

Prima Luna Evolution 300

CHRIS KELLY TAKES THE TUBE FOR THE FIRST TIME IN DECADES,
AND FINDS HIMSELF TRANSPORTED

The world of valve (or tube, for our US cousins) amplification can be a daunting one for the neophyte. We read phrases like “tube rolling”, “auto-bias”, “triode”, “pentode” and “SET” and know that here is a different subset of our weird audio world, and one about which we often feel an odd trepidation.

I have an agreement that I won't be asked to review anything I can't carry by myself, so I checked and the £3798 Prima Luna Evolution 300 weighs in at 31kg, which is about my limit. In due course the courier rang my doorbell having lowered the box onto my doorstep, and retreated beyond the required two metres. “Be careful!” says he, “it's heavy!”. 35kg packed weight it says on the box, but in it came.

Opening the outer carton and then the inner box reveals a beautifully designed and hefty remote control set into a recess in the top styrofoam cover. With that lifted, I look down on the amplifier from above and I love the symmetry of it in plan form. 6 12AU7 small valves sit in front of a row of 4 EL34s, with a barred metal guard protecting them. That abuts on to a silver grey housing below which, out of sight, sit the hand wound toroidal transformers.

I then carefully lifting the device up and out of the carton, I lowered it carefully onto the bottom shelf of my Quadraspire XL rack, which I'd reconfigured to allow for the guest amplifier's height and to afford it as much breathing space as I can.

On the front panel are two knobs, one for source selection and one for volume. On the left side are the on/off switch and a fuse cover while to the right are two switches, one to select loudspeaker or

headphone, the other to select high or low bias. On the back, from the right, we find an IEC mains input socket, loudspeaker terminals with 4 and 8 ohm options then a double row of RCA sockets, marked “HT/Caution” then “Aux6 to Aux1”, “Tape Out” and “Sub Out”, a mono/stereo switch and another set of speaker binding posts. The latter by the way can accommodate banana plugs, spades or bare wire.

Attention to detail

The attention to detail and the quality of the components are quite exceptional: not for the Dutch designers the less expensive use of a printed circuit board – everything is wired point-to-point, always using the shortest possible signal path. The high quality input relays are always left open except for the selected source, to eliminate cross-talk between them, the volume control is a high-end Alps Blue unit, and the toroidal transformers are hand wound and designed to minimise RFI.

In keeping with the very high technical specification, the amplifier uses a dual-mono configuration, and everything has been designed to put quality above cost control: even the external metalwork is beautifully finished.

I plugged in my Harbeth P3ESRs, which are rated at a steady six ohms across the frequency range, into the 8 ohm taps with my usual Tellurium Q Ultra Black II cable. This is a 100% analogue device, so RCA cables ran from the Gold Note PH10 phono stage and the Yamaha CD-S3000 into the Aux1 and Aux3 inputs, my REL305SE into the sub out sockets and a Shunyata Delta NR2 mains cable from the wall into the IEC socket, I switched on and, putting my ear up to a loudspeaker, was pleased to hear there was no extraneous noise at all – total silence.

I inserted Pink Floyd's “Wish You Were Here” on SACD into the Yamaha, and relaxed into my Stressless chair. On the front panel of the amplifier shone a very bright red LED, telling



me that the tubes were warming up. After some seconds (I didn't ever measure it but it was less than half a minute) the red light changed to a much less bright green, so we were ready to go. I pressed play on the Yamaha remote and slowly increased the volume on the delightfully tactile Prima Luna remote control.

Shining first impressions

The familiar opening of *Shine On You Crazy Diamond* filled the room. Rick Wright's eerie synths, joined by David Gilmour's plangent guitar build up beautifully. Vocals project realistically into the room and a very wide and deep soundstage enveloped me in the music. I realised that the system needed time to warm through thoroughly but even at this early stage I was impressed.

