



e.a.r.

912 Professional Tube Control Centre

as reviewed by Robert H. Levi



I have noticed over the last 5 years or so that as loudspeakers have become more detailed, extended, and dynamic, preamps have become just the opposite. Today's active preamps have lower gain and offer ultra neutrality bordering on passive designs. With increased finesse and sophistication, today's top preamps are wonderful and very close to that "straight wire with gain" ideal. They are also becoming increasingly boring and lean.

ROBERT H. LEVI'S SYSTEM

LOUDSPEAKERS

Avalon Eidolon and REL Stadium III subwoofer.

ELECTRONICS

E.A.R. 324 phono preamplifier, E.A.R. 890 amplifiers (ran as monos), NuForce Reference 9 SE amplifiers, E.A.R. 912 preamplifier, and an E.A.R. 834L Tube Line Stage.

Those most guilty of this are solid-state designs and, surprisingly, some of the most advanced tube models. When a preamp is both neutral and dynamic, like the Conrad Johnson Art series, they do not seem to stick around long enough to be "updated" by their manufacturer, and become more reserved in the process. I like the current crop of statement preamps for the most part, but have stuck with my 7-year-old Pass X1, as it has never really been solidly, thoroughly bested. Until now!

Enter the E.A.R. 912 Professional Tube Control Centre. This is a statement preamp from E.A.R., highly evolved and tube/transformer based. It rewrites my definition of what a preamp can and should do. It is both powerful and exacting. It is both extraordinarily detailed and natural. It is focused and organic. It sounds like real music.

SOURCES

VPI Scout/JMW 9 tonearm, VPI SDS Controller, ZYX R-1000 Airy 3-XSB phono cartridge, E.A.R. Acute CD player, **ModWright Sony 9100 Player with tube power supply**, ModWright Sony 9100ES with Signature Truth Modifications, Mod/Bybee Filters and Revelation Cryo Silver Umbilical. Alesis Masterlink 24/96 Recorder/Playback Deck, and the Benchmark DAC 1 revised. Grado Statement Phono Cartridge. Pioneer DVL 919 LD/DVD Player, and a Marantz DV8400 DVD/SACD/CD player. Magnum Dynalab MD-108 Reference Tuner, Marantz 10B FM Tuner, Day Sequerra Reference FM1 Tuner, and Scott 350B FM Stereo Tuner, AQ 7500 FM Antenna, Stax 7t Electrostatic headphones, Grado Reference 1 headphones, and a Grado headphone amplifier.

CABLES

Kubala-Sosna Emotion, Harmonic Technology CyberLight, **Harmonic Technology Magic 2**, Dual-Connect interconnects, **Dynamic Design THB Nebula**, Soundstring, Kimber Select balanced, Kimber TAK phono AG, Kimber Hero balanced and single ended interconnects, and Acoustic Zen Silver Reference II balanced interconnects. Kimber D-60 Digital Interconnects. Kimber Select 3038 Silver, **Kubala-Sosna Emotion**, and **Harmonic Technology Magic Reference Silver** speaker cables. Kimber Palladian, Tara RSC and Decade, Tice, Soundstring, and **Kubala-Sosna Emotion** AC power cords.

ACCESSORIES

Monster Reference 350 Mark II v2 Power Conditioner, World Power Power Wing, Tice Clock, and Audio Prism Quiet Line IIs. Cable Cooker 2.5, Winds Stylus Pressure Gage, Bedini Ultra Clarifier, VPI Record Cleaning Machine 16.5. Audio Magic's Quantum Physics Noise Disrupters.

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I compared this British wonder to its top American counterpart, the terrific ARC Ref 3. They share only one attribute ...quiet black backgrounds. Otherwise, the E.A.R. was consistently more detailed, bold, and lifelike. The E.A.R. soundstaging was bigger and deeper (lots deeper), while imaging was decidedly more solid and richly focused. I was so stunned by the performance of the 912 that I ordered one—even before I found out it cost \$11,000!

The 912 bucks the norm sonically and ergonomically. Its big transient sweep and powerhouse sound is only matched by its flexibility. The 912 features a fabulous full-function phono stage on board ...meaning you get an all in one box. The phono-stage has facilities for two turntables and allows the user to adjust for gain, loading ...whatever you need to get the most out of your cartridge(s)! It has become so evolved it needs only one rather smallish but heavy chassis ...no second or third box to hide ...and only one power cord. Less is more, as fewer boxes and power cords mean less RF will seep into your system and create noise and distortion. It has two balanced inputs, 4 single ended inputs, and a tape loop. It also has VU meters, a mono switch, and a remote control to adjust volume (a first for E.A.R.). It has dual balanced and single ended outputs. It has wondrous features galore that are all you may need for years of musical enjoyment, no matter how complex your system may become. *(If you want the whole background on what is going on inside the 912, visit the E.A.R. website - Ed.)*

It also sounds like live music. The sound starts several feet in front of your speakers and then goes back to infinity. I can only describe what I hear: the 912 makes the case for two-channel like no other I have heard ...ever. If this is not state-of-the-art sound, I do not know what is!

