

## Wyetech Opal Line-Stage Preamplifier

There aren't many products that can transform an audio system. The Wyetech Opal line-stage preamplifier is one of them.

Wyetech is hardly a name that trips off the tongues of High Enders. Few have heard of it. I hadn't. I have now. Based in Ontario, Canada, Wyetech Labs is the home of computer-industry veteran Roger Hebert, who's turned his design talents to High End audio. I haven't yet heard his amplifiers, though I'd dearly love to – my experience with the Opal proves it by far the best preamplifier I've ever had in my system.

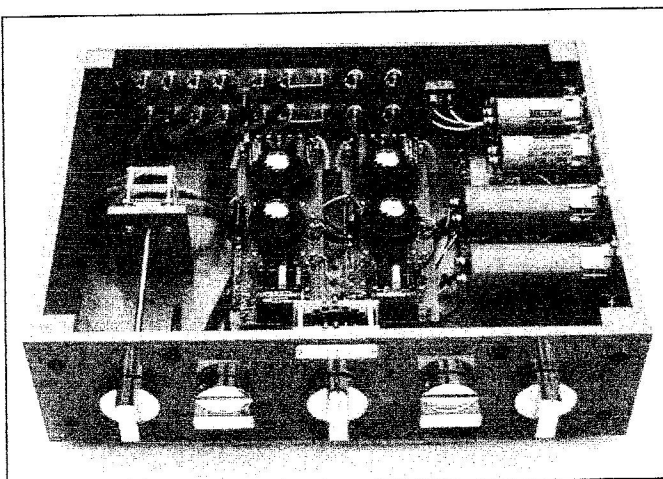
The first thing you notice is the Opal's appearance. When was the last time you saw a mauve preamp? Few of us can even imagine an electronic component that's not finished in basic black, silver, or a combination of the two. It's also built to last, inside and out. Think of it as a California line stage, because when the Big One hits and you search through the rubble for what's left of your life, the Opal will be waiting for you, ready to play when juice is restored.

The Opal is a two-piece line-stage preamp with a 39-pound control unit linked via an umbilical DC-shielded cord with 30-amp Neutrik connectors to an 18-pound power supply. Both pieces, aside from color, are conventional looking enough. But a closer look (and touch) reveals decidedly unconventional construction – a control chassis of thick machined aluminum plates bolted to square posts provides solidity as well as external radio-frequency shielding; a 14-gauge welded steel power supply holds all the magnetic components and has a filtered power system claimed to outperform a battery pack.

Overbuilding and high quality extend to the innards, as well. Hebert uses top-grade precision parts, including separate hand-crafted, hard-wired circuitboards for each channel. Dual-mono construction yields outstanding channel separation, while the grounded grid configuration ensures a wide bandwidth – Hebert claims a flat frequency response from 20 Hz to 100 KHz;  $\pm 1$  dB from 6 Hz to 375 KHz.

The Opal is tubed, which you'd never guess if you still think of tubes as colored, noisy artifacts. The power supply has a single 6X5; the control chassis, four military spec NOS 6SN7s. Because they operate at less than half their rating, they've a stated life of ten years at three hours per day. Hebert's confidence in the Opal's quality is reflected in a 20-year warranty (component parts and labor) for buyers who register their purchase within 15 days.

The front of the control unit has two LED status



indicators. One glows red when the Opal is muted or not fully powered up, a 70-second process whose completion is signaled when the other LED turns green. Five rotary switches, gold-plated, machined brass knobs weighing more than a half-pound each, offer control functions. There's a five-position input selector, the Mute switch, and a 24-position stepped attenuator used to fine-tune volume, flanked by two master gain-control knobs, one for each channel, that set overall gain and control balance. The rear panel sports the usual array – inputs for preamp out, line out, two tape inputs and outputs, and four line-level inputs.

My first aural impression of the Opal came before any music coursed through its innards. After turn-on, I heard – silence. None of the tube rush, hiss, and RF noise I thought a permanent feature of my system. Most of my listening was through Metronome's T-20 Signature transport, a striking improvement over the non-Sig version, especially when it was placed on the remarkable Solid Tech footers (another transformative product that made believers out of some confirmed non-tweakers I lured to listening sessions). I mention the footers to illustrate how revealing the Opal is, clearly registering any upstream change, however small. The Opal also demonstrated a new lack of coloration and a bristling energy when I replaced the Jadis JP-80 preamplifier whose phono stage I'd been using with the Plinius M14 phono preamp. The Opal brought a new airiness and ease to large-scale music even at lease-breaking volumes, revealing that the culprit was my old preamp, not, as I had thought, an under-powered amplifier.

