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WYETECH LABS JADE LINESTAGE PREAMPLIFIER

By Scot Markwell



The vacuum-tubed Jade preamp from Wyetech Labs is designed to be a scaled-down version of the two-chassis Opal linestage (reviewed by Dan Davis in TAS Issue 127), but at a significantly lower price, and in a single chassis. Finished in Wyetech's signature pale lavender hue, the Jade weighs in at a manageable 17 pounds and, at 17" W x 14¼" D x 4.25" H, easily fits into any standard rack system. Constructed of machined aluminum plates that are bolted to square posts at each corner, the preamp's chassis is both quite rigid and easily disassembled if repairs are needed. Such a solidly constructed chassis design also provides excellent shielding from external radio frequency fields, which assists the Jade in performing without noisy outside interference. In use, I have not once experienced any RF or hum with the Jade; except for a tiny residual bit of tube hiss, it is as noiseless in operation as any preamp that I have used, tube or solid-state, and this through 101 dB sensitive speakers!

Roger Hebert of Wyetech Labs is as fanatical about design and assembly as he is about sonic considerations in his equipment, and uses a technique in all of his products that brings together the best of point-to-point wiring and the lack of conventional circuitboards: He uses fixed-terminal, hand-crafted, point-to-point soldered circuitboards identical to the ones utilized in his Opal preamp and Topaz amplifier. Posts elevate these boards above the surrounding metal chassis to avoid capacitive coupling between components, and all parts are arranged to allow the shortest possible signal paths. Not having a 3-D maze of parts inside the chassis allows much neater and convenient construction than conventional PC-boardless techniques, while also easily allowing any needed repair without the removal of the boards themselves. Hebert maintains that this board construction also increases overall circuit durability tenfold, since there are no traces to fail and all joints are hand-soldered with high quality control. To make sure that the neutrality and bandwidth he designs into the Jade's audio circuit is maintained to the outside world, Hebert fits a Danish-made stepped ELMA volume control that uses 0.1% precision metal film surface mount resistors; he believes that this volume control is second only to the Opal's Shallco military-style unit in life expectancy and sonic cleanliness.

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The Jade is one of the finest linestages I have heard in my home. Used in a system in its price range, it is, for the most part, indistinguishable in its sonic characteristics from its bigger brother, the Opal. Its minor shortcomings are not noticeable unless one listens to it in an ultra-high resolution system, such as is generally not used in conjunction with a \$3,800 preamp. HP and I first listened to the Jade in his main reference system, and the Alón Exotica Grand Reference loudspeakers allowed us to hear a bit of high-frequency grain and glassiness that, while not unpleasant, was certainly noticeable and vanished as soon as we inserted its bigger brother Opal. The extremely wide dynamic envelope of the Opal was, likewise, not as fully encompassed with the Jade. Frequency response, however, from the bottom octave to as far up as I could hear, was not compromised, and the remarkably clean and neutral tonal balance of the Jade was complimentary to all recordings we played through it.



When I took the unit home and inserted it into my system, I was no longer able to hear the high-frequency or dynamic limitations audible in the Sea Cliff set-up. Now, I don't suffer from a lack of resolution or detail retrieval in my personal reference system, but then again, I am not listening through nine Raven ribbon tweeters, either. In my setting, which is much more in line with the intent of the Jade, this preamp approaches invisibility. Frequency response, especially at the extremes, is exemplary for a tubed unit, especially in the highs (the response of the thing is rated to 100 kHz flat), where there seems to be no end to the air and unrestricted sense of space that this preamp is capable of resolving. Through both the Coincident Victory and Lammhorn 1.8 loudspeakers, as well as the Alon Exoticas (reviewed last month in my web column), instrumental timbres and hues are remarkably spot-on. The human voice, in particular, is rendered exceedingly convincingly, with an exceptional sense of ease and naturalness, without any added sibilance or other obtrusive artifacts. The slight grain and glassiness I could hear modulated in the highs at HP's in Sea Cliff were nowhere to be heard at home in Glen Cove. Dynamic contrasts in all types of music are another strong point with the Jade; in particular, the occasional sense of limiting or input overload that I can sometimes seem to detect in other linestages was entirely absent.

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I spent considerable time listening to LPs with the Jade, simply because it was so low in distortion and so high in resolution that CDs seemed, for the most part, too exposed as the digital creations they are. Super-demanding recordings of vocal and orchestral material, such as Hayden's *The Creation* (Karl Forster w/Choir of St. Hedwig's Cathedral in Berlin/EMI Odeon ASD 409-411) and Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis* (Georg Solti w/Chicago Symphony and Chorus/London OSA-12111) sounded astonishingly good; the voices on these recordings were so splendidly open, transparent, and correctly scaled dynamically that it was addictive to listen. I looked for one recording after another to showcase the purity and openness of this preamp. Heavier instrumental fare such as Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* (Lorin Maazel w/Cleveland Orchestra/Telarc LP DG-10054) was also well-served, and deep bass was resolved with almost as much impact and tautness as when I listened through the Plinius CD LAD solid-state linestage.

