

EarMaxTM

HEADPHONE AMPLIFIER
VACUUM TUBE - O.T.L. - TRIODE - CLASS A

"...out of the tubes into your ears!"

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reviews

EarMaxTM

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NOW EAR THIS

Certain components — and I don't mean Golden Turkey award winners — have this ability to make you smile. Not just the sense of awe you experience when faced with floor-to-ceiling speakers or amplifiers which make the lights dim when switched to 'on'. No, what I'm talking about are designs with witty names like 'Ampzilla' or crazed styling like the MBL 101s. The latest rib-tickler to set me a-grinnin' is something so comical, so cute, so likeable and so covetable that I can't believe it actually exists.

OTL amplifiers, as your friendly local valve casualty will tell you, are the *ne plus ultra* in tube amp designs, about as direct a source of power as you're gonna get, with as little between you and the actual power as is possible. Of course, said maven will also tell you that (with a few notable exceptions) you can only drive high impedance/high sensitivity loads with OTLs, but, hey, that's why God invented horns. Add to this the currently-adored triode configuration, winning hearts among the more modish members of the tube fraternity. Then throw in Class A operation and you've instant credibility since this has been deemed mandatory for state of the art performance for a decade or more. Dig it: every amplification buzz-word in a single unit.

But also add to this the not insignificant aspect of adapting said technology to a single purpose: driving high impedance headphones. Hey, we're talking fractions of watts, right? So if you have a mental image of a pair of cans strapped onto the ass-end of a mutha Croft, Futterman or GRAAF, think again. The Earmax is as pint-sized as its task. More specifically, this example of valve downsizing, while stopping short of Nuvistors, has a footprint of only 85x85mm and a height of 90mm.

To put that into perspective, a half-dozen of 'em are needed to obscure this page. And yet this tiny box, fashioned (I think) from resin, contains three valves, a volume control, gold-plated RCA sockets for signal-in, a 1/4in socket for the headphones and a tiny socket to accept the juice from an AC-in/AC-out mains adaptor, with the

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regulation inside and providing DC for the tubes. Aah, you're thinking — the clever dick scaled down the Earmax by sticking the big bits outside. Not so. Only after a search of six months did the manufacturer managed to source this component, measuring a mere 85x45x57mm, a small black lump less than half the size of the unit I have to schlep around with my notebook computer. And it bears its own on/off switch! For the truly sad, psychotic audiophile, like those commuters who bear a briefcase full of Walkman Pro and Stax electrostatic headphones on the Bullet Train in Japan, a battery power supply is under development. So a hearty 'Smoke that' to those who laughed when I said I wouldn't object to a tube-driven portable hi-fi.)

But let's back up a bit to learn how this device 'happened'. Apparently, one Herr Brocksieper of Wuppertal in Germany, formerly of a company called Music Components and in his mid-30s, made it as a joke for his girlfriend. One thing led to another and Hart Huschens of Audio Advancements in the USA saw it, fell in love with it (the Earmax, not Brocksieper's girlfriend) and begged him to put it into production. The rest is, as they say, history.

And so the Earmax was born, along the way picking up the aforementioned on/off switch on the mains adaptor at Huschens's insistence. Because Herr Brocksieper is rather, uh, protective of his design, the circuitry resides inside a resin casting to which there appears to be

no means of entry. The review sample's chassis is in an aqua blue/green colour, and other hues like dark gray and purple are also offered. Suffice to say that everyone criticised the finish, which is dappled enough to make it look like a prop from The Flintstones, but that's missing the point. We're talking earthy funk, anachrophilia, a cosmic giggle, Jurassic-ness.

On the sides are the inputs and outputs, while one corner of the top plane holds the volume control and the opposite corner wears the Earmax badge for US models or the Brocksieper for European versions. Arranged between them, across the top in a diagonal and protected by a clever wire frame are the three dual triodes, two AEG mil-spec valves with numbers removed, flanking a Mullard M8162/12AT7WA.

Apparently, these AEGs are ultra-rare tubes designed specifically for headphone use (read: low noise), but I have no idea why anyone would remove the numbers (nor why anyone ever designed a tube for headphone use). I don't exactly see the hi-fi community's industrial spies forming a queue to rip off a design for a headphone amp, so let's be kind and suggest that the numbers were shaved off for aesthetic purposes. But I've been assured that E88CC/ECC88/6DJ8 will work in place of the mystery tubes.

