



# EAR-869

## Integrated Amp

by Jimmy Hughes

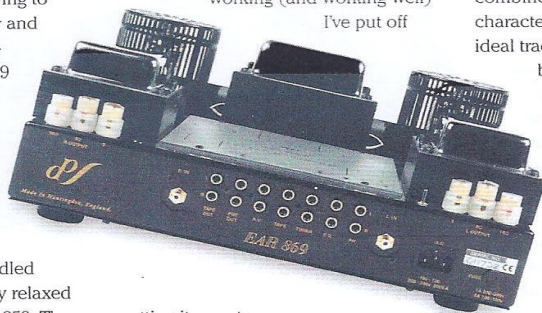
Most reviews, by their very nature, chronicle a first encounter. Naturally, as much time as possible is spent with the product before writing commences. But (at best) we're usually only talking of a few weeks. My sojourn with EAR's 869 follows this pattern. But, for me the experience was very much one of coming home rather than having to acclimatise to something new and unfamiliar. As a satisfied long-term user of EAR's 859, the 869 was pretty much a case of more of the same.

True, I'd temporarily put aside my 859 in favour of Papworth's TVA-1. But, so etched in the memory is sound of the EAR, that firing-up the 869 immediately rekindled old memories. There's a lovely relaxed and natural quality about the 859. The presentation is lively and detailed, yet at the same time smooth, warm, and very melifluous. If you ask me, it's as near perfection as you're ever likely to hear. Moreover, the asking price is very affordable – as High End audio goes.

Now I've had my 859 since 1998, or thereabouts – bought secondhand from a friend. Even then it wasn't new, my friend himself having bought it secondhand. Why anyone gets rid of such a marvellous amplifier defies logic! It's still got its original compliment of valves, a tribute to the easy-going nature of the circuit which does not 'stress' the tubes excessively. But, of late, I'd begun

to wonder if the sound hadn't lost a little of its original brilliance and bite.

Getting the Papworth rather suggested it had, and I was impressed by the latter's extra brilliance and detail. Of course what I should do is get my 859 back to EAR for an overhaul. Alas, I'm a lazy so and so... Because it's still working (and working well) I've put off



getting it seen to.

That seems to be the way with EAR 859s – like old soldiers, they never die, just quietly fade away. Getting the 869 would doubtless highlight any shortcomings in my old 859.

But – would the 869 really be any better? And if it was, in what sort of areas would the improvement manifest itself? To tell the truth, I wasn't sure quite what to expect. But, on getting the 869 up and running, I experienced much of the excitement I remember feeling when I heard the 859 for the very first time. Compared to what I had it was a revelation. Likewise, the 869: I was immediately impressed by its

spaciousness and dimensionality, its vivid holographic 3D soundstaging.

The sound had presence and body, yet the overall impression was one of easy fluidity coupled with a complete absence of strain. It's a winning combination. And I'm tempted to say that few amplifiers at any price combine these desirable but opposing characteristics. I think it's born of a near ideal trade-off between having a simple but near perfect circuit, and

limited but sufficient output power. It would be very difficult to increase power levels and still maintain this quality of sound. Power output is a restriction. Being limited, the use of low-efficiency loudspeakers is a borderline thing. Even with the relatively sensitive Impulse H-1 horns

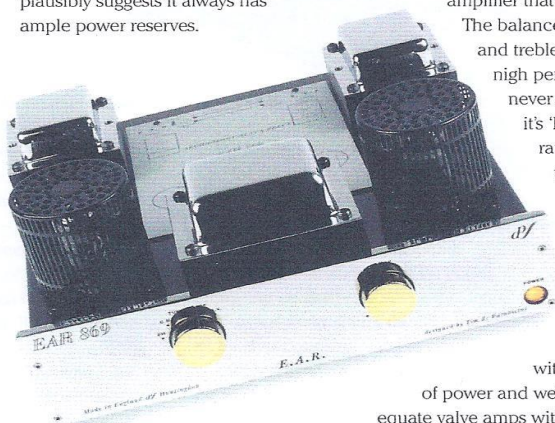
I use, my old 859 could run out of steam – for example, when playing heavy choral music at realistic volume levels. In this respect, the slightly more powerful (an extra 2W!) 869 betters its predecessor, giving noticeably greater headroom for peaks. And just like the original design, it tends to compress rather than clip when pushed hard. Trouble is, the 859/869 tends to sound so at ease with itself, you're hardly aware it's approaching the limits of its power envelope. Most amplifiers tend to become stressed and ragged as they reach peak output. By comparison, ►



## ● EQUIPMENT REVIEW

▶ the 859/869 always seems so darn relaxed. The killer climax arrives, and you might perhaps sense the sound holding back ever so slightly. But, often the effect is so subtle that only a highly experienced ear would know the amp had reached the end of its tether.

