



EAR / Yoshino 868 Tube Preamplifier With Phonostage

One of the best I have heard!
Review By Ron Nagle



The company that would evolve and come to be known as EAR/Yoshino was founded by Tim De Paravicini, one of the preeminent audio designers/engineers of our time. Tim is a legendary designer whose genius has been put to good use not only in the home audio market, but also within recoding studios! Tim's designs are not 'fave of the day' items mind you; they easily withstand the test of time. Just because the 868 preamplifier may be considered old by some, as it has been in serial manufacture for three years, that most certainly *does not* make it obsolete by any measure! A *truly* great piece of equipment should last a lifetime. Tim resides in the company of such notables as Nelson Pass, John Curl and Sid Smith. Reading a profile of Tim De Paravicini as a designer/consultant you realize there is no aspect of audio electronics he hasn't influenced. Mr. De Paravicini founded the EAR/ Yoshino company in 1977. The production of EAR components originates across the pond in Huntingdon England.

My EAR 868

The left front panel has the source select knob labeled PH, CD, Tuner, AV, Aux, XLR. The center panel knob is labeled Tape: Mon (monitor) IN (input). On the right is a larger Volume Control knob. And the last, farther right, is a back lighted two position power on/off knob. Just below that is the receiver for the remote control. The remote control is a plastic remote made in Italy; it provides only two functions, up and down volume. The 868 measures 15" x 5" x 12" (WxHxD) and weights 22 lbs. My review sample, *serial number 021113*, has a bright mirror finished face plate and four matching chromed knobs. Adding to the preamplifier's versatility the rear panel

has both balanced gold plated XLR inputs and outputs and unbalanced RCA input and output. On the left side next to the IEC power cord socket are two pairs of RCA connections designated as the right and left channel preamp output. On the right next to those unbalanced RCA jacks are an additional two pairs of balanced XLR sockets. With the two pairs of RCA and/or XLR output connections you might use the 868 to drive two separate power amplifiers.

Just to the right there are five additional unbalanced RCA pairs labeled, Tape Out, Monitor Input, Aux, AV, Tuner, and CD. And as you can see there is a provision for a tape loop. Just under the four sets of RCA inputs there is a pair of balanced right and left line level input XLR sockets. This is for a balanced line source component, possibly an outboard DAC? On the far right side there is an additional pair of RCA Phono input jacks along with a cartridge grounding post and a push button MM/MC select switch.

Inside Delights

Unusually the literature that is supplied with this preamplifier is basic and very brief. It is comprised of four pages and amounts to not much more than a common sense way to install the device in your system. According to EAR, the \$7595 model 868 has essentially the same circuitry and sound as its big brother, the Professional 912 preamplifier. The difference is that the 868 lacks some of the flexibility and features like the D'Arsonval meters of the Pro 912. The preamplifier is a transformer coupled input and output device and that it contains four tubes. The tube compliment includes the PCC88/7DJ8, which is an equivalent to the more common United States spec 6922 miniature dual triodes. Two of the PCC88 tubes are used within the line stage and two more are in the phono amplifier stage. We are told the phono stage is exactly the same as the circuit used in the separate standalone \$4995 EAR 88PB. Thus for a mere \$2600 extra you get far more versatility.



The phono section is comprised of two amplification stages but eschews adding a third stage of amplification instead opting to use a step up transformer. The transformers are adjustable with three primaries that provide amplification ratios of 10/1, 20/1 and 30/1. For a moving-magnet cartridge the default resistive load is 47 kOhms. The phono transformer step up ratios/gain can be selected with jumpers located inside the chassis near the back panel. For the moving-coil cartridge the default resistive loading is listed at 40 Ohms. However as you adjust the gain you also change the internal impedance i.e. 50, 125, and 500 Ohms. Obviously with a little trial and error proper cartridge loading should get you in the sonic ballpark.

Listening Trials

Component burn in and pre conditioning before the audition was emphasized by the distributor, EAR U.S.A. Consequently, when I received the amplifier it had nearly one hundred hours on it. That is not unusual for a hollow state component and during my listening sessions it sounded better after it was on for approximately 20 minutes. Most of the time the EAR 868 fed the input of my workhorse 320 Watt Sanders ESL transistor amplifier. Anecdotally, it takes an unusually long 20 seconds for the sound to gradually fade away after you turn off the preamplifier power.

Initially I warmed things up playing my Sangean HDT-1 Digital tuner. That is before listening to my Marantz 8400 universal CD player. Everything sounded quite accurate and normal, as there was very little audible component character to describe. With all line sources, the sound is moderately warm just as a very modern tube amplifier *should* sound. About a week into my

auditioning something difficult to describe caught my attention. Like a light bulb turning on, I became aware of a subtle quality contained in the music. For lack of a proper familiar audiophile phrase, the music became more "relatable". It seemed I could relate to it better on an emotional level and the performers sounded more lifelike. A big part of this was the conceptualization of a dimensional sound stage inhabited by people separate but still acting in concert. The phrasing was real and the music conveyed a sense of warm life. These qualities are often spoken about but still they are very elusive and difficult to capture. But after all isn't that the *raison d'être* for a hollow state amplifier.