The 912 has 5 tubes, two in the line stage and three in the phono stage. They are the very available 7DJ8s, similar to the 6DJ8. You may use 6DJ8s if you wish, but you should replace all of them at one time. The DP branded 7DJ8s supplied are superb, though the NOS Tungram 7DJ8s available from Upscale Audio in Upland sound just a bit more clean and focused than the E.A.R. house brand. I like the 912 isolated on a good rack or on cones or audiophile grade footers ...a Ginko or Townshend shelf really works wonders. Like all tube gear, they need isolation to sound their best. I very much liked the Kubala-Sosna Emotion AC cable and interconnects with the E.A.R. 912. This was a musical combination made in audio heaven.



From the E.A.R. website is a hint of the advanced transformer coupled circuitry here:

"The low distortion, low noise line stage is coupled to the outside world via transformers, giving the option of balanced or unbalanced connection. Two balanced and three unbalanced line inputs are also

featured, plus you get a tape loop. Selection is achieved by reed relays, keeping signal paths short and delicate signals intact. Meters connected upstream of the volume control give useful visual correlation of levels and help ensure that phono gain settings are optimal."

I asked myself in mid review if there just might be a synergy at work here, since my amps, one of my CD Players, and my phono stage are all E.A.R. manufactured. I do not think so. I can clearly hear any changes thought the chameleon-like 890 amps, and the E.A.R. 912's attributes shine through in spades. No, I am not talking audio subtleties here. The 912 focuses your system and refines it to level you will love. Once you hear it, you cannot do without. It is a major advancement technically, and as such, will enrich your listening experience.

Some specific examples are in order. Using my favorite recording of *Carmina Burana*, Telarc SACD 60575, the Atlanta Symphony conducted by Donald Runnicles, I refer you to cuts 13 and 23. In cut 13, there is a baritone solo right of stage center that will sound alive and ambient if all is right. With the Pass X1, I heard good air and definition. The voice was well textured, but a tad thin and "white" sounding. It was hard to tell exactly where the voice was coming from, but the focus was quite good overall. With the ARC Ref. 3, the focus was excellent, though a bit soft with a touch of wooliness. Ambience was significantly better with air being present almost all the way to the left speaker. Distance behind the singer was difficult to hear. Frankly, I did not know there was any back wall to hear. The singer sounded more robust, though you knew you were listening to an SACD played well. With the E.A.R. 912, the baritone voice popped. I heard space around and behind the singer for the first time. Ambience clearly reached the left speaker. The ceiling was higher and the SACD took on a fresh clarity of tone that was surprising. I've played this SACD 100 times or more, and never heard it like this.

Cut 23 of *Carmina* features a glorious soprano solo, which sounds spicy and clear on the Pass. It is quite improved on via the ARC as through its greater sense of focus and weight. The insufficiencies of these two preamps only become apparent when the E.A.R. 912 is inserted in the system. The soprano gains 20 pounds and moves slightly forward with an obvious wall to her back. All of the sound comes from a single source filling the space in a much more realistic way. She goes from softly focused to amazingly well focused and alive. I thought the Ref. 3 was excellent, but the E.A.R. is even better by offering the listener a big slice of *you are there* reality in a way that I've never heard before.

Try the new Tchaikovsky *Violin Concerto* with Julia Fischer on Pentatone SACD 5186095. The recording is taped in DZZ Studio 5 in Moscow, a lousy venue. It is as tall as it is wide, no kidding! Through the Pass, it makes almost no sense. The violin will not focus and the ambient sound is confusing. The orchestra sounds distant and rolled-off on the top-end. Through the ARC, the violin is more focused, but sounds thin and cool. The orchestra is fleshier and more formed in space, though still weirdly vague. The ambience makes somewhat more sense. Through the E.A.R., the acoustic space comes clear! For the first time you hear a tall strangely shaped hall, with an orchestra which sounds much more alive and right. The violin sound is gorgeous and precisely focused. It all makes sense now. I still disliked what the acoustic space does to the performance, but so what? I can hear all this for the first time. I rather enjoyed the performance through the ARC gear, but I *understood* it and truly enjoyed it through the E.A.R.

I hope that you have acquired a copy of *Joe McQueen and Friends* from Kimber, SACD 55802. It is wonderful jazz with an ultra-natural sound. Through the Pass, it sounds like a superb recording in a great venue. Through the ARC, it gains a warmth and glow while maintaining all the subtleties as heard from of the Pass. Focus is top notch, but with soft edges and reserved dynamics. Through the E.A.R. 912, the SACD becomes a master tape. Any and all softness and reserve disappears—live instruments pop into place in the room. There's no edge or grain; you hear life-like sound as never before. I heard this same effect on numerous jazz disks with the

912: instruments coming to *life*.

