



EAR Yoshino Phonobox Tube Phono Stage

Analog, Star Component Award

I first heard the precursor of the EAR Phonobox, the [834P Phono Stage](#), in 1998, a few years after its debut. I loved the look of the quarter-size component and was intrigued by its tube circuitry designed by the legendary [Tim de Paravicini](#) (1945 – 2020). Our reviewer loved it, as did the rest of the Audiophilia staff. It had good looks, produced lots of detail and was brushed with a tube sound for which de Paravicini was famous. It's still popular on the used market 30 years later and commands decent bucks.

Note: The unit under review is called "EAR Phono Classic" in the USA. "Phonobox" is for the worldwide market.

Once again, the Canadian tag team of John Stratton of [Pure Fidelity](#) (an EAR Yoshino dealer) and importer David Jensen of [Red Leaf Audio](#) gave me a heads-up about the Phonobox, explaining its lineage, excellent performance and relatively low price (see pricing below). Thank you to David for shipping the unit across Canada to the island for review.

My Use

The Phonobox comes securely shipped and is larger than the original, now a half-sized component. The unit is available in several versions, including Moving Magnet, with added Moving Coil, and with or without volume control. My version was the model's most expensive version with MM/MC and volume control with the



de Paravicini's famous original 834P from the early '90s.

chrome fascia (**\$2500**). Purists may order the volume control with confidence and use the large knob simply as a set and forget gain control, using their reference preamplifier or integrated amplifier's potentiometer for the volume. After experimenting, I set the EAR's "volume control" at 3:00. I didn't think about it again for the entire review period. But for those wishing to, you can plug the Phonobox with volume control directly into your power amp and do without a preamplifier. And with the Phonobox's native 72dB of gain, you'll always have enough headroom.

Pricing (USD) is dependent on the model and options. No CAD price listed? Price is the same as USD:

Black/MM (\$1500)

Black/MM & MC (\$1900/CAD 2000)

Black/MM & MC with Vol (\$2100/CAD 2150)

Chrome/MM & MC (\$2300)

Chrome/MM & MC with Vol (**\$2500**—review model)

Like many of the phono stages I've used, including my reference [Phasemation EA-350 Phono Amplifier](#) (\$6400), the Phonobox's MC houses a fixed value for cartridge loading. Mine is 110 ohms; the EAR is set at 470 ohms. There are no loading dipswitches, so no tinkering for you. I've been at "loading seminars" where differences in sound between various MC loadings for the same low-output cartridge were substantial. My three MC reference carts (2 stereos, one mono) are approx 100 ohms; I was happy and content with the EAR's loading parameters. I had no setting problems.



Available in a black brushed aluminum faceplate or polished chrome

Setup is a snap, and the EAR had great buddies chez nous with which to shine, including my new [Pure Fidelity Symphony Turntable](#) and [Pure Fidelity Savant Ti Tonearm](#) (USD 22,000 with arm). It was amplified by my [MBL N51 Integrated Amplifier](#) (USD 21,400) and played through my [BØRRESEN Acoustics 01 Silver Supreme Edition Loudspeakers](#) (€47,000/pair, stands not included). Carts were the [IKEDA 9mono](#) (\$4900), [IKEDA KAI MC Phono Cartridge](#) (\$9600) and [Analog Relax EX1000 MC Phono Cartridge](#) (\$17,750). All cabling (incl. power cord) was [Ansuz Electronics C2 level](#) (approx €50,000 in total).

When turned on, the power button glows red until it settles to a warm amber once the tube circuitry stabilizes (about 30 seconds). There is a small button on the rear panel to choose MM or MC. I did not test the MM. The Phonobox was factory fresh. EAR suggests a 48-hour continuous break-in time. I did so. The unit sounded very good right out of the box, but the improvement was noticeable as the 48 hours passed.

When we accept gear at Audiophilia, we review the component without variations to the item. I say this because of added Step-Up Transformer magic. And Tim de Paravacini's renowned winding of transformers. EAR's Step-Up Transformer, the MC4 ([reviewed last year](#)), was a superb \$2500 add-on to my Phasemation; the improvement over the Phasemation's MC circuitry was not subtle. As such, here's an idea: ask your dealer to play a base MM Phonobox with an MC4 added and use with a quality low-output MC cart. I'm betting that'll be some analog front end. World-class for \$4000. I've been told that the transformers in the Phonobox are not quite to the standard of the hand-wound MC4s but are approaching them.

