
A U D I O
R E V I E W S

U P S T A I R S

Esoteric Audio Research (EAR) 861 Power Amplifier

The resurgence of triode amplification has been something of a puzzle to me. Even accepting that these amplifiers may produce beautiful and musically compelling sound, there remains the intractable problem of finding a well-balanced full-range speaker that can be driven with a handful of watts. Tim de Paravicini, no stranger to taking the road less traveled, obviously shared similar thoughts, and set about designing an amp that could provide the triode “magic” while having enough power to accommodate a reasonable range of speakers. The result is the EAR 861.

This amp is a visual knockout. The compact chrome and black enamel chassis, with its retro-cool tube cages and towering chrome-topped transformers, is guaranteed to incite lust in any tube lover.¹ Do be careful when you try to pick up this little beast. Though it is small, it weighs a whopping 65 pounds, the lion’s share of which is contained in de Paravicini’s proprietary “Yoshino” transformers. The 32/watts per channel 861 accepts both balanced and single-ended inputs; two 861s can be configured for use as 64/wpc monoblocks. As is his usual practice, de Paravicini’s approach to the question of triode amplification is highly distinctive. The 861 runs in pure Class A with zero feedback. Its input/driver stage is handled by two ECC88 tubes and six PCC88s, with output provided by a push-pull pair of EL519 pentodes per side, which are wired in “enhanced triode mode.”²

Far too many components are able to capture all of the constituent elements of sound but are somehow dyslexic in translating those elements into music. Like a scholar who can speak six languages, but who has nothing to say in any of them, such components shortly become intensely boring, however superficially impressive their presentation. The EAR 861 not only speaks the language of music, it has plenty to say in the bargain.

There is nothing slow-footed about the 861’s bass. It is in fact surprisingly potent and well defined. No, it does not match top-notch solid-state in this regard, but its bass performance is certainly comparable to and competitive with other excellent tube amplifiers. The weight and bloom of the lower strings in Respighi’s *The Birds* [Mercury 432-007-2 CD] and Rimsky-Korsakov’s *May Night* [Speakers Corner/Decca SXL 2221 LP] is not lost, and is only a bit less

taut than life.

Triode amps are celebrated for their way with midrange, and the EAR does not disappoint. The amp is strikingly tactile and intimate through the midrange, at times bordering on the sorcerous. With the 861, Classic Records’ 12-inch single of “The Look of Love” [CR-5005-12] makes Dusty Springfield, the guiro, and the saxophone vivid and palpable presences. For once, all of the brandy and sandpaper in John Wetton’s expressive baritone are present on King Crimson’s “Exiles” [*Larks’ Tongues In Aspic*, Editions EG EGKC6]. Great recordings of strings are ravishing in their woody sweetness and properly rendered overtone structure, without losing the correct measure of bite. The 861’s treble performance is not stereotypically tube-soft, but harmonically rich and complete. The last smidgen of airiness is not entirely present.

Tonal colors are intensely saturated through the 861, much as a photograph taken with a long exposure on slow film is more subtle and revealing of color shadings than is one taken with a short exposure on fast film. This rather unusual characteristic is not the same thing as the golden, romantic glow of some tube electronics or the Pluto One phono cartridge I reviewed in Issue 112. The EAR does not euphonicaly soften transients or boundary definitions, but it presents the core of music with an immediacy and textural and tonal intensity seldom heard from an audio component. On music that is principally about



1 The amp’s only display of temperament was when the power switch’s pilot light conked out after a couple of months.

2 The output tubes are wired so that the signal “sees” only a triode. According to the manual, the output tubes’ normal “grid one” is tied to the cathode, becoming “an invisible, transparent element and a part of the cathode.” Wiring the durable EL519 pentode in this mode is claimed to allow greater efficiency, linearity, and very long tube life.

3 I refer here to the “field source” discussed on page 116 of Issue 111.

sheer sonic beauty, such as *Scheherazade* [Classic/RCA LSC-2446] or the orchestrated *Clair de Lune* [Classic/RCA LSC-2326], the EAR is nothing short of enrapturing.

Any amplifier worth its salt must allow you to hear the acoustically charged air close to well-recorded instruments, and the EAR does it handsomely.³ Angelo Badalamenti's soundtrack to David Lynch's *Fire Walk With Me* [Warner Bros. 9-45019-2] is a particularly atmospheric and ambient recording; on "Moving Through Time," the air around the vibes and acoustic bass allows them to roll out of the speakers like ethereal sonic lava. The EAR's ability to capture in full this bloomy near-field ambience drives home the piece's subtle pulse and intensely unsettling mood.