A Tale Of Two Personalities

The EAR 868 line stage is a revelation and easily one of the best I have heard! Now lets go vinyl. Thinking my Shure V15 Type V-MR would represent a typical Moving Magnet cartridge, I went with it. It is spec'ed at three milliVolts output and requires a 47 kOhm load, that should make it a perfect match for the EAR 868 Moving Magnet phono stage. Incidentally, am not a big fan of this cartridge, competent yes, but slightly boring, it is all of that. I cleaned and spun a vinyl two dollar flea market purchase of: Sting, *The Dream Of The Blue Turtles* [A&M SP-3750] I know this to be a good recording, I already had the CD. Side one, first song, *If You Love Somebody Set Them Free*. The first few notes got me to sit up in my chair. Wow, never knew a Shure V-15 could do what my ears told me it was doing. Dynamic speed swinging dynamic contrasts deep wide soundstage echoing reverberation along with the separation of backing vocals. It had drive, pace, and excitement. You could clearly hear the metal disks shimmering sound of the tambourine. Like a starving man looking at a picture of a Big Mac I grabbed another black disk. This was a vinyl version of my long time CD reference Basia *Time and Tide*. But this time it was *Time And Tide* the vinyl version [Epic Stereo – FE 40767-1].

Again the first cut on side one, *Promises, where the opening line is 'promises, we forget about our promises'*. This was no aberration; once again the excitement is there with driving pace and articulate speed. You can hear the details and power in the bass lines that is not complete on the CD. As a matter of fact it was necessary to dial down the separate bass amplifier that is built into my Onix Rocket Strata Mini four way speakers. After listening to these albums I began to wonder what after all these years could explain a Shure V15 coming alive like this. This is a cartridge and a system that I know very well. Logically the only component that was different was driving force of the EAR 868 preamplifier.

Naturally I expect better performance from my moving coil cartridges in direct comparison with one of my moving magnet cartridges. Once again, like the Shure V15 V-MR, I tried to select a relatively inexpensive cartridge that would be almost universal among vinyl loving audiophiles. This has to be the \$225 Denon DL103. We must remember this is a moving coil cartridge made for the Japanese Broadcasting Company 50 years ago. Its numbers are legion and is still being manufactured today within Japan.

Some of the DL 103 specifications are relevant to this inquiry.

Cartridge type: Moving-coil, Output voltage: 0.39mV

Channel separation: >25dB (1kHz), Frequency response: 20Hz-45kHz

Impedance: 40 ohms ±20% (1kHz) , Load resistance: 100 ohms or higher

Stylus profile: Conical

After following the pains in cartridge alignment and setup, I cued the Denon 103 on Sting's song "If You Love Somebody Set Them Free". This same track, as played using the Shure V15 V-MR, didn't sound quite as good. Something very unexpected was messing with the sound. It is not that the Denon 103 wasn't performing properly. It was just that there was less detail as compared to the Shure V15 V-MR. An e-mail to Dan Meinwald, the EAR USA distributor, affirmed that I had the correct Denon 103 resistive loading set with the phono printed circuit board jumpers set at 40. The Denon 103 just did not have the transient speed and dynamic contrasts of the V15. In addition, what had been an expansive and deep center stage had moved slightly closer. Thinking the set up must be at fault, I tried readjusting the vertical tracking angle. Alas, raising and lowering the arm position did not seem to have much effect. During this adjustment process the reason became obvious. The Denon cartridge basically has

a round stylus profile. It is referred to as a Modified Conical stylus. It simply cannot extract the very same fine details of the hyper critical Shure V15 V-MR (Micro Ridge) stylus.

At this point I needed a third opinion. The truth and nothing but the truth comes in the form of a not so typical Haniwa HCTR 01 MC cartridge. The Haniwa Audio System HCTR 01 is a low impedance moving coil I reviewed for *Enjoy the Music.com* in June 2012. This \$5000 MC was designed by Dr. Tetsuo Kubo and has a bare minimum of wire turns in an attempt to minimize cartridge inductance and its detrimental phase shifting effects. Without getting too technical, its input impedance is only 0.8 Ohms and inductance is 1.3 micro henrys with an output voltage of 0.35 mV. After shifting the loading jumpers, the loading options chosen during this review was set at 12. There is one other pertinent fact; the HCTR 01 uses a critical profile line contact stylus.

