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EAR EAR864 Preamp Reviewed

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New pre-amps from Tim de Paravicini never fail to cause a tube-lovin' pulse to race a bit faster. Tim is, after all, one of the planet's valve heroes, and his products never bore nor disappoint. Of late, he's added a level of professionalism so out of character with the mad-as-a-hatter Tim of yore that you have to wonder what the hell's come over him. Maturity? Responsibility? I mean: the brochures are slick, the web site trick, supply of goods quick, the faceplates thick. That's not to say Tim can no longer step into the role of mad scientist should, say, Hammer ever recommence film production, but now you must distance EAR from the valve lunatic fringe. And it's all down to the changes wrought by the Yoshino concept.

Tim launched this high-end division back in '92 with a brace of amps (the XXXA and XXXB) designed, initially, to prove that he could make a solid-state and a valve amp and you'd have a hard time telling the two apart. While XXXA and XXXB proved to be design statements rather than serious commercial ventures, they did mark a whole new approach in terms of presentation, which Tim immediately allowed to trickle down to affordable products (while keeping the big classics like the '549 in production). And since then, we've been treated to the marvellous 834P phono pre-amp, the wild V20 amp, some luscious integrated amps and more. The new EAR 864 full-function pre-amp uses the basic 834P circuit for its phono stage (see sidebar); it's to Tim's credit that the most humble post-XXX product rather than the over-the-top stuff inspired the family. Other 834P derivatives include the 834L line level pre-amp and a deluxe chromed version, both of which also share their DNA with the 864.

Tim designed the EAR 864 pre-amp to satisfy both audiophiles and pros, studio business being an ever-increasing part of EAR's activity. (Just read some Water Lily liner notes for a testimonial.) Instead of concerning himself with cost-based concerns, as with the original 834P, Tim allowed himself to create something a bit luxurious while not inviting accusations of avarice. I should therefore let you know that this beauty sells for only £1445; you're not gonna believe what Tim has packed in to elevate this pre-amp to high-end status..

Most important, and a key in making it suitable for the pros, are balanced outputs and one balanced input, all via XLR and all coupled through high quality transformers. I'm not sure which manufacturer can lay claim to offering the least expensive, all-balanced/all-tube pre-amp on the market today, but this undercuts GRAAF and Audio Research by substantial sums. So, if you're one of those with a hankering to sample balanced vs single-ended AND you want to do it with tubes AND you want to stay south of £1500, look no further.

In a nutshell, balanced operation (beyond the very real ability to accommodate long cable runs) strikes this listener as a sure-fire method of improving dynamic contrasts, slam and overall control and coherence, as well as offering quieter, virtually noise-free operation. Balanced operation has been a key feature of upscale components for years, so justifying it in 2000 isn't necessary. What's so striking about 864 is that it makes balanced operation accessible at a low price point.

In addition to balanced input and outputs, the 864 accepts five single-ended-via-phono line inputs and the aforementioned phono stage, plus a proper tape monitoring circuit. To control all of this, across the front are rotary input selector, tape selector, volume and power on/off, the latter accompanied by a bright yellow lamp. All input and output sockets are gold plated, as are the pins on the XLR outputs, and the unit sports two earthing posts - one near the phono inputs, the other by the mains.

EAR states that 'the electronic architecture is minimalist, so that the absolute minimum sonic degradation takes place.' The valve complement consists of five double triodes, one ECC82 and four ECC83s, adhering to Tim's philosophy that common, plentiful, well-proven valves like these are preferable to exotica for exotica's sake. All inputs at the rear of the chassis are fitted to the same circuit board as the selector switches, operated by long control shafts traversing the unit.

The power supply features a high quality toroidal transformer supplying a double DC power supply providing low tension heater current and the high-tension anode voltage. As Tim insists, "It is critical in a pre-amplifier that both the HT and LT supplies are pure DC, and free from AC ripple. This is the case with all EAR products, not just this pre amplifier."

Matching it to a variety of amps and sources proved painless, its specs of 47k ohms input impedances for both line and phono, input sensitivity of 2.2mV phono and 200mV line, and maximum output of 8V into 10k ohms allowing it to function perfectly between the Krell KAV300cd and Marantz CD-12 CD players, Linn LP-12/Ekos/Arkiv analogue front-end, and the Musical Fidelity Nu-Vista 300 and McIntosh MC275 reissue power amps. Speakers throughout the sessions were the Wilson WATT/Puppy 6, and all wiring was from Kimber, including the mains.

