Trafomatic Audio PRIMAVERA Review – Giving Life Back to Music

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Overall Score 96/100

Sandu Vitalie Feb. 11, 2023 Amplifiers

My Video Review:

Today I won't give you a formal review, but a story about what later became my end-game headphone amplifier, that's flawed and perfect at the same time. If you are a returning visitor, then you know that headphone listening is equal as listening to loudspeakers to me. I love both and I can't part ways with either for so many reasons. Try rocking out at midnight on standfloor speakers, some things just won't work until you find a solution and that's how I discovered my love for headphones. You will find the word "love" in plenty of my articles and that's because emotions are driving me forward. Some measurements could be important (but not always and not all of them), but if a unit can't awaken feelings of joy or sadness, then that's a dead-on-arrival unit for me. Music is a form of art, which can only be discovered with an open heart and wild imagination. My farewell words at the end of my videos are "*listen to more music and be positive",* but we're living in difficult times and have complicated lives. I'm listening to music as an escape from the outside world and I like when a unit can teleport me there. You know… after trying tens of headphones, speakers, DACs and amplifiers, not everything has those traits. Some will be serious, technical and unforgiving, while others would be sweet and relaxing. A perfect amplifier should be equally impressive at awaking emotions and at showing the smallest intricacies, while providing an abundance of power & headroom, never choking down dynamics.

It's easier said than done, as very few headphone amplifiers had it all and these words shouldn't be a surprise to you, as I was lately driving the Hifiman Susvara with integrated and power amplifiers that were supposed to drive passive loudspeakers. I never wanted to do that, but current production headphone amps simply couldn't provide the current, voltage and dynamic swings that I craved for.

Enter…a different type of headphone amplifier that comes from a complicated mind that never wanted to deliver a familiar experience. After meeting the man behind his creations and talking for a few hours, I saw the spark that lit a fire, a spark that I also have in some of these writings. This guy wanted to create an Ultimate headphone amplifier, something he wouldn't update in a decade, combining crazy, oversized and overkill into a single unit. Today I will be discussing about what I believe is the best headphone amplifier you can

get for non-electrostatic headphones. It's one of those units that made me cry, laugh, stand and applause so many times now, but before going down the rabbit hole, let's ask some (tricky) questions to none other than Saša Čokić that sits behind this masterpiece.

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Q&A Session with Saša Čokić of Trafomatic Audio

Sandu V. (Soundnews) Q1: I recently reviewed your excellent-sounding Head 2 headphone amp that in the right conditions (a higher voltage coming from the source) could drive even the hardest loads out there. It was close to perfection in so many ways but it begs the question: what did you want to achieve with the Primavera versus what you did with the Head 2? Please tell us the story behind it.

Saša: *Head 2 was released somewhere in ~2013 as a successor to our good-old Head 1 which offered about 300mW of power into 50 ohms. For a few years, headphone enthusiasts didn't need more than 300 mW, but once planar-magnetic headphones started appearing all around it was clear that we needed a more powerful unit. At 2W per channel in 50 ohms working in a Pull-Pull Class-A configuration, Head 2 worked great with planars. Since the very beginning, I was a huge fan of Single-Ended DHT designs so it was natural that Primavera would come out at some point in time as my absolute best headphone amplifier offering 9W per channel, driving every possible headphone.*

Q2: At 30 kilos of audiophile goodness, I don't think a heavier or bigger headphone amplifier exists today. I'm filming most of our video B-Rolls in an office, meaning that I need to put it down and back on my table a few times per week and my back isn't so happy about this. Was it mandatory making it so big and heavy and would we live to see a smaller Primavera anytime soon?

Saša: *A high-end SE tube amplifier will always have massive high-quality transformers. There are four II C-core transformers (two output transformers and two main power transformers) and two II C-core high inductivity chokes. Most of its weight comes from them. Sorry, but a smaller one can't be made with current technology.*

Q3: I always believed that Primavera is a hybrid amplifier (transistor-based input stage and tube output stage) mostly because it touches my soul with its tonality, but it's also technical, fast, and impactful – skills that are usually found in solid-state electronics. Could you tell us what secret sauce did you use and from where that technical performance is coming? I understand electronics well, but I can't understand how it came out so clean and technical sounding.

Saša: *As I have mentioned before, my lifelong specialty is custom output transformers which we are doing from scratch for our use. It doesn't mean we won't develop custom transformers for audio brands around the globe, but our facilities are limited and we can't produce enough even for our use. Besides crafting custom transformers, many other things can make an amplifier special, never using negative feedback is probably our best ingredient.*

Q4: This will hurt a bit, but I still need to ask this question. I'm wondering why Head 2 can work as a preamplifier in a stereo setup, while Primavera doesn't have such a feature. Will that feature downgrade its performance as a headphone amplifier or are there other reasons?

Saša: *Head 2 looked more appropriate working as a preamplifier, isn't it? On top of that, we never wanted to compromise Primavera's performance.*

Q5: Primavera can be ordered with either SV811-10 or SV572-10 power tubes. Can you please enlighten us, what're the technical & sonic differences?

Saša: *SV811-10 tubes are no longer made at Svetlana. They have similar characteristics with the exception that SV811-10 have double anode dissipation. SV572-10 are still in production, but from SV811 and SV572 lineup, only SV811-10 and SV572-10 can be used in the Primavera, which have a gain of 10. To my ears there is a very small difference, SV572-10 sounding a bit more linear in the midrange, but that's only my opinion.*

Q7: Amplifier designers are tuning their gear with the help of several pairs of headphones. Can you share with us which did you use while crafting the Primavera?

Saša: *While developing the Primavera we used Hifiman's Susvara and HE1000 as our main headphones, but we also tuned it with the help of Audio-Technica ATH-W1000 dynamic headphones, which have a higher sensitivity of around ~100dB. We toned down the noise with these and some other things.*

End words: Thank you for accepting our Q&A session, for awakening unforgettable moments, and for warming our homes in the winter.