Scant though the info supplied may be, I've gleaned that the unit features 'a classic amplification input stage followed by a Class A output stage, practically omitting everything between the tubes and your ears.'

The bandwidth is specified as 4Hz to 1MHz (+/- 3dB) and the output is 100mW/ch. Where I part company with the manufacturer is over the unit's suitability for headphones below 200 ohms or so.

Earmax is designed for headphones with loads of 200 ohms-2k-ohms, and I was warned that my current fave non-electrostatic, the pocket-money Grado SR60 which I love to pieces, is too low impedance a model to work well with the Earmax. I was cautioned that it wouldn't drive the Grado to sensible levels.

Not so. With the volume control only a quarter of the way around, I was nearing my maximum, so Grado

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hardware's headphone outputs — especially spatial clues at the frequency extremes. But do you really want me to talk about such concerns using what are in-the-head sounds which can't possibly operate in the same manner as a soundstage created in front of the listener?

Face it: headphone listening, while clearer, more intimate and more neutral, has little in common with the real or (to put it another way) the out-of-head experience. But I swear that the Earmax provided a greater sense of the scale, space and openness which one would normally associate only with open-back electrostatic headphones or proper loudspeakers out in front. But that's not what headphone listening is all about, because the quest for three-dimensionality must be abandoned with in-the-head listening and stay restricted to in-the-room transducer systems.

Instead, revel in the Earmax as you would with any headphone session: for the detail, the transparency, the newfound nakedness the sound displays.

Attack is as quick as that of electrostatic headphones costing a thousand pounds or more, these gains experienced even with the less-expensive of the two Sennheisers. Indeed, using any of these headphones directly into portables or into the headphone sockets on integrated amplifiers so compromises the headphones that I am glad — in retrospect — that I've not specialised in reviewing dynamic headphones dependent on whatever headphone output is available. It's only with the Earmax that I've learned the true measure of these headphones. Hey, I even A/B'd the Earmax with the headphones fed directly into some cherished open-reel tape decks of pro calibre. Even they sounded muddy in comparison.

CONCLUSION

The verdict? There's not just one type of potential customer for this device, though the temptation is to suggest it's only of worth to fastidious, habitual headphone users unable to stretch to Staxian heights. True, they'll adore Earmax. But the other customer? Any reviewer who ever expects to review dynamic cans.

Oh, there's another likely candidate for Earmaxing: anyone who just adores the kind of knick-knacks which make guests smile and ask 'What on earth is that?' and then beg to borrow it. Believe me, it'll happen two times out of three. But be on guard: this sucker fits most pockets. Via the newly-appointed UK distributor, the retail price is just £325 including VAT

headphone owners should try out the Earmax for themselves. But, in keeping with the company's wishes, I also borrowed Sennheiser's excellent MD580 and MD320 headphones from the two ends of that company's range, and I dug out the Sony cans which came with my Walkman Pro.

Since the Earmax begs to be fed signals from equally diminutive sources, I employed both the aforementioned Sony cassette recorder and the Technics XP150 personal CD player. What faced me, desktop, was what must be the most truly compact yet still audiophile-grade, tube-based personal music system imaginable, a bedside-table confection for the insatiable purist. Hey, the only snag is making sure that you don't stand up and walk off with the headphones still connected to the Earmax: it weighs but 360g (13 ounces).

And you will indeed forget that you're wired for sound. If

transparency is the reward for shortening the path between source and listener, then this sucker is mainlining. Before you say another word, I know that the shortest path to a Walkman or personal CD player's signal is via its own headphone output. But let's face it: the signal coming from that wee headphone output isn't as untrammelled as that which emerges from the line output because there's a (probably cheap) volume control in the signal path. Feed the line signal instead into the Earmax and it's a shortcut to heaven.

Regular headphone users, even those coerced into it because of spouses or neighbours, know that there's nowt to touch the intimacy of direct injection. To say nothing of eliminating the listening room and its flaws from your listening pleasure. Suffice to say, the Earmax allowed me to hear things via (familiar) headphones which I never experienced via the source

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