



A Creative Forum for 1

PrimaLuna EVO 100 Tube DAC - Premier Review

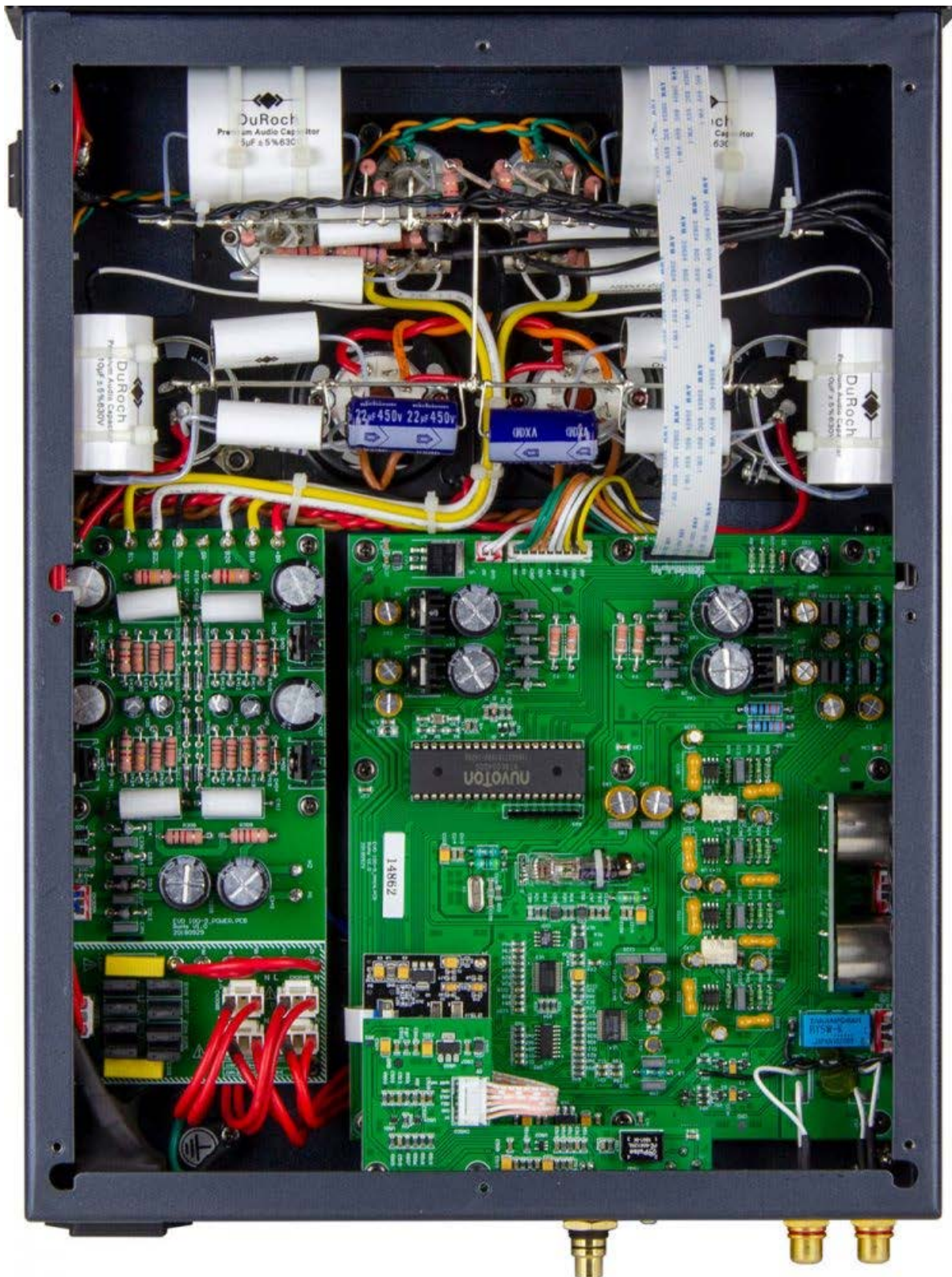
04-17-2019 | By Robert H. Levi | Issue 103



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Digital Audio Converters (DAC), which take the carefully crafted digital signal and convert it to analog, mostly matured between five and ten years ago. Companies like DCS, Playback Designs, Theta, and more, pushed the chip manufacturers to develop extraordinarily complex and powerful designs, and finally have nearly eliminated jitter and other innate problems. Musicality improved with every generation, as did computing power, topping out about a decade ago with chips used quite often today for stereo PCM 24/192 and up to 2X DSD. The latest and greatest DAC chips are purposed for 4X DSD and 8X DSD and are used in highest priced cutting-edge DACs, though to these ears, the last generation of DAC chips, not the current chips, are the most musical and realistic sounding around and are preferred by most manufacturers. A lengthy lead up for sure to spotlight the highly regarded Burr Brown PCM1792A Chip used in the EVO 100.

