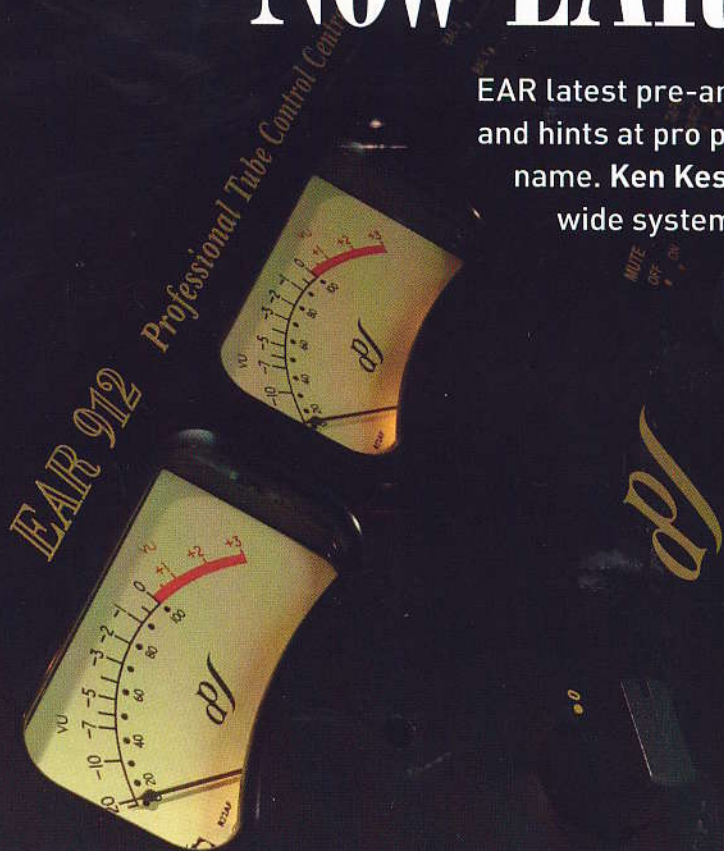


Now EAR this...

EAR latest pre-amp uses tube technology and hints at pro performance in its model name. Ken Kessler settles down with a wide system of sources to test it out



made in England by EAR Professional

designed by Tim de Paravicini © 2004

DETAILS

-  EAR-Yoshino 912 pre-amp
-  £4950
-  www.ear-yoshino.com
-  0223 208877
-  Great control
-  Want lush? Not here...

The EAR 912 is not a budget product, but is a candidate for 'World's Best Pre-amplifier'. EAR's Tim de Paravicini has no qualms about using valves or transistors and he's opted for the former in the 912.

It's a fully featured unit designed to cater both for the vinyl lover and the modern multi-source line-level system. So, it's loaded with facilities, and it's as flexible as any two-channel system owner could hope for in a sector increasingly

DETAILS



ABOVE: On the left hand side are the phono section controls; also note the mono/stereo button and the gain matching rotary control with three settings



ABOVE: The back of the 912 features beefy connectors and two sets of balanced (XLR) and single-ended (RCA) outputs

'The 912 joins the very short list of equipment that could find a home in either a studio or domestic system, without ever seeming like an interloper'

known more for minimalism.

Here the dominant feature is the extensive use of transformer coupling. Transformers are one of Tim's specialties, so he's designed all-new ones for the 912. Of particular interest is the moving-coil phono input, which could turn out to be the 912's major selling point.

In the 912, the m-c stage is transformer-coupled with four different taps to provide a wide range of impedance matching: 40, 12, 6 and 3 ohm. What we have here is an m-c step stage so quiet, yet so wide in its dynamic range, that you might consider it one of the most successful juggling acts in recent (analogue) history.

