

venster op beeld en geluid

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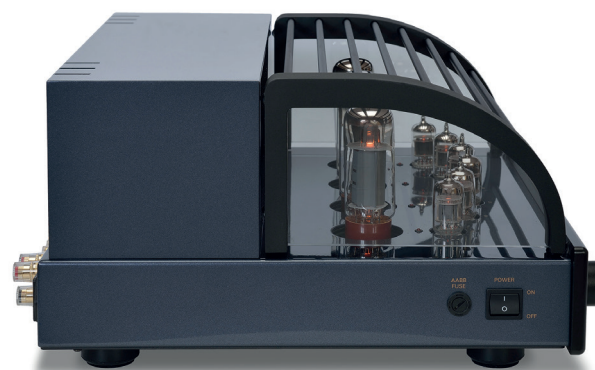


UNDER THE SPELL OF THE TUBE

Tube amplifiers are familiar for me, now also in the hi-fi sector. Of the models that the Dutch PrimaLuna offers in their programme, various models have been reviewed in HVT. I have had the honour to welcome three of them on the test bench: the EVO 200-p preamplifier, the EVO 200-a power amplifier and the 100-D DAC. Now it is the turn of a heavy kid from PrimaLuna, an integrated amplifier that listens to the name EVO 300-i.

Much has been written about tube amps. Both within and outside the hi-fi world, and yours truly was also invited to contribute. Every electric guitar player knows the ins and outs of guitar amps with tubes. The application of tubes in studios is also well-known. Nowadays, there are alternatives to the heartwarming tube in both sectors, and I am a keen participant. So much that I

increasingly question the supremacy of the tube. Both for the guitar, for use in the studio and also in hi-fi, especially with the rising tide of Class D power amplification. But the phenomenon still keeps having something magical, something irresistible. This is also the case with Hans van der Lubbe, De Dijk (Dutch group) bass guitarist and upstairs neighbour.



In his studio, he still uses a lot of tubes in preamplifiers, especially for microphones. On his way to his downstairs neighbour and the lure of his 65" Philips OLED+ 984 (to watch Ajax go down against AS Roma), his eye immediately fell on the PrimaLuna EVO 300-i. And then, almost in ecstasy, he immediately lost sight of both his host, the sublime Philips, and his favourite club. It turned out that he did not miss a thing about the latter, and opinions differed about the former statements. But the fact that even my excellent TV could no longer fascinate him is pretty astonishing. I now look at it more down-to-earthly, but I still have a weak spot for a top-class tube amplifier. I'll tell you right now that the EVO 300-i also stole my heart.

'Venom' and distortion

What did Olaf van Wijk, from importer More Music, bring for this greedy musician? Apart from the necessary additional cabling, such as a Shunyata Venom RCA interlink, Venom loudspeaker cables, Venom V10 power chord for the amplifier and V12 power chord for the sound source, his poor back had to suffer from the 36-kilo EVO 300-i. This model fits into the series of 100-i, 200-i, and, you guessed it, the 400-i. The latter is the heaviest in the range, with 2×70 watts of 'ultra-linear power' and 2×38 watts in 'triode power' mode. The 300-i 'has to do it' with 2×42 Watt (ultra-linear power) and 2×24 Watt (triode power). You can switch between the two different modes with the supplied remote control. Who is familiar with tube amplifiers knows that these figures say very little about the sound volume, let alone the sound quality, and also nothing about the dynamics. In any case, during the long listening sessions, I never felt there was something wrong with the volume or the dynamic power. Both in terms of the volume differences and the transparency in the sound colours, the timbres. And another thing about the figures: the specifications indicate a distortion percentage of 1% THD. That seems disastrous for hifi, but believe me, this figure says nothing about what you experience as distortion with a tube amplifier. Many of the typical characteristics of the PrimaLuna amplifiers, especially in a technical sense, have been extensively discussed in other reviews, and I also have tried to

make my statements. To avoid repetition, this story is different; much more focused on the practice in the living room with some listening impressions, accompanied by the replacement of components by alternatives. Moreover, the excellent website of More Music contains everything about the particular technical characteristics of the PrimaLuna designs.

High lights and bright lights

And yes, it is extraordinary what the Dutch company has managed to do. You don't have to be a technician to understand that the properties are unique and innovative. Moreover, you hear it back in the sound image, which matters. I am certainly not alone in thinking this. The PrimaLuna products win admiration and awards all over the world. Here are their highlights. Standard, the EVO 300-i, comes with 4 EL34 power tubes and six 12AU7 tubes. One of the (many) unique features of the amplifier is that the system is compatible with just about every power tube imaginable, from 6L6 and EL34 to the legendary 6550 and a whole range of KT models: 66, 77, 88, 90, 120



and 150. I know most of these, I could tell you a lot about them, but I won't do that. My favourite is and remains the EL34, so that works out well.

