

# The Essence of Balance

## The EAR 834P

By Jerold O'Brien

EAR 834P

ON

POWER



I am probably the last person to review this rather innocuous-looking tube phono preamp. I'd heard about it for years, but this is my first hands-on experience with it. This one is the most basic version, being all black and lacking the volume control of more deluxe versions. Circuit-wise, it's identical to those upper models. I actually prefer this model because it maximizes the price/performance ratio in the users favor.

The 834P is available in a few different configurations: MM only for \$1,495, the MM/MC version reviewed here for \$1,695 and the 834P Deluxe, which features a chrome front panel and some connector upgrades, for \$2,295. The two basic models are only available in black. The standard MM input has 48dB of gain, while the MC section offers 70dB.

The 834P is not overrun with features; it's just the opposite. All of the performance is on the inside of the unassuming box. The rear panel features gold-plated RCA jacks, a cursory ground-wire binding post, a fuse holder and an MM/MC switch. That's it. A word of caution, though, for those who like to tweak their systems with the power cord of their choice: that ground connector is awfully close to the IEC socket.



## The EAR 834P



### Straightforward Layout

A peek under the hood reveals some very tidy construction techniques. There's a single circuit board which is divided down the middle – half is power supply and the other is amplification circuitry. There's also a rather thick, steel divider down the middle of the chassis to shield the amplification circuitry from the power supply. On the power supply side, one finds neatly arrayed filter caps and a rather large toroidal transformer. The circuitry side reveals the two transformers for MC Cartridge step-up duties as well as three JJ manufactured ECC 83/12AX7 tubes. Tube rollers will be happy with tuning options, and we'll cover that later.

A couple of numbers to be aware of. The MM input impedance is set at 47Kohms while the

MC transformers present about a 125ohm load to your cartridge. I'm told that special-order loading for MC cartridges can be obtained from the factory. I used a Sumiko Blackbird high-output moving-coil cartridge for this review and fed it to the MM input, per Sumiko's loading suggestion of 47k.

### The Sound

So how *does* it sound? Coherent is the word that kept coming to mind; everything seems to hang together as a whole wrought from the same material. There is no emphasis of any frequency spectrum. Images are presented in space in perfectly scaled left-to-right and front-to-back harmoniously. On classical music, the strings are sweet, never steely, and horns never have the strident glare that can become so off-putting.

Big-scale dynamics aren't the best I've heard but are certainly convincing. On small jazz ensembles, the resonance of acoustic bass is present and accounted for while cymbals possess the right amount of detail and shimmer without any tizziness.

On rock recordings, the dynamic swings are rendered with appropriate grunt. The thwack of bass drums lacks the impact of the best phono stages, but we're not talking about a hugely expensive piece of kit here. Compared to others in this price range, the 834P is excellent.

Vocals are the one area where this little black box truly excels. Female voices had a natural breathy quality that was very enticing. Male vocals had enough detail and presence without getting muddy in the mid-bass region. *(continued)*







Playing your favorite solo female vocal records will give your system a much bigger, more natural sound than you should hope to expect, and that is the magic of the 834P.

Is this the perfect phono stage? No, but it's a very, very good one. As mentioned before, bass dynamics are not the last word in realism. It's slightly lacking in ultimate transparency and it's a bit laid back in its presentation. But these are minor caveats at the price point. You could do far worse for this money with other products.

#### Tweaks

Swapping power cords yielded mixed results. I finally settled on a Crystal Cable Ultra as the best performer over the stock power cord in the system as it's currently configured. Playing around with various interconnects, I settled on AudioQuest Niagara as being a perfect partner to the 834P in my system. Both gave the best balance of tonality and bass weight.

Tube rolling can be a mixed bag and it's all too easy to go too far in the wrong

direction when experimenting. I substituted some carefully matched Tung Sol 12 AX7s which gave me a bit more resolution without sacrificing any warmth. I also went down the vintage path with great results using RCA 12AX7As. They yielded the most neutral presentation of the three sets. Your mileage may vary and I know a number of audiophile forum dwellers enjoy swapping Telefunks in place of the stock tubes. The EAR importer, Dan Meinwald, likes to say that "swapping the front tube gives you 90 percent of the effect switching all them does," so that's a great place to start for those on a budget yet still craving the absolute performance.

As a final bit of tweaking, I used an HRS damping plate on the top of the 834 and also tried a set of Vibrapod isolation feet. These two final tweaks combined made the amp absolutely sing in my system.

You can spend your phono dollars in a lot of places, but I can't imagine getting more bang for your buck and more musical enjoyment than spending them on the 834P.

## Additional Listening

I have to thank a number of people from various internet forums for pushing us to review this product. Having spent the better part of last year reviewing phono stages in the \$750 - \$1,200 range, I thought we'd heard them all. But the EAR kept popping up in discussion forums with a borderline maniacal following. A little research revealed that this design has been in production since 1994, so no one can accuse EAR of bowing to the latest/greatest trend of introducing a new piece of gear with minor changes, simply to say "new and improved."

#### Up Against the Big Boys

Giving the 834P a bit stiffer competition with the new Boulder 1008, the Naim Superline, the Nagra VPS/VFS and the Audio Research REF Phono on hand, there was a definite curiosity to see if we had a real "giant killer" (a term I personally loathe) on hand.

Five minutes of listening to the 834P will convince you that you spent \$12k wisely on the Boulder or the ARC if you have a system that can do them justice. But eight hours later, you realize that this phono preamp is *damn good*. The best comparison I can make to the 834P is the Vandersteen 2Ce Signatures. Not the last word in resolution or slam, but so good through the middle, you forget what you're missing.

I reached this conclusion after spending some time with the Lyra Skala and Clearaudio DaVinci cartridges, both having a price tag about three times that of the 834P. This is where the rubber meets the road. Making a quick switch on the Raven Two turntable, with one arm using the Blackbird and the other the pricier cartridge, there wasn't a big difference in sound, certainly not what you'd expect going that far up the chain. On the big-bucks preamplifiers, this was a "kapow" moment.

#### Playing in Its Neighborhood

Where the 834P excels is in its own weight class. Compared with my other favorite phono preamplifier in this price range, the Black Cube SE with outboard supply, the 834P is the one I'd roll with in a heartbeat. The Black Cube SE has slightly more bass slam, but the three dimensionality that the 834P offers at this price is truly a huge helping of the "analog magic," which I hadn't heard with the other competitors.

It's important to know that I'm always slightly biased towards a more warm, rich, musical sound. If that's something you crave as well, or if you have tried a number of the other solid-state phono preamplifiers at this level and are still wishing there was a more exciting analog experience to be had minus the huge check, the EAR 834P is the one you want. —Jeff Dorgay

**The EAR 834P Phono stage**  
MSRP: (as tested) \$1,595  
[www.ear-usa.com](http://www.ear-usa.com)

#### PERIPHERALS

**Turntables** Rega P9/  
RB1000, Technics SL1200/  
SME 309, TW Acoustic Raven  
TWO

**Cartridges** Sumiko  
Blackbird, Lyra Dorian &  
Skala, Clearaudio Virtuoso  
Wood and DaVinci

**Preamplifier** McIntosh C500

**Power Amplifier** McIntosh  
MC 1.2kw

**Speakers** Verity Audio Finn,  
Harbeth Monitor 40.1, B&W  
805D

**Cable** AudioQuest Niagara,  
Furutech REF III

**Power** Shunyata VRay,  
Running Springs Dmitri