Like a canny politician being economical with the truth, the 859/869 plausibly suggests it always has ample power reserves.



Put another way, it simply doesn't sound like a 'small' amplifier. For all its exquisite subtlety and finesse, it's big and ballsy, producing strong cleanly-defined images that holographically detach themselves from the loudspeaker boxes. It does so by the quality of its sound, not brute force. And implies muscle that isn't really there – at least not in the sledgehammer sense. Nevertheless, given speakers of reasonable efficiency (my Impulse's are about 95dB/W) you can enjoy room-filling climaxes with large-scale symphonic and choral music with little if any restriction in terms of loudness levels. There may be limitations on paper, but only headbangers with average sensitivity speakers are likely to encounter problems. In any case, the 869 isn't really an amp for headbangers; it's altogether too subtle and refined for those wanting quantity over quality.

Although it does sound smooth, and melodious, sonically the 869 does not fit

the clichéd warm, rosy, valve amplifier stereotype. Its warmth and liquidity are innate; a product of exceptional linearity rather than pleasant additives. The 869 does not sound 'soft' or vague; it's sharp, lively, and very detailed. Yet always there's a sense of relaxed effortless ease that gives the music a sweet flowing quality. There's a 'rightness' about this amplifier that's unmistakable.

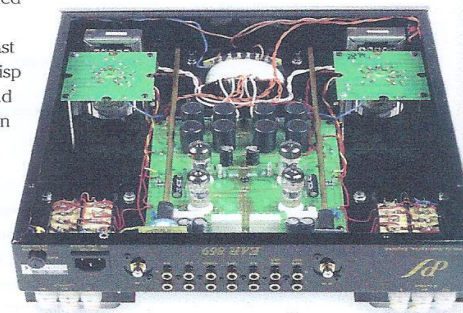
The balance between bass and treble extremes is well-nigh perfect. The top-end never sounds as though it's 'leading' the mid-range or bass. The treble remains articulate and brilliant, but always perfectly integrated and very clean. Bass is firm and extended, with a palpable sense of power and weight. Those who equate valve amps with smooth rolled-off treble and soggy bass will find the 869 sounds as firm and controlled as the best transistor designs.

Musically, the 869 sounds fast and articulate. It's capable of crisp phrasing, with precise attack and sharp transients. Pitch definition is exceptionally good; likewise the ability to maintain clarity between complex extremes of loud and soft, high and low. But this is at best a clumsy description of the way the 869 lays bare the soul of the music by simply letting you hear what's there, without fuss or drama. The sound is informative, stimulating, and attractive. All at once.

Surprisingly, given all this, there's no sense in which the 869 draws attention to itself. Actually, maybe that's not 100% true. Doubtless for the first few days (or weeks) you'll sit there revelling in the music thinking you've never heard your system sound so good. However, believe

me, it doesn't last. Given a couple more weeks you'll find it hard to 'notice' the 869. It's as though there isn't amplifier in the system, so effortless and transparent is the sound. I found this with the 859; it's equally true of the 869.

Running-in time lasts about a week. But, you're about 70% of the way there after the first evening. From then on, there's a slight increase in spaciousness and ease; the sound seems to free-up and become more relaxed. Warm-up time seems minimal. Like the 859, there's little if any subjective improvement after the first few minutes – though you can hear a sporadic tinkling from the output tubes during perhaps the first 20 minutes or so as the glass reaches operating temperature! My review 869 produced a few seconds of hum during the first minute or so after being switched on – something my old 859 never did. However, it's nothing to worry about – just a question of which valves warm up first. Apparently some 859s do it! The 869 offers a few extra features over the 859, among them a switch and an extra set of input sockets to allow the



amplifier to be used with an external pre-amp, plus an extra set of loudspeaker output terminals to match 15 Ohms.

