression being maximum neutrality and tonal fidelity of reproduction. However, one component caught my attention more than the others - the EVO 100 Tube DAC, so much so that I expressed my wish to get to know it more thoroughly. I have been granted and am happy to share my impressions and conclusions with you.



PRIMALUNA EVO 100 TUBE DAC

Digital music enlightenment

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FOTO: PRIMALUNA

➔ Visually, it's classic PrimaLuna again. Perfect quality and completion of the cabinet parts, massive anodized front panel (silver or black color), ribbed removable tube cover in front of the top panel, behind it a massive cover of the power supply and filter circuits block, honest rocker power switch on the left side of the cabinet. The front panel contains only the bare essentials - 4 digital input switches (AES/EBU, coax, optical, and USB) and two centrally located displays.

The rear panel houses the digital inputs and one pair of RCA audio outputs. The upper one displays the selected input, and the lower one shows the sampling frequency and, after switching on the instrument, the minute countdown of the heating of the tubes and the total preparation of the converter for operation. I would have my only quibble here - the absence of balanced audio outputs - with this equipment, the Tube DAC's sonic expression would have the potential to be even more pronounced.

Technically too, the Tube DAC is a unique device. The basic concept is dual mono with a fully separated power supply and filtering

for the left and right channels. The power supply contains patented AC and DC Offset Killer circuits designed to reduce the mechanical hum of power transformers and prevent the transmission of unwanted influences to signal circuits. This results in reduced distortion and a cleaner background in the reproduction. Only high-quality components are used in the circuitry, including polypropylene capacitors. The digital-to-analog output section is completed using point-to-point, i.e., "hard" technology, by hand using direct cable connections and wire bridges using high silver content solder. The synchronization device, the "clock," is a unique feature where a low-noise triode is integrated directly into the digital clock circuitry to reduce phase jitter. Circuits designed in this way have high resolution and excellent clarity of detail.

Although the sound setup I first got to know the Tube DAC was of excellent quality when I was introduced to the DAC, I decided to approach the test uncompromisingly. I included it in a setup that should reveal its features down to the "bone." The signal source was an Electrocompaniet ECM 1 mkII streamer connected to the Tube DAC via an XLO Signature coaxial digital cable. The signal then traveled to the Octave HP700 tube preamplifier and through the XLO Signature symmetry to the Electrocompaniet AW 800 monoblock power stages. Dynaudio Confidence 60 loudspeakers were connected to the amplifiers using XLO Signature cabling. For direct comparison, I had the Bricasti M1SE transducers (introduced in the winter issue 4/2022), Electrocom-



paniet ECM 1 mkII, and Audio GD R7HE mk2 (4.990 Euro). I used the Rega Planar 10 turntable with the Rega Apheta 3 MC cartridge for analog versus digital comparison.

In such comparison cases, Patricia Barber's Cafe Blue is a must-have in any listening room. Ode to Billy Joe is an intriguing track that combines female vocals, guitar, and a flashy rhythm section made up entirely of finger snapping. The tube DAC managed to render it all extremely appealing, including echoes of peeling in the recording studio. The singer's voice had a natural coloration with all the little bits of information around its edges, subtle tremors, and reverberations. The overall musical picture was the personification of an intimate, gloomy, and sometimes almost somber atmosphere.

More significant differences between the converters occurred when playing less-than-ideal recordings, such as Norah Jones's Come Away With Me from her album of the same name. The singer's vocals come close to the microphone's limit with their power and immediate onset, manifesting in an intensely aggressive timbre. While on vinyl, this track is still easily listenable; with digital, we are already getting "on the edge." Ironically, the most expensive converter proved to be the most problematic in this case - the digital grain was already clearly audible, and the singer's voice was shattered into ones and zeros. However, given its tube origins, the PrimaLuna was able to keep this solid high-frequency presence under control.

Monty Alexander and his trio at the Montreux festival also appeared attractive. The distortion and layering of the music scene were excellent, the double bass doing its own thing and adding further shades to an already colorful pastel picture with its drumming and mumbling. The percussion was lively, once subtle, even unobtrusive somewhere in the background, but suddenly explosive, predatory, filling the whole musical scene space. The enchanting atmosphere of the "live" concert took on a gradual gradation for me until I sighed: "I wish I had experienced it with my own ears!" Incidentally, the remarks I wrote down in my notebook during my previous testing of PrimaLuna components - atmosphere, color, drawing - were repeated.

The converter also appeared briefly in the editorial line-up in combination with a PS Audio PerfectWave CD/SACD drive (9,990 Euro), an Ayre K1xe + Ayre V5xe amplifier combination, and Avalon Acoustics Arcus speakers. Also, in



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great sound, non-digital performance

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no balanced audio outputs

this combination, the line-up confirmed its excellent tonal balance, fine treble delivery, and rich, fast, and voluminous bass. Again, I used the turntable as a benchmark and recordings that I could compare directly, such as the annual Celebrating 95 Years of Elac compilation. The digital-analog combination used here also competed quite ably. Apart from the different characters of the sound, the most noticeable difference was the slightly more presentable treble range with digital and the resulting slightly flatter musical image. The bass range, on the other hand, was more voluminous, richer, and more fluent.

The positive impression gained from the first, short acquaintance with the EVO 100 Tube DAC and after its thorough airing has not only been maintained but also significantly increased. Its balanced, fluent, and totally "non-digital" expression proved that my sympathies were justified from the start. It has yet to lose its luster even in direct comparison with its able rivals in its own and considerably higher price categories. After considering all the partial aspects offered by the individual converters and summing them up into one comprehensive whole, I have to declare the EVO 100 Tube DAC the uncrowned winner of this comparison.

Conclusion? PrimaLuna's nature is based on more than just a surgically precise rendering of detail but rather on the overall mastery of an incredibly complex and emotional experience called music.

The manifestation of the converter is the result of a perfect initial recipe - to serve digital in a digestible way, to take advantage of all its advantages, and not to emphasize the disadvantages so much. However, this is not a simple and fashionable solution in the form of refinement of the digital signal with tubes; here, it went much more profound, and the tubes themselves are just one of the ingredients for a perfectly balanced digital dish. And that's what the Evo 100 Tube DAC serves up on a silver platter in an imaginary restaurant with three Michelin stars. ✘

PRIMALUNA EVO 100 TUBE DAC

D/A converter

Number of channels: 2

USB: PCM 16 Bit-32 Bit/44.1 kHz - 192 kHz
DSD DSD64 - DSD128

Coax: PCM 16Bit - 24Bit/44.1 kHz - 192 kHz
DSD64

AES/EBU: PCM 16 Bit - 24 Bit/44.1 kHz - 192 kHz
DSD64

Optical: PCM 16 Bit - 24 Bit/44.1 kHz - 176.4 kHz
DSD64

Frequency Range: 20 Hz - 40 kHz +/- 0.5 dB

Dimensions (h x w x d): 190 x 280 x 378 mm

Weight: 13.8 kg

Price: 3 475 Euro

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