



PrimaLuna EVO 100 Tube Integrated Amplifier

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It's not easy to find an affordable tube amp in the world of hi-fi poshness and skyrocketing prices. While most audio companies focus on pricey components produced in exclusive limited series, PrimaLuna still offers simple and reasonably priced tube amps. We are not saying it's a bargain, but many audio aficionados find it acceptable. In fact, buying a tube amp is actually an irrational decision because it takes a lot of effort and care to have your components working at an optimal level. The same applies to turntables, which are far more complicated than streamers handling hi-rez files.

Going back in time, PrimaLuna really lit up the audio sky back in the first half of the noughts with Prologue 1, a simple integrated amp with a modern interpretation of classical design, which attracted new generations. The second model continued on the same foundation, only using different tubes (and capacitors). The minimalistic design featured four inputs and volume control, no remote control, and only one front panel power led. It was a hit, both in press reviews and in sales.

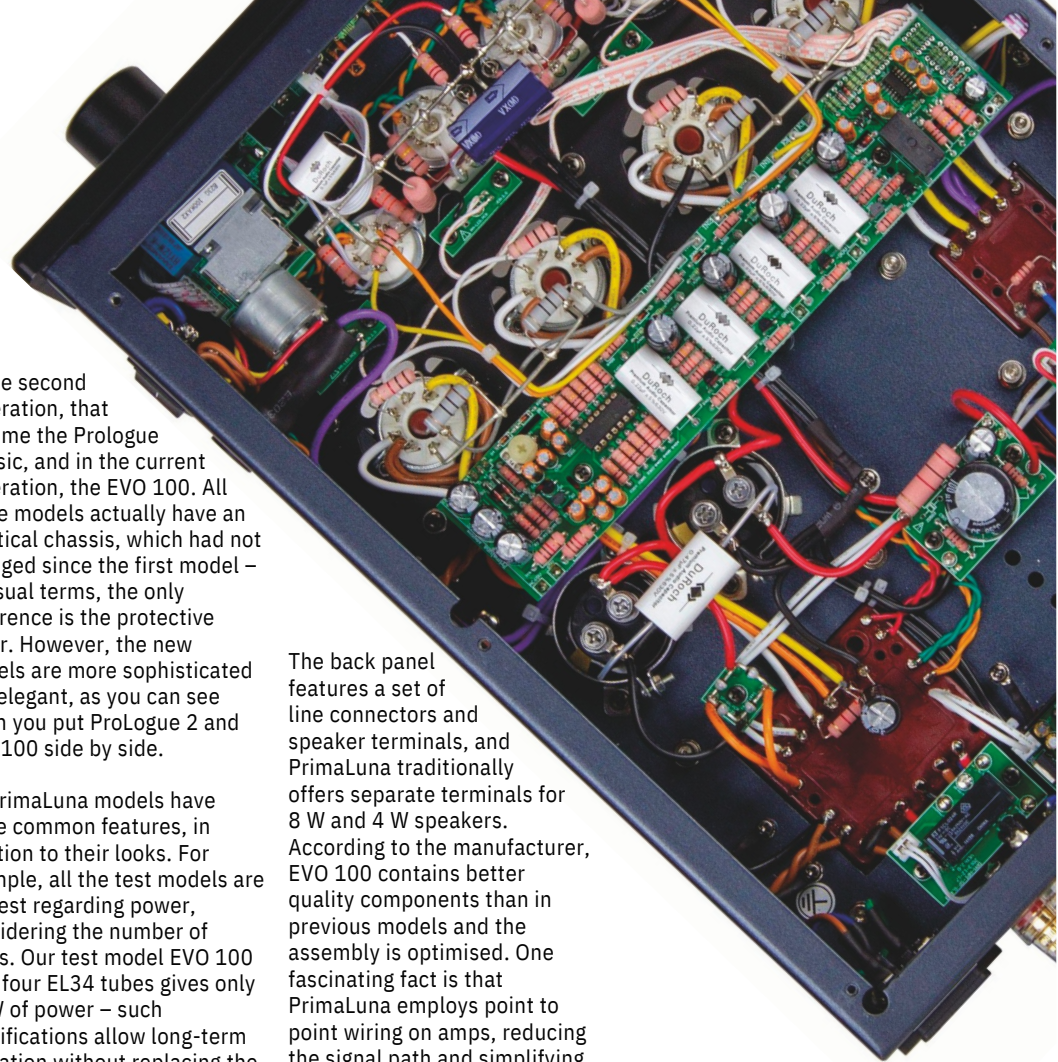
When I say "modern interpretation of classical design", I primarily refer to the PrimaLuna adaptive auto-bias system, which allows using different types of tubes in one model without pairing the tubes. This massively facilitates the purchase of replacement tubes and long-term maintenance. The new amp also features a faulty tube indicator. PrimaLuna Prologue 2 is compatible with EL34, KT88, KT90 and 6550 tubes, without any interventions in electronics. Of course, all tubes must be of the same type, once we choose the type we want to use.

