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# the Stereo Times

The Complete Audiophile Magazine





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## Associated Equipment:

### Analog Front End

Linn Sondek LP12 (Origin Live DC motor)

Linn Sondek LP12 Nirvana

AR/Merrill, Connoisseur BD2a

Clearaudio Champion Level 2 w/APG turntables

Clearaudio Unify

Origin Live RB 250 300 and Silver tonearms

Shure V-15 V xMR

Audio Technica AT-OC9ML

Ortofon Jubilee

Goldring Eroica LX (Garrott re-tipped)

Sumiko Blue Point Special (Garrott re-tipped)

Talisman Boron

Garrott Brothers Optim FGS

Rega Exact

Grado Signature TLZ-V phono cartridges

### Amplification

Meitner PA6i PLUS +

AMC CVT 3030

EICO ST 84, Hegeman HAPI One and HAPI Two preamps

## The EAR 834P Phono Preamplifier

Paul Szabady

2 December 2002



### Specifications

Moving magnet and moving coil tube phono preamplifier  
12 AX7 (ECC 83) tubes  
MC amplification by transformer  
Dimensions: 5" W x 4" H x 9" D

Price: \$995 (Black).  
Price: \$1295 (Chrome).

### Address:

US Distributor:

EAR USA

Dan Meinwald

Sound Advice

1087 E. Ridgewood Street

Long Beach, CA

90807 USA

Telephone: 001 562 422 4747

Fax: 001 562 6577

Email: [info@ear-usa.com](mailto:info@ear-usa.com)

Website: [www.ear-usa.com/index.html](http://www.ear-usa.com/index.html)

and [www.ear-yoshino.com/](http://www.ear-yoshino.com/)



One of the major pitfalls of journalism is that because of its pre-occupation with the news of the day, it tends to lose perspective and context. Mainstream audio journalism is prey to the same foible, with *Component of the Month Syndrome* highly dominant. Probably the most glaring example is Stereophile's List of Recommended Components, where an older piece on the list is bumped simply because of the time elapsed since it was reviewed.

Tim de Paravicini's designs have the reputation of withstanding the tests of time. While the EAR 834P has been available for a few years now, it bears listening to with News of the Day freshness and currency. It's one of those "Yes!" products - where you know immediately that something right and good is happening.



Meitner STR 55

Rotel RB 980

EICO HF 89

**Loudspeakers**

Sound Lab Dynastat

Rega ELA

**Cabling**

Clearaudio Sixstream

van den Hul The First  
Origin Live Reference  
interconnectsXLO and Rega  
speaker cable**Accessories**

Stillpoints

Aurios MIB Pro

Ganymede VCS

Townshend Seismic  
Sink

The 834P is a classic rectangular black box roughly the size of a carton of English International size cigarettes, featuring only an on/off switch on its stately front panel. The back includes two sets of RCA jacks along with a push-button to select either moving magnet or moving coil and a detachable AC cord. The EAR rests on 4 soft feet. A tube design utilizing 12AX7 tubes, the EAR uses transformers for the additional gain necessary to preamplify moving coil cartridges. A "Signature" version is available that will cosmetically match EAR's preamplifiers and amplifiers; the circuitry of the 834P is also available within a full-featured preamp, the 864.

Although I own 2 sets of tube electronics (3 pieces of which are vintage items) in addition to my various solid state components, I don't attribute musical excellence purely to a type of amplifying device: it's what you do with tubes or transistors that matters. I've experienced intense musical pleasure from both tubes and solid state, so have no particular axe to grind. In particular, I don't find the old stereotypes - soft and mellow tubes versus harsh and bright solid state - to be dogmatically applicable to any well-designed component. Excellent tube designs do, however, tend to produce very believable timbres with acoustic instruments and excel in painting tonal colors, particularly important in classical music where a live reference is available for comparison.

The Garrott Brothers Optim FGS moving magnet cartridge has become my reference for affordable musical communication. Since Garrott uses tube phono amplification in their listening/development tests, I first ran the EAR 834P in an all-tube system. The musical results of this set-up were truly engrossing and riveting: dynamics, drive, rhythm and musical phrasing/accents were simply exemplary. The EAR was exceptional in getting the heart of music right. I immediately stopped listening to my staple reference critical-listening LPs, and began randomly listening to various LPs purely for the musical pleasure: the entire Procol Harum catalogue, then The Band's, then the Buffalo Springfield/Neil Young/Steve Stills nexus, the Doors, and finishing with Jim Hendrix. The EAR proved superb at recreating the drive, emotional intensity, and the literally electrical intensity of this music. Jimi Hendrix understood perhaps more clearly than anyone that music is a physical power and the EAR superbly reproduced that tangible electric cosmic power that Hendrix so intensely unleashed.

A listening journey through 50's/60's small combo jazz proved equally compelling: noteworthy was the EAR's ability to fully articulate the bass parts of these recordings, many of which (on later re-issues anyway) seem to present the bass player as a weird sort of background phantom. Not only was the bass present as a full participating member of the music, but bass sonorities were rich and full-bodied, with taut and excellent transient control and drive. I was moved deeply by the musical expressiveness of solo instruments - horns and piano - the emotion behind the notes being clearly revealed. Be it the 'dry martini' sonority of Paul Desmond, the studied cool of Miles Davis, the gentle 'rain on the windows' of Bill Evans' piano or the cosmic destroyer aspects of Pharoah Sanders/John Coltrane in their more exorcistic moments, I was getting the heart and emotion of the music.