I received some clarification from importer Jensen regarding some of the design topology and tubes used.

Tim uses a somewhat unique tube called the 13D16, which is an improved version of the 12AX7. It's much quieter (essential in a phono stage) and has no micro-phonics. There is a switch inside that changes the

filament voltage supply from 13 to 12 volts to allow the user to use 12ax7s properly, should they choose to do so or in an emergency. As for tube rolling, Tim says, "You can change the tubes in my equipment, and it will sound different but not better!"



All tubes that ship with EAR products are made specifically for EAR in Russia. EAR tests all tubes they're supplied with, and keeps the top 5%, and returns the rest. As a result, EAR tubes are known to last a decade or more without issue. Extra sets of tubes are available through Red Leaf Audio or an EAR dealer.

Specifications

Tubes: 3x 13D16 (ECC83)

Inputs/Outputs: RCA

Input Sensitivity: MM – 2.2mV (1V @ 1kHz); MC – 0.22mV (1V @ 1kHz)

Voltage Gain: MM – 55dB; MC – 72dB

Loading Resistance: MM – 47k Ohms; MC – 470 Ohms

Sound

Although auditory memory can be woefully short, I remembered the beautiful midrange of the

original 834P and its migration 30 years to this latest iteration. Even the Phonobox's treble and bass were pretty well-defined out of the box. I looked forward to what the break-in would deliver.

The break-in did not disappoint. The midrange filled out even more with a beautiful roundness to the sound but detailed within a recording's soundstage. In this mid-tessitura, comparison to my Phasemation's \$6400 solid state performance made my reference a runner-up. There are several things that the Phasemation within the mids did better, including instrumental separation when the players were confined in tight spaces, but richer timbral cues from instruments and voices were not one of them.



After the break-in, I listened to an original of the famous ASD 521 from HMV (EMI), *Barbirolli conducts English String Music*, in preparation for a video I was filming. This is the kind of record right up the Phonobox's street. Diaphonous, translucent with glorious string tone. The unit did not disappoint. The reverberation around the two string choirs from London's Temple Church was clear, and each solo instrument was individual in tone. The solo players' tones can often be indistinct with weaker phono stages. The important bass notes in the "Tallis Fantasia" within the resonant acoustic were distinct and deep.

My regular go-to test record of Cat Stevens' *Tea for the Tillerman* in the dynamite Mobile Fidelity pressing of Stan Ricker's heavenly cut sounded beautiful, with rich guitars, a solid bass foundation and the multi-layered Steven's baritone front and center. The imaging was outstanding, but it was the timbral cues of guitars, bass, and drums that won the day. The Phonobox does not emphasize rhythmic energy as well as my Phasemation, but it has plenty of grunt and can deliver the effects the artist

intended.

Maurizio Pollini's new Deutsche Grammophon, The Original Source vinyl reissue of his Chopin *Preludes, Op. 28*, was an immersive experience as only the tactile Pollini and Chopin can bring. So, after a few moments, the EAR drew me into its replication of the music rather than judging its sound. Total emotional involvement. And the tube topology never softened the leading edge of Pollini's

percussive attacks. Enough said that a well-recorded piano will be a sensory experience through Paravicini's phono.



Barn burners like *Led Zeppelin III* certainly had enough visceral energy, but there's no doubt the outstanding solid-state engineering of the EA-350 bettered the Phonobox in unravelling the complex rhythms and animal energy of "Immigrant Song". Sometimes, tube circuits can gloss over inner lines. They sound beautiful, but at times, I want ultimate clarity.

Finally, back to where the tubes shine, Sibelius' *Symphony No. 1* on a Decca narrowband with Maazel and Vienna (1964 recorded in the Sofiensaal by Gordon Parry and produced by John Culshaw). The Philharmoniker's massed strings in the opening movement were mesmeric through the **\$2500** tube phono stage. This record, with important pieces of musical information darting in and out of the soundstage, emphasizes what a ridiculously good value the Phonobox is.

Conclusion

The EAR Phonobox competes with phono stages at more than twice the price, looks sexy as hell in your rack, and can be purchased to suit your budget and cartridge requirements. It retains its legacy sound but with some modern twists. It's a win-win all around, just as Tim de Paravicini expected. Very highly recommended.

Further Information: [Ear Yoshino](#)



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<https://www.audiophilia.com/reviews/2024/12/19/ear-yoshino-phonobox-tube-phono-stage>

