

Two Paths to the Way Of the Supreme Source

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Cary 805-C



Wyetech Labs Topaz

MEN OF GENIUS never error, their mistakes are the possibilities for discovery. We learn from imperfection, striving toward the ideal, gaining valuable insight as each revelation unfolds. The pathway to ideal has many roads, and with the case of the two strikingly different sounding, and *looking*, amplifiers at hand, a paradox visited many times before. One amplifier views the sunny side of the bill, steep in daylight contrast. The other, though miles from darkness, is basked in shade with a passive and pleasing character centered about a glorious midrange.

The hill concept of light was established by the ancient Chinese who attached the ideograms Yin (shady) and Yang (sunny) to mutually interdependent and potentially interchangeable forces. Despite the seeming polarity, each contains an embryonic essence of the other and is illustrated by the familiar Yin and Yang circle. The circle represents the Supreme Source, half Yin and half Yang, each with a dot of its opposite growing inside. The boundary of the two is S-shaped allowing that each is never fixed, with an ever-waxing and ever-waning tug of influence: upon the other. So it is with ancient Taoist beliefs in mind that we visit the estimable Cary 805C and, new to the industry, Wyetech Topaz, two triode amplifiers, each capable of driving a wide variety of loudspeakers.

The ageless Chinese painting *The Vinegar Tasters* depicts three men standing about a vat of vinegar, each has dipped his finger into the fluid and has tasted it. The first, K'ung Fu-tse (Confucius) has a sour look on his face, the second, Buddha, wears a bitter expression. The third man, Lao-tse, author of the oldest existing book on Taoism, is smiling; he believed that harmony naturally exists between heaven and earth from the beginning of time and can be found by anyone. If the painting included Cary's Dennis Had, you would not be surprised to see a man gleaming ear to ear with a smile of contentment. Mr. Had's philosophy of music reproduction is rooted deep in experiential pleasantness, far from the clinical beliefs many audiophiles embrace. His Cary 805 steps beyond words just as Lao-tse's belief in the Tao or "the Way" teaches that the way of the universe can not be described in words and to try to do so would be insulting to its power and to the intelligence of humanity. I will though humbly invoke descriptions to explain the magic of the 805 and Topaz so that you can share my listening experiences and evaluations.

The Cary 805 is evolutionary and, not unlike the Supreme Source, contains elements of both Yin and Yang within an overwhelming Yin infrastructure. If life be best when soft and sweet, as when laying close to a lover, then the Cary will be your choice and will embody all that is necessary for unceasing musical enjoyment. The 805 creates an

endlessly deep and wide stage from which instruments spring softly into life with auto-focus agility. The attack is not defined in Newtonian physics as ironclad sharp (I'm thinking here of solid-state low distortion and, at times, lifelessness) but rather as a linear evolution of each instrumental tonal transient expanding upon itself until the sonic signature is manifest. This growing or expanding of transient emanates from a living ocean of spatial texture that appears to attach to instrumental tonal identifiers prior to full resonance.

Mozart's *Piano Concerto No.22* aptly demonstrates the Cary's ability to pre-define air space. Horns initiate the work with a rushing and rolling of air rising to tone and sustain as the flutes and oboe enter. Breaths appear vividly natural as the musicians lips blow across reeds and down columns of differing lengths. This air blowing sensation is, through the Cary, the best I've heard, and balances perfectly with the instrumental tonality blending to form the highest degree of reproduced realism. I cannot say this is first time I've experienced this other than live, but this amplifier exhibits this ability all the time; a most superior air-dynamics recapture ability. As instruments enter and leave or work in unison, the Cary softly outlines individual definitions much as you experience them in the concert hall.

High resolution audio systems often fail at emphasizing edge delivery, pulling you out of a music paradigm and seating you in a self-synthesized analytical environment. As a cutting edge audio reviewer, I know this location all too well and find that my directions and interests are becoming more and more based on the result, not the process, and the result has to be happiness and enjoyment. I no longer enjoy the analytics of a Spectral-based Avalon system for this reason alone. I believe both are exceptional products and represent the state-of-the-resolution art, but if you want to enjoy the musical experience, I believe there are other paths to explore. This is why I focus on audio equipment that, in my opinion, delivers a more natural portrayal of life. if you happen to compare the Cary next to a state-of-the-art transistor behemoth and not focus on audiophilisms, you will prefer the Cary, that is if you like naturally produced music. I know many who are too over-schooled in the arts of high fidelity to enjoy the musical expressiveness of the Cary.

