

Review of EAT'E-GLO S, by Jason Thorpe, June 2018, on :
European Audio Team E-Glo S Phono Stage



How many people know what a phono stage is? Of that microscopic cross-section of humanity, how many do you think actually own a standalone component whose only job is to amplify the tiny electrical signal generated by a phono cartridge?

I've asked around, talked analog with friends and coworkers, and not one of them owns one of these odd little boxes. I've tried to infect these people with the audio bug, and over the years one or two have caught the fever, come over to the dark side, and embraced LPs. Those one or two now own phono stages of their own. But no one else.

But given what seems to be the vast number of companies now building phono stages, sometimes in multiple models (imagine!), you'd think there was a huge market for the things. But if you're going to be even remotely serious about playing LPs, you need a phono stage. The phono stage of your 1980 receiver will not cut it.

In November 2016 I evaluated the [European Audio Team C-Major turntable](#) for SoundStage! Hi-Fi, and it impressed me in a number of ways. First, it looked elegant, even sexy -- low and slinky, it was all chrome legs and carbon-fiber lingerie. It was also technically well designed. Not just a throw-mass-at-it buildup with a decent tonearm plonked on top, the C-Major sounded great. Ever since, the portion of my prefrontal cortex devoted to audio has idled in an EAT loop. What else might they be up to?

After all, EAT is run by Jozefína Lichtenegger, an audio enthusiast who cut her teeth in the tube world, first working with VAIC, then gobbling up Tesla, and finally (still) actually manufacturing tubes, which EAT also sells, along with their extremely cool turntables. It's a natural progression: tubes, analog, turntables, phono stages.

As these thoughts swirled in my head, I received a press release announcing the launch of EAT's new phono stage, the E-Glo S. Let's get it on.



A short e-mail exchange and, on what seemed only the next day, a small, heavy box arrived at my door. It's never easy to tell from a website or a press release how a component will look and feel in the flesh, let alone sound. The E-Glo S made me inhale sharply, then whistle through my teeth. This is no simple box of folded steel. Instead, sheets of aluminum are rigidly bolted to a thick front panel, also of aluminum, to form a dense, well-made, low-profile case measuring 17.1"W x 3.5"H x 10.6"D. The left and right sides of my sample were clad in what looked like panels of deep, delicious, chocolatey Macassar ebony. I had to examine them closely to ascertain that they weren't solid slabs of an endangered hardwood but instead very-well-veneered MDF, with not a seam visible. The lacquer is deep and lustrous, imbuing the E-Glo S with a feel of old-world luxury and class that punches above its weight. This phono stage's carriage-work alone justifies its retail price of \$2995 USD.

A fair bit of flexibility is built into the E-Glo S. Its gain can be set to 45, 50, 55, 65, or 70dB, and its impedance to 10, 25, 50, 75, 100, 1000, or 47k ohms. I'd be happy to trade off two of those impedance settings -- say, 10 and 75 ohms, which will hobble almost all cartridges -- for a 200-ohm setting. Also provided is a wide choice of capacitances: 50, 100, 150, 200, 270, 320, or 420pF.

All of these parameters can be adjusted with various combinations of settings of three lovely and precise three-position toggle switches, labeled Impedance, Capacitance, and Gain, in a neat row in the top panel's right front corner. The resultant settings are displayed via three rows of blue LEDs that glow pleasingly dim on the front panel. There are two more toggles, each with two positions each: Subsonic, at the end of the row of three toggles just described; and Power, in the top panel's left front corner.

Toward the back of the top panel are cutouts for the two ECC83/12AX7 tubes. The tubes come pre-installed, each surrounded by a cooling sleeve, and ringed and capped with circular guards -- there's no way you can bonk them.



With a dizzying 210 combinations of gain, impedance, and capacitance to play with, I rolled my eyes, set the E-Glo S where I thought it would sound best, and started listening. I didn't futz with it too much. I found that a gain of 65dB worked well with my preamp, and a loading of 100 ohms sounded about right with both my Roksan Shiraz and Ortofon Quintet Blue cartridges. With any impedance lower than 100 ohms things started sounding muffled, while 1000 ohms had just a touch too much zing. Again, I'd have preferred having the option of 200 ohms, but I didn't worry about it.

I ran up and down the range of capacitance settings a few times, but could hear little difference among them with either cartridge.

Crash

My wife has just had a car accident. Pulling out from the curb, she didn't turn out far enough, and dragged the entire right side of her car along the left rear bumper of the car in front of her. I was standing on the curb when it happened, and I'm writing about it not five minutes later.

Have you ever been close to a collision? The noise was astounding -- loud, with sounds ranging from a high-frequency shriek to a low bass rumble. No recording or reproduction of same could come close to approximating the howl of metal on metal and the crackle of shattering plastic.