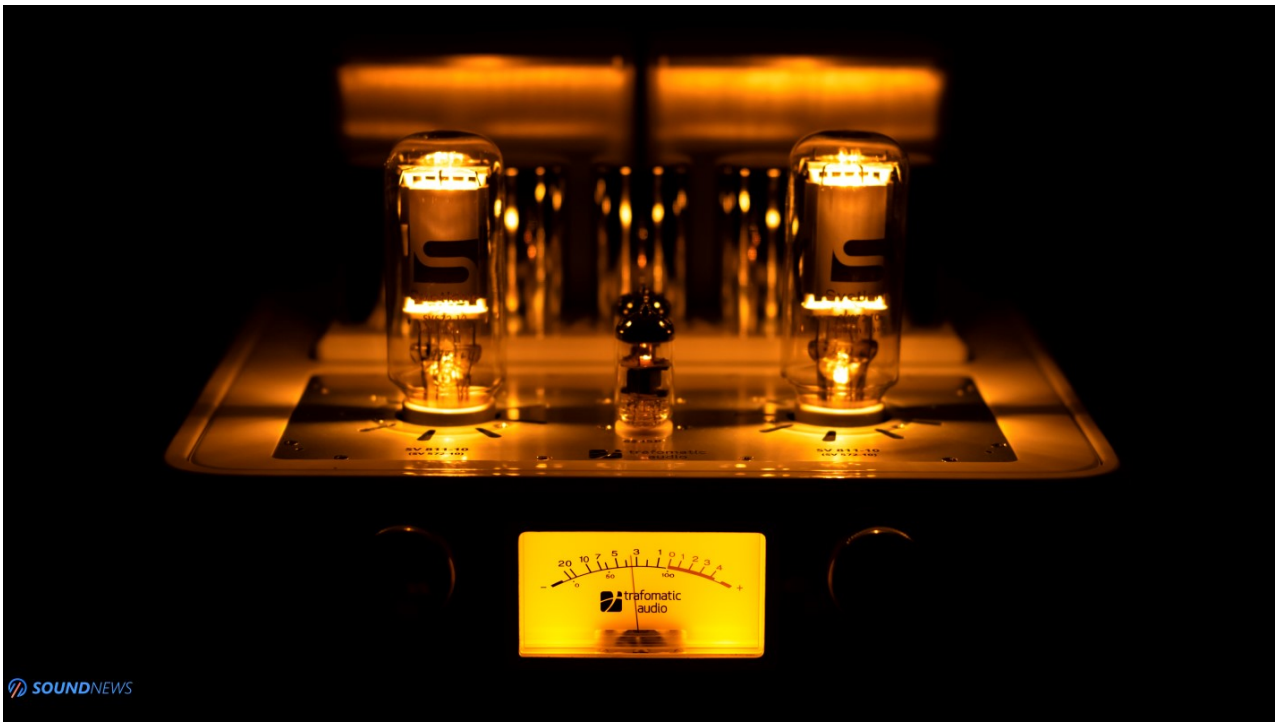
Saša: *Thank you too for challenging questions.*

Unboxing Experience

The moment you receive a wooden crate the size of your washing machine, you know you are in big trouble! Even if Chord's Ultima 5 box was massively looking, this was even bigger!

I got a triple-boxed affair, as you can never be too careful about high-end electronics. Wrapping the unit in a velvet pouch with a pair of white gloves on top felt like unboxing a precious gem. Every unit crafted by Trafomatic Audio is hand assembled and I must confess that these guys are very careful when shipping out their gear. There's the right amount of hardened foam for nicer protection and you can be sure that it will arrive in an immaculate condition at your front door.

Dragging it into the living room was quite a challenge, but the unboxing experience was worth it. Placing it in a perfect spot on your table, and slowly adding the tubes & their protective grills almost felt like a ritual.



Design & Build Quality

First and foremost, Primavera will impress you with its sheer size and weight, coming at 30 kilos or a little over 66 lbs., this is the heaviest amplifier I ever had the pleasure of testing at my place. I tried some massive gear in the past, including colossal power and integrated amplifiers, but this one tops them all. I wasn't aware that it's so deep, coming at 480mm it has the depth of my office table and it could be a problem with small or medium medium-sized desks. Trafomatic recommends good ventilation around the unit and since it weighs 30 kilos, it would be foolish putting anything underneath those massive aluminum feet.

Speaking about its feet, having a diameter of 60mm and a height of 20mm, these are the widest metallic feet I've seen on amplifier designs, but it all makes sense since plenty of heat is being dissipated and it does need a good elevation from the table for that to happen. You need to make sure that there is at least 200mm of space above its vacuum tubes as the unit needs to stay in a cool and dry environment. When it comes to maintenance, you should never touch the tubes with your bare hands and if you accidentally did that, just turn it off, let vacuum tubes cool off, and then wipe your fingerprints with a dry cloth.

As for the unit itself…since all my electronics changed their color to white and silver (black is way too serious), I decided getting it in white. Primavera stands for spring in Italian, it's also Primăvară in my mother language, but I'm calling it the white princess since you always need to be careful around her. Primavera is overweight and massive, looking like a fat princess that had too many sugars in her diet, but for me, it looks beautiful. I'm always dimming my display in the evening and I'm turning off the lights in the office, letting it shine brighter in the room. It's a weird feeling, but looking at the light show and its VU-meter, it creates a stronger bond with my music. As a child, I remember visiting one of my father's friends where a Studer A800 tape player was connected to a

VU-meter-equipped amplifier playing music in the background. I experienced electronic music for the first time back then and I was fascinated that the beats were syncing with VU-meters in perfect harmony, making me feel better at that time. The same happens with Primavera, just engage some toe-tapping music and watch that VU-meter go wild, slowly raising your mood. It's a gimmick…but it's a cool gimmick.

Although beautiful and raw, Primavera was built like a tank with oversized parts all around, including metallic fins (for better heat dissipation), huge transformers and Mundorf capacitors. It's an overkill amplifier, but that's fine as high-end audio isn't about limiting performance, but about unlocking it.

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Controls & Connectivity

Primavera works only as a headphone amplifier, nothing more and nothing less. It won't work as a preamplifier and it won't drive your passive loudspeakers. It was made with one purpose and that's why there aren't so many inputs and outputs. On its front panel, you can see a VU-meter in the middle, a volume pot to the left, and an impedance switch to the right. Balanced 4-pin XLR and a pair of 3-pin XLR outputs are provided, including a regular 6.35mm jack.

On its back you have your regular RCA and XLR analog inputs, a ground On or Lift switch, and an AC input. Primavera supports 230V and 115V voltages, but please make sure the correct voltage is selected before powering on the unit.

Under its Hood

We are dealing with an oversized Single-ended DHT (Direct-Heated-Triode) full Class-A headphone amplifier that outputs 9 Watts per channel into 50 Ohms. This isn't only a very powerful tube amplifier, but one of the most powerful headphone amplifiers I have tested around here. It constantly draws 280 Watts from the wall regardless of the selected volume and besides tubes dissipating some heat, additional heat is oozing from its lateral heatsinks. It works as a heater in the winter and it can become a problem in the summer.

A Single-Ended DHT amp is a tube amp that uses a single triode to produce an output, in contrast to a push-pull amplifier (like their Head 2) which uses a pair with antiphase inputs to generate an output with the wanted signals added and the distortion components subtracted. Single-Ended amplifiers usually operate in full Class-A and push-pull amps are usually operating in Class-AB or B, hence consuming a lot more power versus any other designs.

The benefit of such analog designs is simplicity! There isn't a simpler amplifier design out there. You have a driver tube that provides voltage output, coupled to a triode which is then directly connected to your headphones through an audio transformer in a common cathode arrangement. The triode is biased into Class A operation by applying a suitable negative bias voltage to its input control grid or by raising the cathode potential with biasing components.

Class-A working principle is known to be the best sounding one, but such amps will cost you several times more, as about ~75% of consumed power is transformed into heat never to be used, hence tripling or quadrupling the number of components and case size for

similar power output to a Class-B amplifier. In such designs, vacuum tubes are always powered on, producing the lowest possible distortion and the maximum amplitude to the output signal. The same amount of current is flowing at the output, even if there isn't an input signal, therefore big heatsinks and/or heat dissipation fins are mandatory. As you can guess, the efficiency of such amplifiers is very low, sitting at around ~25%.