The 805, like most all single ended designs, lacks the final and authoritative word in low frequency pitch definition, though there is bass, and it is not rolled off as many would have you believe. My current reference speaker, the Classic Audio Studio Standard 11 is 3 dB down at 28 Hz. When mated to the Cary, you attain this limit but the leading edge is a little blurry when compared to, say, the new David Berning 80 watter (which has the best bass definition to date with an appallingly realistic low-frequency tonality). The 805 has character, as do all amps, even those of which measure to infinity with abundant bandwidth (white comes to mind here). The Cary's character is sweet and musical and natural like a warm concert hall. Do not misunderstand, a character, such as it is, is not formed at the expense of detail retrieval, it just attaches to the instruments and becomes part of the timbre; realistic yes, clinical no.

The Cary, earlier said, is an evolution. It has been refitted to the 845 output tube (from the 211). Generally, a 211 output based amp offers greater transient reproduction and leading resonance impact, an 845 is not as sterile as a 211, nor does it offer the bass wallop and reach as its look-alike brother. The Wyetech Topaz, which mind you is named for its color, employs the 211 power triode, and herein lies the greatest difference between the two. The Topaz is clairvoyant and up-front in its imaging and tight below, while the Cary offers mid to rear-hall presentation and is softer in the lows. Again, don't misjudge the Cary here, it has wonderful bass impact and one that mates with the whole.

The Topaz mates as well, but does it in a different and "Yang" or sunny way. I originally thought the Topaz too forward and bright but after a number of days, I made system and attitude adjustments and thought it the more fun of the two. With the Topaz in the system, I found myself playing many old-chestnut recordings, skipping from track to track, to feel the punch and get the audio fix. If the Cary had the Topaz's bass impact, it would come at an expense (I assume) and would detract from the musical impact of the Cary's gestalt. My listening panel much preferred the Cary on an afternoon exploration, while I (wise to the ways of both amps), liked the Topaz for its strengths and on a ABX basis I became quite ambivalent. Longer term listening disallowed snap judgments and the Cary became my preference as well. It remains proven over and over that the attributes that are preferred during short-term analysis usually do not hold over extended periods of time.

The Yang-like Wyetech Topaz is a stereo amplifier (the Cary a mono block) and boy, is the Wyetech big and heavy. It uses Audionote transformers and has a massive power supply. It also sports the best low-frequency reproduction I've heard in a single-ended amp, though I should point out that I unassumingly became well-versed as a proponent and reviewer of such designs and have heard in my system more single-ended units than probably any other North American audio reviewer. The Topaz is 18 watts of triode amplification versus the Cary's 28. Both amps can drive big speakers with efficiencies as low as 89 dB. You have to be very careful with impedance matching, as with all amps of this genre, but due to the relatively high power outputs (at least for single-endeds), I can recommend trying them on most any speaker, though I'm not going to offer a strong recommendation on matching either with the Quad ESL due to a disappointing match with the 845-based Komuro.

The Topaz is lavender in color, and yes, I've never seen anything quite as startling, but after a while it grew on me. The Cary is champagne silk and industrial black and visually refined. The Topaz is a bold sounding and a brutally forceful beast that bespeaks its appearance. It offers greater tonal impact than the Cary and can be very vivid, if not a tad aggressive. The piano on Beethoven's "Sonata in C Major, Op. 102, No. 1" for cello and piano is a percussion showpiece through the Topaz.

The hammer strikes are clear and superior in definition to the reproduction through the Cary. I like the Topaz's decay as well. It seems to trail off each note and chord separately from the next. On close examination, the Topaz reproduces the sound of a piano better in timbral terms, while in spatial presentation the Cary is the superior. The Topaz appears less veiled, but offers a smaller acoustic environment between and around the instruments, and remember, it's upfront as well. The Topaz is grain-free (a statement the Cary can not agree to), and more precise in focal imaging, it unzips layered texture better than the Cary and, as mentioned, murders the North Carolina amp in the bass. Still, I prefer to listen to music through the Cary and judge it one the best amplifiers, if not the best, for this purpose.

