

# PrimaLuna EVO 400 preamplifier

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I am an artist-painter *and* an audiophile. When I listen to recorded music, I sit in the sweet spot and stare at the empty space between the speakers. And while I listen, I survey and critique the soundfield, as if it were an unfinished landscape painting in my studio. As I observe the soundstage and the apparitions of musicians within, I notice the dimensions of the recording venue (and/or microphone placement), as well as the *physical energy* of the entire vibrating illusion. While my mind appraises the tonal character of each recorded instrument, it simultaneously registers the tonality and viscosity of the entire soundfield. I am always aware that the stereo presentation I'm scrutinizing has two parts: an *illusion* and a tangible *physicality*. Exactly like a painting.

Also just like a painting, I'm forever considering what needs to be fixed or improved. When I change a cartridge or speakers, the change is conspicuous—like adding trees or changing the color of the sky. When I change DACs or phono stages, the change is subtler but still unmistakable—like adding aerial perspective, highlights, or deeper shadows. Switching from a transistor component to a tube component is like switching from acrylic paint (solid-state) to oil paint (vacuum tube).

Changing line-level preamps can be one of the subtlest changes of all.

Today, when I switched from the \$4995 Rogue RP-7 tube preamp to PrimaLuna's new EVO 400 tube preamp (\$4499), it was like changing *brands* of oil paint. The new brand is still oil paint—except that, whenever I pick up the new 37ml tube, I notice its mass relative to the old 37ml tube. (Heavier costs extra but is usually better.) When I squeeze the tube, I notice differences in material density, color saturation, and viscosity—the exact differences I notice when changing preamps.

## **Prologue**

PrimaLuna's previous preamp lineup, which has been retired, consisted of two models: the ProLogue Premium (\$2199) and the DiaLogue Premium at \$3199 (which I aspired to own). These two preamps, now referred to as "legacy" models, have been replaced by four new Evolution-series models: the EVO 100 (\$1999), which is the same basic dual-mono, tube-rectified, choke-filtered preamp as the original ProLogue Premium; the EVO 200 (\$2699), which adds a home theater pass-through; and the EVO 300 (\$3699), which adds one more 12AU7 tube (for better amplifier drive) and includes a boatload of bad-ass audiophile parts, just like the original DiaLogue Premium. And now comes the new PrimaLuna flagship preamp, the EVO 400 (\$4499), which includes all the aforementioned luxuries plus input and output transformers for balanced XLR connectivity.

## **Description**

What I like most about PrimaLuna preamps is how their exposed tubes and power-supply capacitors and their vintage-Marantz-style transformer covers make them look like classic old-school tube *power amplifiers*. It's a timeless look, one that shows off the most important feature of all current PrimaLuna preamps: dual-mono 5AR4/GZ34 tube rectification. The 5AR4 is a 250ma/450VAC-capable full-wave rectifier that draws 1.9 amps of current at 5VAC (in this product, from its own separate transformer winding) and costs at least dozens of dollars to implement, while the 1N4007 solid-state diodes used in most preamps draw no current, require no additional transformer windings, and cost less than 10 cents each.

PrimaLuna's Holland-based CEO-designer, Herman van den Dungen, apparently believes, as I do, that the sonic quality of all audio amplification is set mainly by the physical and electrical characteristics of its power supply, and that expensive, overspecified, choke-filtered, tube-rectified supplies make music sound more natural and easy-flowing than do silicon diodes and cheap chip voltage regulators. Did I mention that tube rectifiers are quieter and less colored than silicon diodes?

Each channel of the EVO 400 line stage consists of three 12AU7 medium-mu dual-triodes, two of which are wired in parallel (four triode sections total), forming a high-current cathode-follower that makes possible an output impedance of only 256 ohms—meaning it will effectively drive just about any competently designed tube or solid-state amplifier.

Most of the EVO 400's extraordinary (52.8lb) weight comes not from its sturdy steel chassis or thick, brushed-aluminum faceplate but from the chokes and transformers required for its dual-mono power supplies—those and the six mu-metal-shielded transformers for its balanced inputs and outputs. Adding to that weight are the squadrons of fat, made-in-Switzerland DuRoch tin-foil caps; legions of super-high-quality, made-in-Japan Takman resistors; and the slick, motorized Alps Blue Velvet potentiometer, also made in Japan. All these bits are big, expensive, and generally heavier than their less accomplished counterparts. The EVO 400 measures 15.2" wide by 8" high by 15.9" deep, comes triple-boxed with tubes installed, and takes only a single minute to unpack.



The EVO 400's rear panel features six pairs of gold-plated RCA jacks: one pair for the fixed-level tape output, three more pairs for line-level inputs, one pair for the stereo HT bypass, and another as a single-ended output. There are two balanced inputs and one balanced output, all XLRs. The on-off rocker switch is on the amplifier's left side, just behind the aluminum faceplate—itsself a simple expanse that sports a volume-control knob on the left, an indicator light dead center (red means Mute, green means On), and an input-selector knob on the far right. The aluminum remote handset is both heavy (12.5oz) and stylish.