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The 1792A has been around for almost ten years and is much less expensive than the current high-tech chip used in the Astell&Kern ultima 1000 DAP. PrimaLuna chose them because they are extremely musical and detailed to the max if used correctly. With chips more or less perfected, why do most DACs sound musically thinner than equally priced phono or expensive R2R Tape playback?

When converted from digital to analog, the music is amplified and buffered by an analog stage. Even some of the finest DAC gear use less than savory analog amplification. Combine ordinary analog circuitry with solid-state digital DAC components, and you often have a recipe for box wine.

Brief History

Here comes ModWright. Around 2003, Dan Wright, founder of ModWright and an electrical design genius, began modding DACs by the likes of Sony, Oppo, Denon, and others with an excellent output stage with two triode tubes and, later, a tube power supply. His modded units were much better than the originals in every way. It was obvious for companies like ARC, E.A.R., and even PrimaLuna CD Players, that combining the new digital thinking with tube analog may be magical. I believe E.A.R. was the first company to build a CD Player with a tube in the digital stage as well as in the output stage.

I remember about 2009 asking Keith Johnson about the inclusion of a tube in the digital stage, and he told me it did not work. I asked Tim de Paravicini, designer of E.A.R. the same question; he just smiled.

PrimaLuna EVO 100 Tube DAC: Success in Spades



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Enough beating around the bush. The EVO 100 DAC is a musical *tour de force*, incredibly analog-natured, and built for a lifetime of demanding audiophile use. There is zero, nada, nothing under double its cost that can touch it. User-enhanced with an upscale power cord, interconnects, and USB cable, it just gets better and better! PrimaLuna has produced a world-beater with imaging, breadth, and depth of musical presentation that leaves you wondering how you put up with most other digital gear.

Bottom line: if you hate dry and thin music, you will *love* the PrimaLuna EVO 100 Tube DAC.





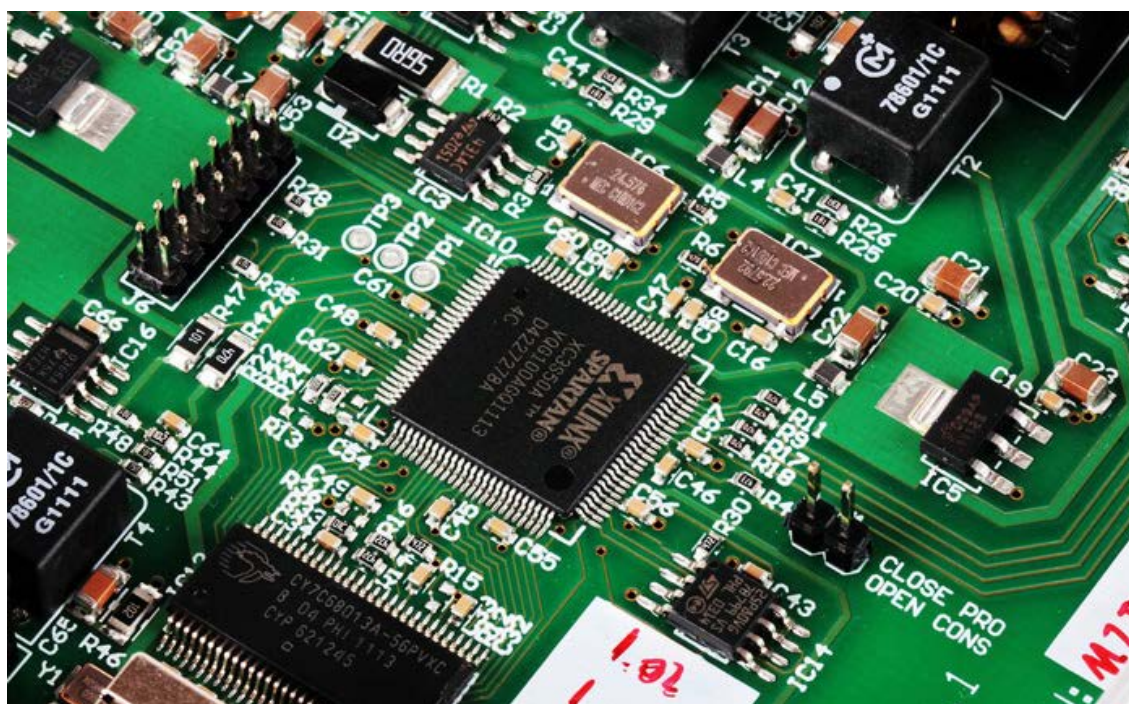
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Included with the DAC is a nifty metal remote control that addresses each input and mutes the circuit. There is no volume control, so the EVO 100 must be used with a preamplifier or integrated amp. It is single-ended only, with RCA output connectors. Every kind of digital input is included, with plenty of real estate between connectors for the beefiest models on the market. The specifications and exotic electronic features that contribute to the smoothest sound around may be found [HERE](https://www.primaluna-usa.com/primaluna-evo-100-tube-dac) (<https://www.primaluna-usa.com/primaluna-evo-100-tube-dac>). The two large display screens on the front can be read from 20 feet and are helpful, too.