Although the m-m section is fixed at 47k ohm, and thus without the variable settings of the dearer standalone EAR phono amps, it welcomed the input of both the mono and stereo Deccas and the [astounding!] Shure V15 V MR. LPs ranged from the glorious 1950s mono and stereo of certain RCAs and Capitols, to Richard Thompson's latest, and the variety of surface conditions uncovered a delightful phenomenon: the EAR 912 places any tracing noise below the music. You have to strain to hear it, even on my worn-out Mickey Katz LPs.

I played with enough other cartridges – a couple of Grados, the Lyra Dorian (mono), the Transfiguration Temper V and the Blue Angel Mantis – to exercise both phono stages, and although I would have liked

some way of fine-tuning the Deccas, I couldn't find a single reason to whinge about the 912's handling of LP sources.

But let's not presume that the phono section is this pre-amplifier's sole raison d'être. A glance at the photos tells you it has a professional look to it, as its name suggests, and not just because of the metering. Once you get past the chassis you notice that aesthetics are firmly of the form-following-function school. No, that's not a euphemism for 'ugliness': I adore the looks for their sheer no-nonsense muscularity.

AUDIOPHILES' DRIBBLE

The metering is provided to give a visual indication of signal level, not just to add something for audiophiles to dribble over. EAR feels it is useful when setting up a system.

There are plenty of controls. At the far left are what constitutes the phono section controls, three knobs providing,

WE LISTENED TO

LPs

- Harry Belafonte, *Belafonte Sings The Blues* (Classic Records/RCA Living Stereo LSP-1972-200)
- Ray Charles & Cleo Laine, *Porgy & Bess* (Classic/Rhino/Jazz Planet JP-1831)
- Jefferson Airplane, *Takes Off* (Sundazed LP5186 180g)



- vinyl, mono)
- Richard Thompson, *Front Parlour Ballads* (Diverse Records/Cooking Vinyl DIV009LP)

CDs

- Eric Bibb, *A Ship Called Love* (Telarc Blues CD-83629)
- The Persuasions, *The Persuasions Sing U2* (Chesky JD306)



REVIEW SYSTEM

- Turntables – SME 10, Series V arm; SME 30/2, Series V arm
- Players – Musical Fidelity kW DM25 and Marantz CD12/DA12 CD players
- AudioValve Sunilda phono stage
- Amps – McIntosh C2200 pre-amp; McIntosh MC2102 power amp
- Speakers – Rogers LS3/5A and Wilson WATT Puppy System 7
- Cables – Atlas Questor interconnects; Transparent mains distribution block; Transparent Ultra balanced and single-ended cable; Transparent Reference speaker cables

of two balanced inputs and line inputs marked CD, aux 1 and 2, and phono. Selection of the latter is used in conjunction with the rotary to the far left that chooses phono 1 or 2.

BEEFY CONNECTORS

At the back are the decidedly beefy connectors to feed the balanced and single-ended line inputs, the phono inputs, and tape monitor; all outputs are also coupled through transformers. At the main output, the phono and XLR stages are even fed from individual transformer windings. The 912 is fitted with two sets of balanced (XLR) and two sets of single-ended (RCA) outputs, so one could, if so driven, hook it up to four stereo systems.

All inputs, whether balanced or unbalanced, are selected by relays, addressing Tim's desire to keep the signal paths as short as possible, to avoid potential problems due to long internal wiring runs. The main output circuit is based on a gain block 'somewhat similar to that used in the phono stage, but of course with lower gain and flat frequency response. The primary of the output transformer is in the anode circuit of the output valve, while two secondaries feed the outputs, one to the unbalanced output sockets and one to the balanced outputs'. Incidentally, this all-tube design uses five PCC88s, which are rugged and easy to find.

Simply swapping between the McIntosh C2200 and the EAR 912 in my reference system, the latter slipped in like it was born to be there, immediately rendering me dumbfounded because of its quietness. Pavlovian conditioning forces

me to assume that any pre-amp with a fistful of glassware will issue some layer of hiss that one learns to tolerate. Not so the 912: with the volume control cranked up and no signal fed in, it was ghostly in its silence. With music, the EAR exploited this characteristic by delivering some of the widest dynamic behaviour I can recall.