Compared to the 859, the 869 has a slightly revised circuit, with an extra valve added to make things behave more predictably. Output has been increased marginally, but alas 859s ▶

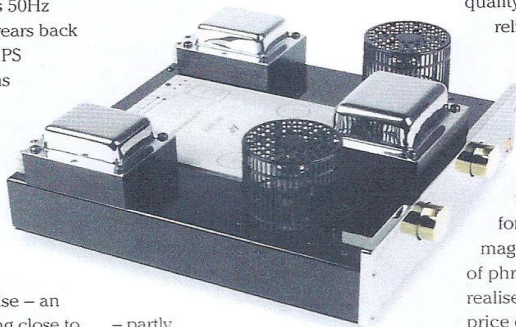


cannot be upgraded. Cosmetic appearance is virtually identical to a late-ish 859, with attractive chrome-plated transformer covers. My 859's mains transformer is slightly noisy; the review 869 is quieter, though not totally silent – a faint buzz can just be heard when sat close by. This noise seems to be down to the mains transformer being slightly unhappy with the UK's 50Hz mains frequency. A couple of years back I was able to try my 859 with a PS Audio variable frequency mains power supply, and just upping the mains frequency by 5Hz to 55Hz noticeably lowered the buzz. Increasing the mains frequency to 60Hz eliminated it altogether. The 869 is definitely quieter than my old 859, but it's not totally silent. In terms of residual noise – an important factor for those sitting close to very sensitive speakers – the 869 is very quiet; with an ear pressed close to the H-Is a faint hiss could just be discerned. For what it's worth, the Papworth TVA-1 seems even quieter – though in most situations any difference will be purely academic. Speaking of the Papworth, it was interesting to go back to it again after having lived with the 869 for nearly two months.

Verdict? I think the EAR has it for spaciousness and sheer breadth/depth of soundstage; the 869 gives a 'bigger' more generous sort of presentation. Rather than being confined to speaker boundaries, the 869's soundstage seems to extend away from the speaker boxes so that images hang in the air. The Papworth, by comparison, sounds leaner and a shade more forward, with an impressive immediacy and attack in place of the EAR's relaxed openness. The sharpness of the Papworth makes it seem more purposeful and articulate. Tonally the impression is still one of refinement and smoothness, yet dynamically it sounds more keyed up – lucid, abrupt, and ready to snap shut like a tightly coiled spring. In this

respect, the TVA-1 is perhaps closer subjectively to a good transistor amplifier design, compared to the more mellifluous sonic presentation of the 869. It offers greater punch and crisp fast transient attack.

Power-wise, the Papworth runs out of steam before the EAR – at least that's my subjective impression



– partly because the latter clips so gracefully you're hardly aware of its power boundaries. It's almost impossible to 'clip' the 869; even pushed beyond its limits, it retains a remarkable sense of poise that disguises any strain it might be under. Some big amplifiers achieve this by having power to spare, the 869 does so by sheer quality.

Which of the two amps is best? I was afraid you were going to ask that... It's a close call, and one that might go either way depending on taste and priorities. In tight situations I always ask – if you couldn't live with one, could you live with the other? Answer? No! I could live happily with either. Even so, I have to admit a preference for the EAR. It has something very rare; the ability to liberate reproduced music from the shackles that normally limit it...

For recordings of classical music, I like the extra refinement of the 869; the way it makes the speakers 'disappear' as sound sources. There's an effortless natural quality about the EAR that's very seductive. That said, the added brilliance and bite of the Papworth makes for

exciting listening. I love the way it focuses the music – and your attention. It's commanding and engaging. As remarked earlier, it's a tough call between two outstanding designs. The 869 costs more – a shade under £2,300 – so that might swing things in favour of the Papworth. But the EAR offers excellent value – both in terms of build quality and outstanding sonics. It's

reliable too; my 859 is living proof of that. Buy an 869 and hopefully you can look forward to years of consistent trouble-free use without needing to replace valves. It'll maintain its long-term place in your system on merit too; once you get a feel for its sound, and the almost magical way it brings out subtleties of phrasing and tonal allure, you'll realise how few amplifiers at any price offer better sound. Louder? – yes. Bigger? – possibly. Flashier and more chromium plated? – definitely. But truer, and as natural and realistic? – I very much doubt it. The EAR 869 is amplifier to settle down with – your long-term partner. Till death us do part... ➤

#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Line Integrated Amplifier
Inputs:	5 Line
Input Impedance:	50K
Outputs:	1 tape
Output Power:	15 watts
Valve Complement:	4x PCC88 2x EL519
Dimensions (WxHxD):	390x175x405mm
Weight:	21kg
Price:	£2298

Manufacturer:  
EAR/Yoshino Ltd  
Tel. (44)(0) 1223-208877  
E-mail. earyoshino@aol.com  
Net. www.ear-yoshino.com