Primavera uses four in-house developed double C-core output transformers which are sectioned with harmonically sized sections, resulting in a minimum inductance and the best high-frequency performance. The power supplies are completely separated from each other, including the main transformers. Special C-L-C anode voltage filters using Mundorf MLytic HV type capacitors were implemented, including high inductivity filter chokes made by Trafomatic Audio and everything works in Zero Feedback!

I don't want to complicate things but in simple words: most tube amp makers use negative feedback to bury the noise floor as deep as possible and that is super easy to do, at the cost of a less natural presentation. The hardest part is crafting a Zero Feedback amplifier that doesn't rise the noise and distortion at dangerous levels. Zero feedback amplifiers are usually regarded as the purest, most natural, and most real-sounding units out there. Since there is no way to manipulate the noise floor, Trafomatic lowered it by using the highest-grade components, including custom-made parts.

As for tubes themselves, Primavera uses a set of current production Sovtek 6S45P-E triodes (also called 6C45PI on a few websites) and another set of SV572-10 or SV811-10 power triodes made by Svetlana. There are several substitutes for its driver tubes, the smoothest and most natural-sounding ones are NOS Reflektor 6S45P-E which you can find over eBay at decent prices. If you need clean and transparent-sounding driver tubes, then nothing does it better than Electro-Harmonix 6S45Pi Gold Pins. In the latest chapter of this review, I will be testing every available driver and power tube, so you can save a few bucks by choosing the right pair.

Test Equipment

Trafomatic Primavera is an end-game headphone amp, there aren't additional stairs to climb after this one and that's why I tested it with as many high-end headphones as I could, ranging from dynamic to planar-magnetic ones, coming in closed-back or open-back flavors. For the sake of science, I will be testing its noise floor with a few ultra-sensitive IEMs, but most of my testing would circle around a pair of Hifiman Susvara.

I used a Zidoo NEO Alpha wireless streamer linked to a Roon Nucleus, feeding a Chord M Scaler and Chord DAVE DAC, followed by the Primavera for the cleanest possible signal. High-end Crystal Cables Reference Diamond XLR interconnects and A Charlin Silver 3500 MKII BNC cables were also used for the best results.

All right everybody, I think it's the right time to hit some eardrums!

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Sound Performance

I. Prologue

After cracking open a wooden crate and experiencing a headphone amp of colossal proportions, I knew that a long burn-in period would be imperative until it will start blooming.

In the first days Primavera sounded bad…like really bad. So bad that in fact, I was going to shamefully return it. The low-end was completely missing the action, getting bombarded by a high-pitched sound. The weirdest thing? It lacked cojones, oomph, and power. It was heavily clipping at around 50% of power with planar-magnetic headphones (that require a higher current intake). I wasn't feeling those 9 Watts per channel in my gut, not even a quarter of that power, sounding polite and very shy. I set a goal of burning it for ~8 hours a day, as tube amplifiers don't need only long run times, but cooling hours as well, as cathode and anode elements are forming when tubes are cooling and heating up. Its oversized transformers and capacitors would also need at least a week until reaching optimum parameters.

I left it playing in my office for two weeks (a little over 110 hours of use), I went back to it and there was a massive difference in terms of dynamics, power output, scale, and control of the drivers…I couldn't recognize it anymore. It was no longer clipping, even with the hardest loads, it was no longer grainy, exchanging that with an effortless sound that made my other amps hard and grainy sounding by comparison. The bass turned 180 degrees, getting a lot punchier & meatier, more so than any of my top-tier headphone amplifiers. To be completely honest with you, I never felt my planar-magnetic headphones sounding as alive, energetic, and tactile before, something I would never expect out of a transformer-coupled tube amp.

Two more weeks passed and what was an already excellent headphone amplifier, transformed into a beastly sounding unit, providing even more power on tap, better driver control, there was more oomph, and a limitless soundstage stretching wide open. From that point onwards I didn't feel that Primavera was improving and I sat down for countless listening sessions that are still undergoing daily.

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II. Preliminary Sound Impressions

People are sometimes complaining over Disqus or email about my ranking system and why I'm never offering 100 points and why their expensive units stop at ~95 and are never going higher. Today I will be breaking that psychological barrier as I do believe a few things stand head and shoulders above most solid-state, hybrid, and full-tube amplifiers, and let me explain to you why.

As a SET headamp that offers almost unlimited power, you can already imagine that it will drive everything, including inefficient planar magnetic cans like Hifiman Susvara and Abyss AB1266. Primavera offers a vast, open and wide soundstage, so wide that many times I turned my head over my shoulders, checking if somebody entered my room. It is so wide and tall sounding, that oftentimes I forget that I'm listening to headphones. This was the only amp that worked excellently with Audeze LCD-5, seriously improving their scale and layering. I could finally enjoy closed-back headphones without feeling claustrophobia, never placing the sounds in a bowl and shaking them around. Primavera is unmatched when it comes to scaling and imaging and this trait alone uplifted headphone listening for me. Being part of a stereo HiFi community, some folks are always turning their heads when I'm talking about headphones. Most of them don't believe in headphone listening, due to their intimate approach to music reproduction. I invited a few stereo heads to check out the Primavera with open-back headphones and the look on their faces was priceless. I think I converted a few guys into headphone listening as there are enough reasons to embrace headphone listening.

If you know me by now, then you know that I like fast transients and natural decays, fading out at the right time is important to me. Without perfect timing and a fast tempo, a few amps can lose their grip over headphone drivers and that can have bad repercussions. Usually, tube amplifiers don't provide a fast pace, sounding slower and mellower, to a point of becoming smooth and way too romantic sounding. This was one of the reasons I sold my old tube amps, as I could never make them fast and impactful.

After cooking the Primavera for over a month and engaging some of the nastiest tunes out there, I had a feeling that I was living a lie for so many years. I don't want to complain about my former tube amps, but Primavera is something else entirely & nothing like my former tube amps combined. While I couldn't do a direct comparison, there wasn't a tube amp at the Munich High-End Show 2022 that outperformed it, although Riviera Audio Labs AIC10 wasn't far away.

The Primavera isn't just nimble, especially with upgraded driver tubes, but the most head-crushing headphone amp that passed through my hands. After living with it for just two weeks, I decided to sell off my Benchmark HPA4 and AHB2 mono blocks including a few mid-level amps, as I couldn't see myself using them ever again. Primavera felt so thumpy that even end-game solid-state amplifiers were lacking behind in dynamics. When I'm craving for high energy levels, then I will be powering it on and use nearby flagship headphones.

To this day I didn't crown a single headphone amp as being a genre and headphone master, although Enleum AMP-23R was extremely close to that title. Some amps worked better with dynamic headphones, while others worked better with planar-magnetic cans. Some sounded exceptional with smooth and relaxing music, while others were nicer with aggressive tunes. Those rules will be abdicated today, as Primavera sounds great regardless of the musical genre or headphones attached to it.