The single CD I listened to that approached the qualities of purity and high-frequency extension of my better LPs is one that is, unfortunately, not generally available. It is a reference disc made by Keith Herron for his own use in evaluating his designs, recorded, as I understand it, in a church in St. Louis, Missouri. Its version of *Oh, Holy Night*, featuring a soprano voice with organ accompaniment, is as stunning a recording achievement as I have ever heard, digital or analog. Through most systems, either in my home or at CES exhibits, this soprano, although beautifully captured, can seem to have a dynamic limit in her upper registers, in that she appears to have a cap on the top when she sings loudly. Through the Jade, she soars and keeps going; so lovely is this that my mouth hangs open and I can't wipe the silly grin from my face. The only other preamp I have heard pass this kind of dynamic freedom is the (out of production) Fanfare Millennium linestage that Acarian Systems uses at all of its demos and for its design reference. Zimmer's soundtrack CD of *Gladiator* [Decca/Universal 289 467 094-2] also sounded quite fine, but even here the digital origin of the recording was unmistakable; the sense of extreme high-frequency air on this CD was not as extended and effortless as when listening to my best analog sources.

This is a remarkably well-executed preamplifier, one that easily meets the goals its designer set for it, and one that is fairly priced, representing solid value in today's marketplace. In a system that reasonably matches it in price and sophistication, most listeners will find nothing to complain about. I could easily hear its minor faults when I subjected it to intense scrutiny in the Sea Cliff super system, but at home I got nothing but pleasure and ease from the Jade. Its ability to pass a signal in such a remarkably neutral and uninhibited way (in frequency and dynamic response), combined with its stunning renditions of vocals and ability to make instruments sound like themselves, make it a winner in my book. I shall return it to the manufacturer with more than a little regret, something that does not often happen with me. I will miss the Jade mightily. I hope a bit of exposure such as this review will make folks seek it out and give it a listen. Those that do will not be sorry, I promise you.

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Manufacturer/ Distributor Information:

Manufacturer

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Specifications and product information:

Frequency response:

(reference to a sine wave at 3.5 V RMS output)

1. +/- 0 db FLAT: 20 Hz to 100 kHz
2. + 0 db/ -1 db: 3 Hz to 320 kHz
3. + 0 db/ -3 db: 1 Hz to 575 kHz

Input Impedance: 50 kohm minimum

Absolute phase: non-inverting

Channel balance control: 11 position for +/- 5 db adjustment in 1 db steps

Attenuation: 24 position stepped volume control (-60db to 0 db)

Output impedance: 425 Ohms

Rated output: 3.5 V RMS (maximum = 8.5 V RMS)

Slew rate: Greater than 30 volts/microsecond

Outputs: 2 pre-amp outputs, 1 tape output, 1 line level output

Inputs: 4 line level inputs, 1 tape input

Power requirements: Switch selectable 115/230 volt 50/60 Hz 35 watts

Net weight: 17 lbs. (7.8 kg)

Dimensions: 17" W x 14¼" D x 4¼" H

Limited Warranty: (Transferable)

Tubes: 1 year parts

Components: 3 years parts & labor

Extended warranty: (See warranty registration)

Components only: 10 years parts and labor

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Associated Equipment:

VPI HW-19 MK IV turntable w/ JMW Memorial 10.5 arm and SAMA (Stand Alone Motor Assembly), VPI Synchronous Drive Unit motor controller; Lyra Evolve 99, Sakura Systems/47 Labs Miyabi and Dynavector DV XV1 MC cartridges; Marigo Audio Labs MR 20.2 PH/F, Hovland Groove 2, and EX Cell Power Solutions Groove Tube phono interconnects; Siltech Gen 3 and Gen 5 interconnects, Siltech LS 180 Gen 3 speaker cable, Audio Magic silver interconnects; Stealth Audio Silver and gold interconnects and silver ribbon speaker cables; Alón Black Orpheus speaker cables; Wyetech Labs Jade (tubed) and Plinius CD-LAD (SS) linestage preamplifiers; Plinius M-14 and EX-CELL Power Solutions Microgroove Plus phono sections, Forsell Air Reference CD Drive; EAD TheatreMaster DAC; Custom Power Cord Company Green Hornet coaxial digital cable; Coincident Speaker Technology SIP 300B SET stereo integrated amplifier; Wyetech Labs Topaz 572B stereo SET amplifier; Vaic VV 52B ST integrated amplifier; Zanden 7000 845 SET stereo amplifier; De Havilland Aries 845 SET mono amplifiers, Plinius SA-100 SS stereo amplifier, Custom Power Cord Company Top Gun HCFi A/C power cords and super power blocks; Arcici Suspense Rack

Manufacturer's Comment:

I wish to thank Scot Markwell for thinking highly enough of the Jade that he would place it into HP's main reference system. Doing this has allowed the full revelation of the Jade's attributes and gives the consumer a reference by which to judge the conclusions by. It is indeed rare to hear the differences between the Opal and the Jade as he has demonstrated. When the Opal was brought to market about 4 years ago it was an all-out, cost-no-object design. The Jade, on the other hand, was an attempt, as Markwell describes, to come as close as possible to the Opal in construction and sound at half the price. It appears that we have met our objective. I would also like to thank Markwell and HP for giving a small company a venue that is not possible with other mainstream competing magazines.

*Roger Hebert
Wyetech Labs*