

EAR 890 power amplifier

Art Dudley, April, 2004

Most of us have at least some taste for gear that *jumps out*—for audio components whose sonic and musical distinctions are easy to hear from the start. In audio, unlike in the art of music itself, there's nothing wrong with being obvious.



Then there are such products as the grand-looking 890 amplifier (\$4995) from Esoteric Audio Research, which had nothing of the obvious about it during its stay in my home. Voices didn't pop out. Groove noise didn't vanish. Textures were neither smoothed-over nor scuffed-up. Whites weren't whiter and colors weren't brighter, and I had to listen to it for weeks on end before it sank in just how beautifully well the 890 played music. That's not so much an indictment of the amp as it is of the whole audio reviewing paradigm, which, admittedly, is more about jumping in the sack than mating for life.

The EAR 890 confounds reviewers in another way: It's a straightforward thing, and while its design and execution are not without ingenuity, the EAR 890 lacks even such basics as hand-rolled capacitors or exotic metallurgy. Good God, this amp...*has no story!*

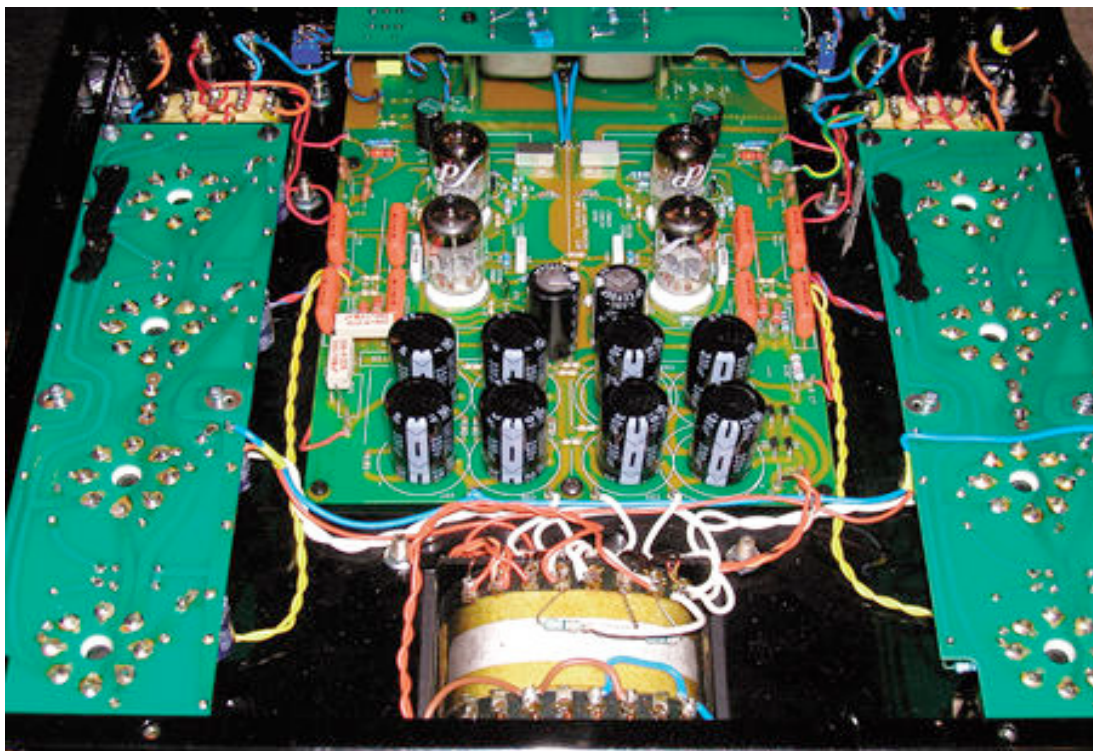
Description The EAR 890 is, in designer Tim de Paravicini's own words, a very conventional tube amplifier. Each channel uses its own 6AQ8 dual-triode as a differential pair, working in concert with another dual-triode, the ubiquitous 12AX7. The output section uses four tubes per channel in a parallel push-pull configuration: the relatively young KT90, which de

Paravicini describes as Yugoslavia's answer to the classic KT88. This beam tetrode, which shares some physical characteristics with the EL509 power tube used in the earliest EAR amps, is used as a tetrode, albeit not in ultralinear mode.