With the increasing demand and growth of the company, more powerful and more expensive models appeared, but the company always had one model, which was a counterpart to their first and basic model, the Prologue 1.

In the second generation, that became the Prologue Classic, and in the current generation, the EVO 100. All these models actually have an identical chassis, which had not changed since the first model – in visual terms, the only difference is the protective cover. However, the new models are more sophisticated and elegant, as you can see when you put Prologue 2 and EVO 100 side by side.

All PrimaLuna models have some common features, in addition to their looks. For example, all the test models are modest regarding power, considering the number of tubes. Our test model EVO 100 with four EL34 tubes gives only 40 W of power – such specifications allow long-term operation without replacing the tubes. Customer experience shows that one set of tubes can last for years, depending on working conditions. I should also mention that the amp comes with two 12AX7 and two 12AU7 tubes in the preamp stage. The amp still has only four -remotely controlled- stereo inputs in addition to volume. The model features headphone output using these tubes, and our test model had a built-in phono stage.

All in all, PrimaLuna once again confirms the tested concept first introduced with their Prologue 1. Interestingly, PrimaLuna decided to select EL34 tubes as standard for all amps. We know from experience that they are easiest to come by and most affordable, making the replacement costs less than in KT88.



The back panel features a set of line connectors and speaker terminals, and PrimaLuna traditionally offers separate terminals for 8 W and 4 W speakers. According to the manufacturer, EVO 100 contains better quality components than in previous models and the assembly is optimised. One fascinating fact is that PrimaLuna employs point to point wiring on amps, reducing the signal path and simplifying the assembly.

The sound

We did the sound test directly compared with the Prologue 2, which is still the centre amp in my set-up. Immediately, it's clear that EVO 100 is more sophisticated and softer than Prologue 2. The lower range has more body and sounds warmer in general. Agnes Obel's voice sounded perfectly arranged on stage, soft, but still defined. The sound is exactly what we expect of a modern tube amp. White Stripes albums sound excellent, with a balanced edge to Jack White's guitar and roundness of the sound. If we compare the Prologue 2 with KT88, drums sound tighter and more aggressive but lack the sophistication we hear in the EVO 100.

The progress of PrimaLuna was evident when we placed EL34 tubes in the Prologue 2. The soundstage became more spacious, with a better arrangement of instruments and vocals. The details are more intricate across the spectrum than with the older model. Of course, the question is how PrimaLuna compares to other amps in the same price range. Equally priced solid-state amps will have more power than PrimaLuna, and Prokofiev's Romeo and Juliet would have tighter kettledrums and a wider stage. Still, nothing can surpass their mid-range details, not even a much more expensive component.

On the other hand, Kraftwerk's The Man-Machine sounds amazing despite the amp's modest power, with deep bass and excellent body.



PRIMALUNA EVO 100

SPECS

Power 2 x 40 W / 8 Ohm (EL34), ultra-linear
 Input sensitivity 260 mV (EL34)
 Line outputs 4x stereo RCA
 Outputs 4 and 8 Ω, stereo RCA Tape, 6.3 mm
 headphone output
 Tube set 2x 12AX7, 2x 12AU7 and 4x EL34
 Dimensions (WxHxD) 279 x 190 x 404 mm
 Weight 17.9 kg
 Price: HRK 20,200
 INFO: Media audio, Tel. +385 21 323 550,
www.mediaaudio.hr

The only thing missing is the sense of control we had with Dialogue Premium HP, which fascinates with the combination of power (2x 85 W / 8 W) and warmth with four EL34 tubes per channel. The EVO 100 still has better control in the lower range and can reach deeper than expected. It works with a wide range of speakers, as PrimaLuna really managed to eliminate most disadvantages of tubes. Compared to some older tube amps with similar construction, PrimaLuna had a more modern and tighter sound, still succeeding in having that unique tube signature that motivates customers to buy these amps.

It should be noted that the headphone output is in itself a great preamp. The sound it gives through DAC greatly surpasses the sound of any small component combining DAC and headphone preamp. Grado SR80x, tested in this issue, sounded exceptional, and it was an absolute pleasure to review the combo with the PrimaLuna EVO 100. The amp showed us what these headphones could do.

Conclusion

Once again, PrimaLuna produced an exceptionally affordable amplifier, building on the concept they first developed almost 20 years ago. Far from the total minimalistic approach of the first models, the EVO 100 is a modern component with remote control, phono stage and headphone input. Although the price tag is not negligible, the fact is that the EVO 100 literally has no competition in this range, as tube amps of this quality cost much more. And if we add the price inflation during the past 20 years, we come to the same amount. All things considered, PrimaLuna EVO 100 deserves our highest recommendations.

