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e.a.r.

534 amplifier

as reviewed by Robert H. Levi



Released initially in 2000, the E.A.R. 534 Stereo Tube Amplifier was a new design for

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), E.A.R. 534 stereo amplifier, NuForce Reference 9 SE V2 amplifiers, E.A.R. 912 preamplifier, and an E.A.R. 834L Tube Line Stage.

SOURCES

VPI Scout/JMW 9 tonearm, VPI SDS Controller, VPI Heavy Weight Super Platter, 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.

tube guru Tim d'Paravicini. This EL 34 loaded stereo amp runs in pure Class A 100% of the time, operates in push pull tetrode, has auto bias, and has dual volume controls. It features single ended or balanced inputs and may be switched to monoblock operation. It has 4/8 ohm taps as well. It is 100% tubes. It produces 50+ watts on demand...probably more.

My analysis in a nutshell: The 534 was designed by an extraordinary engineer with extremely high musical tastes. At \$6400, this EL34 tube amp, 4 per channel, just sounds like the real thing. I have auditioned EL34 tube amps for 45 years and the 534 is more musically convincing, more detailed, more harmonious, more linear, more transparent than any other design of similar ilk at any price. This is the most perfect 50 watt-er yet achieved and I've heard pretty close to all of them. It has been produced for 8 years, but as far as I'm concerned, this newly minted sample is celebrating its US premier. I don't know if it sounded like this on release, but it sure kicks ass and takes no prisoners right now!

I put 100 hours on the 534 before reviewing and ultimately used cutting edge Harmonic Technology Photon fiber optic interconnects, my very favorite metal Kubala-Sosna Emotion interconnects and Emotion PCs, and the new incredible TR Marigo Mystery Feet under the amp. The JM Labs Cobalts were fed at 8 ohms. The ModWright Sony 999 and E.A.R. 834L loaded with Mullard NOS tubes completed the system. I also used the Modiferi Mac MR-71 as a source. Speaker cables were the truly superb Harmonic Technology Reference Pro 9 bi-wires.

I've read a few reviews of this amp and they were very complimentary, but not over the top. They were also 6-8 years old. Maybe ancillaries have improved. Maybe the amp and EL34 [branded DP] tubes have been updated. I don't know. I do know the amplifier shipping now is state of the art for a 50 watt-er ...and that's that. It's also an amazing deal.

I have two of the E.A.R. 890s in my other reference system which uses KT90s instead of the EL34s and are overall larger amps. They are based on this 534 design. Sonically, the 890 is more robust and powerful, but really no more convincing if your speakers don't need the power. I am surprised by this as I am a big fan of the KT90 tube and its performance. Getting the EL34 to sound almost like a KT90 is a miracle in itself. The 534 is a wolf in sheep's clothing!

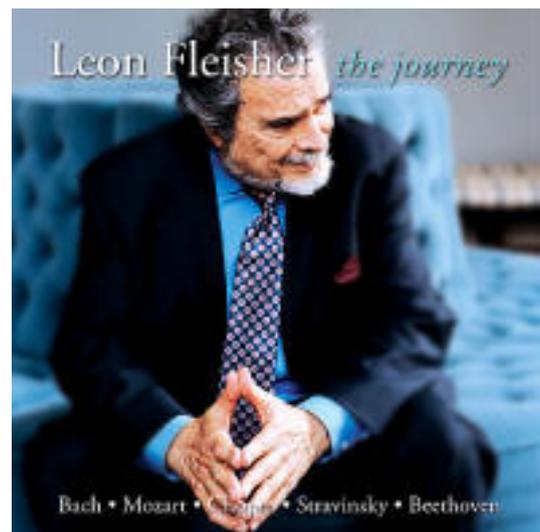
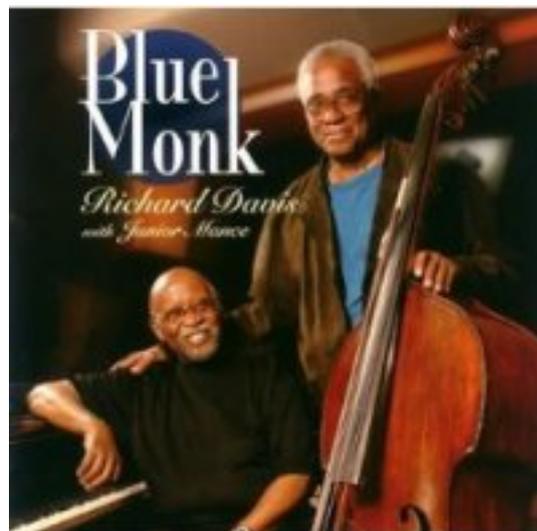


Tim d'P and I visited at RMAF. He said he built a pair of custom monoblocks for a Greek Shipping Magnate for an unspecified six figures ...all tubes and 500 watts per channel ...he says sounds very similar to his 534 and 890, just a lot more powerful. I think I see a trend here.

I replaced my Cary Custom 300B Western Electric tubed amplifier with the 534. The Cary was quite good ...the 534 is vastly superior. Vastly. How can EL34s be better than WE300Bs? It's all in the execution. This circuit, these custom trannies the E.A.R. uses are just in a category by themselves. Once fully broken in, the 534 makes real

music. I have always believed that the amp was the most important piece in your system. This proves it.