Setup

The new review sample PrimaLuna EVO 100 Tube DAC was fully broken in before shipping to me, and changed little during my warm-up. It required about 15 minutes of actual playing time from turn-on to reach full perfection. It should be turned off after each session using the easy-to-reach switch on the side of the unit. Tubes should last five to ten years with one to two hours of use per day. A few inches of ventilation space above the unit is appropriate.

The digital drivers for integrating the EVO 100 with a Mac Computer of any vintage or a MS/Windows computer with Windows 10 or higher (NOT LESS), is on board the EVO 100. The EVO 100 and computer should shake hands automatically when you connect the USB cable after loading the Windows 10 drivers.



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The PrimaLuna EVO 100 Tube DAC is hand-wired, chock full of premium parts, and has six tubes in the analog output stage and one in the digital circuitry. Not being a technical kind of guy, let us just say all the amazingly cool original thinking that went into this piece of kit paid off in immediate musical gratification! At almost 29 pounds, the steel-and-glass chassis compliments the complex artistic circuit layout. It even has two rectifier tubes in a DAC! At \$2999, and available in silver or all black, you cannot miss my enthusiasm for this piece.

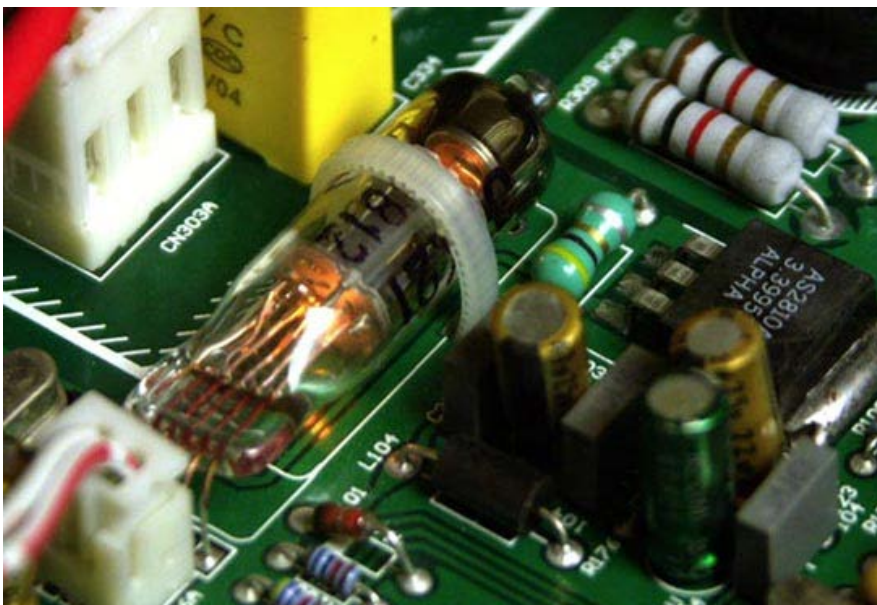
I usually do not do comparisons with other brands, but this may be helpful. With the new Cardas Clear Ahead power cord on hand as well as their superb interconnects, the PrimaLuna EVO 100 Tube DAC took amazing flight. With Kubala-Sosna Emotion or Elation! power cord and interconnects, the sheer impact of the DAC was awesome. With Jorma Origo interconnects, the delicacy was enhanced and imaging became rock solid. With Kimber Select 1036, the EVO 100 became neutral-with-a-bullet, and very focused. USB cables that were truly superb with the PrimaLuna EVO 100 Tube DAC included the Kubala-Sosna Emotion and Elation!, Kimber Copper Select, WyWires Diamond, and the WyWires Gold.

