



## EAR 324 Phono Preamplifier | REVIEW

By Garrett Hongo

March 9, 2025

### EAR 324 phono preamplifier review by Garrett Hongo

Over a decade ago now, I met the late Tim de Paravicini at the Rocky Mountain Audio Fest. He was visiting his American distributor Dan Meinwald in his demo room, its system set up diagonally, producing a lovely sound both rich and resolving via EAR (formerly Esoteric Audio Research) electronics, a Townshend turntable and audio rack, and a pair of Marten floor standing speakers. Mr. de Paravicini stood over six feet tall, a slender man with a white beard that wound around from his chin and up his jawline. His hair was a longish grey mane and whitening too, receding from a peninsula of growth from his forehead in two parallel bays of bare scalp. Habitually he stooped from the waist a bit and the overall impression he gave was what I imagined Gandalf from J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* cycle must look like were he to wear English tweeds and an argyle sweater and not flowing robes and a staff. His industry

reputation proclaimed him one of the chief wizards of audio, a genius who saw through complexities of electronic circuits inward to their inherent potentials, teasing from their components, with masterful calculations and a magician's ears, the magisterial sounds of a symphony, the drive and jump of rock, the sensuousness and sonorities of jazz. Mr. de Paravicini was not only someone who knew everything—he was somebody who had created some of the most admired pieces of equipment in the industry—among them the 509 monoblock amplifiers, the 890 stereo amp I once reviewed for another publication, and the highly versatile 912 tubed preamp with its built-in phono stage.

After a few years (1972-1976) working at Luxman Corporation—the famed audio company in Japan—Mr. de Paravicini struck out on his own in 1976, moved to England, and founded EAR. Since then, his company has been a leader in audio electronics, featuring a wide array of tube and solid-state gear at a variety of price-points from the quite affordable to the not quite astronomical. Yet, with every piece in the extensive lineup, both sound and build quality are of the highest order, earning its long-lived, esteemed reputation among newbies and cognoscenti alike. One of the first pieces I ever owned was the EAR 834P—a bread loaf-sized, single-box, tubed phono stage with both MM and MC capability that punched way above its weight, delivering an analog sound of pleasing density and textures. Above it stands the EAR 324 (MSRP \$6,095), a much wider-bodied, single-box, solid-state unit that was released in 2003—at that time not only beyond my slim budget but possessing features that were also above my needs as a beginning vinylphile. Just recently, though, I got the notion to go back and pick up where I'd left off in the EAR line and requested that Dan Meinwald loan me a unit to review.



## Description

The first thing you notice about the EAR 324 is its serious heftiness for a relatively compact unit—12.75" L x 8.125" D x 4" T. It weighs in at a dense 16.5 pounds. It comes with a spiral-bound user's manual and warranty registration sheet. The warranty is for three years, parts and labor. My review unit had no stock power cord, but one normally comes with every new piece.

The faceplate is an attractive brushed aluminum with black, silkscreened labeling for all its numerous functions. In a line of italicized lettering just above the bottom, there is the proud declaration "designed by Tim de Paravicini, Huntington, England." With the unit's two sets of

inputs, Phono 1 for MC and Phono 2 for MM, there are five dials—one on the far left for Phono 1's MC impedance loading via internal step up transformers (4, 15, and 40 ohms), two more dials, vertically stacked, about two inches to the right for Phono 2's capacitance loading (20, 100, 220, 330, and 47k picofarads) and impedance loading (100k, 47k, 33k, 22k, and 15k). In the middle of the faceplate is a somewhat larger 1" diameter dial for controlling gain with settings of -6dB and -12dB. On the far right is the On/Off power switch, which the user's manual instructs you must leave on continuously once in operation. All these dials detent with an assured resistance and set securely with no worrisome looseness.

Also on the faceplate, near its lower edge, are three pushbuttons to select between Phono 1 and Phono 2, between normal and inverted phases, and between stereo and mono operation. Finally, on the lower right corner, there is a small, round LED light that indicates that the EAR 324 is operational.