The payoff is a hefty, hell-raising 70Wpc, operating in pure class-A (footnote 1). Although de Paravicini says he strives for extended tube life—described for our purposes as a minimum of 10,000 hours—and thus maintains plate current within the realm of sanity, you still would not want to rest your hand on the metalwork of an EAR 890 that's been playing music for any amount of time. As we say here in the Northeast US, "Bastid git hot, dunnit?"

Other interesting details: Hobbyists whose preamplifiers lack a balance control will be cheered by the presence of individual left and right channel-level controls, mounted on the rear panel. Nearby, a top-mounted switch allows the user to transform his or her EAR 890 into a 140Wpc monoblock; two-channel enthusiasts will then need to buy another 890, while monophiles can use a single one to intimidate the corner horn or old Quad ESL of their choice. Another switch toggles between unbalanced and balanced operation, the latter involving XLR sockets and an internal pair of custom-wound line transformers.

The 890's output transformers are also de Paravicini's own—he perfected the craft decades ago while working for Japan's Luxman Corporation—and they present the user with separate taps for 8 and 16 ohm loudspeakers. And, finally, the auto-bias 890 requires little in the way of user intervention apart from working the On/Off switch, which is an orange plastic button. (But Tim: Are you *sure* that ivory, or perhaps even whalebone, wouldn't sound better...?)



Notwithstanding an idiosyncratic approach to holding the tube cages in place (hard-to-reach bolts that extend into the circuit-board standoffs on each channel's output boards), the 890's construction is logical, robust, and beautiful. The parts count is surprisingly low—especially true of the tubeless power supply, which Tim de P describes as "a boring, conventional voltage doubler"—and the whole of the amp comprises four neat circuit boards: a small one for the balanced input trannies and associated bits; one large, central board for the driver section and power supply; and two output section boards. The smooth, heavy chassis has a finish of baked enamel, and the front of the amp is anchored with a thick brass faceplate, chrome-plated and polished to the proverbial mirror finish. Heavily chromed tranny covers with brass fixing nuts, another EAR calling card, complete the look.

Listening At first I tried the 890 with my Lowther horns, replacing the Fi 2A3 Stereo amp I usually use. (My sample of the 890 already had several hundred hours on it, so I'm afraid I can't speak to the issue of break-in time as it affects this particular amp.) I was extremely impressed, and although it may sound simpleminded to say so, the 890's performance made me think of nothing so much as a Fi amp with even more headroom, and a little more drive and richness in the bass. Musically, the performance was faultless. Symphonies were appropriately forceful but never lacking in poise—and, to an equal extent, never lacking in musical flow. This was not at all the choppy, mechanical sound for which some SET devotees criticize push-pull.

But for the most part, I put all 70Wpc to work using the EAR 890 with my mildly insensitive Quad ESL-989 loudspeakers (*Stereophile*, [November 2002](#) and [May 2003](#)). The combination proved to be among the most sonically faultless and musically satisfying I've had in my home.

In the past, I've used the word *unspectacular* in a derogatory way; this time, I mean it nicely. The EAR 890 was an unspectacular amp that gave me easy access to musically important details. When I used it to play Clarence White's "Bury Me Beneath the Willow" (from the indispensable *33 Guitar Instrumentals* CD, Sierra SZCD 26023-2), I heard clearly, for the first time, how the occasional "late" note attacks in this very early White recording weren't mistakes at all, but rather deliberate attempts to push his cross-picking pattern off the tracks, so to speak, and to shift the upstroke—and thus the emphasis in each measure—in a way that made the tune more interesting. (Special note to guitar enthusiasts: Clarence White's cross-picking pattern was virtually always *down-down-up, down-down-up*, not *down-up-down, up-down-up*, resulting in what I consider a more old-fashioned, mildly syncopated sound.)

The 890 also let me appreciate—if not for the first time, then certainly more easily than usual—Billie Holiday's calm, understated delivery in the unsettling "Strange Fruit" (from the album of the same name, Commodore MVCJ 19214). I'm not sure why, but the 1930s-era recording, which merely sounds quaint through most gear, seemed "righter," more serene, more inviting through this amp-speaker combination. Even the inevitable transfer noise, though still audible, imparted less distraction and fussiness to the

listening experience.