Try the well-played Miles Davis in *Kind of Blue* (SACD Sony 64935). Once again, the Pass sounded very good—though a bit sweet and smooth. Focus was very good. The Ref. 3 was much better and more right sounding. The instruments were a tad fuzzy and ambience was indistinct, though, and the instruments lacked drive and vitality. Overall, the ARC was enjoyable and a solid improvement. The E.A.R. injected DNA into the performance like no preamp I have heard before or since. The disc was much closer to that of the 45 RPM Classic LP sound than ever before. There was a reach out and touch it vitality and clarity of focus that was just not there with the ARC. I did not think the ARC could be bettered here, but it was, and clearly so.

One other disk I love and use as a reference is the rare SACD from MFSL of Duke Ellington, *Blues in Orbit*. It sells for \$150 used right now! Through the Pass, it sounds like a great SACD with solid imaging and lovely sound overall. The ARC reveal instruments and textures the Pass misses. It is a bigger orchestra with the ARC, but that charming, though soft focus, is quite pervasive. The E.A.R. adds life and reveal even more instruments. The staging is more precise and the dynamics are thoroughly convincing. This is a 1959 recording, so that richly hewed tube sound is now clearly apparent. You hear it on the Classic LP, and now you hear it on the SACD with the E.A.R. 912.

I was delighted how the E.A.R. picked up the subtleties of my FM tuners. The differences between the Sequerra Reference and the MD 108 were more pronounced with the E.A.R. Frankly, both sounded more clearly flawed than ever before. The Pass and ARC actually masked the flaws of the solid-state tuners. The ARC made them sound more lovely and involving than they are. The E.A.R. cleaned up the solid-state tuners sound thereby revealing their shortcomings. The Sequerra sounded smooth but boring. The 108 was crisp and rather strident. The opposite occurred with the Marantz 10B. I found the sound closed in and lacking in life through the Pass. The ARC was a bit more interesting but still softly focused and reserved. The E.A.R. brought the 10B to life. I was shocked at the vitality of the 1966 tuner. It was quiet and powerful. The 10B has 19 tubes on board and sounds that way with the E.A.R. Bottom line: the E.A.R. 912 sounds more like the real thing more often with more sources.

I tried the E.A.R. Acute CD player directly into the amps, then into the Pass and ARC. The Pass degraded the sound of the CD player when compared to direct connection. The ARC improved the CD player by adding a touch of additional dynamics, smoothness, and finesse. The E.A.R. 912 took the CD player to the next level. Major improvements in definition, focus, imaging, and textures were also obvious. The CD player became much more precise and life-like with the dynamics no longer being blunted. It was obvious that the CD player had been shortchanged by the other preamps and by direct connection—when compared with the E.A.R. in the system.

Is it worth the bucks? With a full featured dual phono stage on board, a remote and enormous flexibility, I believe it is. To equal the performance of the 912, I think you'd need to spend \$20,000-\$25,000 to gain a slight advantage in flexibility. You will, however, step mightily into that world of low output and slightly lean neutrality characteristic of the most expensive gear around today. This is fascinating stuff for sure, as I actually find the 912 a good deal for what you get. Frankly, I would like to find a preamp that bests the 912 musically. It would be so close to the live performance as to put me out of business as a reviewer (not to mention being a very thrilling discovery). Until then, just try to take the 912 away!

I am searching for a quibble or two, and I have to admit that I find none. From the lowest bass to the highest airy highband notes, I hear no anomalies. I hear as much definition outside the edges of the Avalons as I hear between them. Depth perspective is flawless, and all inputs from Tuner to Phono are quiet and exacting. The phono section is just a bit softer and more elegant sounding than my solid-state

E.A.R. 324 ...I like them both. I'll have both. Again, this is a quiet preamp with black backgrounds like great solid state. A real achievement for tube gear I think. The 912 has no flaws of any nature to report ...maybe in a year of two I will come up with something. I usually do.

Nevertheless, until that day comes, the E.A.R. 912 Professional Tube Control Centre will take its place as my reference preamp against which all others will be judged. With a flexibility second to none and musical performance unmatched in my experience as a reviewer, you must consider the 912 as a contender for that first position on your audiophile shopping list. With a superb sounding, fully featured phono stage, you will need one less box on the rack. As the top preamp for quiet, black backgrounds coupled with spot on musicality and realism, you get the complete and fully evolved package. I would buy this before the British pound gets more expensive! The E.A.R. 912 Professional Tube Control Centre is the state of the art in preamp design and performance. What more can one ask for? Tim de Paravicini hits a home run, yet again. Tim, please don't ever stop! **Robert H. Levi**

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Retail: \$11,000

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