

Wyetech Labs Topaz



For about 12 years, this company has produced some of the best audio hardware this side of the Atlantic Ocean. Wyetech Labs' designer, Roger Hebert, insists on quality work, which is why all important circuitry, assembly and testing is done by him. His amplifiers and preamplifiers, are built to exacting, self-imposed standards that exceed established codes. A look at the chassis design easily confirms that this amplifier is a bit different from most others on the market.

Appearance:

The most apparent differences from other vacuum tube amplifiers are the location of the speaker terminals and

RCA inputs at the front (most other amps have these terminals on the rear of the chassis). For this upgraded model Hebert has used the original Topaz chassis—a robust solid steel design finished in the traditional purple. A large LED shows red when the unit is in the standby mode, and a green LED indicates the unit's readiness for operation. Two new output transformers, the input and output tubes, additional (caged) power transformers and a couple of toggle switches for impedance (4 and 8 ohms) complete the top front of the unit. On the rear, only the on/off /standby switch and the fuseholder is visible. As with the earlier Topaz, one can't help but be impressed with the look.

Source:
Wyetech Labs

Price:
\$10,800.00 Cdn
\$9,800.00 US

Rating: ♪♪♪

Technology:

Hebert's first design employed Chinese-made 211 output tubes which resulted in superb sound, but quality control was not sufficient to assure reliability. Some had filament defects, likely from poor packaging, and some were poorly constructed causing the carbon plate and the tubular connecting structure to feed noise into the system. The second generation Topaz was constructed using 572-10 tubes which eliminate the noise problem, but also alter the all-round sound—still high-end, but not up to Hebert's self-imposed standards. For this new model, Hebert returned to the 211 tubes manufactured by Valve Art, finding that they were reliable, well made and provided better overall sonic finesse.

Whereas Audio Note E-1 type transformers were used in the earlier Topaz amps, the new model employs a double C core, copper wire wound transformer made by the Italian firm Bartolucci. This transformer boasts wider bandwidth and better low frequency response than the Audio Note design.

The hand-crafted, printed circuit boards are said to be new technology and feature fixed double turrent terminal posts. Most components are mounted on these terminal posts, but chips, relays and associated parts are mounted in sockets, soldered to the board.

The double-sided PCBs are of superb quality (they are also employed in the company's Sapphire monoblocks). They are elevated from the metal chassis to avoid capacitive coupling (between components). In addition, the PCBs boast full solder masking on both sides of the epoxy surface with silk-screened markings to identify parts for easy servicing.

Hebert always insists that "it's all in the power supply" and the new Topaz power supply speaks for itself when one switches on the unit to listen to...

The Sound:

The small WLM Auras, the larger Audio Reference (both reviewed in our last

issue) as well as our Editor's Ethers Vitaes served as auditioning loudspeakers. The Audio Aero Prestige CD player (reviewed in this issue) and the Piccolo turntable/Benz cartridge (reviewed in our last issue) were source components and wiring was done with Nordost, Zen and Cardas cables. To assure immaculate AC, all components were plugged into the Exact Power EP 15A line conditioner (reviewed in Vol. 16 #3), coupled with the Nordost Thor power distribution centre (reviewed in Vol. 16 #4).

After a few hours of listening, we were able to establish the amplifier's fundamental sonic signature and compare it with the two previous Topaz models.

Whereas the original Topaz provided more apparent resolution across the audible frequency range, it did so at a price, namely slightly diminished harmonics in the midrange. The new Topaz, however, picks up and delivers harmonics with clearly delineated textures allowing listeners to hear the music's substance and spirit, albeit without the heightened resolution. Our panelists agreed that the new Topaz delivers a distinct harmony in its sound, affording a more intimate nearness to the music. The amplifier reaches deep into the frequency abyss, presents crystal clear midrange and exquisitely culminated highs—all adding up to a very satisfying listening experience. All our auditioning loudspeakers demonstrated the Topaz's sonic signature and synergistic compatibility, but we chose the WLMs as the most gratifying match.

With the WLMs, the overall sound was smooth and effortless with dynamics comparable to those achieved with powerful solid state designs. This system combination provided the kind of sound we'd characterize as organic. In addition to the system's musical integrity, the Topaz introduced imaging, spatial elements and focus (on the performers) like no other amplifier we have auditioned with the exception of the Audio Aero Prestige monoblocks (reviewed in Vol. 16 #4).

Hebert always insists that "it's all in the power supply"

With the Audio Reference loudspeakers the Topaz exhibited a similar sonic character with a tad better extension in the lower bass region, while midrange was a little more recessed. However, the AR's tweeter/super tweeter configuration quickly showed the amplifier's natural and relaxed smoothness at high frequencies. While this system handled all program material with ease and suitable musicality, it lacked that definitive touch of refinement. Although there was enough "glow" in the midrange, this system didn't achieve the superb spatial elements noted above. However, it did allow astounding, true-to-life horizontal, vertical and front-to-back imaging.

With the Editor's Eterra loudspeakers, the all-round sound was very close to that with the WLMs in the system, but it again lacked completion in all but the high frequency range. "Perfection" is an arbitrary term that confers superiority, but is based on subjective assessment. Thus, completion, or the lack of it, is perceived by our listeners who gauge all-round sound by performance. In this Topaz model midrange bloom, harmonics and imaging was very close to perfection. The various cables worked well, some highlighting imagery (the Zen), smoothness (the Cardas) and neutrality (the Valhalla). However, all cables established the Topaz's musical stability and choosing a cable is an issue best dealt with by the end-user.

Synopsis & Commentary:

Manufacturing vacuum tube electronics can be relatively inexpensive, and there are many amplifiers and preamplifiers on the market with ridiculously low price tags. However, as in any other business, price variation is dependent on parts selection, workmanship and attention to technical details. Add to this the planning, the many hours of testing, adjusting, retesting and finally, the finished product trials—the debugging. If done correctly and with the essential consideration for quality, the product price will increase. We mentioned this to alert potential consumers that quality

is never inexpensive—and the amp under review illustrates that quality electronics can't be regarded as bargains. Nevertheless, we believe that you get what you pay for and a "bargain" for some folks simply means lasting quality. The Topaz falls into this category; it can be employed in almost any system with loudspeakers rated at about 89dB efficiency or better. Needless to say, the loudspeakers used with the amplifier should be of good quality, although this is where personal preference comes in and the choice should be left to the discretion of the end-user. However, if you wish to replicate *TIE's* splendid sound, the system combinations mentioned above will do the trick.

Like all single-ended tube amps, the Topaz exhibits the most desirable elements of such designs: blossoming highs and mids, richly textured musical information and full-bodied bass. Where it differs is in its ability to provide deep bass with more primary resolution than most such designs. Unlike many single-ended tube amps, the Topaz completes frequency extremes—the highs and the lows—with unwavering firmness, but without diminishing the all-round musical glow.

With this model, Hebert has added the finishing touches to an already superb design. According to him, the sonic improvements are the result of a synergistic parts selection which included the use of very beefy transformers. Though we aren't technical wizards, we do know that power supplies are of the utmost importance and may well be the reason for the aforementioned improvements. In the final analysis this new Topaz offers that crucial musical quality that touches the soul and provides listeners with a truly outstanding sonic experience. This amplifier presents a modern update of an established technology that translates to a lifetime of listening enjoyment. ¶

www.wytechlabs.com
tel. 613.526.5390

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