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534 power amplifier

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by Art Dudley

Tim de Paravicini's resume is one of those things I can get about halfway through before giving up in disgust: This guy's done it all, and done it well. It's embarrassing to be me and read things like that.

Here's just a taste: TdP started working in sound engineering in 1965, when he was in his teens. In the early 70s, he went to live and work in Japan, where he was hired by that Borgia family of the tube Renaissance, the Luxman Corp. Then he moved back to England and founded E.A.R.-whose first amplifier, the 509, was an instant hit, and has now been in production for a quarter of a century. Tim has designed and built every component in the record-making chain, from tape machines to mixing consoles to mastering decks, and when Paul McCartney needs something for his studio or home music system, he asks Tim to drop by the next time he's in the neighborhood. He's also extremely tall, which I imagine must irritate a lot of people.

The model 534 is a more recent addition to the E.A.R. line, and although Tim de P now designs and makes single-ended amplifiers, this isn't one of them. The 534 is a fairly straightforward push-pull amp, supplied with eight EL34s for a total of about 50 watts per channel; other such tubes, like 6L6s and KT88s, can also be used, in which case the output power may be slightly different. This amp operates in Class A, uses extremely low feedback, and can be bridged for use as a monoblock (oh, yeah: monoblocks are another thing Tim brought to the market before almost everybody else). The 534 incorporates Tim's own output transformers (arrgghh! I can't take it anymore!) and uses two ECC83s and two ECC85s upstream of its power tubes. The 534 is well built, and it has the sort of solid beauty that would lead its owner to make sure it gets mentioned in his or her will.

Of the three amps reviewed here, the E.A.R. is actually closest to being a good alternative to the amps I own. By which I mean: It's good, and it's an alternative. The Wavelength is like a super version of what I already have

(hey, nothing wrong with that), and I just didn't care for the WAVAC. But the E.A.R. is both very good and very different.

First, let me dispense with the things I like least about Tim's amp. Essentially, I found it unsuitable for really upbeat music. It just doesn't have the sense of drive I find necessary for rock music (unless plodding stuff like Pink Floyd is your idea of rock music). Let's Active's "Waters Part" was as unstimulating as I've ever heard it. Nor should Chris Stamey fans apply: "Cara Lee," from *It's Alright*, was similarly non-propulsive. Is there a hint of a disconnection between deep bass notes and their high-frequency attack components here-something which keeps everything in the same musical line (the electric bass, in this instance) from being laid out precisely in time the way they should be? I don't know, but whatever the cause, when you ask this amp to swing, it doesn't.

Note, however: I did not try this amp with tubes other than the stock EL34s, and some other choice - 6L6s, in particular - might give the 534 a little more rhythmic drive.

Turn up the plod knob, though, and you'll hear this amp in a much better light. Procol Harum's "New Lamps for Old" from the new BBC *Live in Concert* disc (Strange Fruit SFRSCDO89) sounds great, and the E.A.R. makes Alan Cartwright's electric bass sound especially full and lush. I suspect, on the basis of this, that Pink Floyd fans would find much to like here, too.

Of course, something like Georg Solti's Mahler *Fifth* with the CSO (from 1970, now reissued on a Super Analogue Disc from Cisco Records) is served better still by the E.A.R.

This amp's beautifully, realistically full bass makes the orchestral drum accents - loud and soft alike - more scarily believable. And the E.A.R. gets across the full gamut of orchestral colors, not to mention Mahler's wide-ranging and not so simple emotional palette.

And, yes, the E.A.R. does stereo. It has a glorious sense of scale, and instrumental and vocal images are solid, and stay put. Stage depth is insanely good, and while that's not the sort of thing I usually care so much about, I couldn't help but be impressed.

Another sonic achievement: When people describe a tube amplifier as "liquid," this surely is the sort of thing they have in mind. In my system, the E.A.R. never once sounded "colored" in the pejorative sense-or any sense, for that matter. It is as clean and extended and essentially neutral as anything else I've heard. But it does make everything sound smooth and seductive and-well, yeah, liquid. I never tired of listening to it, and I can't say that about everything.

What really surprises me is that, for an amplifier that is, as I think I've made plain, not at the forefront of rhythmic aplomb, the E.A.R. is extremely dramatic - and, yes, on all but the most snap-dependent music, totally involving.

The E.A.R. amp distinguishes itself from the competition like a Bruckner symphony: You hear it and you think-architecture. Grandeur. Clarity of line. Clarity of purpose. Richly drawn beauty, for beauty's own sake. This is "musical" in a manner different from the single-ended amps or the sprightly solid-state entries like the Naits and the Gaincards or just about everything else I know of - but it's "musical" nonetheless. Living with this amp was a rich experience I didn't expect, and which I wasn't happy to see come to an end. Recommended, in a tall, Zen kind of way.

Quality: ****-1/2

Value: ***

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