

EAR 834P phono preamplifier

Michael Fremer & Robert J. Reina, July, 1997

No, folks, vinyl is not dead. And even though my colleague Mikey Fremer is beginning to sound like a broken record, the little guy is right: when it comes to the sound on offer, CD still doesn't come close. There are more turntables, phono cartridges, and tonearms on the market today than ever before. Moreover, with companies like Classic Records, Analogue Productions, and Mosaic offering a steady stream of ultra-high-quality reissues, there seems to be an increasing supply of quality vinyl at reasonable prices.

One of the big problems analog fans face today is in the preamp department. Because most of today's most popular high-end preamplifiers are sold as line-stage only, vinylphiles must seek out separate phono stages. And there aren't a large number of stand-alone phono stages available, and fewer still at affordable prices.



I hEARd it first at HI-FI '96! I came upon the Esoteric Audio Research 834P phono stage quite by accident, at HI-FI '96 in New York. I was hanging out at the Alón room, listening to the Phalanx/Poseidon flagship speakers, unwinding after a long day. Although I've gone on record to a nauseating extent about my love affair with Alón speakers, and own pairs of Alón VMk.IIs and Petites (What can I say? Designer Carl Marchisotto and I have similar listening biases), I'd never really warmed to the sound of the Phalanx the three times I'd heard it at Consumer Electronics Shows.

But this time, at the Waldorf, the sound was exquisite—the best I've ever heard from an Alón design. I voted Marchisotto's room as tied for first place for Best Sound at the Show (after the first day, that is, when there were some cable break-in anomalies). Maybe it was the great room. Maybe it was the fact that it was the first time the designer had used the Audio Research Reference electronics *and* the VPI TNT/JMW Memorial arm/Clearaudio Insider cartridge. All in all, Marchisotto was twirling black discs on a system that retailed for close to \$125,000.

What most visitors to this room did not realize, however, was that between the Insider and the ARC Reference One preamplifier was EAR's 834P phono stage. This tiny box, sporting no more than an on-off switch and a volume knob,

was lost in the shuffle amid all that oversized, state-of-the-art and cost-no-object gear. My "Best Sound at Show" was being produced using a phono preamplifier retailing for just \$895!

I had to get this little wonder in my reference system to put up against my reference Vendetta Research SP-2C phono stage.

A simple, down-to-EARth design The 834P's diminutive box epitomizes designer Tim de Paravacini's "simple is better" design: three ECC83 tubes, a toroidal transformer, and a tiny circuit board are all ya get. The front panel sports an on-off switch and a volume knob. (In a phono-only system, a separate preamp is therefore unnecessary.) The user can toggle between a standard 47k ohm moving-magnet input and a moving-coil input that uses internal step-up transformers, one for each channel.

Sound? let's hEAR that rear wall! The performance of the EAR 834P phono stage combined the strengths, weaknesses, and colorations of classic high-end tube gear. As one would expect, the EAR thus excelled at re-creating the inner detail of good recordings, and was adept at extracting the delicacy, the subtle nuances of well-recorded unamplified instruments. Along with inner detail came agile reproduction of transients, but without a trace of hardness.

The EAR's greatest strength was its ability to reproduce perfectly placed holographic images with body and life on a wide, deep soundstage. This may be *the* phono stage for lovers of well-recorded classical works. On *Cantate Domino* (Proprius 7762) the layered vocals and French horns against the rear of the soundstage were arresting. And the EAR lit up the rear wall and provided a detailed perspective of the recording space unlike any phono stage I've heard. If hall sound and ambience are important to you, you *must* audition this phono stage.

The 834P's tonal balance was replete with a number of classic "tubey" colorations that many of today's valve designers have been able to abandon. The amplifier's overall dark perspective reflected very laid-back extreme high frequencies and an overly round midbass. There was a slightly euphonic liquid presentation throughout the midrange and upper highs as well.

Whether the EAR's mixed bag of characteristics interests you will depend on your own listening biases, musical tastes, and the recordings themselves. On the Classic Records reissue of Richard Strauss's *Till Eulenspiegel* (RCA/Classic LSP-2077), the EAR presented the sweetest string tones from the string bass through the violins. The detail and ambience surrounding midrange instruments were rather seductive, although the overall perspective of the orchestra was dark. Similarly, the silky strings on the reissue of Paul Desmond's *Desmond Blue* (RCA/Classic LSP-2438) seemed to have an extra dash of maple syrup.

No dEARth of bass or dynamics here Whether the midbass thickness was bothersome to me seemed to vary dramatically from recording to recording. The EAR presented a fat muddiness to the string basses, which seemed to lag behind the higher strings in the third movement of Pierre Monteux's rendition of Tchaikovsky's Symphony 4 (RCA/Classic LSP-2369). This thickness seemed to be isolated in a very narrow frequency range, however.

On analog rock extravaganzas in which the bombastic bass information is lower in frequency—such as Jeff Beck's *Guitar Shop* (Epic EK 44313), Human League's "Don't You Want Me" (on Virgin 8466-12), or Grandmaster Flash's "The Message" (on Sugar Hill SH-584)—the bass performance was as tight as could be. Both rock and classical aficionados should be impressed by this unit's wide dynamic capabilities.

This phono stage definitely bears the Tim de Paravicini sonic signature. Last year I was able to briefly audition Tim's EAR 509 power amplifier in my system; its strengths and weaknesses, colorations and textures seemed to parallel that of the 834 to a P!

Tim de P doth not fEAR a shootout with the mighty Vendetta! But how does this phono stage compare to the FET-based Vendetta, my reference of nearly a decade? Well, I wish the Vendetta could reproduce the holographic body of images and room sound that the EAR can (maybe you really do need tubes for that), and the EAR does not share the Vendetta's single coloration: the highlighting of instruments in the lower high-frequency range. But the Vendetta's high- and low-level dynamic performance equals that of the EAR, and, at the end of the day, I cannot live without the Vendetta's superior clarity, overall lack of coloration, and lack of low-level noise. Nope, I'll keep my Vendetta, thank you.

Then again, if the Vendetta were available today (it hasn't been for a number of years), it would likely retail for three to four times the price of the EAR. Finally, if I'd never heard the Vendetta, I would probably have purchased the EAR to be my reference.

Summing up—finally, serious tube gear for low wage-EARners! The EAR 834P is a remarkable piece of work: a reference-quality phono preamplifier that would feel at home in a system of any price. At its \$895 sticker price it's downright obscene. If you treasure analog as I do, particularly if you're a fan of well-recorded classical works, you should treat yourself to an audition of the EAR.—**Robert J. Reina**