Around back of the unit, going left to right, there is an IEC for the power cord, a white badge for the serial number (hand written), two vertically aligned XLR output connections, two vertically aligned RCA outputs, a switch that toggles between unbalanced and balanced outputs, a ground pin, two vertically aligned inputs for Phono 2 (MM only), and two vertically aligned inputs for Phono 1 (either MM or MC). Between the inputs for Phono 1 and Phono 2, there is a small pushbutton switch to select from Phono 1's MM or MC operation.



It is important to emphasize that the EAR 324's MC amplification is accomplished via proprietary EAR step-up transformers closely akin to the EAR MC-4 SUT, a stand-alone unit that I also own.

## Installation

I did two separate installations of the EAR 324. First, to use it with my TW-Acustic Raven AC turntable, I moved the control unit of my Pass Labs XP-25 out of the second shelf of my Box Furniture rack and installed the EAR 324 in its place, skootching the three fo.Q footers I use to fit the smaller dimensions of the 324's undercarriage. Next, I did my hookups—Audience frontRow MP power cord, Audience frontRow balanced output ICs, and TW-Acustic Raven RCA phono input and ground cables. My MC cartridge was a Koetsu Urushii Sky Blue (0.4mV). Second, using the 324 with my Garrard 301 turntable, I moved it to the second shelf of my Salamander Archetype 5.0 rack and ran single-ended hookups, both direct to its Phono 1 MC inputs from my Audio Creative Groovemaster III tonearm with an Ortofon Meister Silver Mkii SPU (0.3mV) and then to its Phono 2 MM inputs from an Ortofon ST-80 step up. Running from the Groovemaster arm, I used Cardas Clear phono cables. From the Ortofon SUT, I used a pair of Analysis Plus Silver Apex ICs. My preamp is the Zanden 3100 and my amp the new Zanden 8120F. All other cabling is a mix of Audience frontRow and Zanden, while my speakers are the Ascendo System M. I also use an Audience aR6-T4 line conditioner.

I've got to say that the EAR 324 was cinch to install and easy to use throughout my time with it. Its convenient switchability between Phono 1 and Phono 2, multiple loading options, two gain options, and three cartridge impedance settings contributed to a pleasurable experience.



Listening with TW-Acustic Raven/Koetsu Urushii Sky Blue



I started out listening to r&b and rock 'n' roll, moved onto jazz and classical, then back to a bluesy rock album, finishing off with opera. The EAR 324 proved adept at rendering both amplified and acoustic music, threw a wide soundstage with depth, and produced solid images within it. Air and space varied, depending on the recordings, but I'd say the sound was consistently punchy, musically affecting, and great at rhythmic timing in every instance.

The sweet, burbling organ on Al Green's "Here I Am" from *Al Green's Greatest Hits* (Hi Records/Fat Possum FPH1135-1) made for a complex contrast with the sassy, strutting horns and snarky rhythm electric guitar on the track. Snare strikes came hard and explosively, the baritone sax honking its fills on occasion, with the entire ensemble creating a captivating rhythm. The EAR 324 easily captured Green's reed-like voice, famous for its agility from gritty tenor to a sweet and airy falsetto, rendering his varied tones and timbres, creating multiple vocal textures as Green crooned, hooted, or screamed his lyrics. Overall, the sound was snappy, tight, and swaggering—a great dance track that got me off my feet instantly, shaking to the beat, cooing along with the light vibrato of the Reverend Green's soulful voice.



Kim Carnes' *Mistaken Identity* (EMI America 17052) is a famously eclectic album of country pop-rock from 1981 that I enjoyed hearing again recently on my fall road trip through southwest France's Aquitaine region. Once I got home, I ordered a copy from Discogs, cleaned and spun it multiple times. "Bette Davis Eyes," of course, was Carnes's famous hit, and via the EAR 324, the sound produced was a rhythmic and textural tapestry—resolving, infectious, with a great array

of instrumental timbres both electronic and acoustic. Carnes' smokey voice teased with its lilt and off-accented dynamic shifts, always coy and sexual—a kind of vocal lap-dance backed with percolating disco rhythms, synth chords, bass drum thumps, and an electric bass that sounded like a digeridoo.



