

EAR 88PB Phonograph Preamplifier

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I was becoming complacent auditioning phono preamplifiers. It was as if I was standing in a long line for my turn on one of the good rides at Disneyland. If I was tolerant and patient, I would eventually be rewarded with a phono stage that would make all the waiting worthwhile. In the meantime, I auditioned other phono stages as they became available, just as you would chat with a friend in the waiting line or people-watch to pass the time. Also in the meantime, I was not in any pain listening to the Conrad Johnson Premier 15 Series 2 with Jensen step-up transformers. On the contrary, the outstanding CJ had bested all comers for well over two years.



I assumed the same would be true for the pretty little EAR.

The solidly built EAR 88PB comes with a list price of \$4995 and four tubes. The stock tubes are 7DJ8s. Any tube in the 6DJ8/6922 family can be used. When I received the phono stage it had seen some use and a couple of the tubes were weak, so I replaced all four tubes with NOS 1970's Tesla 7DJ8s from Tube Depot. These tubes sound great, are readily available, and cost just \$14 each with testing for noise and microphonics. In other words, a complete retube will set you back a reasonable \$60. The easy availability of good sounding, inexpensive tubes is very attractive to me. If you have ever imagined little money signs - \$, or € £, or even ¥ - lazily rising up out of the top cooling vents of a component as your expensive vacuum tubes slowly self-destruct, you know exactly how I feel. It is a tight fit inside the half-width enclosure and there was not enough room to install Pearl Tube Coolers on two of the four tubes.

The EAR has separate inputs for MM and MC cartridges, and the MC input uses Tim de Paravicini's well known step-up transformers for the additional gain these low output cartridges require. Both inputs from the cartridge use RCAs, but you have your choice of RCA or XLR for the output to your preamp. In addition to an input select pushbutton and the power knob, the front panel also has a stereo/mono switch and a volume control. The volume control has two uses: to reduce the very high maximum output level to be more consistent with other components' output levels, or to connect directly to a power amplifier in those (rare) one source systems. I connected it in the former

configuration. The gain is specified at 52db for moving magnet and 72db for moving coil. Someone is mistaken. Comparing the gain to my 75dB-gain CJ, the EAR matched output levels with its volume control at about 2 o'clock. Therefore, a rough estimate of the actual maximum gain would be about 85dB. The EAR has two MC cartridge impedance loading positions: 4 Ohms and 40 Ohms. The two loading options offered enough flexibility to comfortably accommodate a van den Hul Condor XGM, Shelter 9000, Zyx Universe, Benz Ebony LP, and finally, a Koetsu Jade Platinum.

Three turntables were used: Kuzma Stabi Reference, SOTA Cosmos IV Vacuum, and what is probably an antique - 25 years old - a gold platter SOTA Sapphire which is still a fine sounding turntable even after all those years. Tonearms were either an Origin Live Conqueror with VTAF or the latest Tri-Planar VII. The rest of the system included a Dodd Battery Powered Preamp, Placette Passive Line Stage; Conrad Johnson Premier 15 Series 2 and Klyne 7PX3.5 phono preamplifiers; Cary 500MB, Cary CAD 808R "Rocket 88R" and Response Audio Bella Extreme 100 amplifiers feeding Gallo Reference 3.1, Dynaudio Audience 60 (from the HT system) and Spendor S5e loudspeakers. Interconnects were mostly PS Audio Resolution Transcendent, with Audience Au24 speaker cables.

The first things that caught my ear with the EAR were the ways that it differed from the CJ, and I was pretty sure, in pretty short order, that I didn't like it very much. The EAR's tonal balance is more prominent in the bass and also more up front in the range from just above middle-C up to the lower treble, around 2kHz. This gave it - again on first listen - a character that impressed as being both more dynamic and more exciting. And less neutral. Neutral, of course, being the status quo, and not necessarily laser-beam flat response. For a comparison to a really neutral phono stage, the overall balance of the excellent solid-state Klyne 7PX3.5 phono preamplifier was even more definitive in this test of objective neutrality than the CJ comparison had been. The EAR was obviously voiced to appeal to music lovers, not objectivist audio engineers or flat-earth techno geeks. Being a round-earth techno geek, I found a nice empty spot on a shelf to store the EAR.

A week or so later, still with the Universe on the Conqueror arm, I was unclear about a certain aspect of the EAR's sound and reinstalled it. The character traits that are noted above were still present, but this time around I gave the EAR more time to convince me that its presentation was valid. After about two hours, I noticed that my foot was tapping and I was in a hurry to cue up the next album. I am taking this behavior as a confirmation of an often-reported phenomenon in which the listener becomes acclimated and "breaks in" to the sound of a newly installed component. A week or so later, I reinstalled the CJ as a point of comparison and recorded the following observations.

I dig the EAR 88PB. Even though and despite the fact that straight-line neutrality is not part of its wardrobe, the EAR presents all music with a power and resolution that is beyond reproach. The bass is slightly more powerful than the CJ's and with marginally better resolution. The differences here are noticeable in short order, although the magnitude is small on an absolute scale. The solid-state Klyne goes a bit deeper towards the infrasonic and has a small advantage in the initial attack, while the quality of the bass range as a whole is dryer and with less depth to each vibration of a string or drum head.

In the lower midrange, from about 150 to 300 Hertz (just above middle-C), the three phono stages sounded quite similar. As we listen above this narrow range, the EAR's sound gets very interesting.