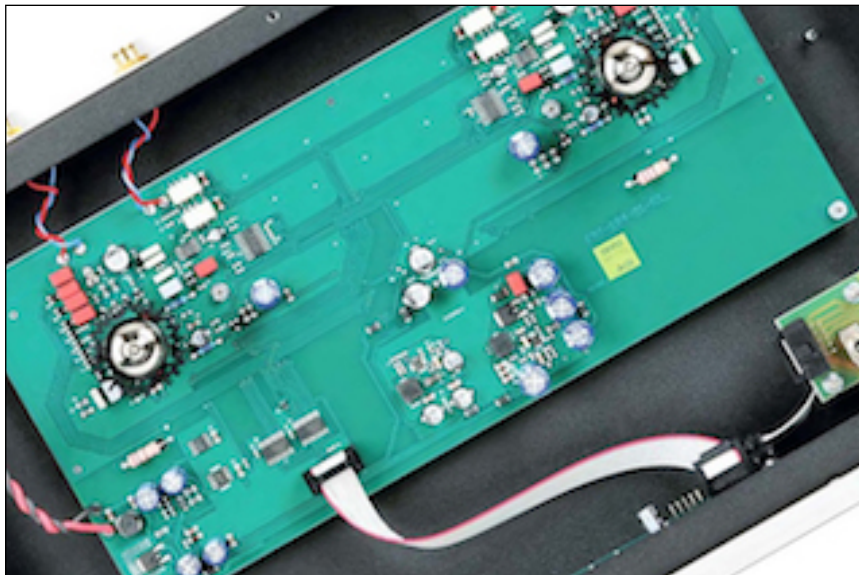
It's these overtones, the harmonics of such destruction, that convey its realism. While the scope and volume of reproduced audio have obvious limitations, it's the cues contained within the details that help us suspend our disbelief in the fact that we're not actually hearing music being performed by actual musicians in our listening room. Tubes can help big-time here, I feel, adding back in some of the texture that's stripped from music by the act of being squeezed through a microphone.



I've never heard a tubed component that sounded too tubey for my tastes, but I know that many feel that some tubed gear just sounds too "wet," too dripping in sauce. The E-Glo S didn't sink into that swamp.

I've also heard components that fairly bristle with tubes but sound like solid-state. The E-Glo S wasn't one of them. It embodied the best of tubed audio. From the moment I first booted it up, I was instantly enamored of its rendering of harmonic texture.

After I'd let the E-Glo S settle in for a couple hours I plonked on my Pro-Ject RPM 10 Carbon turntable a reissue of Talk Talk's Spirit of Eden (LP, Parlophone PCSDX 105) and spun it. It only took a couple of seconds. The initial wash of sound I know so well as "The Rainbow" was drenched in ambience -- a realistic, three-dimensional world thrown up by the E-Glo S. The harmonics imparted by -- I would guess -- the EAT's two 12AX7s sounded, for the most part, delicate and expansive, without becoming unrealistic syrup. I began listening to the E-Glo S using the Ortofon Quintet Blue cartridge. The Quintet Blue cranks out a meaty signal 0.5mV strong -- a reasonable median voltage -- and is representative of the type of cartridge likely to be used with a reasonably priced phono stage like the E-Glo S. But I also had a couple of heavy hitters on hand. First was the order-of-magnitude more expensive Roksan Shiraz. And at twice the Shiraz's price was the Top Wing Blue Dragon (review forthcoming). The Shiraz is a cheap date, at a specified output of 1.05mV (though it seems lower); the Blue Dragon is a supermodel that whispers out only a frail 0.2mV. It needs a lot of gain.



Despite the EAT's tube pedigree, I couldn't hear it adding any tube noise as it amplified the Shiraz or the Quintet Blue -- there was way more than enough gain for either. The Blue Dragon was a different matter. I hear you -- no audiophile in her or his right mind would pair a \$2995 preamp with an \$11,000 cartridge.

The combination may have been silly, but it was instructive. With the E-Glo S cranked up to maximum gain and my preamplifier's volume set higher than normal, I heard some tube rush from the E-Glo, but only when no music was playing. Further, it was immediately clear to me how unbelievably good a cartridge the Blue Dragon is -- on a level that I'd never before experienced. Not for a second did I think, Yeah, this is a great cartridge, but I need a better phono stage to take full advantage of it. Sure, more gain would have been more better, but the shining, nova-like beauty of the Top Wing's sound utterly captivated me through the E-Glo S.

I cranked up "Tom Sawyer," from a reissue of Rush's Moving Pictures (200gm LP, Anthem B0022380-01), and bathed in the huge studio ambience, the power of Neil Peart's drumming, and the massive racket thrown up by Alex Lifeson's guitar. The E-Glo S harnessed the mountain of information dredged up by this exotic, monstrous cartridge and slapped me in the face with the best sound I have ever heard from my system. More bass, better bass, shimmering highs, lush midrange -- the whole thing, delivered in a manner that made my mouth hang open. You'll have to wait for my review of the Top Wing for the full report, but I think you'll find it worth the wait.

