

Single-Ended Heaven: Wytech Labs Topaz 572B

The Wytech Topaz 572B is, on the one hand, a classic single-ended triode amplifier, in that it has but one class A-1 operating output tube and 23 watts per channel (actually rather healthy, by single-ended standards). On the other hand, it has (according to the manufacturer's specifications) the ability to sustain short-duration bursts of power of over 90 watts/channel to facilitate dynamic peaks at high playback levels. So we have here a unit with a foot in the cultist world of specialty triodes, and a toe in the land of "real" amplifiers. I have wanted to have a listen to this amp since I first heard of it a couple of years ago; it has a reputation for honest neutrality, dynamic authority, and superlative full-frequency response, including the upper and lower extremes. There were also some die-hard triode buffs who disparaged the Topaz because they believed it lacked warmth, body, and liquidity and sounded more like a solid-state amplifier. I decided to see for myself.

I partnered the Topaz with my two favorite high-efficiency loudspeakers, the Horning Hybrid Corner Horn Designs Alkibiades Signature Gold (99 dB/watt and 6-8 ohm impedance) and the Coincident Speaker Technologies Total Eclipse (94 dB/watt, 14 ohm impedance), and over the course of several months, I have come to believe that, of the SET amplifiers that I've evaluated, the Topaz is not only at the top of the heap, but decisively superior to any other of its kind. It is also different, almost as if a new category must be formed to put its performance into perspective.

Only two other triode amplifiers I've heard have risen to a similar level of performance: the original Viva Aurora SET monoblocks (which also used 1 Svetlana 572 output tube per amp for 22 watts/channel), and the AtmaSphere MA-2 Mk II.2 monoblock OTLs, which use 20 6AS7 triode output tubes per channel. The chief characteristics that the Topaz shares with these amplifiers are an almost completely uncolored midband, a superbly extended, tonally and pitch-correct response into the bottom octaves, and a soaring, grainless treble that captures the signature air of a recording's venue like few other amplifiers I know. Such a description does not bear much resemblance to a typical single-ended triode amplifier, and indeed, the Topaz does not seem, even on extended listening, to be an SET at all. The single-ended cultists believe, as I have explained before, that the SET is as close to a direct link to the musical event as is possible, and that other designs are lifeless and disconnected, with an ability to play a recording's sound, but little of its spirit. This is a something of an exaggeration, but something in (good) SET designs does seem to bring the listener closer to the original musical event than more complex push-pull circuits. An uncluttered midrange purity and directness is the most obvious trait of these amplifiers, unfortunately often let down by an uninspired,



unextended, soggy bass response that changes drastically with a loudspeaker's load variations in the nether regions, and high-frequency extension that more resembles a ski slope than a flat line.

It is here that the Topaz parts company with traditional SETs. Assuming that you use loudspeakers of reasonable efficiency and benign impedance, what you will hear through this amplifier is not an unpredictable mix of wonder and goop, but a transparency and liquidity that neither flatters poor recordings nor alters great ones. There is a naked honesty to the reproduction of music through the Topaz that is, at first, confusing and contradictory. One generally expects to hear a certain rosy fullness and sweetness through an SET. And that doesn't happen here. However, the quality of the Topaz' reproduction quickly grows on you – you recognize that not only is the recording reproduced quite truthfully, but that there is an unusual liquidity and harmonic authenticity to instruments and voices.

The frequency extremes are the most obvious case in point here: deep bass pedal organ points from the likes of Crystal Clear's Virgil Fox Direct-to-Disc LP recordings made in Riverside Church in San Francisco are tight and well articulated, even down into the sub-30 Hz region, and with either the Hornings or the Coincidents, I could shake the walls of my listening room and make the air shudder. And bass drum reproduction is nothing short of revelatory, whether from an SET or any amplifier. The quality of the initial impact of the drum, followed by the hall-filling roll of the bass wave and its decay, as on Copland's *Fanfare for the Common Man* [Reference Recordings RR99-93 CD], is extraordinarily well-articulated. This is an effect, a feat, that I have been able to duplicate only with solid-state amplifiers. Likewise the sound of upper partials of flutes and piccolos are rendered with beautiful accuracy and realistic air, and the high-frequency signatures of familiar recorded venues such as England's Royal Albert Hall and Kings College of Cambridge have an illuminated depth, breadth, and height that have been, once

again, only the provenance of SS amps such as my Plinius SA 250 Mk II. Cymbals from well-recorded pop and rock discs are crisp and clean, with all the high-frequency information intact, and the sense that nothing is rolled or softened in the top.