Switching to jazz, I spun an old standby—Freddie Hubbard's *Ready for Freddie* (Blue Note BST 84085)—and loved every track, especially “Arietes” and “Weaver of Dreams.” The first featured Hubbard's agile runs and piercing high notes on the trumpet, Wayne Shorter's big tone on the tenor sax, swiftly sashaying among rich notes, Coltrane-like in his phrasing and speed with an occasionally emphatic squawk thrown in. Bernard McKinney's euphonium sounded sweet and *phlumpher* in its midrange notes, while McCoy Tyner's piano solo tinkled pleasingly with nice, rolling arpeggios. The latter tune, a slow and wistful ballad, had Hubbard playing in an utterly romantic style, with sweet, loving attacks, his notes burnished and nuanced, held longingly on occasion, every instance of his breath creating a telling moment. Tyner comped with delicacy, Art Davis on standup bass plucked his notes emphatically in support, while Elvin Jones swept his brushes lavishly on the snare and punched time on the hi-hat. The sound was grand and unforgettable.

“Save Me,” a languorous tune on chanteuse k.d. lang's *Ingénue 25th Anniversary* (Nonesuch 559289-1), produced a room-filling sound, rich and splendid with lang's big, doubled voice on the choruses. The quavery pedal steel guitar on the track sounded like an organ, and the acoustic guitar produced amazing, gigantic notes as though there was a pickup in its sound

hole. On “The Mind of Love,” a following track, lang’s voice sounded airier, pitch-perfect, with a sleek, seductive effect. Backed by a conga drum, synthesizer, and pedal steel guitar, violins, and the usual rhythm section of drums and bass, lang’s voice wove around them, in duet at times with the seductive violins, her voice multiplied in the choruses for a nicely murmurous banshee effect. The soundstage throughout was deep—about 5’ front to back—and 4’-5’ wider than the outside edges of my speakers. Height was about 7’ with images solid and dense.

The EAR 324 was exceptionally impressive with classical music. I played a wide range of things from Albinoni’s Adagio to symphonies by Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven, but I had the finest sessions with pieces by Stravinsky and Debussy. “Suite: L’Histoire du soldat” (Columbia MS 7093), scored for a seven-piece ensemble taken from the Columbia Symphony Orchestra and conducted by its composer Igor Stravinsky, sounded beautifully clear with precise instrumental timbres. Woodwinds (clarinet and bassoon) sounded alternately rich and pensive. The strings (violin and double bass) could be soft and delicate, swelling, or mordant, depending on which passage was being played.



A trombone was rich in colors, with the cornet brisk and provocative. Stravinsky’s composition often creates ephemeral trios—e.g., trombone, violin, and percussion together—whose shared themes are cut across by other instruments, either singly or in unison—which then steal the theme, creating a sequence of thematically related but timbrally distinct passages that can be comic, amiable, or sprightly, depending on register, rhythm, and sonority. Your listening is always freshened, alert, and delighted as though taking in a Michelin star, nine-course meal of delicious, small bites. The EAR 324 was completely up to the task, casting that wide soundstage



with strong center fill and lots of air around each instrument. The acoustic illusion was holographic.

Claude Debussy's *La Mer* as performed by the Cleveland Orchestra, conducted by Pierre Boulez (DGG 479 8519), is a magnificent tone poem that is extremely difficult to render with clarity and resolution. I've found it takes a superior chain of analog components to render its lush complexity and distinct but often clashing instrumental timbres in order to provoke a coherent aesthetic response to the piece. My first analog chains, for example, created muddled, even ghastly presentations of this finely wrought, densely sensuous music. But, with the Koetsu Urushii Sky Blue MC cartridge, TW-Acoustic Raven 10.5 tonearm and captured cables, and the EAR 324's MC setting of its Phono 1 input, I heard the true majesty of this music.

