

EAR PhonoBox

Replacing the longstanding, and long-popular 834P, EAR's new PhonoBox is still tube-powered and comes with MC and volume options in addition to a 'deluxe' chrome finish
Review: **Ken Kessler** Lab: **Paul Miller**

A cat among the pigeons: at a time when we are being treated to a range of superb phono stages at modest prices, what for me is the true milestone of the genre has just appeared in what must be its fourth or fifth generation. The new EAR-Yoshino PhonoBox (also called the Phonobox or Phono Box) is the replacement for the venerable 834P [*HFN* Jun '94], which has seen a few tweaks and variants over the years, most notably restyles to smarten up the otherwise purely functional styling.

This is reflected in the new unit's options – you can buy the black box, fixed output, MM-only version for £1000, have the same with both MM and MC for £1199, or go for the chrome-finished 'Deluxe' for £1499. Amusingly, the finish of the thick black front panel is as luxurious as the chrome in its own stealthy way. The Deluxe is MM/MC but both it and the black MM/MC version are offered with or without volume control for no extra charge. Yes, you read that correctly: something extra for free.

Given that it costs no more, and if you can bear the thought of a volume control's presence when hair-shirted purists might opt for none, I would recommend choosing one of the versions that comes with a volume control. And I say this for a couple of reasons.

ON THE LEVEL

The first is that, in a phono-only system, the PhonoBox can be connected directly to a power amp and thus act as a preamp – perfect minimalism for LP users. As for the other boon, I found that, because this is a fixed-value unit with well-chosen general values for MC cartridges and more than

enough gain, the volume control comes in handy for fine adjustment of level.

I used the PhonoBox with various integrated and preamps, including the Audio Research REF 6 [*HFN* May '16], with a cluster of MCs of varying output: Koetsu Urushi Black, EAT Jo N°5 [*HFN* Dec '18] and N°8 [see p60], TechDAS TDC01 Ti [*HFN* Sep '14] and Denon DL103. At no point did I feel that there was any sort of gross mismatch, which was a repeat of my experience with the 834P, consistently over a quarter-century.

To remind you of the PhonoBox's great granddaddy, it was a small, unadorned box, ideally positioned alongside an existing preamp. Less slick than its grandchild, the original EAR 834P had a rotary on/off control and an optional rotary volume, and a press button for MC or MM cartridges around the back. Three ECC83s made up the valve complement, the MM input a standard 47kohm and MC a nominal 5-50ohm while adding 20dB of gain via an internal transformer.

Slightly larger than the 834P but of a lower profile at 180x77x310mm (whd) versus the older model's 124x95x275mm,

the aluminium-chassis PhonoBox contains three 13D16 triodes, but you can ask for ECC83s. As EAR always selects its tubes with care and therefore stymies tweekers who want to root around in their spares boxes for NOS gems, there's little point in replacing them with audiophile 'unicorn' tubes in the quest for improvements, but be my guest. Once again, two small transformers provide the additional x10 step-up for MC cartridges.

NO-BRAINER

Simplicity is the order of the day here, and editor PM is right to describe this as close to plug-and-play. The front bears only the illuminated on/off button, glowing red in standby before changing to a nice amber hue when switched on. It's just as clean around the back [see p59]. A press button selects between MM (out position) and MC input (in position), while an earthing post is sited below, between the gold-plated RCA sockets for phono-in and line/preamp out. Also on the back is a three-pin IEC mains socket, with a fuse. As you can see, then, EAR really did design this phono preamp to be a no-brainer to ensure absolutely no

RIGHT: Screened-off linear PSU [lower half of pic] supplies the trio of EAR-branded 13D16 triodes [top]. Optional MC input uses encapsulated 1:10 step-up transformers [top right] fitted to a plug-in PCB. Note the optional ALPS volume pot [lower left]





LEFT: Available with either a black or 'deluxe' chrome fascia and with the option of a variable output and MC input (fitted here), EAR's PhonoBox is as close to plug-and-play as it's possible to get for a modern vinyl front-end

techno-fear in newcomers to vinyl replay, while its performance utterly belies its cost.

QUIET REVOLUTION

Warm-up was swift, siting presented no problems and thus it might be a bit of a let-down for those who feel cheated if they can't fiddle about with whatever new component they've acquired. Sorry, but the EAR PhonoBox is as easy to install as, well, a CD player. It's doesn't get any more user-friendly. As much as I know some of you simply must complicate matters, this won't let you. I wish the clock on my cooker was as easy to use.

I had, however, inadvertently created for myself, and the PhonoBox, a different set of criteria. My review of the 834P started out with the obvious – 'What distinguishes the 834P from solid-state phono stages

are the sense of openness, scale and three-dimensionality' – and praised its soundstage and 'some of the sweetest bass I've heard in years. As for vocals, all I can do is s-i-g-h-h-h'. And that hadn't changed. Life is so much easier for a reviewer when a component can be compared side-by-

'The PhonoBox nailed it: you could feel each and every note'

side with its immediate predecessor. As much as I adore the 834P, I think I'd better start saving up for a PhonoBox... for its quietness alone. Put this down to structural integrity, design refinements, the ALPS pot on the variable-output version (which I reviewed), possibly higher-grade tubes than would have been in the 834P – whatever the reason, the PhonoBox offers a whole level of refinement above the 834P.

