

EAR 864 Tube Preamplifier

AARON M. SHATZMAN

Here we have a wholly contemporary preamplifier from Tim de Paravicini, a master designer of circuits conceived to display the sonic virtues of tubes. This model, the 864, traces its origins to the earlier 834P phono and 834L line units, both of which enjoyed critical acclaim and market success. In combining proven circuit designs, adding XLR balanced inputs and outputs to supplement the full complement of RCA unbalanced ones traditionally employed, then encasing the product behind a stunning, deeply chromed faceplate with hefty gold controls, de Paravicini has crafted a component whose appeal will be, for many, irresistible.

I have had the 864 in service for many months. It has performed flawlessly—no thumps, bumps, crackles, snorts, or pops. It is solid, and at 22 pounds, hardly a lightweight. The controls inspire confidence both by their large size and their impossibly smooth and positive operation. The preamp offers one phono, five unbalanced (RCA), and one balanced (XLR) line-level inputs, and employs one ECC82 and four ECC83 tubes. Noise should be a non-issue in modern circuits, whether solid-state or thermionic, and such is the case with the 864 (formally rated in the specification sheet at -80dB IHF). In my large listening room, the ambient household noise masked any residual sound from an 864-based audio system. Only when I placed an ear against a speaker driver and turned the volume control near its rotational midpoint could I hear *any* noise from the unit—impressive by any standard!

Those familiar with de Paravicini's work commonly associate a dark, full sound with his designs. He seems to have a clear and *consistent* sense of audio truth that allows him, in a no-holds-barred effort like the 864, to display that vision without adding even a hint of the bloat, saccharine-like false sweetness, or exaggerated richness (hazy or fuzzy image edges) that plague some tube components. For those whose only encounters with vacuum tube components have left them with such doubts about valves, as little as a single listening session with the 864 will prove persuasive. The 864 is unique in my experience—a tube preamplifier whose sonic signature is dark, yet which avoids displaying any of the negative sonic traits that seem always to accompany that character.

If, like me, you learned what live orchestral music sounds like from an ensemble such as the St. Louis Symphony performing in a venue like Powell Hall, you will recognize audio truth in the EAR 864.

This is not to suggest that the 864 in any way compromises electronic or rock music, or that it fails to reveal to a

startling degree the acoustic character of particular recordings. In fact, my listening notes are filled not only with examples of the 864 providing dark, full sound [e.g., Kovacevich/Davis/LSO in *Mozart Piano Concerto No.25* Philips 442008-2], but with perhaps even more examples of sound that was bright, clear, even hard [e.g. Goode/Orpheus in the same piece on Nonesuch 79454-2]. During a session devoted to Brahms' *Fourth Symphony*, I found that the 864 easily distinguished between the recordings auditioned, presenting the Klemperer/Philharmonia [EMI 769649 2] as searing and bright, and the Reiner/RPO [Chesky Gold CG 906] as sweet, like the old Quintessence LP, all cream and sugar, full, warm, dark. The Barbirolli/Vienna [Royal Classics ROY 7435] struck me as just right, full, solid, smooth. Even more impressive, the 864 preserved, nurtured, and presented performance details that lesser preamplifiers would have either missed or masked. When Reiner, for example, added flourishes of accelerated tempo, or intensified the contrast between soft and loud by asking the RPO to make *pp* into *ppp* or *ff* into *fff*, the 864 allowed me to hear and to appreciate the gesture. When Barbirolli did neither, I was able to hear and *appreciate* the difference.

Perhaps my most rewarding sessions with the 864 came when I asked it to process the sound from CDs recently recorded by the St. Louis Symphony led by the immensely gifted Hans Vonk. For the first time in my audio life, I heard what seemed to be the actual sound of that orchestra playing in its own hall—a sound that I have heard in person so often that for me it defines the standard against which all else is measured. Never, not even by Telarc's talented recording team, has the sound I know been recorded or recreated in a way that strikes me as credible. But listening to the *Beethoven Fifth* and the *Schubert Third* and *Great C Major* [Arch Media 1004 and 1002] I heard my hometown orchestra in my hometown hall via amplifiers and loudspeakers—an experience that was at once eerie and life affirming. The sound was, my listening notes record, "reverberant, rich, mellow, full, dark—the actual acoustic of Powell Hall."

Lest you think, after such running on, that the 864 is relentless in imposing its dark nature on any source, please note that two other discs yielded quite different sound. The Marriner/Academy *Handel Suite in D* [Philips 426 003-2], though recorded in 1979 analog, was brilliant, clear, crystalline. Similarly, the Gardiner/ORR *Beethoven Ninth* [Archiv 447074-2], displayed edge, with a character I found clear, bright, stunning.