Footnote 1: According to Elektronska Indistrija ("EI") of Yugoslavia, the sole manufacturer of this tube, one pair of KT90s is good for 160Wpc if used at a maximum 750V plate voltage and 600V screen grid voltage—and, obviously, not in class-A.

Considering the Purcell music associated with the funeral of Queen Mary (I balk at a more specific title than that if only to avoid the ire of those who rightly observe that we don't know for sure *what* was performed on that miserable day in 1695), the recording I most enjoy is the one made by John Eliot Gardiner in the late 1970s (LP, Erato STU 70911). At the end of this recording of the *March*, the percussionist plays a roll on a kettledrum tuned to C, the sound of which is then left to fade naturally (*ie*, it isn't damped by the player). Bad amps—even enjoyable bad amps—èt this all wrong, refusing to let go of the sound and making mush of it in the process. Good amps give you a natural decay that dies away cleanly, letting you hear how the sound of a kettledrum at stage left can both splash off the assortment of brass instruments at stage right and induce them to resonate sympathetically. By this standard, the EAR 890 proved itself a very good amp indeed.

And that was just the sound; *musically*, the 890 made for a draining experience—but in the best possible way. The second sentence in the funeral service, "In the midst of life we are in death," was uncommonly moving through this amp: The complex and often modern-sounding intervals carried by the four sections of the choir, in a continuous dynamic exchange with the organ, came through cleanly and clearly, leading me to wonder if the 890 produced much less than average in the way of both intermodulation and gross harmonic additives.



While on the subject of good English music, I recommend an impressive recording of John Tavener's recent *Ikon of Eros*, for vocal soloists, solo violin, orchestra, and choir (CD, Reference Recordings RR-102CD). Throughout the work, violinist Jorja Fleezanis plays an almost continuous violin obbligato, which she does with remarkable consistency and sweetness of tone—and which the combination of EAR 890 amplifier and Quad ESL-989 speakers played with both convincing flow and lack of coloration. In fact, the only departure from utter timbral neutrality I thought I heard through this amp was an occasional excess of richness in the upper bass—which I noticed, for instance, in the plucked cello notes of the famous second movement of Borodin's String Quartet 2 (LP, Decca SXL 6036, in a fine Speakers Corner reissue). But the effect was so very slight that, taken in the context of the Quads' own slight tendency toward excess down there, and the possibilities that room reactions might produce the same thing, I hesitate to even mention it.

I don't mean to give short shrift to the 890's considerable output power, which is, after all, among its grandest *raison d'être*. All I can say—which is considerable, I suppose—is that I never once heard the 890 get into any kind of trouble, even with the Quads in the largest of my listening rooms. This was as true of heldentenors as of Mott the Hoople.

Based on my experiences with other, earlier EAR amplifiers, I expected the 890 to excel at stereo imaging—and wasn't in the least disappointed. Using a string quartet recording to describe a home music system's imaging capabilities has become a bit of a cliché, so I'm a little embarrassed to still be thinking of that Borodin LP; in my defense, however, while I can't think of a single stereo recording that really suggests the spatial qualities I hear in a live concert setting, of any type of music and from any seat, good chamber-music recordings such as the above-mentioned probably come the closest. And, yes, the EAR 890 reproduced the sense of depth and performer placement that I presume is a part of the original recording with both uncanny precision and the same sense of "rightness" with which it approached the music itself. (I could also point to how well it separated the voice sections on that Purcell LP, even going so far as to suggest some curve to the choir's risers...)

Previous EAR experiences might also have led me to expect less than the best from the 890 in terms of rhythm and pacing; it's been a few years since I heard it, but I remember the similarly beautiful-sounding 534 being somewhat less than jaunty with upbeat music. For whatever reason—improved damping? the essential sonic differences between EL34 and KT90 tubes?—I heard no such troubles here. In fact, when I used the EAR-Quad combination to listen to such songs as "Don't Kill" and "A Little Concerned, That's All," from the great album *Tough Love* by Hamell on Trial (Righteous Babe RBR033-D), I had just as much fun as with our "party" rig (Naim amps driving Lowther horns—wheee!).