It's worth knowing just how the nature of the PhonoBox compares to the 834P

which, for all of its musicality, was a bit wild 'n' woolly, albeit in a euphonic way. Rich, classically valve-y, with enough detail to satisfy in systems way above its price category, the 834P is still a gem. But the PhonoBox? All it took was a spin of The Beatles' *Abbey Road* 3LP anniversary reissue [Apple 02508 00744] to appreciate that the transparency and resolution of the PhonoBox was of a much higher, most satisfying and revealing calibre.

SIMPLY DAZZLING

To allay any confusion, I had already familiarised myself with the differences between the anniversary reissue mix and the 1969 original, so this was not about remasters vs. first pressings. If there was a new vs. old battle going on, it was between phono stages. But while I prefer my original *Abbey Road*, the PhonoBox is clearly an advance on its antecedent. And yet the price is, in real terms, actually lower than that of the 834P back in the day.

There's an article to be written about how much the cost of hi-fi equipment has plummeted in real terms, especially *vis-à-vis* spending power, and this only enhances the appeal of the PhonoBox. As with its forebear, the bass is simply dazzling in its richness and authenticity. The new take of 'Come Together' had a weight and mass than we just wouldn't have been able to experience a half-century ago, and the PhonoBox – just like the 834P – nailed it: you could feel each and every note.

But I wasn't surprised. Designer Tim de Paravicini really 'gets' bass and knows how to extract every bit of it. His power amps, even the smaller ones, deliver rock-solid slam without sacrificing any valve-ness. This works to great effect on both electric and unplugged bottom octaves, so don't write this off as one solely for headbangers. But they will be delighted with its forcefulness. ☺

PHONOBOX FAMILY

There are seers out in the audio wilds, and Tim de Paravicini is certainly among them: who knew back in 1994, when the LP was on its knees and he released the 834P, that killer entry-level phono stages would be all the rage in 2019, precisely 25 years later? It was his response to the vanishing phono inputs that once were found on every preamp or integrated, and this wee all-valve design was a knock-out. In the intervening years, there have been superlative budget phono stages to accommodate those who bought those line-level-only amplifiers, after CD seemingly put paid to the built-in RIAA stage. Cambridge, Pro-Ject, Creek, Musical Fidelity – joined this year by Chord and EAT's E-Glo Petit [HFN Feb '19]...

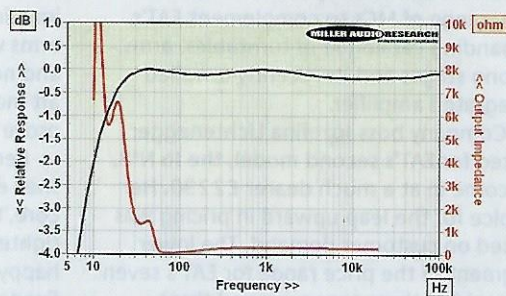
I could go on forever, but it's the 834P which has never left my system. As I wrote 20 years ago when reviewing the dearer EAR 864 [HFN Jan 2000], 'Terrifyingly, it was as far back as mid-1994 that I reviewed the EAR 834P, and I've been using it as my "real world" reference phono stage ever since'. That hasn't changed, but over the decades, the finish has gone from agricultural to something far more slick and presentable, and – as the new PhonoBox also demonstrates – the user again has a choice of a 'black box' economy version or shiny chrome. I still use the original, unadorned 834P whenever a budget or mid-price phono cartridge needs reviewing. And it still matches the best of them.

LAB REPORT

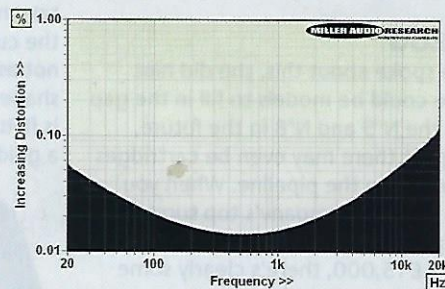
EAR PHONOBOX

For those not requiring a host of loading and gain options from a phono stage, EAR Yoshino's 'one-size-fits-all' circuit configuration has its advantages. The +48.8dB (MM) and +68.5dB (MC) gain options are sensibly chosen, equivalent to input sensitivities of 3.63mV and 378µV (0.38mV), respectively, which is almost exactly the 'average' output of today's pick-ups (re. 1kHz/5cm/sec). The PhonoBox's single-ended output, meanwhile, will drive any power amp you might care to choose – a full 10.6V is possible here from the variable output option although the ~280ohm source impedance does increase markedly below 50Hz, reaching 6.4kohm/20Hz and peaking at 12.5kohm/11Hz [red trace, Graph 1 below]. This coincides with a roll-off in response through the low bass (~0.4dB/20Hz, corresponding with the IEC pole at 7950µs) that successfully quells the influence of any arm/cartridge resonance.