A gradual sense of increasing energy and excitement enters the musical picture and, again after a short time, brings an increased sense of life and physical presence. This is especially noticed in any music that includes male or female voices. Voices stand out from the mix more. This is not a change in the placement or sound stage location of singers, but the actual resolution of frequencies above middle-C. Sure, some of this apparent resolution is a result of some forwardness to the upper midrange and lower treble frequencies, but it sounds too real and vibrant and alive to complain about. This character is not synergistic with the already forward Shelter 9000. It is occasionally over the top with the edge-of-the-envelope van den Hul Condor. But let me tell you, with the very neutral (and underrated, IMO) Benz LP, and even more so with the Universe or Jade Platinum, the EAR 88PB routinely delivers [intense musical involvement](#).

You get used to it. After a few weeks, going back to a more "proper" presentation is like being served mild salsa with your burrito where you have developed a taste for **hot**. I know I run the risk here of making the 88PB sound like a highly colored device, but it is not. Or it is, but the degree of deviation from neutrality is small enough that it is an issue of character, not one of quality. And *every* component has *some* character.

The entire treble range is remarkable. There is layer upon layer of definition and resolution that often clearly reveals new information, as in "I never heard *that* before!" This range gives us the leading edge of notes and micro-dynamic content that helps us differentiate individual voices in a choir, for example, or the different cymbals in a drum set. This apparent increase in the quality of each musical sound is a perfect example of the clean window effect. The noticeable increase in clarity apparently coincides with a similar reduction in a very low level of obscuration or background haze that is present in the Premier 15. I am placing this character squarely on the big Teflon(R) capacitors used in the CJ, and on the fewer number of capacitors used in the EAR. It certainly sounds like an effect we commonly associate with capacitors.

Dynamic contrasts can be stunning with the 88PB. I feel this attribute as instantaneous pressure on my stomach for the lower and middle frequencies, and as actual pressure on my eyes for the upper midrange and lower treble. This was most clearly observed with the Condor and Jade, already at the top of the heap for cartridges with superior dynamic capability. The strong dynamic performance synergized with the Universe, which easily beat all the others for low level resolution in the midrange, but which is aided by careful system matching to maximize its dynamic performance.

Lateral soundstaging is quite exceptional and helps studio music especially to not sound like a continuous wall of sound, slowly blending from one performer to another across the stage, poorly defined. Individual instruments have an obvious place on any stage, either real ones or those created in post-production. The sense of depth is excellent, certainly meeting the competition in this price range. I didn't get quite the feeling of excellence in the depth dimension that I felt with the height and width of the soundstage, but it was comfortably precise and realistic enough to be not at all bothersome.

I tried using a couple of the moving coil cartridges into the MM input. There was enough gain in my system, even with the Placette Passive Line Stage. It was recommended to me to not use the EAR's volume control near its maximum, so for this test it was set below the limit. I preferred the sound of the EAR using the MC inputs, which route the signal through the step up transformers. The sound is a bit smoother with better low level resolution in the midrange. The treble is somewhat crisper or harder through the MM input, and may be preferred with some overly warm cartridges,

such as a Koetsu Black. This may have been a simple issue of incorrect loading of MC cartridges, since using too high a resistance, such as 47k Ohms instead of 40 Ohms, would certainly account for these observations. YMMV.

Let's talk about cartridge loading for a minute. A 4 Ohm load from a step up *transformer* is roughly equivalent to a 100 Ohm load from a *resistor*, while a 40 Ohm load from a step up transformer is roughly equivalent to a 500-1000 Ohm resistor load. I have found that specific transformer loading values are far less critical for obtaining optimum sound than are the exact values of load resistors. I remember working hard to get the best from an Urushi by changing load resistors. The preamp at the time was a CAT Ultimate with internal phono stage, which uses plug in resistors in RCAs. It was fairly obvious that 100 Ohms was the best load and *not* 90, 95, or 110 Ohms. In contrast, with the EAR's transformer, the 4 Ohm setting worked well with the 11 Ohm DCR Shelter 9000, 4 Ohm Zyx Universe, and 5 Ohm Koetsu Jade Platinum. The 40 Ohm setting was best with the 38 Ohm Benz Ebony LP and 36 Ohm van den Hul Condor XGM.

A high-gain MC phono stage increases the very small output signal from the cartridge by 1000 to 2000 times. In addition to increasing the musical signal, the phono stage can also amplify any self-noise to a level that is a constant annoyance. A little noise can get to be a lot of noise real quick. And remember, this chromed beauty with the gold knobs has far more gain than other phono preamplifiers. Is noise a problem here? No. At a similar level of gain to the CJ, the EAR is also very, very quiet. At the listening seat, with the system volume at the loudest level I normally use, there was just a very small amount of additional hiss heard when the Placette preamp's input selected the EAR after being in mute (an unused, shorted input). This small hiss, tube noise, was buried in the sound of silence between tracks on an LP. In other words, noise - in my system - was a non-issue, certainly worthy of comment in a review, but not at all worthy of complaint when listening to music. There was also audible noise from the Klyne 7PX, although its level was even lower than I heard in my EAR.

It was long waiting line and it took over two years to get to the reward. It was worth the wait. After a fairly short period of mental adaptation, the superb musicality of the EAR 88PB becomes readily apparent. I may now be back at the starting point of a long line waiting for an even better phono stage, but I know I will enjoy my time with this product. The EAR 88PB is a very musically involving phono preamplifier, one with a character that honors the art and joy of music.

Overall Rating: 9.5 LPs

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