And the opening bars of Martin Sieghart's altogether superior Schmidt Fourth (CD, Chesky CD143) had a rhythmic insistence I don't get even with

Lowthers (although perhaps that's because so much of it takes place in the bass registers). And when the tempo picked up very slightly, some 12 minutes later—just before the transition to the second movement and its solo cello line—the EAR-Quad combination got the idea across effectively. All in all, there was nothing soggy or slow in the way Tim de P's amp played rhythmically demanding music.

Finally, while most of my listening was done with my usual unbalanced interconnects (my own homemade solid-core silver), a sense of duty compelled me to try the 890 in balanced mode, too. (This despite the fact that Tim de Paravicini told me he believes "There are no sonic benefits that are peculiar to balanced [operation] that can't be accomplished with unbalanced." He went on to suggest that the 890 offers the choice simply to accommodate customers from a pro background, who are more comfortable working in a low-impedance connection context.) In particular, I tried a balanced cable set from DNM (see this month's "[Listening](#)"), which is at least somewhat similar in construction and intent, if you will, to my reference.

Was there a difference? Actually, yes: While I heard no distinctions one way or the other in terms of flow or timbre or pitch or drama, I did in fact hear what I took to be a better, bigger sense of scale with the balanced cables. Sorry, Tim.

Back to where I started As much as anyone else, I enjoy audio products whose strengths are plain and upfront and obvious—that is, as long as those strengths are the sorts of things that I *care* to hear. (Also as much as anyone else, I find it all too easy to fall into the trap of congratulating myself for hearing any difference at all, then buying whatever seems "freshest." Self-control is as hard to come by at my house as at yours.) I hear *obvious* products all the time, and I've even reviewed a few for *Stereophile*.

But as often as that happens, I tend not to covet such products. The extra few notes of bass, the heightened sense of presence, the scary-quiet groove...they're all nice, but after enjoying the luxury of having them in my home for 90 days out of my life, I can still do without them over the course of the days that remain.

Perhaps the most extraordinary thing about the EAR 890 was that, with the exception of the Quads that I used it to drive, this was the first new audio product in a very long time that I caught myself scheming to buy.

Then again, look what we're talking about here. A \$5000 amp. *Mama*.

I have an idea. The EAR 890's only significant flaw is in its engraved top plate, which is screwed to the top of that enameled chassis, and on which are inscribed the words "Technology at it's best!" For one thing, the exclamation point is unnecessary, and its removal would lend the statement more in the way of, you'll pardon the expression, quiet power—which I imagine would appeal to Mr. de P in any event. Second, and more critical, is

the inappropriate use of an apostrophe, denoting a contraction where there is none—a common mistake, and one that I saw many of my fellow teachers make with impunity when I taught sixth grade. (I think they should have got the hot lead themselves. But it is—or should I say it's—a sadly common thing nonetheless.) So I hereby offer my services as an English major to Tim de Paravicini, and I would gladly forgo monetary pay in favor of...oh, I don't know, perhaps some sort of barter arrangement. I will wait to see what he offers in return. I'm not holding my breath.

An expensive amp, then, but one whose only apparent flaw is grammatical. I suppose it's possible that the EAR 890, whose designer suggests that he could make an amplifier of precisely identical performance using transistors instead of tubes, sounds as good as it does because of its ability to step out of the way of good-sounding recordings. But if that's so, I can't help thinking it steps out of the way more gracefully than most.

Sidebar 1: Specifications

Description: Stereo tubed power amplifier with inout level controls. Tube complement: two 6AQ8, two 12AX7, eight KT90. Output power: 70Wpc into 8 (18.45dBW) or 16 ohms (21.45dBW). Power bandwidth: 15Hz-40kHz at <3.0% THD. Input impedance (measured at 1kHz): 55k ohms, unbalanced or balanced. Input sensitivity: 1.0V. Signal/Noise Ratio: 92dB (no ref. level specified). **Dimensions:** 16" W by 7" H by 16" D. Weight: 60 lbs. **Serial number of unit reviewed:** 013903. **Price:** \$4995.