The Verdict Is In

The EAR 868 line stage is capable of sound reproduction nearing the state of the art. It is the phono stage that undoubtedly sets the unit as 'state-of-the-art'. In combination with the Haniwa HCTR01, it raises the level of performance beyond any other phono stage that I have ever heard. To my ears within the system, the Shure V15 did indeed extract more dynamic life out of vinyl records. I was able to hear deeper into the subtle details of the recorded music. Let us refer again to that cut by Sting "If You Love Somebody Set Then Free". Within the orchestral arrangement, it was easy to groove to the sound of a tambourine as it drive the tempo forward. The Haniwa HCTR01 not only conveys the startling transient impact on the tambourine, I could better delineate the sound of the tambourine's individual metal disks hitting each other. The explanation must lie in EAR's very ingenious combination of a tube phono stage that send the signal to a third stage of amplification and two dedicated moving coil step up transformers. EAR's 868 moving coil transformers provide dead quite amplification plus serve as the resistive load seen by the cartridge. The Ear 868 works beautifully.

Foot Notes

During the EAR 868 evaluation I made a few observations. The first is about system interconnects. The sound changed slightly switching between coaxial and balanced wiring to the power amplifier. My balanced generic microphone cable produced a slightly softer warmer but larger and deeper soundstage. The coaxial wiring was via a Nordost Red Dawn used as my reference. This provided more dynamic contrast. I realize that I'm describing the characteristics of my interconnect cables and of course anyone who chooses to purchase this unit should conduct cable optimization. I used the 868 preamplifier to feed the digital power supply of the Rogue Sphinx integrated amplifier. The result: a little uneven response, the bass was more prominent than my reference, but still displayed the wonderful dynamic energy. Additionally the



EAR 868 was employed feeding the tube powered amplifier portion of my PrimaLuna Prologue 2

Integrated amplifier. Result a little less dynamic contrasts. Ultimately I preferred my transistor reference, the Sanders ESL power amplifier, which proved to be the best match.

Next: Placing silicon damping rings on all four tubes had little effect on the sound. Also, Soft Sorbethane feet under the chassis did nothing to alter the sound. Additionally, my VPI Magic Bricks had no effect on the sound. Conclusion: This seems to be one solidly made preamplifier.

Musings

Many recordings passed through my system both Black Disc and Compact Disc. Indeed the sound quality of the EAR / Yoshino 868 always conformed to GIGO (Garbage In Garbage Out). The CD sound quality proved to be better than my reference system. The CD sources used were more consistent in that it did not vary as much as the quality of the vinyl sources. To minimize one possible variable, I based my assessment on one very good vinyl recording. This reviewing thing has a definite down side, and that is I will be parting with the EAR / Yoshino 868 tube preamplifier with phonostage that perhaps represents the state-of-the-art not just for today, but for a long time to come.

As always enjoy the music and from yours truly, Semper Hi-Fi

Associated Equipment

Speakers: Onix Rocket Strata Mini four-way speakers and Aurum Cantus Leisure 2 SE two-way monitors on 24" stands, separate tweeters Mark and Daniel Omni Harmonizers

Reference Amplifiers: Prima Luna Prologue 2, Roger Sanders ESL Power Amplifier, Rogue Sphinx Integrated Amplifier

Analog Source: SOTA Sapphire Turntable, SOTA flywheel power supply, Grado Signature tone arm. Cartridges, Shure V15 V-MR, Denon DL 103, Haniwa HCTR01.

Analog Tools: Cartalign Research protractor, Musical surroundings Fozgometer,

Roksan Digital stylus balance, Digital Laser Tachometer, Analogue Productions Ultimate Test LP.

Digital Source: Marantz CD player DV8400, Music Hall DAC 24.3 D/A Converter, Sangean HDT-1 AM FM Digital tuner.

Speaker Cables: Kimber 12 TC

Interconnect Cables

Monster Reference 2 pairs, 1 meter and 1.5 meters

Nordost Red Dawn, 1 meter

Audio Research Litzlink 2 pairs, 1.5 meter

Chord Silver Siren, 1 meter

Audiobhan 0.5-meter digital

Power Cords, By Kaplan Cables

Line Conditioners:

Richard Gray 20 Ampere Isolation Transformer, APC S15 Power Control Center.



Specifications

Type: Vacuum tube stereo preamplifier with MM/MC phonostage
Tube Compliment: One ECC82 and four ECC83
Inputs: One phono and five line level unbalanced via gold-plated RCA
Outputs: Two sets balanced XLR, two sets balanced RCA and one tape monitor
SNR: 90dB (1V out reference)
Phono Section Noise: -80dB (IHF)
Input Impedance: Phono 47 kOhms MC input, 40 Ohms standard
Maximum Output: 5V into 600 Ohms (Both balanced and unbalanced)
Dimensions: 15" x 5" x 12" (WxHxD)
Weight: 22 lbs.
Serial Number: 021113
Price: \$5795 as standard, \$7595 with phonostage

Company Information

EAR / Yoshino USA
1087 East Ridgewood Street
Long Beach, CA 90807

Voice: (562) 422-4747
E-mail: info@ear-usa.com
Website: www.ear-usa.com