"De la'aube à midi sur la mer," the piece's first movement, began with gently swelling notes from a harp, horn fanfares from deep stage rear, and an oboe and violins forward with distinct timbres. Then came wondrous *pizzicati* from the double basses and cellos and a grand orchestral crescendo ending in an understated fanfare from muted trumpets. Timpani strikes were sudden and agile. Woodwinds layered in from the mid-stage background that, together with strings, produced an attractive orchestral thrum and convincing crescendos. Especially remarkable was the supreme clarity of the orchestral layers in the soundstage. Yet the price of this clarity might have been a slight dryness to the overall sound, possibly a function of the EAR 324 being solid-state.





Turning back to amplified music, I spun Jeff Beck's *Truth*, a double LP reissue with Beck-Ola (Epic BG 33779) and an album I first co-owned with my blues guitarist brother back in 1968. Beck's version of the classic "I Ain't Superstitious," written by Willie Dixon and first recorded by Howlin' Wolf, features Beck's snarling guitar work and Rod Stewart's raspy vocals. Beck toys with dynamic contrasts between distorted, up-volume wah-wah fills and clearer, quieter figures, also via wah-wah. He uses single-string strummings to create Hendrix-like screaming effects. Stewart's voice, of course, is familiarly dry, even hoarse, and it engages in a deft sequence of call-and-response with Beck's guitar. The sound has all the grit and staccato momentum of classic Chicago blues, with the added touch of English swagger and invention.

I finished my sessions with the TW-Acoustic/Koetsu rig by spinning *Violetta: Arias and Duets* from Verdi's "La Traviata" (DGG 00289 477 6167), a double-album performed live by the Wiener Philharmoniker conducted by Carlo Rizzi, featuring Mexican tenor Rolando Villazón and Russian soprano Anna Netrebko during their early careers. Every track was marvelous from "Libiamo" with its airy chorus and Villazón's robust singing to "E strano/Folie, folie!" and the alternating faux gaiety and darkly erotic desperation in Netrebko's voice. In duet, their voices were balletic, thrilling, and powerful. The soundstage was astonishing as well, extending outside the boundaries of my speakers by a good 5' and presenting a realistic breadth of space, fine placements, and cross-stage movements of the singers.

### **Listening with Garrard 301/Ortofon Meister Silver G Mkii/ST-80 SUT**

As good as the EAR 324 was with my TW-Acoustic/Koetsu combo, it had a special character of sound with my vintage Garrard 301 'table in a Woodsong Audio plinth, Groovemaster III arm with an Ortofon Meister Silver G Mkii SPU either feeding directly into Phono 1's MC input or via an Ortofon ST-80 SUT going into its MM input. Both chains produced an even denser, more full-bodied sound than I got with my Raven rig.

Hubbard's "Arietis," for example, via the Phono 1's MC inputs (and no SUT), not only maintained that beautiful tone of his trumpet, but sounded mellower and more colorful. Everything else was tight—Davis's bass, Jones's drumming, and Shorter's big and swaggering tenor sax. But Tyner's comping came more deftly timed, I thought, tasteful and sombre in its light-fingered delicacy. And McKinney's euphonium sounded bigger to me, creating bountiful harmonies with Hubbard's trumpet and Shorter's tenor. When the ballad came to its ending, I felt Jones's drumrolls pressurizing the room with an aesthetic ache I could feel in my body.