All the connections are at the rear side of the amp, including five stereo RCA inputs at line level. The sixth offers direct access to the output stage through an (additional) external preamplifier. The six inputs are selectable with a large rotary knob on the front panel and remote control. We have two outputs for external devices; one RCA set for a stereo/mono subwoofer and the stereo RCA tape out. The speaker outputs are separate for 8Ω and 4Ω. Underneath the mentioned connections, an independent chassis is mounted with connections for an optionally available MM phono stage. I have a pretty strong suspicion that the mere fact that this phono board is wholly isolated from the other electronics can only benefit its sound performance. Amazingly up-to-date and cost only 180 Euros. On the front, we have the headphone output. After the process of warming up, a contemplative look at the front offers a view of the bright lights of the ten tubes. Bright and warm, both the appearance and the temperature. Always special.

Tube and pollination

I used the Primare DD35 as a source, a disk drive, so no DA conversion. That part comes from the Mytek Manhattan DAC II. This world wonder combines a preamp and DAC, which you can also use separately. I was allowed to experience the differences with and without the EVO preamp of the EVO 300-i. I also looped the tube preamp to a Class-D

Specifications

Power Ultra-linear:	42 watt x 2 (EL34) (8Ω, 1% THD)
Power Triode:	24 watt x 2 (EL34) (8Ω, 1% THD)
Inputs:	5x Stereo RCA, Stereo RCA HT Bypass
Outputs:	4 & 8 Ω, RCA Stereo/Mono Subwoofer, Stereo RCA Tape Out, 1/4" Headphone
Frequency Response:	10Hz-65kHz +/- 1dB, 8Hz-75kHz +/- 3dB
THD:	< 0.2% @ 1W, < 2% @ Rated Power
S/R ratio:	86dB, 95dBA
Input sensitivity:	270mV (EL34)
Output impedance:	100kΩ
Consumption:	280 watt
Tubes:	6x 12AU7, 4x EL34 tubes
Dimensions (WxHxD):	38,6 x 20,6 x 40,4cm
Weight:	31 kilo
Price:	€ 4.150
Optional MM phono board:	€ 180




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output stage, the Mytek Brooklyn AMP. I can save you a long story. It works OK, but actually, the result does not fit into this premier league. No, to enjoy the quality of the EVO 300-i, you have to use the device on its own.

The amplifier knows what to do with the converted signal; I did not expect otherwise. My honoured tube guest was in good company at the time of its staycation: besides the Yamaha NS-5000, I was allowed to connect the amplifier to the Yamaha NS-3000 and the Bowers & Wilkins 702 Signature. On all three pairs of speakers, the result was excellent, while the Yamaha's were the ones mainly showing the critical points of the EVO 300-i. I suspect that the enthusiasts for this amplifier will fall for a speaker in the vein of the B&W. The 702 is, in any case, a very suitable candidate as a successful blind date. And what does this romance show us? For starters, the phenomenon of 'warming up' with tube amps has a different meaning. After hours of warming up, the EVO 300-i unfolds what its enthusiasts are looking for. And actually, you should do that with every session. Don't be alarmed. You can do this without sound. Just switch it on in time, like an oven that you must preheat. Once 'on steam', this amplifier confirms all expectations, both the bloodcurdlingly beautiful and the somewhat critical.

Hot and in love

To start with the latter. In some conversations, the lack of bass of the hi-fi tube amplifier is criticised. With the EVO 300-i, this is true and not true. It is not true because the dynamics in the low end is of an exceptional class and produces a beautiful punch in this area. Think bass guitar, bass drum, kettledrum, low brass. Bang it out! But with the absolute low end (also this) tube amp has some more trouble. Reference for me is always the mega low C in Pat Metheny's 'Cathedral in a Suitcase', on 'Secret Story'. The EVO 300-i reproduces it, but not enthusiastically. Let's move to the superlatives. The start-off, dynamics and detail that you may experience in the whole midrange remain exceptional with tube amplifiers, and the EVO 300-i proves to be a true master in this. Smothered in love and heartwarming, I cannot deny it. You hear it especially at the start of the strings, the diction of the vocals and, surprise, the width of Q-sound. Really great. PrimaLuna mentions using the triode mode to compensate for shortcomings of old recordings on vinyl.

I have some questions about that. I understand the argument, especially when you own those recordings, but why should you have to polish a shortcoming in the recording with an amplifier? A difference in interpretation. For the rest: an absolute masterpiece in technique and musicality. Equipped with the aforementioned EL34 tubes, the EVO 300-i comes out at a price of 4,150 Euros. Great Class (A).

More information on the importer's website www.moremusic.nl