Usually, I'm getting some hardness from op-amp based amplifiers. An overly sharp contour adds a weird pitch in the treble that no EQ can heal. That hardness is nowhere to be spotted on the Primavera, getting an effortless, clean and transparent sound. Making resolving solid-state amplifiers isn't a big deal anymore. Just look around at affordable THX-AAA, PLFCA and NFCA amplifiers, that are using noise-shaping techniques, burying the noise floor and bringing forward the tiniest details. You can get an ultra-clean-sounding amp that won't cost you more than a decent pair of interconnect cables and I mean it. Even at less than $200 you can get revealing and clean-sounding units. With that out of the way, there is always a cause and effect with analog designs, as amps that juggle negative feedback (and noise floor for that matter) were plain wrong sounding, stripping away the life and textures from the music. If you ever tried a THX-AAA-based amplifier by now, then you know exactly what I'm writing about. Making clean-sounding amps without using noise-shaping techniques, well that's the hard part. Guitar-mashing Trafo-heads know these causes and effects, focusing on improving their gear with a good selection of components. As their name states (*Trafo*-matic), they are melting copper and are winding their own transformers from scratch. Primavera uses four custom transformers, some of the best-in-class Mundorf M-Lytic capacitors and power triodes

that were designed to be used with passive loudspeakers. I'm not sure what makes it so clean and resolving, but all of those things combined made it clean and highly resolving. In fact, there are plenty of high-end solid-state headphone amps that aren't approaching this level of resolution.

How can an amp become a genre master if it doesn't have a perfect balance in between bass, midrange and treble? Some are trying to bury or elevate regions from the frequency response, but Primavera isn't doing that. There's a perfect blend and a strict balance of quantity and quality that makes it different and unique at the same time.

III. Background Noise & IEM Compatibility

Let's be serious for a second, you aren't buying a 30-kilo (66-pound) monstrosity for IEMs, right? I don't feel safe connecting ultra-sensitive IEMs to a 9000 mW per channel beast, out of which a single mW is needed to arrive at super loud levels. What could possibly go wrong with multi-thousand IEMs…right? Still, if things go south for the sake of science, I will sacrifice a pair of entry-level IEMs. I already prepared a nasty playlist and a fire extinguisher near me, just in case.

I need to warn you about several things though. Primavera does not have a gain switch, meaning that you could accidentally blast armature-punching power into your precious IEMs, so you will need to be extra careful with such (easy-peasy) loads. Its working gain sits at +33 dB and its variable impedance switch isn't limiting the power flow. Luckily, its volume pot offers moderate physical resistance as you will need to apply some force.

The most sensitive IEMs that I have in my possession are FiiO's FA9 used in a high-sensitivity mode which has an ear-bleeding SPL of 113 dB from a single mW of power. Since we're talking about a SET amplifier, it provides the same power on its 6.35mm

(1/4”) and 4-pin XLR jack. I connected them to the regular 6.35mm jack, went all the way down volume wise and hit play.

To my amazement, FA9 were completely silent, without a single trace of noise or hum playing in the background. Considering that we’re dealing with a mammoth amplifier, I didn’t expect it to play so safely, mostly because their Head 2 wasn’t dead-silent, nor other tube amps that passed through my hands, including upper-class WooAudio amps. I couldn’t believe it as usually this is the biggest con of tube amps. I checked my wires and everything looked fine. When music started playing, I went ahead and reached an SPL of 100 dB (please don’t listen at that volume) and again…there was an absolute silence in between passages.

I let it play *Eagle Brother* by *Mari Boine* (**Qobuz** / **Tidal**) which has amazing crescendo moments, including long silence moments in between passages which are crucial in setting the mood for the album. Primavera wasn’t just dead silent with IEMs, as musical notes were coming from a black void from another side of the room. Some were appearing closer to my face, while others felt coming from an angle. Regardless of how loud I would go, it didn’t add noise or distortion into the mix. My safe listening position sits at ~13 out of 100, which is loud enough and while I couldn’t go louder fearing damaging my hearing, I could do that with music on pause. When I arrived at ~35 out of 100, which are Hifiman Susvara levels of power, a gentle whine appeared in the background, which gradually raised in intensity when going louder. While beastly looking, it provided less noise compared to their own Head 2 and Burson Soloist 3X GT and there’s a bit less noise compared to a Ferrum OOR and Flux Labs Acoustics Volot. In all honesty, only very few solid-state amps were marginally better at repelling the noise like Benchmark HPA4 and Topping A90 Discrete. Still, at safe listening levels, Primavera can be used with sensitive IEMs and that is something new for me.

As you can guess, sensitive desktop headphones performed in a similar fashion. The highest sensitivity headphones I own are my co-designed Apos Caspian, which I tailored to be efficient & easy to drive, even from regular sources like smartphones and laptops. Coming at 115dB per a single mW of power, these were loud in no time and as much as I have tried, I couldn’t detect traces of noise.

All these tests were made without my passive power conditioners (Plixir Elite BAC400 & Elite BAC1500) in place, strengthening my claims that Primavera is a silent tube amplifier.

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IV. Power Output

With 9 Watts per channel into 50 Ohms, Primavera is one of the most powerful amplifiers that passed through my hands. While a lot of companies are marketing their headphone amplifiers as Class-A amps, very few are mentioning how much power is being delivered in Class-A. Most units are providing in between 5% and 15% of Class-A power. The easiest way in knowing if you are dealing with a Class-A amplifier is by looking at their power consumption, as such amplifiers are very inefficient (having an efficiency of about 25%), consuming lots of power and dissipating a lot of heat. You can also inspect their size and weight, as usually, these are oversized, overweight, and beastly looking.

Here are a few examples of Class-A headphone amplifiers:

1. Musician Andromeda is labeled as a Class-A amplifier, yet it consumes just 7 Watts and delivers about 4.5 Watts in 16 Ohms. I'm sorry, but there is none…or close to nothing being delivered in Class-A via its headphone jacks.
2. Burson Soloist 3X consumes 72 Watts and delivers 8 Watts in 16 Ohms. Clearly, we're dealing with something else that will deliver a decent amount of power in Class-A.
3. Ferrum OOR consumes up to 80 Watts, working in a deeper Class-A operation compared to the above-mentioned amps.
4. Flux Labs Acoustics Volot consumes 110 Watts, providing double the power in Class-A compared to its smaller FA-10 sibling (which consumes 55 Watts).
5. Burson Soloist 3X GT works in an even deeper-Class-A operation, consuming 120 Watts and providing a similar power output to a Soloist 3X and OOR.

Trafomatic Primavera consumes 280 Watts and that happens at idle and full power, as this is a true Class-A headphone amplifier. I don't imply that Class-A amplifiers are sounding better, but this is the only fully-operational Class-A amplifier from the list.

I will go straight to the point and mention that there isn't a headphone available right now that Primavera wouldn't drive, whilst leaving at least ~50% of power on tap for crazy dynamic swings. If you need clean & undistorted power from a SET amp that will drive everything from IEMs to Hifiman Susvara & Abyss AB-1266, then Trafomatic Primavera could easily pull that off.

Most of my listening was made via a pair of Hifiman Susvara, a headphone that was driven with flying colors while providing the wildest dynamic swings. If you go back to my Hifiman Susvara review, then you'll see me driving them with two Benchmark AHB2 power amplifiers that awoke great dynamics and provided the best driver control. After listening to the Primavera for a few months, I decided to sell my AHB2 duo as Primavera was providing as much power while making Susvara so much easier to listen to. The weird part? Primavera sounded much wider and deeper than two AHB2 working in dual-mono, sounding as effortless and alive, while putting more meat on the bones and infusing some joy.