The 861's presentation of low-level musical detail is of a very high order. One is never at a loss to hear whether a drummer is softly striking the bell or the disc of a cymbal, the differing sax techniques that make players such as Ben Webster or Joe Henderson unique, or the distinctive tonal shadings of pianists as disparate in style as Bill Evans and Sviatoslav Richter. There is, however, a pervasive darkness to the EAR's resolution of low-level ambient detail in the far field, as if the air further away from instruments were somehow thickened, absorbing some sonic information. Decay tails are slightly truncated, and the furthest corners of concert halls are not fully illuminated.⁴ This minor suppression of ambient information at the far reaches of the stage, when taken together with the amp's intensely rendered tonal hues, explains the 861's remarkable quality of musical intimacy. It is as though a certain amount of ambient information is sacrificed in order to bring the listener into a close, personal relationship to the musicians. The EAR makes clear the distinction between the concepts of "you are there" and "they are here," and is firmly in the latter camp.

As can be expected from better tube amplifiers, the 861's soundstaging is quite good, indeed. Lateral spread can be impressive, though depth is occasionally somewhat diminished by the aforementioned far-field darkness. The EAR's special excellence is in its ability to place fully developed three-dimensional images into the soundfield it projects. Its ability to reproduce timbres with great intensity only adds to its quality of dimensional solidity and stability.

When paired with efficient speakers, the 861 is far more dynamically convincing than one might reasonably expect. There is a slight but noticeable diminution of dynamic response at the frequency extremes, but from the upper ranges of the midbass to the lower treble, the 861 is lively and responsive. These are 32 very large-sounding watts, but ultradynamic LPs such as the Paul Paray Ravel/Ibert disc [Classic/Mercury SR90313] can cause the soundstage to scrunch just a bit at the biggest moments.

Ultimately there is something more painterly than photojournalistic in the 861's presentation. This is not necessarily a bad thing. The lens of the camera is usually considered to be more objective, and this may be true on such elements as surface characteristics, but the eye of a sensitive painter brings something more to the interpretation of a subject – the sin-

gularly human quality of understanding that which lurks beneath that surface. As beautiful as a photograph of the English countryside may be, a Constable landscape has more depth and soul, and can capture an ineffable sense of time and place. The EAR, in similar fashion, has an unerring ability to go straight to the emotionally evocative heart of the *musical* experience rather than focusing on some of the more hi-fi qualities cherished by some as a part and parcel of the *audio* experience.⁵

So the EAR 861 does have a definite and discernible character, one that I would describe as a somewhat golden variety of the yin. I should probably be more critical of this, but its existence does not keep the 861 from providing an unusually profound musical satisfaction. Music at its best can give glimpses into the heart of the human experience, and the small failings the EAR may have in terms of "neutrality" are more than compensated for by its uncanny ability to let music touch the mind and heart. The 861's deep and subtle tonal colors, solid imaging, and surprising extension at the frequency extremes take it well beyond the specialty niche of its lower-powered triode brethren. It is an outstanding synergistic match with the efficient Wilson Audio CUB, and should also work superbly with other well-balanced speakers of 90 dB or higher sensitivity. If 32 well-muscled watts can ring your system's bell, don't miss the EAR 861.

PAUL A. BOLIN

Manufacturer's Response

What a good review! Good not just in . . . being positive, but in the accuracy of Paul Bolin's description of the nature of the 861 amplifier. When he says that it "has an unerring ability to go straight to the emotionally evocative heart of the musical experience rather than focusing on some of the more hi-fi qualities. . ." he precisely expresses Tim de Paravicini's design goals. . .

Even Bolin's principal quibble about the amp, a "minor suppression of ambient information at the far reaches of the stage" (an audiophile complaint if ever there was one) contributes. . . to the goal of the 861's "uncanny ability to let music touch the mind and heart."

Dan Meinwald
Proprietor, EAR USA

MANUFACTURER INFORMATION

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IMPORTER

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Designer: Tim de Paravicini
Source: Importer loan
Serial No.: N/A
Price: \$6,495

ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

Front End (analog): SOTA Cosmos turntable; Graham 2.0 arm; van den Hul Grasshopper IV-GLA cartridge; Front End (digital): Audio Alchemy DDS-Pro transport; Dodson Audio DA-217 Mk II DAC; Electronics: Ayre K-1 preamplifier; Audio Research PH3 SE phono stage and LS25 line stage; Speakers: Wilson Audio CUB; Wiring: Kimber Illuminati D-60 digital interconnect; Nordost SPM and Quattro-Fil interconnects; Nordost SPM (shotgun) speaker cables; Accessories: Siltech and Ensemble Reference power cords, Ultra Resolution Technologies Bedrock stands and Cornerstone turntable isolation platform.

⁴This is far more noticeable on well-recorded large-scale orchestral works than on chamber music, jazz, or pop/rock recordings.

⁵Interestingly, non-audiophile friends who heard my system with the EAR providing power lavished more praise on the sound than with other amps in place.