## Listening

In order to convey what the EVO 400 brought to my system, I must begin by describing how the now-discontinued [PrimaLuna ProLogue Premium](#) amplifier (\$2199) and [preamplifier](#) (\$2199) sounded with my reference [Harbeth M30.2](#) loudspeakers.

Driving those medium-size Harbeths, PrimaLuna's class-AB EL34 push-pull Ultralinear amplifier made music sound effortless, direct, and emotionally accessible. As I type these words, that combo is letting Momo Wandel Soumah's *Afro-Swing* (44.1/16 FLAC Fonti Musicali/Tidal) generate pure, harmonious, Technicolor pleasures. With vivo. Without strain.

This combination's most notable weakness was a slight veiling—a misty, second-harmonic softness that muted detail and diminished rhythmic drive. I was hoping the new, more expensive EVO 400, with its extra 12AU7 driver tube, would generate a slightly brighter, more muscular presentation—with sharper focus, greater transparency, and more distinctly punctuated momentum.

I began these preamp-to-preamp comparisons by exchanging the ProLogue Premium preamp for the EVO 400 and listening to The Lord's Prayer as spoken in unison by Revd. S.W. Sykes and the Choir of St. John's College, Cambridge, from *Evensong for Ascensiontide* (LP, Argo ZRG 511). The first thing I noticed was how the EVO 400 enhanced the distinctiveness of each vocalist. Recordings of groups singing, chanting, or reciting are more interesting when each voice occupies its own unique and identifiable soundstage position; the ProLogue Premium preamp did only a *good* job with this kind of high-resolution spatial mapping, whereas the EVO 400 preamp *specialized* in image specificity. The voices were more than just clear, intelligible, and properly toned—each was surrounded by its own personal volume of air. The EVO 400 appeared to be letting extraordinary amounts of recorded information pass through it.



The chief beauty of tubes and analog is how a great LP can sometimes produce an unmistakable inkling of reality; one aspect of that is an acute sense of having real

instruments and real human voices *right there in my room*. For me, audio is not complicated. The more real a recording feels, the more I connect with the music.

When I played the Ventures' 1963 hit "Pipeline," from *Surfing* (Mono LP, Dolton BLP-2022), with My Sonic Lab's Ultra Eminent Ex moving-coil cartridge, Tavish Design's Adagio tube phono stage, the EVO 400 feeding PrimaLuna's ProLogue Premium amp, and the Harbeth M30.2 monitors, I experienced a lot more than a *hint* of reality. While the liner notes on *Surfing* were busy reminding me that a "pipeline" is the long, hollow part of a wave, the above-described system was busy making Mel Taylor's drums and Nokie Edwards' Mosrite guitar and Fender Twin Reverb amp sound deep-groove solid, in-the-room present, and 100% reverb-juicy.

We all know our father's jazz records were about the *sounds* of acoustic bass, saxophone, and piano. In response to all that unamplified acousticness, Ventures' records—especially those on the Dolton label—were all about the new, powerful, driving sound of electric guitars. (The Ventures, along with Chet Atkins and Link Wray, played a significant role in making electric guitars the most important instruments in 1960s popular music.) Therefore, any playback of their recordings that doesn't convey the expressive reality of those guitars and their associated tubed amplifiers is a fail. The all-tube EVO 400 preamp and the ProLogue Premium amplifier triumphed: They brought the Ventures' incomparable guitar sound to ravishing new life. The PrimaLuna tubes let the Ventures' reverb-soaked essence fill my room; they made me feel like a "ho-dad" (a greaser/hot-rod) and let me go "ten-over" until I wiped out.

### **Rogue RP-7 comparison**

Remember when I said that changing from the Rogue RP-7 hybrid preamp to PrimaLuna's all-tube EVO 400 was like switching brands of oil paint? Actually, it was slightly more dramatic than that, especially when I switched from the EVO 400 back to the RP-7.

While doing this review, I was simultaneously working on some cartridge reviews, so I went eight full days without listening to any digital program (except when watching tractor pulls and drag-race videos on YouTube). Can you imagine life without CDs or streaming? Better yet, can you imagine playing the same LP on the AMG Giro G9 record player with a 9W tonearm and EMT TSD 75 moving-coil cartridge, and then switching to the Feickert Blackbird turntable with a Jelco TK-850L tonearm and a My Sonic Lab Ultra Eminent Ex MC? Think PrimaLuna tubeness plus superanalog coolosity.