Again in keeping with Tim's belief that ownership should be a no-brainer - I can't recall when he last used a hard-to-find tube - the company claims that 864's valves should have a minimum life of five years continuous operation barring random valve failure. And I can't remember the last time I had to replace an ECC82, ECC83 or ECC88, so I'm sure the claim isn't a wild boast. Furthermore, the 864 is beautifully built, the unit oozing chunky, confidence-inspiring solidity. Though it measures only 380x305x100mm (WDH), it weighs 5kg, dispelling any notion that corners were cut for materials or internal parts count. And the controls feels, uh, expensive.

Before even sampling a taste of the 864, I let it burn in for a day. This is now par for my course regardless of product type or manufacturer's instructions; even the ones who don't believe in run-in periods can't complain because I pay the electricity bill. And, when I finally could resist no longer, I was treated to what I had hoped I would hear: a grown-up, no-compromise, silent, perfectly-behaved 834P which also happens to have a fistful of line inputs. And anyone who's ever used an EAR product will recognise the sound immediately just by the bass.

Tim has dialled in the kind of weight and precision which transistor guys swear you just can't get from tubes. And, given the amount of bass produced by a brace of Puppies in a room only 4x6m, I covet all the control a system can muster. There's no sense of bass truncation, the EAR letting you hear way down into John Entwistle's ever-deft fingering on the MoFi-remastered Who's Next. Indeed, so impressive was the speed and clarity of the lower-octave info that I even pulled out the vinyl original of 'Boris the Spider' and - shock! horror! - some of those deservedly-maligned Japanese audiophile crossover jazz albums of the late 1970s. I was reminded why we put up with such mind-numbing ambient drivel: the sound was, simply, in the room. Preferring to review while conscious, I heard the EAR cut through the mire on Nirvana's 'Smells Like Teen Spirit', separating to great effect all that was going on behind the late Mr C.

But the EAR was also a lesson in understanding why guys like Kavi Alexander of Water Lily want Tim's gear in their studios. No, I'm not saying that there are EAR 864s in studios around the globe, but Tim's thinking pervades everything he makes. Using the latest Water Lily title, Jon Hassell's Fascinoma, as delicate a release as the label has issued, I was able to picture Kavi twiddling the knobs with added precision thanks to the abundance of information flowing through. But for me, the two things which make me love the 864 more than the 834P are its retention of the latter's soundstage and mid-band ear-friendliness, while acting with the authority of a studio tool.

To Tim, I can only beg two things: First, would you issue a version for £1999 called the 864R, with remote controlled volume? And second, will you please make a balanced input stereo power amp - say 35W/ch - for £1445 to match it in size, cost and intent? Other than that, Tim, your reputation is intact.

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SIDEBAR: EAR 834P - WHERE IT ALL BEGAN

Terrifyingly, it was far back as mid-1994 that I reviewed the EAR 834P, and I've been using it as my 'real world' reference phono stage ever since. This unit is still available, showing admirable longevity. And why not? It now seems that this venerable phono section is good enough to serve as the (analogue) heart of a very modern, very Y2K full-function pre-amp. As is obvious from the photo of the EAR 864, the agricultural look of the 834P has been discarded in favour of the EAR/Yoshino house-style of a massive chromed faceplate, gilded knobs and no sense of cost-cutting whatsoever.

A simple black box measuring 95x124x275mm (HWD), the 834P is deliberately small move to allow positioning alongside an existing pre-amp without the loss of much shelf space. All it bears is a rotary on-off control or, if ordered with the optional gain control, a rotary volume control. The back contains a fuse holder, IEC mains input, a multi-way earthing post, gold-plated sockets for phono in/out and a press button for m-c or mm cartridges. Three ECC83s make up the valve complement, its unregulated power supply is a small toroidal transformer and the components reside on a main PCB. Output is line level, the mm input is a standard 47k ohm and the mc setting a nominal 5-50 ohm impedance, adding 20dB of gain. In the interests of quietness, m-c gain is via transformers rather than active step-up devices. Note that in the EAR 864, the phono section is equivalent to the EAR 834P's mm stage, without an extra m-c step-up level, but the gain was more than enough to allow the use of the Linn ARKIV without having to resort to playing the 864 at '11'.

I described the 834P's performance thusly: 'In a word: wonderful. As with all tube bargains...there's a certain price to pay in absolute detail and background silence. The 834P, though, swings so fluidly and has such wide dynamics that you just don't notice the barely audible background hash. Hell, most surface whoosh is so much louder than the 834P's own noise that the LP will mask it.

'What distinguishes the 834P from solid-state phono stages are the sense of openness, scale and three-dimensionality. While it's easy to better the retrieval of detail...it's hard to match the warmth and the "analogueness" of the 834P. It's a

great soundstager, a strong defender of the analogue argument and (for those who cherish this one aspect of LP playback above others) the source of some of the sweetest bass I've heard in years. As for vocals, all I can do is s-i-g-h-h-h.'

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