The active/passive RIAA equalisation is otherwise very flat and extended out to 100kHz, with two broad but mild ~0.2dB dips either side of 1kHz [black trace, Graph 1]. The RIAA-eq'd distortion [see Graph 2] is largely determined by the trio of tubes and increases from 0.02% (re. 0dBV) to 0.1%/5.5V at 1kHz, and to 0.06%/20Hz and 0.12%/20kHz (re. 0dBV). Noise is also just below the threshold of most vinyl systems, the 77-79dB A-wtd S/N ratio (MM/MC) an excellent result in this context. The overload margins are well judged too – the MM input supports an 84mV ceiling and the MC offers 8.7mV – a margin of +25dB for standard 5mV MM (re. 1kHz/5cm/sec) and 500µV MC pick-ups. Assuming a maximum practical LP groove modulation of +18dB, EAR's PhonoBox will accommodate all MM/MCs without clipping. PM



ABOVE: RIAA-corrected frequency response over an extended 5Hz-100kHz at 0dBV via MM (black trace) vs. output impedance (red trace) from 10Hz-20kHz



ABOVE: Distortion extended frequency (20Hz-20kHz) via MM input re. 0dBV (1Vrms) output

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Input loading (MM/MC)	50kohm / 6.5ohm
Input sensitivity (re. 0dBV)	3.63mV / 378µV
Input overload (re. 1% THD)	84mV / 8.7mV
Max. output (re. 1% THD) / Impedance	10.6V / 50ohm-12.3kohm
A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBV)	78.5dB / 76.6dB
Frequency resp. (20Hz-20kHz/100kHz)	-0.4dB to +0.0dB / -0.18dB
Distortion (20Hz-20kHz, re. 0dBV)	0.014-0.118%
Power consumption	14W (2W standby)
Dimensions (WHD) / Weight	180x77x310mm / 5kg



ABOVE: Two levels of gain and two loading options are offered at the press of a small MM/MC button below the ground post. The single pairs of inputs and outputs are on RCAs, the latter variable here through a front-mounted analogue volume control

Turning to the punkish Runaways' *Queens Of Noise* [Modern Harmonic/Sundazed MH-8094], as punchy and raucous an affair as its title promises, the PhonoBox dug deep, while working fast to ensure that the transients from both bass guitar and kick drums were taut and precise.

Joan Jett's guitar work showed that this prowess extends up the frequency range, and the PhonoBox's speed is one of its secret weapons. Quick, decisive, with sharp edges to each note in her fiery leads – it's the kind of performance I used to relish when there was a battle between tubes and transistors, now a conflict as out-dated and unimportant as LP-vs-CD. (And we know which were the winners...)

SPEED DEMON

It also demonstrated another family trait shared with the 834P, when it came to scale. Whitesnake is quintessential stadium rock, and even the band's ballads sound massive. The remastered *Slip Of The Tongue* [Rhino 0190295409784] is the usual feast of swagger, with even better guitar showmanship, and the delivery was apposite for Steve Vai's complex playing. This unit is *fast* and nothing caught it out.

Rather more pensive is *Arthur (Or The Decline And Fall Of The British Empire)* [BMG BMGCAT407DLP], for my money The Kinks' greatest release ever – and far better than the deliriously over-rated *The Kinks Are The Village Green Preservation Society*. Ray Davies never shied away from using unusual instruments and sound effects, and this paean to a long-lost England that may never have even existed, like a musical version of R F Delderfield's family epics, is rich with nuance.

Just listen to the militaristic drum opening of 'Yes Sir, No Sir' behind proper, sinuous electric guitar, contrasted with brass that wouldn't shame the Black Dyke Mills Band. It's airy, spacious percussion, yet so crisp that it takes your breath away. As intended, you don't know if it's rock, or a repeat from a late-1950s episode of *Saturday Night At The London Palladium*.

'She Bought A Hat Like Princess Marina' and 'Drivin' are pure music hall. They're rendered all the more evocative (don't forget: this is the band that all but invented heavy rock with 'You Really Got Me' a mere four years earlier) by the inclusion of contrasting instruments in terms of the eras being evoked. Take the chunky bass guitar and twangy lead on 'Drivin' or harpsichord, wild lead guitar and kazoo on 'Marina' – I can't begin to tell you how much this little phono stage reinvigorated my love for the album... which I have done for precisely 25 years longer than I have treasured the 834P. And now I adore the latter's grandchild. ☺

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

In 1994, I described the 834P's performance as: 'In a word: wonderful'. Fast forward to 2019, and ditto the PhonoBox, which, like the 834P, 'swings so fluidly and has such wide dynamics' – but unlike its still-cherished forebear, it's quieter, more refined and thus an even bigger bargain. Look elsewhere if you're a variable-loading obsessive, but I doubt you'll find anything more downright musical.

Sound Quality: 88%