During my digital abstinence, I was obsessed with the great teal-label LPs from Argo—many of which were recorded by legendary engineer Kenneth Wilkinson—so I played *Evensong for Ascensiontide* with at least four different phono cartridges. With every cartridge, the Rogue was just a teensy bit more sharply focused than the PrimaLuna. You know that imaginary dividing line between the left and right sides of your brain? The RP-7 and EVO 400 were both standing right *at* that line, next to each other, holding hands. The RP-7 was on the left side of my brain centerline, and the EVO was on the right. Their yin-yangs were almost touching. Both preamps separated the voices of the St. John's College Choir extremely well, but the Rogue RP-7 made each voice more solid than the EVO 400, which seemed very slightly more diffuse. Yet during the opening and closing voluntaries, the EVO 400 made the St. John's organ feel larger and more air-movingly expansive. It emphasized the church's cubic space and atmosphere. In contrast, Rogue's RP-7 made the organ's sound feel denser, more direct, more powerful.

Late one night, my system was sounding super-scintillating. Singers were sounding like they are supposed to sound. I had the Rogue RP-7 driving the Rogue Stereo 100 amplifier driving the Harbeth M30.2s, and as my attention locked onto French experimental singer Brigitte Fontaine's *Comme à la radio* (LP, Superior Viaduct SV042), I realized that the most obvious differences in sound character between the Rogue RP-7 and the PrimaLuna EVO 400 were probably due to the differences in power-supply design. The RP-7 uses 17 separate solid-state power supplies, including an individual regulated filament supply for each tube. This is 100% new-school tube-audio design. In contrast, PrimaLuna's tube-rectified, choke-filtered power supply is certified old school.

I listened at length to Brigitte Fontaine's well-recorded sound collages while alternating between the RP-7 and EVO 400 preamps. Both tube line stages did *vivid*. Both did *scintillating*. And they did them in ways my third comparison preamp, the more buttoned-down, all-solid-state [Pass Labs HPA-1](#) (\$3500), could not match.

When I compared these three preamps, I found the sonic differences were mostly subtle and mostly in the realms of color saturation, viscosity, and texture—just like the differences between brands of oil paint. The all-solid-state HPA-1 is fine-grained, dynamic, and disappears readily. It generates an ultra-pasteurized viscosity. It tames music's natural wildness. It has a slightly grayish tonal character, and its soundstage is less commodious than either the Rogue's or the PrimaLuna's. However, most audiophiles would, I think, describe the HPA-1 as an exceedingly neutral component.

Compared to the all-transistor Pass Labs HPA-1, the all-tube EVO 400 develops deeper, darker shadows, is more three-dimensional, makes more saturated tonal color, and has more eye-catching highlights. Its sound is thicker in viscosity than that of the HPA-1. Old-school tube aficionados would likely describe the EVO 400 as the clearest, fastest, most transparent *all-tube* preamp ever. Contemporary fans of solid-state might concede its transparency but would probably declare the bass not tight enough.

Not surprisingly, the hybrid tube-MOSFET Rogue RP-7 sits authoritatively between these pure-tube and pure-transistor extremes. The Rogue allows a modest gleam of tubes to enhance the Apollonian steadiness of its transistor-regulated power supplies. Its bass packs a greater wallop than the EVO 400. To an unbiased audiophile observer, the RP-7 is the product that might seem the most neutral. But, to me, each of these preamps offers a different, but equally legitimate, perspective on the recordings I played. Remember the parable of the blind men and the elephant . . . ?

**March 25, 2019:** Scott Walker, experimental pop-music hero, dies, age 76. Suddenly, the next morning, it's Scott Walker Day, and I bowed my head and gave thanks for Walker's long run of edgy creativity. Overnight, I went from Brigitte Fontaine's sound collages to Scott Walker's powerful collaboration with Sunn O))), *Soused* (2 LPs, 4AD CAD 3428). The PrimaLuna EVO 400 exposed every electron of *Soused's* primeval darkness. When I played *Soused* really loud, its massive, expanding, synth-generated spatiality held me by my chestplate and forced me to stare at flickering galaxies floating in voids of black ether. The EVO showcased the dark strangeness of Walker's voice. This kind of music sounds best with tubes, and even better with tubes and giant horns. (Imagine enormous volumes of densely charged air.)



With the Rogue RP-7, the sound was considerably denser but less voluminous and dramatically expansive, and textures were less prominent. With the Pass Labs HPA-1, the depth and strangeness of this music were still expressed, but the spectral color and quirky affectedness of Scott Walker's voice were diminished.

### **Epilogue**

As I had hoped, PrimaLuna's new EVO 400 was more concise-sounding than the ProLogue Premium preamp. It generated clearer, more muscular presentations, with sharper focus, and more distinctly punctuated momentums.

My elaborate comparisons revealed that these three preamplifiers—the Pass Labs HPA-1, the Rogue Audio RP-7, and the PrimaLuna EVO 400—offer distinctly different physical and illusory representations of whatever musical program they are fed. These differences were more covert than overt and showed themselves mainly as variations of texture, spatial volume, and viscosity. In the end, the Rogue RP-7 still seemed like the best-balanced, most open, most neutral-sounding of the three. The Pass Labs HPA-1 still seemed like a relaxed, neutral-sounding preamp for use in systems where headphone listening is primary. But, of the three, the PrimaLuna EVO 400 dissolved into the music more completely than the others. It seemed the most highly resolved and naturally transparent. Class A all the way.