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EAR 890 power amplifier

Art Dudley | Apr 23, 2004 | First Published: Apr 1, 2004

Most of us have at least some taste for gear that *jumps out*—for audio components whose sonic and musical distinctions are easy to hear from the start. In audio, unlike in the art of music itself, there's nothing wrong with being obvious.



Then there are such products as the grand-looking 890 amplifier (\$4995) from Esoteric Audio Research, which had nothing of the obvious about it during its stay in my home. Voices didn't pop out. Groove noise didn't vanish. Textures were neither smoothed-over nor scuffed-up. Whites











weren't whiter and colors weren't brighter, and I had to listen to it for weeks on end before it sank in just how beautifully well the 890 played music. That's not so much an indictment of the amp as it is of the whole audio reviewing paradigm, which, admittedly, is more about jumping in the sack than mating for life.

The EAR 890 confounds reviewers in another way: It's a straightforward thing, and while its design and execution are not without ingenuity, the EAR 890 lacks even such basics as hand-rolled capacitors or exotic metallurgy. Good God, this amp...*has no story!*

Description

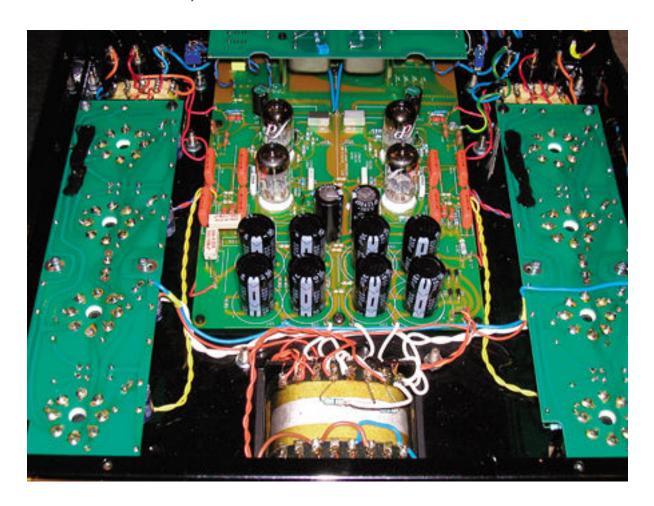
The EAR 890 is, in designer Tim de Paravicini's own words, a very conventional tube amplifier. Each channel uses its own 6AQ8 dual-triode as a differential pair, working in concert with another dual-triode, the ubiquitous 12AX7. The output section uses four tubes per channel in a parallel push-pull configuration: the relatively young KT90, which de Paravicini describes as Yugoslavia's answer to the classic KT88. This beam tetrode, which shares some physical characteristics with the EL509 power tube used in the earliest EAR amps, is used *as* a tetrode, albeit not in ultralinear mode.

The payoff is a hefty, hell-raising 70Wpc, operating in pure class-A (footnote 1). Although de Paravicini says he strives for extended tube life—described for our purposes as a minimum of 10,000 hours—and thus maintains plate current within the realm of sanity, you still would not want to rest your hand on the metalwork of an EAR 890 that's been playing music for any amount of time. As we say here in the Northeast US, "Bastid git hot, dunnit?"

Other interesting details: Hobbyists whose preamplifiers lack a balance control will be cheered by the presence of individual left and right channel-level controls, mounted on the rear panel. Nearby, a top-mounted switch allows the user to transform his or her EAR 890 into a 140Wpc monoblock; two-channel enthusiasts will then need to buy another 890, while monophiles can use a single one to intimidate the corner horn or old Quad

ESL of their choice. Another switch toggles between unbalanced and balanced operation, the latter involving XLR sockets and an internal pair of custom-wound line transformers.

The 890's output transformers are also de Paravicini's own—he perfected the craft decades ago while working for Japan's Luxman Corporation—and they present the user with separate taps for 8 and 16 ohm loudspeakers. And, finally, the auto-bias 890 requires little in the way of user intervention apart from working the On/Off switch, which is an orange plastic button. (But Tim: Are you *sure* that ivory, or perhaps even whalebone, wouldn't sound better...?)



Notwithstanding an idiosyncratic approach to holding the tube cages in place (hard-to-reach bolts that extend into the circuit-board standoffs on each channel's output boards), the 890's construction is logical, robust, and beautiful. The parts count is surprisingly low—especially true of the tubeless power supply, which Tim de P describes as "a boring, conventional voltage doubler"—and the whole of the amp comprises four neat circuit boards: a small one for the balanced input trannies and associated bits; one large, central board for the driver section and power supply; and two output section boards. The smooth, heavy chassis has a finish of baked enamel, and the front of the amp is anchored with a thick brass faceplate,

chrome-plated and polished to the proverbial mirror finish. Heavily chromed tranny covers with brass fixing nuts, another EAR calling card, complete the look.

Listening

At first I tried the 890 with my Lowther horns, replacing the Fi 2A3 Stereo amp I usually use. (My sample of the 890 already had several hundred hours on it, so I'm afraid I can't speak to the issue of break-in time as it affects this particular amp.) I was extremely impressed, and although it may sound simpleminded to say so, the 890's performance made me think of nothing so much as a Fi amp with even more headroom, and a little more drive and richness in the bass. Musically, the performance was faultless. Symphonies were appropriately forceful but never lacking in poise—and, to an equal extent, never lacking in musical flow. This was not at all the choppy, mechanical sound for which some SET devotees criticize push-pull.

But for the most part, I put all 70Wpc to work using the EAR 890 with my mildly insensitive Quad ESL-989 loudspeakers (*Stereophile*, <u>November</u> 2002 and May 2003). The combination proved to be among the most sonically faultless and musically satisfying I've had in my home.

In the past, I've used the word *unspectacular* in a derogatory way; this time, I mean it nicely. The EAR 890 was an unspectacular amp that gave me easy access to musically important details. When I used it to play Clarence White's "Bury Me Beneath the Willow" (from the indispensable *33 Guitar Instrumentals* CD, Sierra SZCD 26023-2), I heard clearly, for the first time, how the occasional "late" note attacks in this very early White recording weren't mistakes at all, but rather deliberate attempts to push his crosspicking pattern off the tracks, so to speak, and to shift the upstroke—and thus the emphasis in each measure—in a way that made the tune more interesting. (Special note to guitar enthusiasts: Clarence White's crosspicking pattern was virtually always *down-down-up*, *down-down-up*, not *down-up-down*, *up-down-up*, resulting in what I consider a more old-fashioned, mildly syncopated sound.)

The 890 also let me appreciate—if not for the first time, then certainly more easily than usual—Billie Holiday's calm, understated delivery in the unsettling "Strange Fruit" (from the album of the same name, Commodore MVCJ 19214). I'm not sure why, but the 1930s-era recording, which merely sounds quaint through most gear, seemed "righter," more serene, more inviting through this amp-speaker combination. Even the inevitable transfer noise, though still audible, imparted less distraction and fussiness to the listening experience.

Footnote 1: According to Elektronska Indistrija ("EI") of Yugoslavia, the sole manufacturer of this tube, one pair of KT90s is good for 160Wpc if used at a maximum 750V plate voltage and 600V screen grid voltage—and, obviously, not in class-A.

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