The Cary breathes life into the vastly deep soundstage it recreates, the Topaz projects it. Let me explain. The Cary sets the performance in an organic acoustic, while the Topaz presents the musicians in your listening environment. The Cary's spatial signature is identifiably warm, airy, and wooden, the stage being pre-set with natural acoustic presence. The Topaz is absent of predetermined air texture and totally dependent upon the recording where it slightly abbreviates each instrumental signature (the leading spatial transient). The result of the Topaz's slight cropping of leading air produces an exceptional clarity and one, I believe, responsible for its excellence of instrumental timbre. The Topaz soundstage is forward and extends several feet in front of the loudspeakers, while the Cary's begins at the plane of the speakers and extends rearwards in tantalizingly endless depth. Not to say that every recording will follow these rules

but that generally you can predetermine instrumental positioning by amplifier selection.

The Topaz will produce ample depth, but the recording must abound with it, as with the hauntingly beautiful Arvo Part recording of "De Profunds" by the Theatre of Living Voices on Harmonia Mundi. The choir, with either amplifier, is set distantly in the rear soundfield in a vast semicircle surrounded by a yet larger organ which pierces through the choir in the higher registers. The bass pedals are anchored tight to the back wall with both amplifiers, but what is interesting is the depth rendering of the choir. The Cary produces more of a three-dimensional gathering of voices, while the Topaz packs them tighter together. I'm moved (on this recording) by the scale and majesty of the Topaz and wonder if its superior bass reproduction is the answer. I pause here thinking the Topaz has more "living presence" with the Part recording even though its overall presentation is ever so slightly two dimensional. I suspect I'm returning to the clarity factor discussed above. High-frequency performance is objectively equal but distinctively different. The Cary extends farther up than the Topaz but is less crystalline as octaves increase. The Topaz is cleaner in the highs but ever so rolled at the tippy top. I believe there is a pinch of grain inherent to the Cary that begins in its upper midrange and blurring higher frequency extension, here the Topaz suffers none. Maybe the soft grain works as an added acoustic and is cause for the soundstaging differences as well. It never detracts from the Cary's listening pleasure and is only "there" while you're looking for it.

Warm-up times are substantially different between the two. The Cary gets to operational pleasure within minutes, the Topaz takes hours. I often leave the Topaz on overnight for morning listening sessions. This is a major inconvenience and even though you can pull cables during operation for quick comparisons, it still takes the Topaz well over an hour to come into its own upon reattachment. A great feature of single-ended amplifiers is the ability to run them unloaded, you can change cables, switch amps and speakers at will, too bad the Topaz is not more friendly here. Tube life with either amp should be several years and replacement cost is low so either amp is dirt cheap to run, though dear to own. A pair of Chinese 211s or 845s run as low as \$60 from New Sensor. There is a reliability issue with the Chinese tube that predicates owing a back-up pair. Quality control is low with failure rates as high 20 percent, though I've been informed that the following batches will be highly improved.

The Chinese descriptive *feng-lui* translates as *flowing with the wind* or, perhaps better said, "to fly in the ace of convention." Both of these amplifiers under study represent the antithesis of those from the modern high-powered output, low-efficiency college. If we step back and ponder that both schools result in identical frequency ampliification and visceral sensation, then what advantage is gained to choose? Well, this is complex, but let me suggest that the distortion levels of the single-ended units contain additional musical pleasure over the push-pull approach. Single-ended units have even harmonic distortions which attach to the signal within the transformer versus the push-pull process that strips the signal of any artifact of deviation (prior to the transformer by phase splitting and then summing again at the transformer in polar opposite with odd- and even-harmonic distortion cancellation) leaving a scientifically "pure" signal. So we have a house with two floors; one clean and clear with neatly stacked text books of theorems and measurement techniques, the other, a hodgepodge of life, items here and there, with books of classical literature tossed about.

The Cary and the Topaz amplifiers both capture the culture of music. The Wyetech's path to the Supreme Source might be defined in a Yang Technicolor vibrancy, while the Cary's is more natural and casual, basking in the Yin-like shade of the Tao.

NOTES

Wyetech Labs Topaz, \$9,800. Distributed by North Country Distributors, Cadence Building, Redwood, NY 13679-9612; phone 315/287-2852, FAX 315/287-2360.

Cary 805 C, \$8,495 per pair. Manufactured by Cary Audio Design, 111-A Woodwins Industrial Court, Cary, NC 27511; phone 919/481-4494, FAX 919/460-3823.

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Volume 4, Issue 1