The Prima Luna has another very nifty trick up its sleeve - on the remote control the very top button is marked TR/UL. This means that at one touch the listener can switch between Triode mode, which gives 24 watts per channel into 8ohms with the EL34 valves, or Ultra-Linear mode, which yields 42 watts. A small LED right above the warm-up/ready one changes between red and green so it is easy to see which is operating.

I switched between the two regularly during the Evolution 300's time in my system and found often that one mode suited a particular recording better than the other. I have some early Chess recording of Muddy Waters and Little Walter on vinyl, and they, for example, seemed to sound more "right" in Triode, whereas other more modern recordings and in particular TV and film soundtracks were better using the UltraLinear mode. The difference was less marked than I had expected, but noticeable: it's another example of the thoughtful design.

Switching the speaker cables to the 4ohm outputs, the sound improved again, giving extra depth and body, so that was kept for the remainder of the review. New owners should seek advice from their retailer but don't be afraid to experiment.

A few days into the review, I took delivery of a pair of Harbeth's new C7ES-3 XD speakers, which have a sensitivity rating of 86dB/1W/1M versus the 83.5dB of the P3ESRs. I swapped them in to the system and turned off the sub, and the combination moved forward to another level of musical enjoyment.

Playing a variety of vinyl the listening hours passed very quickly, and I realised just what a deeply musical experience I was enjoying. Alan Shaw, the owner of Harbeth and the designer of its loudspeaker range, has told me more than once that matching his designs with a valve amplifier is something of a game of luck, since some designs will work and others will not, because of potential incompatibilities between the loudspeaker's

crossover and the output transformer of the amplifier. I can report that The relationship in this case was extremely felicitous.

What was particularly gratifying was that rock music really rocked when pumped through the Prima Luna. This was no "pipe and slippers" (which I assume means dull and boring) presentation. I have the 50th anniversary vinyl pressing of the 1969 Rolling Stones *Gimme Shelter* album. The instructions on the inner sleeve of every version of this album which I own (which is several!) say "Play Loud", and 24W of triode mode valve power is more than enough to comply with that! This has never been an audiophile recording but by golly it rocks - and the PrimaLuna propelled it into the room with speed, energy and what my father would have described as gusto.

Intense experience

I was also curious to see how the amplifier sounded driving headphones rather than loudspeakers. so I plugged in my Audioquest Nighthawks, a closed-back design now sadly discontinued but whose sound I really enjoy. Where better to start than *Dark Side Of The Moon* on SACD? I'm no habitual headphone user, so had forgotten what an intense listening experience this can be: room darkened and eyes closed I was absolutely engrossed. There was no background noise at all, just a magical musical experience.

Are there any downsides to running the Prima Luna? From an operational point of view, I had to remember to switch off at the end of every listening session, to preserve the life of the valves and to cut down on electricity use. A valve amplifier will use more power than a solid state design, and it is important to give the Evolution 300 room to breathe. On the bottom shelf of my open rack it seemed perfectly happy to play for extended listening sessions.

As with any such amplifier, tubes will eventually fail, but that is a cost any owner will know to expect. The standard EL34 valves were aurally very pleasing to me, but if you're keen to try tube-rolling there is nothing to stop you. However, I'd ask whether, given that no corners seem to have been cut to save money and the designer has selected EL34s, might they might not just be the best choice anyway? And here's another subjective reason to love this amp: those ten valves glowing in the dark look fantastic!

The Evolution 300's price puts it in direct competition with some very highly regarded solid state amps, some of which I have been lucky enough to have had in my system, and I think it more than holds its own against any of them. It's a wonderful modern implementation of twentieth century technology, with build quality and sonic appeal - and an immense achievement.

HIFICRITIC
HIGHLY RECOMMENDED

Specifications

Prima Luna Evolution 300

Type	Valve integrated amplifier
Price	£3798
Power	42Wpc into 8 ohms (ultra-linear); 24Wpc (triode)
Inputs	Five line plus bypass
Outputs	4/8ohm speakers, tape out, headphones, subwoofer
Dimensions (WxHxD)	386x205x404mm

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