Regardless of what headphone it was driving, I felt like listening to the best version of that particular headphone. I don't recollect experiencing my headphones so energized, *musical,* and alive, it almost makes me re-write the Susvara review and a few more around here. Erzetich Phobos V.2021 is no longer the Phobos that I know, but a dormant flagship headphone that could be compared with anything out there and the same can be said about Meze Elite.

How about Sennheiser HD800S? Presumably, you already checked my Trafomatic Head 2 review, I will just say that after testing them with Primavera, I went ahead and purchased a set the next day. HD800S transformed into bass-heavy cans, especially when using NOS Reflektor drive tubes and SV572-10 power tubes. I like HD800S for its limitless out-of-head sound and impressive layering, but Primavera offers an even bigger picture while removing all traces of glare and listening fatigue, shaping them into a flawless version of HD800S.

After receiving the Audeze LCD-5, I was quite disappointed thinking that maybe I got a defective unit. I tried another set and it sounded exactly the same. All the warmth and amazing depth of LCD-4 was no more and don't get me started with the sub-bass. I finished my LCD-5 review only after putting them on the Primavera, which made them so much better, far from the usual claustrophobic mess. Depth doubled and soundstage tripled with the Primavera and from a closed-in sounding can, I've got a different version of LCD-5, something that could dance with flagship-level cans.

I tried a few more headphones and experienced their limits, I started having bad dreams at night as I couldn't enjoy my own amps anymore. The nightmare stopped when I went ahead and ordered a white Primavera, the one you saw in plenty of my writings. It should be clear by now that Primavera is a very powerful & tightly controlled sounding unit, beating a good deal of amplifiers.

V. Transient Response

One of the main reasons for getting a white Primavera was its ability to bring life into lifeless-sounding headphones. Hifiman Susvara and Sennheiser HD800S are usually not that impactful & soul-grabbing and you will need some serious changes in your setup, until any of these will start singing, firing machine-gun-like notes without losing their grip. Personally, I can't enjoy the music if it doesn't emotionally latch on me.

This is why Primavera haunted my dreams and won the fight. People that tried Hifiman Susvara on all sorts of amplifiers know that a very limited number will make them impactful and fearless sounding. You can forget about toe-tapping & head-banging on underwhelming-sounding units, getting too little low-end presence and an uninspiring midrange delivery. With Primavera, I know that I'm listening to the best version of Hifiman Susvara & Co, infusing life where it was none.

When I owned the Sennheiser HD800 a long time ago, I was using them exclusively for movies and media consumption, but not for music. With an amp of this caliber, that wouldn't be the case, adding weight & density in the bass, planting life in the midrange, and removing the top-end glare that upper-class Sennheisers are notorious for.

When putting the Audeze LCD-4 on, suddenly from a warm and creamy-sounding can, I'm getting a more technical version of it, while punching and pounding way harder. The story repeats itself with Kennerton Rognir, Meze Elite and Erzetich Phobos, always bringing more air and expanding their horizons. Primavera provides a fuller-bodied sound, puts more meat on the bone compared to solid-state amplifiers, drastically

changing the sound of several headphones. What was previously lightweight and ethereal, became dense and full-bodied and what was warm and thick, transformed into bold and powerful.

It's funny…as I didn't find tube amplifiers powerful and fast enough to be used with electronic music. Trafomatic Head 2 changed that preconception, sounding punchier than what I was used to. Primavera brought that concept further and awakened dynamics like experiencing them for the first time. From a sizable number of end-game headphone amps, only Enleum's AMP-23R approached close in terms of dynamics, with the exception that Primavera does dynamics better, especially with lower-sensitivity headphones.

Over My Head by *Fytch* (**Qobuz** / **Tidal**) feels like having micro-subwoofers around my neck, getting accurate and deep-reaching bass notes. It is impossible staying still with a pair of Elite, LCD-4 or Rognir on your head, as it physically pushes you. For a similar performance in a stereo setup, you will need end-game stand-floor loudspeakers and state-of-the-art acoustic treatment. The fun factor behind Trafomatic's best rivals end-game stereo rigs as for example my KEF Reference 3 ($14.000) put on a ~$37.000 Chord Electronics stack (DAVE + Ultima 3 Pre + Ultima 5 Power) can't provide the same satisfaction and smiles that Primavera does. It goes without saying, that the white princess swings Thor's hammer gracefully, providing a ground-shaking bass while removing the bloat associated with low-grade tube amps.

SOUNDNEWS

VI. Soundstage & Imaging

When Primavera pushed the sounds outside my head on a pair of Audeze LCD-5, I understood that it could solve the biggest problem of headphone listening. While some headphones have nice imaging, offering an out-of-head experience (HD800/HD800S), many others need a helping hand in spreading their wings. From my collection, the ones

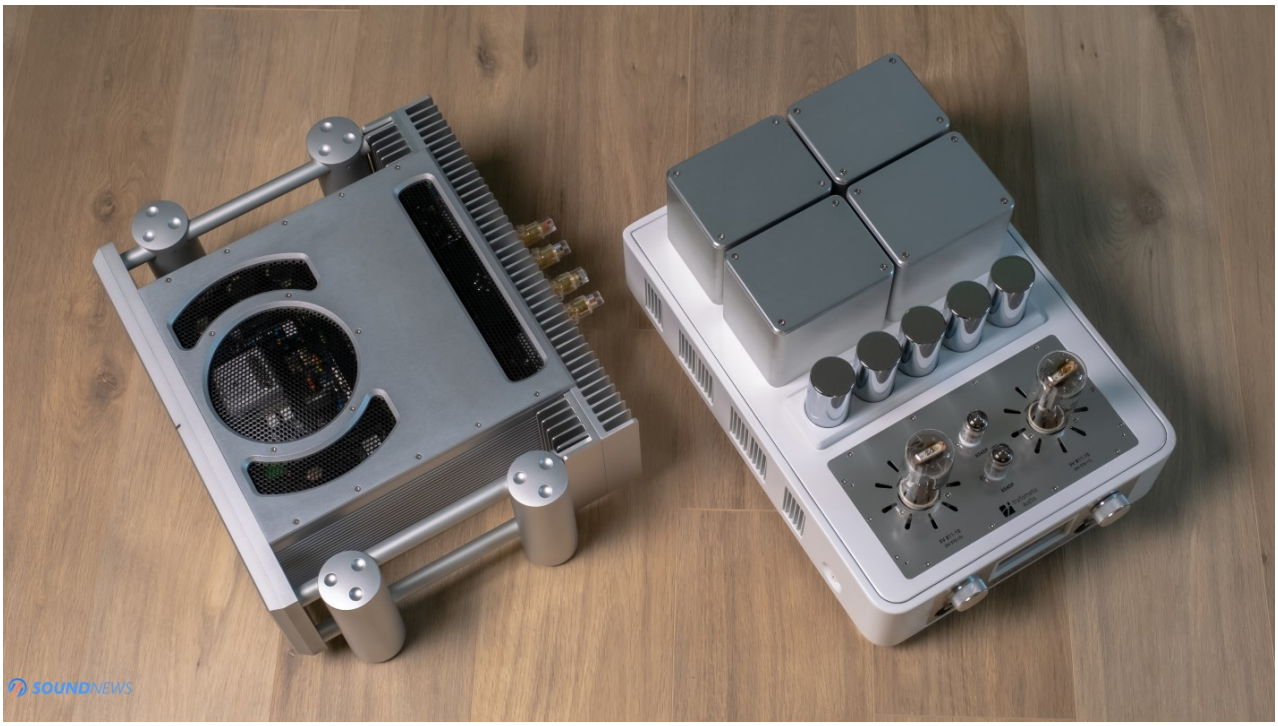
that massively increased or decreased their scale were planar-magnetic ones. Audeze LCD-4 could sound two-dimensional on portable gear, but put them on beastly-looking amps and they will rival near-field stereo setups. The same goes for Meze Elite and Erzetich Phobos, but the ones that saw the biggest improvement were the Hifiman Susvara and Audeze LCD-5.