The 864 crafts a soundspace whose great width, depth, and height vary as dictated by the source. The stage it presents can be wide and deep [Klemperer/Philharmonia EMI 769649 2] or narrow and shallow [Pollini/Bohm/VPO *Beethoven Emperor* DG 459 172-2]. The 864 can place images well beyond the outside edges of the speakers, as it did with singers like the Persuasions' Jimmy Hayes in "The Sun" [COL-CD-5234] or the Weavers' Pete Seeger in "Guantanamera" [Vanguard VSD 2150]. No matter the volume, or how suddenly the dB level increases or diminishes, images remain not only stable, but consistently sized and shaped (not a mean feat). If precision in imaging when amplifying small ensembles like the Persuasions or the Weavers is expected, and hardly noteworthy, it is less common when components confront massive orchestral works that are both loud and complex. The Saint Saëns *Third Symphony* can challenge any audio component. It left the 864 unfazed. The famous Munch/Boston version from 1959 [RCA 74321 64740 2] had, via the 864, a great stage, with strings that spread in a gentle arc across the front of the left speaker, with winds center stage, and with drums deep in the rear. The brass was placed above the plane defined by the other sections, and stayed there no matter what else was going on. The 864 presented the Barenboim/Chicago in the same piece [DG 459 185-2] as a pervasive presence, especially the organ. But what was most striking was the way the brass, especially the Chicago horns, blared forth from above and behind the orchestra. Magnificent.

The EAR 864 is not perfect. While the line stage defies criticism—indeed, it sets a standard for those who share the designer's sense of musical truth—the phono stage is problematic. Because the 864 is such a splendid product, I am hard-pressed to believe that it would be sent to market with a phono stage that, performing as intended, produces sound that is thin, edgy, light, threadbare, harsh, compressed, and undernourished; and which lacks body, warmth, or richness (precisely the qualities sought by those who use LPs). Yet every descriptive word in the preceding sentence appeared over and again in my listening notes. I used both my Oracle turntables and three phono cartridges, and auditioned over a dozen LPs in an unsuccessful attempt to get sound from the 864 phono section that was better than mediocre.

The 864 phono stage design is elegant. Though the owner's manual fails to discuss the scheme, my reading of the wiring diagram indicates that each channel includes a transformer that can be engaged or taken out of the circuit by a tiny pushbutton hidden on the rear of the chassis. Engaging the step-up did yield an increase in volume, but had no beneficial effect on the thin, wiry sound. As I listened to the Karajan/BPO Shostakovich *Tenth* [DG 139020], the sound reminded me of an old transistor radio; and ironically, the 864 made CDs sound like LPs and LPs like first-generation CDs. Yet when I substituted the Plinius Jarra phono preamplifier, all the glories of classic LP sound were instantly displayed. Indeed, the EAR 864/Plinius combination, fed by an Oracle Delphi/Premier FT3/Virtuoso Boron front end, gave what may well be the best LP sound I have heard, testimony to the brilliant EAR line stage [Kojian/Utah Berlioz *Symphonie Fantastique*, Reference Recordings RR-11]. A Unitrac/Ortofon

MC7500 combination was almost as satisfying, with Sinopoli and the Philharmonia in Mendelssohn [DG 410862-1] and with Kleiber and the VPO in Schubert [DG 2531124]. Both of those discs had sounded harsh, thin, edgy, wiry, threadbare, when auditioned through the 864 phono stage.

It may well be that my 864's phono stage was "off" in some critical way. The unit is so wonderful in every other respect, I will not be surprised to learn that something was awry. Yet even with an at best mediocre performance with LPs, the EAR 864 is one of the few preamplifiers I have heard that delivers sound that would satisfy for the long term. Its dark, full sound has the mark of musical truth about it. That beautiful, truly glorious sonic character make it a product serious audiophile music lovers should hear. And that sound, combined with its gorgeous appearance and solid build promise years of pleasure to those who acquire an EAR 864. ☞

IMPORTER INFORMATION

Dan Meinwald
1087 E. Ridgewood Street, Long Beach, California 90807
Phone: (562) 422-4747
dmeinwald@loop.com
Price: \$2,995

ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

Reference 3A MM da Capo loudspeakers; VAC Renaissance 30/30 amplifier; Plinius Jarra phono stage; Oracle Delphi Mk II turntables (two) fitted with FT3 arm/Virtuoso Boron cartridge and Unitrac arm/Ortofon 7500/Grado 8MX cartridges; JVC XL-Z1050 CD player; Discovery interconnects; Siltech FT12 cables

SPECS

None provided.

IMPORTER'S RESPONSE

...While it is gratifying that Mr. Shatzman was so taken with the 864, I am perplexed that he characterizes it as "dark," when it did not consistently sound that way. He reports that he heard "perhaps even more examples of sound that was bright, clear, even hard." If he heard the 864 create "a soundspace whose great width, depth, and height vary as dictated by the source," why did he not surmise that its darkness or brightness was also dictated by the source? If he had, he would have concluded that the preamp was being faithful to the recordings.

This is not a matter of opinion. If a component is dark, it will consistently be so in comparison with a preamp that is not. Does Mr. Shatzman's own preamp render the same recordings with the same relative darkness? He doesn't say. Nor does he mention whether the 864 sounded dark with cables—or, for that matter, an amplifier—other than the ones he typically uses.

...I am also at a loss regarding the reported performance of the phono stage. I use an 864 on a daily basis, and assure you that LPs do not sound "thin, edgy, light, threadbare, harsh, compressed, and undernourished." Like many users, including Harry Pearson, who listened to the outboard version of the phono stage (the 834P), Shatzman would probably have preferred NOS tubes in the phono section.

DAN MEINWALD
PROPRIETOR, EAR USA