Back to Planet Earth: With the E-Glo S amplifying the Ortofon, the music at first seemed to be coming down with a bit of a clunk, but I adjusted more quickly to this real-world cartridge than I thought I would -- before I'd finished playing side 1 of my shitty Canadian pressing of Joni Mitchell's Blue (LP, Reprise MS 2038), I was back in the game. Blue is a magnificent album full of emotions that range from deep melancholy to orbital euphoria. I can't hear "This Flight Tonight" without being reminded of Nazareth's cover of the song, but to me that just enhances the delicacy of Mitchell's wildly complex guitar line. The E-Glo S kept a lid on the crustiness of my miserable copy, but still let through appropriate amounts of sizzle from Mitchell's busy steel strings. Plenty of top-end extension came though the E-Glo S, but it was a joy to hear how the EAT nipped the tiniest edge off any abrasive nasties. And through the midrange, the E-Glo S brought Mitchell's voice just slightly forward, accentuating the emotion and poignancy in her singing.



Aural images were wonderfully well formed through the E-Glo S, and meatier than I'm used to -- thicker, richer, but not quite as crisp around the edges as I hear from the JE Audio HP10 (\$3300) and AQVOX 2CI Mk.II (€1990, factory direct) phono stages. It was in some ways like comparing an electrostatic panel loudspeaker to a minimonitor. The slightly bigger images thrown by the E-Glo S added a very enjoyable sense of scale, but this was at the expense of minute-of-angle accuracy. I've mentioned before my love of Percy Jones's bass work, and on Eno's magnificent *Another Green World* (2 LPs, Virgin ENO2LP3), specifically Jones's simmering, extended solo in "Over Fire Island," the E-Glo S presented his fretless electric bass as a large, woody instrument slightly bigger than I'm used to hearing -- which was just fine by me. With that sense of a huge instrument came a tiny reduction in the sense of hearing Jones's fingers on the strings, slightly less of the buzz of those fingers running up and down the instrument's neck.

More instructive was "A Passage to Bangkok," from Rush's 2112 (200gm LP, Anthem B0022371-01). The E-Glo S presented this straight-ahead, crunchy rock tune across a closer-meshed, coherent, organic soundstage. I could easily identify instruments' positions onstage, but those stages were thicker, richer, and juicier than those scratched out by the more detailed AQVOX 2CI Mk.II phono stage, which I placed on the same shelf as the equally slim E-Glo S in order to quickly switch between them.



Moving on to Rush's almost too-epic "Something for Nothing," also from 2112, I was entranced by the feeling of scale and depth of texture provided by this slim, not-too-expensive phono stage. Lifeson's guitar has a monstrous, end-of-the-world quality, jam-packed with harmonics that make me feel as if I'm swimming in the aural equivalent of homemade gravy. This music seemed made especially for the E-Glo S: that mountainous wash of guitar-amp distortion, Peart's mini-gun drumming, Geddy Lee's quick, biting Rickenbacker bass, and, the cherry on top, his voice, which women love to hate. I could easily track each of these across the front of my room, but I enjoyed far more just letting it all wash over me.

One rainy Friday night, after a long work week, the E-Glo S felt like the better choice than the AQVOX. I could sink into the music -- it was like drinking hot chocolate laced with Cointreau. But Saturday morning was sunny, and as I ate a half-dozen snappy-cold clementines, the AQVOX seemed more appropriate to my mood. The sounds of both phono stages are equally valid; ideally, I'd love to keep both hooked up, ready to satisfy the humor of the moment.

But later, as Tom Waits grumbled away from a remixed and remastered version of his *Real Gone* (LP, Anti- 87548-1) -- specifically, "Don't Go Into That Barn" -- the E-Glo S did the nifty trick of projecting into my listening room the ambience of an entire world into which I could melt. Marc Ribot's buzz-saw guitar had all the abrasive bite I know so well -- the E-Glo S didn't soften its sound, or sand away any of the requisite rasp of Waits's awful voice. Instead, it added just enough texture to the overtones of both those nasty instruments to deepen the soundstage and add a nice density to the overall sound.

Conclusion

I've harped in this review on the tube-like sound of the European Audio Team's E-Glo S phono stage -- to me, its most prominent feature. But don't think for a second that the E-Glo S ever sounded thick or veiled. It was a thoroughly musical phono stage that readily conveyed subtle cues in the music, the details that come together to build a musical performance.

EAT's C-Major turntable had a lively, very slightly crisp tonal balance. If aural memory serves, I imagine that the C-Major would be an ideal complement to EAT's very slightly lush-sounding phono stage. If I were looking for a complete analog rig in this price range, I'd sure want to investigate this combo.



That the E-Glo S adds some tube sweetening is what makes it, in my books, so special. In the 21st century, phono stages that use tubes to actually amplify a cartridge's signal rather than using tubes only as buffer stages seem somewhat quaint, considering that it's far easier to slam out 70dB of gain with transistors. But EAT has managed to use vacuum tubes -- that century-old technology -- as the gain devices of a great-sounding, thoroughly modern phono preamplifier.

. . . Jason Thorpe