I couldn't understand the LCD-5 on solid-state amps and that comes from a die-hard Audeze fanboy. While they were faster, cleaner and more transparent to their predecessors, depth and soundstage took a serious hit, including the legendary sub-bass of LCD-4 that felt seriously crippled. Yet, Enleum AMP-23R and Primavera were making them livelier, getting more energy while trying to add void spaces in between the sounds. Primavera solved the biggest issues that I had with LCD-5, but it didn't radically change them.

While I couldn't compare it directly in a controlled environment with end-game tube amplifiers, I felt that Riviera Acoustics AIC-10 was marginally smaller sounding, followed by Feliks Envy and Cayin HA-300 MKII, amps that I tried for a few days at the Munich High-End Show 2022.

When *Ashes Of The Modern World* by *Apocalyptica* (**Qobuz** / **Tidal**) started playing, a pair of Meze Elite hopped on my head, retrofitted with brand-new velour pads (these will be revealed soon). As a huge Apocalyptica fan, hearing them going back to their roots, made me quite curious. The first notes felt haunting and deep, trying to show a dirtier face of symphonic metal, running cold in the dead of the winter as three cellos started pulling me in. Primavera added lots of substance and thick air in between passages, empowering the whole experience and pulling me from ice into unyielding fires. While bass and midrange notes will dominate the rest of the album, it was obvious that I was experiencing a grander version of this album via Trafomatic's best. I was surfing huge bass waves and my heart skipped a beat after a furious drum solo. There was a sense of determination tainted by the darkness that feels present all around me, like being part of a horror movie from which you can't escape. I was carried over and clearly, Primavera made me do that thanks to its open and wide soundstage.

Secret Of The Runes by *Therion* (**Qobuz** / **Tidal**) is one of my all-time favorite symphonic metal albums and quite possibly the best *Therion* album to date, filled with crescendo moments & soprano voices, all wrapped in a dark mist that hovers all around - a quintessential album that will reveal the sound staging proficiency of your setup. Primavera swapped a great-sounding album with an epic-sounding one. Each track has its own leitmotif, which was later amplified by the grandiosity of the Primavera.



VII. Detail Retrieval & Transparency

This thing still draws 280 Watts per hour no matter where your volume sits, it rises the room temperature after two hours of use, it needs tube replacements after ~5000 hours of use, it weighs a ton and it's not the most detailed sounding amp out there.

If you want to hear every nuance that's happening behind your tunes without murdering your wallet, then you can do that pretty easily with affordable NFCA or THX-AAA amplifiers that you can get for as little as $200. Such amps will be lowering harmonic distortion and noise levels with feed-forward error correction tech and feedback loops that would be canceling the noise within the circuit. However, when forcefully removing things, a chain reaction will happen on a deeper level. For example, I never heard full-bodied, natural and authentic-sounding THX-AAA amplifiers and the same goes for NFCA amps. You will be getting tons of information with such units, but you'll be losing warmth, richness and the tonal balance will tilt towards brightness - which no wires or power conditioners can help you with.

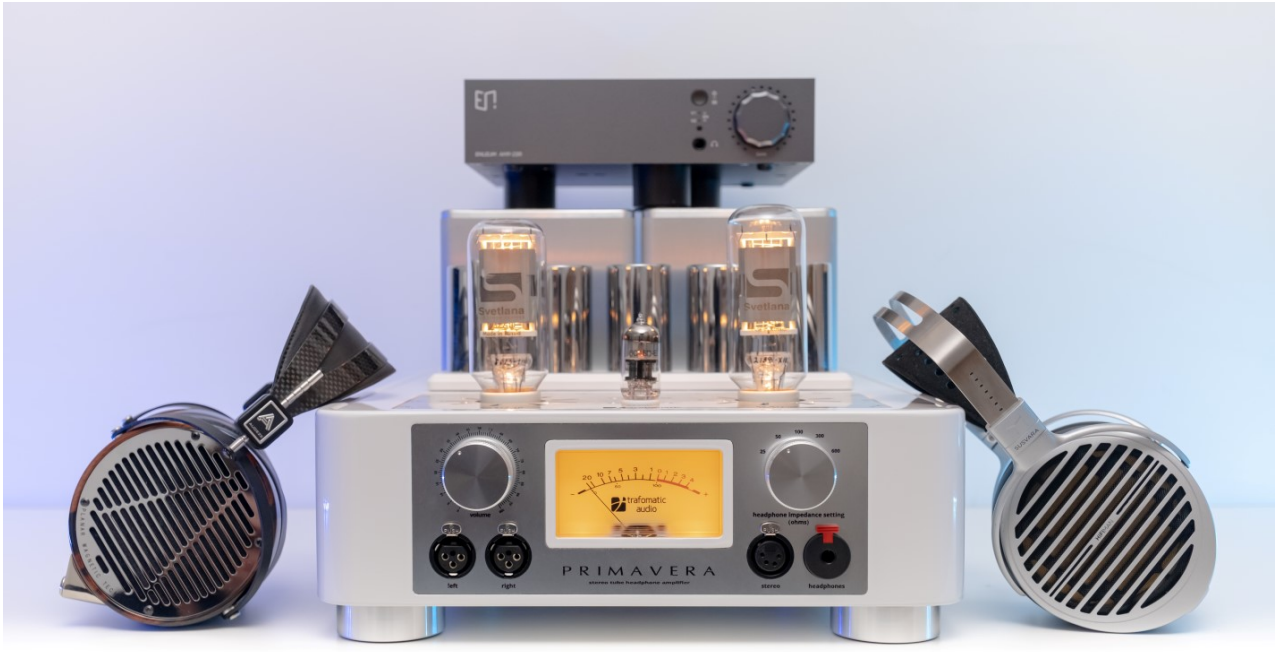
At the opposite corner are staying class-A amplifiers that use tiny portions of negative feedback or none at all, that aren't squeaky clean, but oh so alive and involving. A few years ago, I was a THX-AAA type of person, chasing the last drop of information, even if treble glare was piercing my ears. Today, I'm no longer that person, trying to get accurate-sounding gear that won't shift the tonal balance toward warmth or brightness.

People are sometimes associating tube amplifiers with soft, mellow and sweet-sounding units, rolling off frequency extremes and removing information from the lowest and highest octaves. That description fits perfectly several entry to mid-level tube amps, but Primavera isn't part of that group. It's mostly linear and honest, without altering the frequency response. It's magnificent sounding in the treble, more so than several solid-state amplifiers, getting intricacies without piercing my eardrums with hundreds of

invisible needles. In my view, the Primavera is a detailed-sounding machine and it's a very transparent-sounding unit as well. The only thing it doesn't do well is rendering razor-sharp leading edges, which aren't as outlined as it usually happens on solid-state electronics. That can feel like a blessing with bad-mastered music or a slight drawback depending on what you're searching for.

