

Follow Up: EAR 864 Tube Preamplifier: New Tubes/New Sound

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In Issue 134, I concluded my review of the EAR 864 preamplifier by noting that in spite of a flawed phono section, the unit was so good that it was “one of the few preamplifiers I have heard that delivers sound that would satisfy for the long term,” sound whose “dark, full” character “has the mark of musical truth about it.” That sound was so good I hated to report that LPs heard through the 864 had a lean, wiry, compressed sound that was at odds with what I perceived as the essential nature of the component, and the sonic character of everything I had heard that had come from its designer, Tim de Paravicini.

In fact, when I auditioned the 864 in the months prior to publication and was unable to elicit good sound from the phono section, I considered not mentioning the 864’s performance with LPs in the review. Since I *knew* that a company like EAR, a designer like de Paravicini, and an importer like Dan Meinwald would not bring to market a product that sounded like my 864 sounded on LPs, I took it as a given that something was amiss in the innards of the preamplifier. But the unit had already been returned once to have a loose wire in the phono stage reconnected. And TAS policy prohibits reviewers from contacting manufacturers/importers/


distributors while a review is in progress, especially if the message might imply that the sound is less than pleasant. When I half-heartedly suggested that I just skip discussing the phono section in my review, my editors responded by saying what I already knew and believed: Readers not only expect, but deserve, to read a report of what the reviewer actually heard. Since the 864 included a phono section, it had to be evaluated. It stunk. I said it stunk.

But I also reported that I believed something was awry, and the importer, Dan Meinwald, pointed out that the 864’s phono circuit was “so simple” that it was unusually susceptible to having its sound influenced by the particular tubes employed. He sent a set of French Mazda tubes, which I substituted for the Russian Sovtek tubes that came with the unit.

Substituting the Mazdas for the stock tubes did not do what I anticipated it would. Rather than merely changing the phono section’s performance, the new tubes transformed it! So dramatic was that transformation that I am certain the Sovtek tubes were defective. What I heard was not merely a darkening in coloration or an increase in body or warmth. What I heard with the French tubes in the circuit was sound that had impact and presence; that was vivid, alive, rich. What I heard was the

sonic equivalent of heavy cream as opposed to non-fat skim milk, of plush velvet as opposed to threadbare linen. With the Sovteks in, I had to screw the volume control to near maximum just to be able to hear the music from my customary listening-room seat. With the Mazda tubes, sound exploded from the speakers, as the 864 loped along unstressed, unfazed, unper-

turbed by any challenge. The soundspace was big, but utterly without the false, bloated appearance that too often accompanies tube sound that is dark and full. The imaging was precise, but not laser-like. The Mazda-driven 864 reveals lots of LP detail, but one’s attention is drawn to the music’s singing quality, as opposed to the discrete sonic artifacts that some patrons of mid-fi emporia misconstrue as evidence of high quality. All this marks the 864 as a classic de Paravicini design.

With the Mazda tubes installed, the EAR 864 fully delivers on its promise. It is an expensive preamplifier built to the highest standards, and presents, in every respect (linestage, phono stage, parts, build, appearance), what one would expect. Now, I am delighted to report, the words I used to conclude my initial review apply to the entire 864: It is a preamplifier whose “beautiful, truly glorious sonic character makes it a product audiophile music lovers should hear.” Bravo! 

IMPORTER INFORMATION

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