All of the above ancillaries are pretty pricey, so here is one that is not: the UIT line of cables.

Their interconnects, power cord, and USB cable...all sold directly with a money-back trial period...better fit the price range of the EVO 100, and give you outstanding connectivity performance. How good you ask? I use *all* of these cables interchangeably to extract the best sound quality possible for the system setup. Mitch Ko, a *bona fide* audio genius, designed these outstanding high-value UIT cables and builds them in California. See his site [HERE](https://www.uitaudio.com/) (<https://www.uitaudio.com/>).

My reference DAC is the E.A.R. DAC 4 at \$8000, with four tubes on board. To date, it is the best, most analog-like, and detailed DAC I have heard at any price. Utilizing the UIT cables I suggested, the EVO 100 is 80% as musical overall as my reference DAC. Both were placed on a Townshend Seismic Sink and plugged into the new 10 outlet Stein Music Powerbar Signature.

You never know what you are missing. After about thirty minutes of listening with the PrimaLuna EVO 100 Tube DAC, I was so immersed in the luxurious tonality of the reference system performance and the actual performance itself, I forgot about any comparisons. It was only much later when replacing my reference DAC, I heard the added definition and image layering. You would expect more for triple the cost. Nevertheless, the PrimaLuna EVO 100 Tube DAC is fully satisfying to me, and is the first ever really musical DAC to come in under the \$5000 price point in my audio spectrum.



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The Tube in the Digital Circuit: From PrimaLuna

"This is where the magic happens... the SuperTubeClock™ replaces the solid-state oscillator normally found in a DAC with a mini triode vacuum tube. By using a tube, we have significantly lowered the amount of jitter and noise, resulting in superior detail retrieval. This, in turn, yields superior detail and dynamics from top to bottom and improved overall musicality."

Overall Performance

I could not find any musical fault, lumpiness, thinness, compression, or overhang with the PrimaLuna EVO 100 Tube DAC. It is unfailingly musical and textured from the first to last note. Instruments were real and satisfying. Vocals were alive and full-bodied. Soundstage width is amazing and wall-to-wall. Depth is brilliantly rendered with an exceedingly black background. The PrimaLuna EVO 100 Tube DAC is an upsampler with CD sampling increased to 24-bits/192kHz automatically, yielding more space between instruments.

Move over mechanical sounding solid-state DACs with features no one cares about. The PrimaLuna EVO 100 Tube DAC is in town and looking to resolve your music. It is truly involving and superbly detailed built to satisfy even the most jaded audiophile and music lover.

Confession time: I did not do tube rolling. I found the supplied first-rate PrimaLuna tubes performed exceedingly well, and tweaking was best performed with the various cables. The supplied tubes are fast, clean, open, and neutral. In this instance, a different USB cable will yield more overall change than tube rolling. Now that I said that, if you come across a pair of Mullard used rectifier tubes of similar output you can actually afford, those should be quite nice!

Quibbles

Though the DAC is intuitive to operate, I recommend a manual be included, beyond the one-sheeter "quick start" guide that was unhelpful. There is no manual online to download right now, so the setup included a couple of guesses, including the discovery of the fact that a Windows 7 Pro computer would *not* work with this DAC.



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Summary

The PrimaLuna EVO 100 Tube DAC, a blockbuster component and musical triumph, leapfrogs dozens of DACs to virtually achieve state-of-the-art definition at a more than reasonable cost. Built

as an heirloom product, this tubed beauty will bring you a lifetime of enjoyment from all the digital sources I can imagine. Enhanced with top cables, enjoy a mellifluous tonal palette once reserved for your turntable only. It's easy to use, too; do not be afraid of the long-lasting tubes. This is the reason the DAC is so very special, and so similar to phono and R2R Tape.

The folks at PrimaLuna are certainly prolific and display high levels of taste. This new generation of components in the wings will complement the brand, and exceed its high standards. You must hear it for yourself—or just buy it now before the really low initial price takes flight. My HIGHEST audiophile recommendation goes to the PrimaLuna EVO 100 Tube DAC. Absolutely wonderful!

EVO 100 Tube DAC

Retail: USD \$2999 (silver or black no extra cost)

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<https://www.primaluna-usa.com/> (<https://www.primaluna-usa.com/>)

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