

e.a.r.

864 preamplifier

as reviewed by Ed Morawski



Although I was very pleased with my Plinius CD-LAD preamp, I really wanted to get into vinyl, and since the Plinius didn't have a phone stage, my search began. I should mention two important points about myself: (1) I crave detail and dynamics, and (2) I am cheap. My spending limit for any single component is around \$3000. This stems from the fact I could have bought a brand new Mustang for that much when I was a kid, and I refuse to pay more for a piece of audio gear than for a car I lusted over and couldn't afford!

ED MORAWSKI'S SYSTEM:

LOUDSPEAKERS
Magnapan MG12.

ELECTRONICS
Plinius SA-102 amplifier and either an Audible Illusions Modulus 3 or E.A.R. 864 preamplifier.

SOURCE
Resolution Audio Opus 21 CD player, Aries turntable w/ JWM 10 arm and a Dynavector 20X cartridge.

CABLES
Empirical Audio Clarity 7 speaker cables, Holophonics-PC interconnects, power cords.

ACCESSORIES
Dedicated balanced power with Brick Wall Surge Suppression.

About this time, I heard a tube system that belonged to one of my fellow reviewers and found that I really liked its sonic signature, so I decided that I should try to find a tube preamp with a phono stage. Then, there it was—a beautiful Audible Illusions Modulus 3A on eBay! For once I didn't get outbid at the last second, and picked it up. It arrived on Christmas Eve, and it was immaculate! It looked like it just came from the factory, but it was made a long time ago. It also sounded as good as it looked, though I managed to audition only a few CDs over Christmas. The AI definitely has that tube sound—mellow and musical, yet clean and detailed. My new VPI Aries (with JMW 10.5 arm and Dynavector 20X cartridge) arrived at around the same time, so I was able to bask in the glory of vinyl through tubes over the holidays.

CES 2003 interrupted my listening, but allowed me the pleasure of having dinner with Tim de Paravicini, the designer of E.A.R. Tim is an original! A recording engineer who was at dinner with us mentioned that he was unhappy with existing microphones and their lack of frequency extension, so Tim designed one on a napkin! The engineer was drooling, but Tim said he was too busy to build it. After listening to his philosophy, I was intrigued to hear an E.A.R. product. His 834P is renowned as a phono stage, but I needed a full-function pre, so after returning from CES I mentioned to the PF editor that I was interested in hearing the E.A.R. 864. I wanted to find out if Mr. de Paravicini was as good as he said he was! Dave Clark said he would look into it.

I then forgot about E.A.R. and continued to enjoy my system. I picked up some great NOS Tungstram ECC88s for my Audible Illusions, and was enjoying the heck

out of them. The Aries was now broken in, and the combination just plain sang. I was in audio heaven. Vinyl really does sound better than digital! Although the pops and crackles still bug me, I now own several new (and used) LPs that are very, very quiet. Two standouts are Classics Records' Norah Jones 200 gram and Alison Krauss' New Favorites. I also have the Norah Jones CD, so direct comparison is easy. The Audible Illusions does strings, cymbals, and piano wonderfully. A brush lightly laid across a brass cymbal actually sounds like a brush! AI recommends swapping the speaker leads to correct phase reversal, and this is imperative. At first I did not detect much difference, but after a few minutes the improvement in soundstage became strikingly clear. So (I thought) my system was complete! I was happy. It was everything I wanted, and I could just sit back and enjoy great music. Then, E.A.R.'s distributor, Dan Meinwald, who is located nearby, called and dropped off a beautiful chrome-and-gold 864 full-function preamp for me to audition. Every time I think I have it right, something superior comes along, and the E.A.R. 864 really is superior—obviously so!

Over the course of a long weekend, I was able to compare both preamps by rotating each one into my system and listening to the same CD and LP. When judged in this manner, the differences became obvious. I began listening to the E.A.R. with the Norah Jones LP. Can you say dynamic? This was the first time I was able to hear the full thrust of the instruments from a piece of vinyl. The 864 slams the bass out while keeping it under tight control. The bass from the E.A.R. is so superior, it is not even close. While the AI's bass is better than okay, the E.A.R. throws out much more. The Audible Illusions sounds warm and rich, but the E.A.R. is equally rich while much more dynamic. It also has more top end extension. I could immediately hear what I was missing with the Audible Illusions. After listening to the AI and then the 864, it was obvious the AI was rolling off the highs.

The AI is ultra quiet, while the E.A.R. has more "tube rush" than I like (you know, that sound you hear when nothing is actually playing). The E.A.R. also exhibits a loud hum when first turned on, but that goes away after a few seconds of warm-up. The AI has many nice features, like standby, mono mode, and delayed turn on, while the E.A.R. is a minimalist design. As I said, the AI reverses phase, necessitating swapping your speaker leads, while the E.A.R. maintains phase. Although the 864 has a rather gaudy appearance (with Tim's initials and name prominently featured), I admit the chrome finish looks good. Considering that the E.A.R., the Audible Illusions, and my previous favorite, the Plinius CD-LAD, all cost around the same, the 864 is quite a bargain. Why the 864 works so well, I can't explain. My experience as an engineer tells me that a separate, beefy power supply should give the best sound because it imparts the least noise, but the 864 violates this completely. It has an integral power supply, and the circuit design appears fairly simple, with a tube complement of four 12AX7s and one 12AUX7. So what magic is involved? Maybe Tim is really a wizard after all! The 864 with the Plinius SA-102 is a match made in audio heaven.

I recently discovered another Alison Krauss song, "It Doesn't Matter," that is probably the best piece of music I have heard this year. It's a simple ballad, just Alison strumming a guitar and one of the Union Station members playing along, but it is stunning in its clarity. Listening through the 864 is truly a deep emotional experience, one that gives new meaning to the phrase "goose bump factor." Alison's voice floats in space, while I swear you can hear her fingers sliding over the guitar strings and the air stirring around them. Her lovely vocal style comes through the 864 in all its pure glory, with no hint of harshness.

It didn't take much effort to settle on the on the E.A.R. 864 as my new permanent preamp. I gave it a total workout. Becoming more familiar with the VPI Aries and its multitude of adjustments, I was able to judge its benefits in conjunction with the 864. When you get a good piece of vinyl, there is just no comparison with CD—or even SACD, in my newfound opinion—especially with the 864's smooth, smooth phono stage. In the end, that's really what sold me on the E.A.R. 864. I have now sunk a huge amount of money into a phono stage, but I'm loving every minute! **Ed Morawski**

864 preamplifier

Retail: \$2995

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