Back in the early 80s, I fell in love with country-rock singer Juice Newton—I think partly because her face struck me hard as reminiscent of old girlfriend's. But I could as easily have fallen in love with just her voice—a lilting, soft-rock contralto that could also crank the power. With the Ortofon ST-80 in the chain, I spun her beguiling album *Quiet Lies* (Capitol ST-12210) a few times, hearing Newton's voice sail over through the snarling mix of electric guitar, synthesizer, drums, bass, and female backup singers with an incisive punch on "Heart of the Night." And, despite the instrumental complexity, I could still hear a touch of that old Sun Records quality of reverb to it all, a dollop of electronic echo that signified the tune's rockabilly roots. But Brenda Lee's love ballad "Break It to Me Gently" was the bravura track here, Newton's voice aching and sensuous, the interaction between the plucked rhythm guitar and strikes from a glockenspiel

adding tasty grace notes over organ, violins, synth, drums, and electric bass. The gorgeous instrumentation dropped away slightly to give Newton space for the tune's famous, swooping, operatic close. The EAR 324 gave the moment all the juice it needed.

Still with the Ortofon step-up in my analog chain, maybe even more impressive was the 324's performance on symphonic music—for the welter of distinctive instruments, the expressive nuances of their dynamic contrasts, and the huge problem of convincing the sheer scale of the orchestra—a task of audio reproduction perhaps even more difficult than rendering the sustained power of a singer's operatic notes. The *Allegro con brio* first movement of Beethoven's Symphony No. 3, as performed by the San Francisco Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Seiji Ozawa (Philips 9500 002), featured wonderfully brisk and sprightly violins contrasting with sweet and mellow woodwinds and grave double basses at its opening. With the boldness and profound lyricism of the music, its romantically heroic character was supremely evident, especially with the sudden timpani strikes and dynamic surges of the entire orchestra. Horns and brass sounded unfailingly majestic, and the clear oboe in some of the interludes stood out against the lush strings. Resolution and spatial presentation were superb—I could make out each section of the orchestra in their proper positions and scale. Individually, each had their distinct tone, and collectively the entire orchestra sounded like a purring beast in pursuit of the sublime.



## Conclusion

With the EAR 324 in my system, I came away from each listening session satisfied, my mood always bettered from the glooms and defilements of the day, my awareness of elements in the music I'd heard expanded in appreciation of its "finer tones," as English poet John Keats once wrote in his letters—the ephemeral enlightenments embedded within the precious acoustic

moments the music provided. There was not one single thing the 324 did well, but it did well with the whole of the music, the riches of its elapsing entirety, revealing bounties of sound no matter the genre from rhythm 'n' blues to jazz, oldies rock to romantic and modern symphonies.

Possessed of a prestigious design provenance from the laboratory of Tim de Paravicini, one of the few genuine grandmasters of audio, the 324 phono never failed to deliver a pleasing richness of sound full of resolving details. I thoroughly enjoyed my time with it and urge you, if you're in the market for a relatively affordable piece of high-end analog equipment, not to pass up the chance to audition the EAR 324. It delivers way above its cost with flexibilities that can adapt to numerous analog pickups, whether moving magnet or moving coil. Were you to buy it, I'm convinced you will not only glow with the pride of possession, but that you'd come away from every listening session with a higher, more nuanced appreciation for your vinyl collection. It's the real deal—a gem of analog art.

- Garrett Hongo –

EAR 324 phono preamp

Price: \$6,095

Warranty: 3 years, parts and labor

Specifications:

Input impedance: switchable between 4 and 40 ohms (moving-coil),  
15k and 100k ohms (moving magnet)

Output impedance: 60 ohms

Gain: 54dB maximum

Input sensitivity: 2.5mV (moving magnet)

Signal/noise ratio: 68dB ref. 2.5mV input

RIAA accuracy: <0.3dB

Channel balance: <0.2dB. THD: 0.2%

Esoteric Audio Research/Yoshino Ltd.

1 Chester Road

Colmworth Business Park

St Neots

Cambridgeshire

PE19 8YT

England

Tel: +44 1480 210004

Email: [sales@earyoshino.com](mailto:sales@earyoshino.com)

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

US distributor: EAR USA

Dan Meinwald

1087 East Ridgewood Street

Long Beach, CA 90807

Tel: (562) 422-4747



Email: [info@ear-usa.com](mailto:info@ear-usa.com)  
Web: [www.ear-usa.com](http://www.ear-usa.com).