I'm no longer impressed by overly sharp leading edges and exaggerated trebles as I want to hear my tunes in perfect harmony, preserving the soul of the music, a skill that Primavera already mastered.

The unusual opening of *Oroborus* by *Gojira* (**Qobuz** / **Tidal**) is not for the simple-minded metal-heads. It's aggressive, complex, experimental and unique at the same time. It's also…unbearable to listen through linear-sounding headphones like HD800S put on solid-state amplifiers. Although it might sound like an act of self-punishment, trying to dissect complex metal compositions via HD800S, it was an act of rediscovery via Primavera, as even misunderstood music started making sense at the end of the day. *The Art Of Dying* is my all-time favorite *Gojira* track for a few reasons. It's incredibly sophisticated, it makes you curious and it will play tricks with your imagination. The percussion and drumming parts are nothing short of spectacular. You have snares tapping slowly & building up until the end, exploding into a furious melee of drums and guitars fighting against each other. Epic riffs and elaborated drum solos are usually painful to listen to via HD800S, but Primavera reminded me once again why I bought it in the first place, untangling and placing the music nicely around me. Primavera boosted textures and added dynamics, but it left the presentation as crude, raw and unpolished, exactly as it needs to be.



SOUNDNEWS

VIII. Frequency Response

A. Bass

Her majesty sub-bass was so skinny at first, that I rarely felt her presence. As days were turning into weeks, she started gaining weight and a rounder shape. A month later, the bass was omnipresent and not only with bass-intensive music. If I think about it, then the only amplifier that rendered the bass as good was Enleum's AMP-23R which was by a hair faster, but not as impactful sounding. After listening to music on solid-state electronics for a while, the whole bass region feels different on this one, like experiencing its beauty for the first time. The nicest thing about its bass performance is that you will be counting the layers flowing around. With SV572-10 power triodes in place, the bass gets tighter, stronger, and more technical sounding, like facing a hybrid amplifier, rather than a full tube one. Primavera isn't that tubey and more like technical, getting only a mild tube flavor and considering that its power output is almost limitless, that's exactly how I felt about its bass performance, trying to get deep and punchy sounding, throwing heavy punches down low and awaking dormant bass notes even on ethereal and lightweight sounding cans.

B. Midrange

The whole midrange region feels like I'm experiencing their Head 2 all over again, as instead of a lush, creamy and overly warm midrange, I'm getting a real representation of it. Primavera doesn't elevate the midrange region in any way, but you'll definitely get a denser and weightier tonality, sounding meatier compared to a Head 2. Swap SV572-10 power tubes with SV811-10 ones and experience a warmer midrange performance. The colors will get a higher saturation, textures will be blooming and instruments will be weeping with more emotions. Personally, I'm a bigger fan of the SV572-10, but with dry and thin-sounding headphones, nothing does it better than SV811-10 together with NOS Reflektor 6S45P-E drive tubes. Regardless of the tubes being used, there aren't traces of hardness, thinness or dryness, always striving for a life-like representation, adding just a sprinkle of life and warmth. Swapping Primavera with an entry-level SMSL HO200 THX-AAA-based headphone amp wiped clean all the colors and beautiful overtones, as HO200 felt colorless and dry, never trying to get me involved in the act of music listening. Male voices lost their weight and female voice lost their pitch, things that were so real and powerful on the Primavera.

C. Treble

Its treble performance is another standout, as there aren't roll-offs in the upper treble with the stock tubes. There is plenty of shimmer and vibration in the upper octaves, and sometimes I'm forgetting that I'm listening to a tube amplifier. Its treble is clean, precise and outlined, without getting hard and brittle. A friend of mine came for a listen a while ago, a stubborn chap that never believed in tubes nor in R-2R ladder DACs. I'm still working on teaching him what's the fuss about resistor ladder DACs, but he immediately clicked with the Primavera and Head 2, so much so that a few months later he purchased a tube amp and looked back. I want my amps to sound great with all musical genres, as I don't have the time nor the energy to swap amps for different music genres. I need a unit

that should be technical, clean, yet involving and that's what I'm getting from the Primavera. With a few tube combinations, you can get it slightly clearer & faster sounding or you can get it warmer & smoother sounding and let's write a chapter about that.

IX. Tube Rolling

I am truly happy that Primavera doesn't use a higher number of tubes than competitor amps. It has only four of them and believe me, this is going to save you a lot of cash. Go check the pricing of ELROG and Takatsuki power tubes. Western Electric, PSVANE and Emission Labs will feel like peanuts money by comparison. Just a few ELROG tubes can be more expensive than the Primavera itself and that's not cool at all.

A. Driver Tubes

1) Sovtek 6S45P-E. Primavera comes bundled with these which can be found fairly easily at decent prices. These will offer you a balanced sound and for about five months I never bothered exchanging them. These are sounding clean and fast, but they can get a little bright sounding. They remind me of solid-state amplifiers, sounding technical but not as warm and inviting. These worked great with modern tunes and not so much with relaxing stuff.

2) Electro-Harmonix 6S45Pi Gold Pins. If you need a pimped-out version of the Sovteks that are no longer bright, then these will feel exactly like that. These are faster, harder-pounding and cleaner sounding as well, but you will need to shelve a lot more cash as these are no longer made. You can find them via eBay at around ~$250 per pair and if you want a better deal, WooAudio are selling these for $195 a pair. These are striking a perfect tonal balance and that's why these are my daily driver…driver tubes. These are

making the Primavera even faster and cleaner sounding across the entire frequency range. The background which was already impressively dark, gets even darker and if you need some of that solid-state transient response, then these are simply the best.

3) Reflektor 6S45P-E (New-Old-Stock). Saša recommended giving a try to good-old NOS tubes, which you can find over eBay at decent prices, I've got eight 6S45P-E Reflektor tubes and I'm glad I did. Simply put, these are the smoothest and warmest tubes of the bunch, gently boosting the midrange region while slashing some energy from the upper treble. If you really despise brightness and you want more warmth in your life, then these are excellent at that. With these in place, I could indefinitely listen to music with a pair of Hifiman Susvara and Sennheiser HD800S on my head. The only problem with these is transparency and detail retrieval which are taking a small hit, hiding a few nuances along the way.

B. Power Tubes

1) Svetlana SV811-10, these are no longer being made and if you can find a few, get them. I found a single pair over eBay which I bought and these are sometimes popping up at various online shops. If you have an extra pair, I will gladly buy them from you. SV811-10 will be offering you the widest and tallest soundstage, the nicest layering and imaging. These are making my solid-state amplifiers closed-in and upfront sounding by comparison, including end-game ones. Another trait I find interesting is that the midrange feels pushed forward a bit at the cost of a lesser grip in the bass. You can't get a better power tube for big orchestras and live tunes. The only drawback is that there is slightly less power output versus SV572-10. At ~2 o'clock position with Hifiman Susvara on high dynamic range tracks these could start clipping, getting slightly less power on tap with these. If you don't use the Hifiman Susvara, then you won't encounter this issue.