EL34s are known for their luscious sound...maybe too rich. Not here. Piano music is most perfect and quick. No liquid overhang to report ...I hear purity of tone and tambour with proper richness and speed. I listened to Leon Fleisher, *The Journey*, ATM CD 1796, and marveled at the rightness of tone and pacing, the feeling that the piano was in the room. Glorious. I listened to the whole CD and was amazed all over again.



Blue Monk, with Richard Davis and Junior Nance, KICJ 541, available from Eastwind Import, is a jazz CD to be collected and cherished by the audiophile. It has superb performances and sound to die for...best bass recording yet and it's just a CD. It's even better than Telarc's SACD bass extravaganzas. Heard with the E.A.R. 534, it is alive. The piano fills the space between the speakers in every musical way. The bass is percussive and texturally perfect. You can feel and hear the woodiness of the bass cabinet, no overhang either. The airy extension is filled with micro dynamics and detail. The mids are beefy and quick...major dynamics abound. The mid bass and deep bass are clear, powerful, resounding, and natural. When Davis bows the bass...watch out! You will plotz! This is a stellar reference recording and necessary for all collectors!

Want to hear perfection in vocals? Take a listen to the *Best Audiophile Voices*, XRCD 27901. Exquisite. The purity and "reach out and touch it" reality of the vocals are extraordinary. The 534 is THE amp for vocals. I would build an entire system around this amp and never look for anything else. I would say that for the 890, too ...in fact I have. I don't care if you have heard Alison Krauss or Carol Kidd or Jane Monheit a thousand times...you have not heard them unless you have a 534.

I am only impressed if intense musicality is presented along with neutrality. I clearly heard the differences between the Kimber Palladium and the Kubala-Sosna Emotion Power Cords on the 534, preferring the more musical, truer mids and highs of the K-S. The 534 on its own feet was no where nearly as defined and real sounding as with the TR Marigo Mystery Feet. Each change of cable and ancillary was made obvious and when I got it right, it was amazing. This is both a reviewer's amp and connoisseur's amp to be sure.

The sonic textures and presentation between the classic Mac MR-71 and the newer Marantz 17 FM tuners was never so distinct. They sounded like they came from different worlds. They had sameness with the 300B single ended triode amp that I now realize was a serious coloration. I also use the NuForce 9SE V2 in this system as a reference and its very nice and detailed here, but not in the E.A.R.'s league at all. I have never heard this kind of purity of sound on this system. It's a magical combination with JM Labs/Focal drivers and must be auditioned if you own any of Focal's speaker products.

Thick or lean sounding cables will make the 534 sound thick or lean. It needs top quality isolation and support, too. By putting it on an ordinary stand with just some soft-shoes under it, it sounded rather thick and slightly tubey. With aluminum cones, it was faster and rather thin. With the Marigo feet, it was just right. I could clearly hear the differences from CDs treated with L'Art du Son CD treatment and the Bedini Clarifier.

Garbage in, garbage out, which I've never said before about an EL34 powered amp. However, when it is right, WOW! The great thing about the 534 is that it reveals its glory quickly as it is so very transparent. Any knowledgeable audiophile can maximize it and reveal its perfection.

Tim told me that a set of NOS Genelex KT77s would sound even more special. He also said I should stay away from Chinese tubes as the glass is thin and the vacuum is faulty. He suggested that a NOS set of 6L6s would also be fun. Overall, the EL34 he uses is specially picked for lowest distortion and highest reliability. I agree. By the way, the amp does not require matched tubes. What a smart design!



I have spent a great amount of listening time trying to identify the 534's shortcomings. It's hard to do and harder than any other amp I've ever auditioned. It's harder than E.A.R.'s other amplifier designs and I adore the 890. The 534 clips so gently, I really could not identify when it ran out of gas. I heard definition at all frequencies that was tip top. Textural nuance was state of the art, a by-product of operating in class A 100% of the time. The amp is silent with totally black backgrounds. Micro and macro dynamics are unrestricted and natural. It's a somewhat small amp as tube amps go, easy to place, and beautiful to look at. Fit and finish is excellent and it worked right out of the box. It even came with a polishing cloth for the chrome face and transformers.

My basic recommendation for the E.A.R. amp to buy would be to use the 534 with monitor speakers with no dedicated woofers or with single woofers no larger than 8-9 inches, in a small to medium size room. I'd go with the 890 for speakers with multiple woofers or single woofers 10 inches or greater in a medium to large room.

The only MAJOR flaw I detected is that the E.A.R. 534 did not have 500 watts per channel like the Greek guy got. But good news! Tim told me, and I have a witness, he would build another 500 watt-er on special order for about \$250k depending on the pound/dollar exchange. Great, I think. However, for a mere six grand or so you can more than taste perfection and enjoy the 534 right now. You could buy two and switch them to mono 100 watt-ers or vertically bi-amp. I recommend you buy the 534 new as I'm a fanatical audiophile reviewer and have never auditioned the original 534 amp from the beginning of the century. My hat is off and my *E.A.R.s* are way open for the fabulous E.A.R. 534 amplifier. I bought the review sample. State of the art and most highly recommended! **Robert H. Levi**

534 amplifier

Retail: \$6400

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