Tim de Paravicini is perhaps best known for the tube electronics he designed for Chesky's re-issues of the classic RCA Shaded Dog LPs and listening to a batch of these proved an exercise in natural timbres and a total immersion into the music. Smaller scale music, particularly string quartets, was presented with the same intimacy and communication that was so engrossing with jazz. The pure unalloyed joy of Mozart's early Divertimenti was reproduced with breathtaking exuberance, the EAR easily passing one of my prime requisites for any component.

Results with my other MusicMaster moving magnet cartridge, the Rega Exact, were similarly compelling and musical enriching and I was having one of those pleasant reviewing experiences where you know immediately that the component is excellent: the question then becomes just *how* excellent it ultimately is.

I did not play around with varying AC cords, or indulge in tube tweaking, but of necessity with an outboard phono stage, choosing an interconnect was required. I didn't find this an anguish-inducing experience - the Clearaudio Sixstream, van den Hul The First, and Origin Live Reference all proved deeply satisfying - leading me to believe that the EAR is not particularly fussy and high-strung about interconnect choice. I auditioned the EAR without isolation devices at first and the following comments all refer to the 834P played 'neat.'

Sonically the EAR was without electronic edge or glare, with a non-analytic cast to the proceedings. It tended to focus on the entirety of the music rather than breaking each recording down to its component parts. I find this ability more musically satisfying than components that neglect the forest for the trees. Transient control was very good, with good tracking of the decay of notes. Soundstaging and stereoscopy were believable and non-intrusive, though short of hallucinogenic intensity. Ultimate detail and transparency is short of the very best, but considering the EAR's price and its other sterling musical virtues, acceptable. I never found myself squinting with my ears or baffled by any aspect of the musical proceedings. I found noise to be a non-issue also.

Listening to the EAR in my solid-state system was slightly less intense, as parts of its abilities were lost in the transition to transistor amplification. This is normal for tube electronics: their full flowering normally requires all-tube systems to hear to the fullest. Context plays a role too. Though I was unable to audition the 834 in the context of a full EAR system, I'm deeply aware that most of front-rank designer's products (and Tim di Paravicini is certainly one) need to be heard within their complete systems to produce the designer's full intent.

The moving coil section of the EAR uses transformers to produce the additional gain necessary for their lower output and Tim de Paravicini has a reputation as a master of moving coil transformer design. Running the Audio Technica AT OC9ML, Garrott re-tipped Blue Point Special, and Talisman Boron revealed less stirring performance, due to the fact that these 4 cartridges are not as successful music makers as the 2 moving magnets I used. My Goldring Eroica LX, also re-tipped by Garrott, however, flowered with the EAR, as did the Ortofon Jubilee. The EAR faithfully revealed the sonic signature of these cartridges, and revealed as much of its own



considerable abilities in the process, without forcing its personality on them. My suspicion, which I was not able to verify to any degree of certainty, was that moving magnet performance of the 834P was perhaps stronger than that of moving coil. This was due to the overwhelmingly stunning dynamic performance of the moving magnet Garrott Optim FGS, a cartridge whose dynamic and musical coherency is unmatched by any moving coil cartridge I've heard, except for Garrott's \$6000 P89. Those who run moving magnets exclusively, a minority among audiophiles who seem generally wed to the moving coil, can opt for the moving magnet-only 834P, available by special order for \$795.

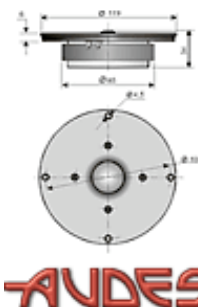
The EAR clearly revealed the differences in tonearms and turntables. The more traditionally 'audiophile' Clearaudio Champion Level 2/ Clearaudio Unify Unipivot arm/ Sigma Wood moving coil cartridge front end was stunning in neutrality, resolution, and 3-D stereo effects. Also highly evident, though, was this set-up's intellect-oriented presentation. My Linn LP12s, Origin Live Standard Kit, AR/Merrill and antique Connoisseur BD2a turntables were more in keeping with the EAR's rhythmic and dynamic aplomb, musical lines flowing with the kind of ease and believability that one more normally associates with live musical expression.

In standard trim and set-up, the EAR 834P rates high musical marks indeed. The use of effective isolation proved transmogrifying - dispelling any quibbles about lack of hallucinogenic imaging and completely nullifying my suspicion that moving magnet performance was superior to the EAR's transformer derived MC amplification. My experience with the state-of-the-art in isolation products over the years has led me to the conclusion that a component played 'neat' shows only a fraction of its true capacities compared to what it can produce when removed from the contaminating effects of spurious vibration. The small size of the EAR precluded optimum usage with some of the devices I had available. The new Stillpoints, (at \$279 for a set of 3, a joint effort from Paul Wakeen, ex-Aurios and Larry Jacoby and Deb Folz, both ex-Wadia) vaulted the already excellent performance of the 834P into an altogether different realm. Stunning and mind-blowing are probably the mildest of adjectives to be used in describing the 834P when placed on the Stillpoints: the sonic improvements in image placement and soundstage transparency, the superior resolution of low level information, the extension of bandwidth and flow of dynamic gradations were matched by an equally exalted improvement in the already heady and deeply moving communicative powers of the 834P. Lyric intelligibility, as just one example, went from the very good to one of the very best when the EAR was placed on the Stillpoints. The EAR's performance with moving coil was improved to the point where my mild suspicions as to its ultimate capacities were vanquished.

The highest of recommendations for the EAR 834P then, especially when mounted on the Stillpoints. Old news is good news indeed.



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## The EAR 834P Phono Preamplifier