2) Svetlana SV572-10. These were my default power tubes and I personally like these a little bit more. Firstly, there is more power on tap with difficult loads as Hifiman Susvara and Abyss AB1266. You can blow your eardrums and still, there would be no clipping at all. Another highlight was the low-end control which felt superior to SV811-10, getting a tighter overall sound. These are slightly more technical and more linear sounding, without rolling off anything. The only drawback is that these won't sound as open and wide like SV811-10 will. You can find these fairly easily, usually going for ~$350-400 per pair, sometimes a bit less if you're lucky. Regardless of what power tubes you are getting, Primavera will self-bias these for optimum performance, so you won't need matched pairs.

As much as I wanted to have a comparison or two, I'm sorry, but that's not going to happen as I don't have a real competitor for it.

X. Epilogue & Conclusion

Primavera is devoid of excellent measurements, it's heavy and hot after a few hours of use, it's not the fastest, nor the cleanest sounding amplifier out there and its vacuum tubes have a limited lifespan. In spite of that, prepare a bag of tissues as it will feel like a comedy-drama unfolding once the music starts playing. If you won't smile while driving your favorite headphones, then you are an AI or a cybernetic organism. Trafomatic guys don't care for what others are doing, or what are the current audiophile trends & market needs, as these guys are doing it for fun with loud gigs playing in the background.

You might be wondering how in hell I switched from perfect measuring DACs and headphone amplifiers I had years ago to less-than-perfect measuring units? The thing is… I no longer follow the numbers game; this life needs to be lived and felt. I don't listen to 300 Hz sine waves, and I don't care how many zeroes are behind my amp's THD, but I do care if I feel great while listening to it. People put a lot of heart into making fine tunes that people would listen to for generations to come, how on earth I would feel that if I'm stripping life from the music? I've been doing that for a while now, always trusting the numbers appearing on a screen and pushing away my instincts. I don't know what life will hold for me in the future, but I will surely follow my instincts from now on. If a setup makes you feel great, feeling every pulse of the music, then stick to that, learn from that, and follow the beat. Good mood and positive vibes will surely follow. We don't need that much to be happy. An old drink, a good joke, a kid playing around, a few smiles a day, and a good tune pumping dopamine into our bloodstream. I think that's more than enough for me.

I won't push you to make wild purchase decisions, this thing is still extremely expensive, more expensive than it needs to be, but at the same time, nothing plays like it and nothing unlocks my imagination as it does. It played tricks on me…and will do the same with you.

I don’t need to remind you why I purchased it, including a stash of tubes that will last me for the next ~15 years or so. I’ll probably stick with it for a while and I pray to Odin there’s something in the wild that could top its performance or at least challenge it. Arriving at the end of the road is both a rewarding achievement and a sad place to be. It’s like losing your life purpose, your driving power. I won’t stop and I will still be searching for an equivalent, for a worthy contender, but until that happens, Primavera is here to stay by my side in the mornings and evenings alike.

Its hefty price tag of $15.000 will shoo away headphiles and that’s probably fine. If you just started this hobby, I won’t recommend it to you, if you have a few years invested - I won’t do it either, if you have a few audiophile-worthy headphones lying around – I won’t mention it, but if you have a sizable collection, you like listening to big orchestras, blues, zen-funk, dubstep and rock, remembering why you started this hobby in the first place, only then I can recommend it to you.

It goes without saying that Primavera deserved our absolute highest Gold Award! Congratulations and I’m looking forward to what’s coming next. In case you have some questions, please let me know in the comments section below and don’t forget to press that Subscribe button on YouTube, it means a lot to me.

PROS:

- Oversized, Overweight & Overkill

- Rock solid build quality
- I always liked VU-meters on vintage amplifiers, happy to have one on the Primavera
- One of the most powerful headphone amplifiers out there, there isn't a headphone it cannot drive
- Uses only four tubes!
- This is the soundstage and depth king, always sounding 3D and holographic
- Zero feedback and full Class-A design makes it incredibly real, pure, and organic sounding
- Never stresses the listener with over-sharpness and listening fatigue
- A transient-response monster! A punchy and visceral-sounding unit
- Crazy. Wild. Dynamic. Swings.
- Noiseless sounding with IEMs, offering a dark background, setting it apart from my past experiences with tube amps of all sorts
- Sounds technical and clean, so clean that a few solid-state amps will be lacking behind
- Impressive detail retrieval and transparency levels
- Never rolls-off portions of the frequency response
- A genre master amplifier
- Goose bumps machine & smiles generator

CONS:

- It's way too big & heavy and occupies a lot of desktop space
- It gets hot after a few hours of use; it will need proper ventilation in the summertime
- Very long burn-in time
- Tubes have a limited lifespan (~5000 hours)
- Can't work as a preamplifier, as their smaller Head 2 does at a lower price
- I wish it had a higher-quality volume pot, I would pay extra for an ALPS RK50
- Very expensive

ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT:

- DACs: Chord Electronics DAVE + Chord M Scaler, Gustard R26, Gold Note DS-10 PLUS & PSU-10 EVO, SMSL D400EX
- Wireless Streamer & Music Server: Zidoo NEO Alpha
- Roon Core: Roon Nucleus
- DDCs: Denafrips Gaia, Singxer SU-6, Matrix X-SPDIF 3
- DAPs: FiiO M17, M11S, Shanling M7, M6 Ultra, Hiby RS6
- Headphone Amps: Trafomatic Primavera, Trafomatic Head 2, Enleum AMP-23R, Ferrum OOR + HYPSOS, Burson Soloist 3X GT, Flux Lab Acoustics Volot
- Preamps: Chord Ultima 3 Pre
- Power Amps: Chord Ultima 5, Burson Timekeeper 3X GT (x2)
- Loudspeakers: KEF Reference 3, Musician Knight 1, Sound Of Eden Crescendo UNO
- IEMs: FiiO FH9, FH7S, Meze Rai Penta, LittleDot Cu KIS, 7Hz Timeless, Kinera Skuld & others

- Full-sized headphones: Hifiman Susvara, Hifiman HE1000SE, Meze Elite, Meze 109 PRO, Audeze LCD-5, Audeze LCD-4, Sennheiser HD800S, Sennheiser HD660S2, Erzetich Phobos V2021, Erzetich Mania, Kennerton Rognir Planar, Kennerton Vali, Apos Caspian, Sendy Peacock, Apollo, HarmonicDyne Poseidon & a few more
- Interconnects: Crystal Cables Reference Diamond XLR, QED Reference (x2), Topping TCX1 (x2)
- USB Cables: Supra USB Excalibur (x2), Chord C-USB, Matrix Hi-Fi USB
- HDMI Cables: Supra 8K HDMI 2.1 (x2)
- Speaker cables: Kimber PR8, Audioquest Type4
- Power Cables: Isotek EVO3 Premier (x3), iFi Audio SupaNova (x2)
- Balanced Isolation Power Conditioners: PLiXiR Elite BAC1500 (stereo setup), Elite BAC400 (headphone setup)

SOUNDNEWS

Overall score 96/100

Value / Features 88/100

Power Output 98/100

Resolution 94/100

Dynamics 99/100

Frequency Response 95/100

Stage Size 100/100

Build Quality 95/100