So haze- and noise-free was the LP playback that I even A/B'd some LPs with their better CD versions. This applied, too, to transients, which were as crisp as a Hee's wonton, no overhang, from bass to treble. You like setting up CD vs LP demos? This baby is the playground. Once the correct impedance is chosen, and you've trimmed the levels, you can swap between LP and CD to your heart's delight. If you do this with care, you will learn why the analogue brigade deserves to be so insufferably smug.

I had the state-of-the-art Musical Fidelity kW DM25 two-chassis CD player as I was auditioning the 912. The innate qualities of the 912, beyond those exclusive to the phono stages, allowed the kW DM25 to sing unhindered. This allowed me to pinpoint those very qualities common to all inputs (I used the Marantz CD12/DA12 to assess the balanced inputs), and I fed the McIntosh MC2102 from both the 312's balanced and single-ended outputs.

Balanced is better in every

case, but the 912 is so soundly designed that the differences are less marked. If you already own a power amplifier without balanced inputs, the 912 is still worth having.

Beyond sheer quietness the 912's 'personality' is authority: very clean, unbelievably detailed. It never sounds dry or lean, and there's enough warmth such that voices have the requisite textures and 'realism' – Classic Records' *Porgy and Bess* performed by Ray Charles and Cleo Laine, and Harry Belafonte's stab at the blues were perfect tests for this.

Many years ago, Dave Wilson (when reviewing) gave overhead views of the room to convey the shape of the soundstage. I have only words: Tim tuned in just the right amount of width, avoiding anything approaching the overtly, unnaturally panoramic, while providing greater depth than usual. The latter will make many pre-amps seem 2D.

With the EAR 912, the soundstage snaps into place, and – aside from the cavernous depth – performers have the appropriate dimensions. Throw in a cartridge like the Denon DL103, known for its unharnessed soundstage width, play it through speakers such as Wilson's WATT Puppy System 7, and you have nigh-on-perfect presentation. The 912 simply takes over, doing what it says: Professional Control Centre, with the emphasis on control.

CRITICISMS?

Criticisms? Those seeking the overtly lush must look elsewhere. I suspect Tim would rather swallow broken glass than dial in euphony for the hell of it. The 912 joins the very short list of equipment that could find a home in either a studio or a domestic system, without ever seeming like an interloper. ■

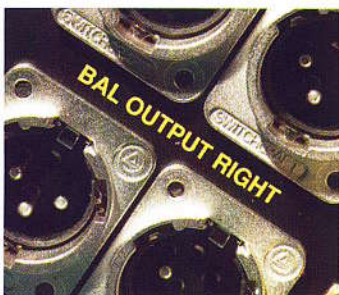
THE REPORT

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

Just under £5k is a bagful of shekels, but this should be a prime contender for everyone who 1) loves valves, 2) uses their turntable more than any other source, and 3) doesn't want to buy another pre-amp in the foreseeable future. This thing has 'classic' written all over it. Now, Tim, how about a matching amp?



ABOVE: Note the m-c/m-m option control



ABOVE: Close-up of audio outputs

from the top, m-c impedance setting, the choice of moving-coil or moving-magnet stage, and Phono 1 or 2; you can hook up two turntables and access m-m or m-c from either. Across the bottom, left to right, are: the much appreciated mono/stereo press button; a gain matching rotary that provides settings of 0db, -6dB and -12dB; a rotary mute switch; a rotary tape monitor selector; an on/off button that lights in the now-traditional EAR orange. Above it is the rotary volume control; to its left, toward the meters, is a rotary that selects either

ALSO CONSIDER

- Audio Research SP16 (£2499) Hey, it's Audio Research – you need to ask?
- AudioValve Eclipse (£2100) and Sunilda phono amp (£1950) all-valve and absurdly good value.
- Nagra PL-P (£7250) Line and phono, truly of pro quality – irresistible if you have the gelt.