Likewise, throughout the midrange, there is – rather than the typical enriched-sounding harmonic fullness of most SET amplifiers – a spare and lean (but *not* threadbare!) signature that at first almost disappoints (Margaret, where is the richness? What is wrong with this amp?). With more listening, however, it becomes apparent that not only is the Topaz telling the truth, but the designer had the courage to not murk up the sound with euphonic colorations or by romanticizing basic harmonic information. This also suggests that output transformers of especially good design have been employed in the Topaz (and such is specifically mentioned in the manufacturer's technical description). Again, in a similar manner to the Viva Aurora 572 and the AtmaSphere MA II Mk II.2, the Topaz plays music with a rather remarkable accuracy to the recorded sound of the CD or LP in play, with a midband tonality more reminiscent of fine solid-state than that of most tubes. The difference, however, is that few solid-state amplifiers have the Topaz' uncanny smoothness, liquidity, and ripeness in this region. Here, the single-ended nature of this amplifier finally makes its presence known, and it is glorious to hear this wonderful quality to voices and instruments without the usual SET saccharine flavorings.

I cannot help but compare, once more, the Topaz' overall sound, both in the midband and at the frequency extremes, to that of fine solid-state, and it is here that the critics of this design find their strongest objections. The Wyetech Topaz does not sound *anything* like a "normal" SET amplifier. Not a hint of syrup or excess warmth, at any point in the frequency spectrum. At the same time, a magical and dense image solidity, dimensionality, liquidity, and palpability of midrange textures is here in abundance. This works because music, as heard in a live situation via acoustic instruments, is not artificially seasoned, either, with the exception of the imprint of the venue in which it is being performed (which comes through easily and well with the Topaz). I think this is, in part, because the Svetlana 572 triode tube (a modern triode of recent design) is a far more accurate device for music reproduction than most triodes of old, certainly capable of *far* better performance at the frequency extremes than most others I have heard. Then there are those custom-made output transformers, the real secret to the ultimate performance of any SET design.

A word on pricing and product availability: The Topaz 572B was originally sold for \$11,200. Since Wyetech was, in the last five years, not able to attract the kind of quality dealers it wanted (except for Marc Rusch's North Country Audio in Redwood, New York), it has changed its strategy and is now marketing its products directly through franchises. All sales in the US are routed through North Country Audio, and the rest of the globe needs to contact the factory directly. This has meant a drop in prices across the board; today, full retail for the Topaz 572B is \$8,500. I believe that not only is this a fair price for such an amplifier, but that it is also, in this day and age, an exceptional value for an exceptional product.

The Topaz Design

The Topaz 572B stereo amplifiers employs 1 6SN7WGTA dual triode as an input tube, 1 6BX7GT dual triode as a drive tube, and a pair of Svetlana 572-10 triodes as output tubes in an all-class A1 single ended circuit that is totally self-biasing. Large value Solen polypropylene coupling capacitors are used to achieve an extended low frequency response. Custom-made Audio Note output transformers are used, each having windings that may be selected via front-panel switches for use with speakers rated at either 4 or 8 ohms. No feedback of any kind is employed at any point in the amplifier's design. Polypropylene in oil capacitors are used for storage capacitance, and a total of 6 heavy-duty chokes and seven large polypropylene capacitors are used in the power supplies. The chassis is of all-welded 12 gauge construction with a baked enamel lavender finish.

— SM

Am I indulging in the "flavor of the month" syndrome, where all competitors that have come before are now relegated to the slagheap of oblivion? Far from it. The SET amplifiers I discussed in Issue 128, for instance, still have all the qualities and charm I ascribed to them. This does not change just because something else is superior. The Wyetech Labs Topaz 572B is an amp of a different color (literally, too, as the thing is finished in a pale and pleasing, though surely unique, lavender); it preserves the fundamental directness of music reproduction that SETs are famous for, and at the same time reaches for and achieves, with appropriate loudspeakers, a new level of overall linearity of full-frequency response and accuracy of timbral information. These things stand out and reveal the truth of recordings starkly and unabashedly, with neither flattery nor ruthlessness. I applaud the vision and philosophy of its designer, Roger Hebert, for making this and the other products in the Wyetech line the way they are, without bowing to the "norm" or catering to a false perception of the marketplace. Those who want to have an SET amplifier and hear the truth will find it in the Topaz. Among amplifiers of its ilk, it is King of the Hill.

SCOT MARKWELL

MANUFACTURER/DISTRIBUTOR INFORMATION

Wyetech Labs

Phone: (613) 526-5390; fax: (613) 526-5797

www.wyetechlabs.com

Source: Manufacturer loan

Price: \$8,500

ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

Plinius M-16 and CD-LAD preamplifiers; Plinius M-14 phono section; Sakura Systems 47 Labs Model 4712 "Phonocube"/ Model 4700 "Powerhumpy" phono section & power supply; VPI HW-19 MK IV turntable w/ JMW Memorial 10" pick-up arm; Lyra/Scantech Evolve 99 & Clearaudio Discovery MC cartridges; JVC 1010 CD player (as transport); EAD Theatre Master preamp/DAC; Siltech interconnects and speaker cables; Stealth interconnects and speaker cables; Custom Power Cord Company Top Gun HCFI & Model 11 A/C power cords and Super Power Block A/C conditioner; Arcici Suspense Rack, Chase Technologies surround decoder with Linaeum LFX surround speakers, Crown Macro Reference amp for subs

SPECS

Output impedance: 8 ohms – 1.68 ohms; 4 ohms – 0.84 ohms