First impressions can be deceiving, but after the briefest of warm-up periods, my impressions of the Opal were clear and unchanged, only refined, by the end of the review period. What I heard then – and three months later – was sound as neutral and uncol-

ored as I've ever heard in my home-listening environment. With a range of musical material from large orchestral blockbusters to intimate vocals to whispered guitar solos, the Opal's sound was extended, with powerful bass, natural-sounding mid- and upper-treble, and always a full, uncolored midrange. Detail and transient information were there in abundance, but always hand-in-hand with an innate musicality that conveyed the heart of the music. I almost wished it had a more definite character of its own so that I could label it a "yin" sound or a "yang" sound and avoid groping for adjectives. But "neutral" was what I heard, with neutral defined as the clear, accurate rendition of what I hear in a good concert hall from a good seat in the front-middle of the orchestra.

The Opal's wide bandwidth proved itself on Andrew Manze's set of Geminiani's *Concerti Grossi* [Harmonia Mundi 907261.62]. Manze is one of the few "original-instrument" violinists I can bear, playing with a flair and technical security shared by few of that breed. Sensitive to mid-treble harshness, I was gratified to hear clear, smooth appropriately pungent reproduction of Manze's violin and the pristine, grain-free strings of the Academy of Ancient Music and the way the Opal realistically captured the harpsichord discreetly shining through the ensemble.

But while enjoying these gems of the Italian Baroque, I noticed something else the Opal was doing – dying chords lingered a bit longer and harmonic overtones were more apparent. I was also conscious of a thousand details that had passed me by in pre-Opal sessions. Put simply, the Opal was retrieving more information than I'd thought was there. This heightened level of transparency and neutrality did not come, as it often does, at the expense of an overall musical experience. In fact, I noticed it only by making a conscious effort. When my system is purring along, sounding great, I get so wrapped up in the music, it's hard to focus precisely on what a specific component is doing. The Opal drove my system to do what good systems should do – draw me completely into the music. And I had to stop to examine that fact.

It happened again when I listened to Cisco's LP reissue of the old London recording of Brahms' *Symphony No. 2* with Istvan Kertész conducting the Vienna Philharmonic [KIJC 9221]. I was captivated by newly revealed details

that brought the music to life – the golden glow of the horns riding over a bed of velvet strings near the opening, the tympani's deathly tread at the end of the slow movement, the blazing brass at the work's fiery close. While great sound can't save a poor performance, it can enhance a good one, and after hearing this familiar recording with the Opal in my system, I have a fresh appreciation for Kertész' achievement.

The Opal's transparency, transient reproduction, and frequency extension were especially noticeable in John Cage's "Third Construction," on *Pulse* [New World LP 319]. The combination of high-pitched tin cans, conch-shell blats, hard snaps of cricket callers, and the roar of the rubbed bass drum, which sounds like a lion waking from a bad dream, tests a system's transient response and resolution. The piece never sounded better on my system – a constant refrain in this review.

The Opal's extended frequency response was readily apparent, too, in the sparkling upper treble of Bill Evans' piano on *Moonbeams*, an album reissued on JVC's superb XRCD series [JVC 60214]. Here the Opal again demonstrated excellent microdynamics, as drummer Paul Motian's brushwork went from slow, whispered caresses to sharp rhythmic slaps.

And its deep, powerful bass, something that had been lacking in my system, was revealed on Ray Brown's delightful *Super Bass* album [Telarc 83393]. Recorded live, three outstanding bass players, joined on some tracks by piano and drums, do about everything you can do with the instrument – bowing, plucking, strumming, slapping, and more. In "Centerpiece," Christian McBride's bowed climax is joined by Brown's *fortissimo* pluck. The Opal clearly separates the two sounds, each in its own space and the bass transients with great impact.

Overall, the Opal sounds gloriously palpable. Jimmy Rodgers' vocal on the Howlin' Wolf classic, *Howlin' for my Darling* [Analogue Productions CD 2001] had an in-your-room presence that dazzled. Coleman Hawkins burly tenor on Classic's LP reissue of *Back in Bean's Bag* [CS8791] had thrilling immediacy. Soprano voices, too, took on a solidity that's often elusive, as heard on Joan Sutherland's London LP set, *The Art of the Prima Donna* [OSA 1214]. I must have played one of my current CD favorites, mezzo-soprano Véronique Gens' recital of French songs [Virgin 45360], a dozen times before the Opal

arrived. Now the voice was firmer, more solidly located in space, surrounded by hall sound. The piano accompaniment I had thought recessed now moved forward, more realistically balanced with the voice.

The Opal doesn't lie. Bad recordings sound bad, good ones sound good. Great ones are mind-boggling, a cliché confirmed by Reference Recordings' *Mephisto & Co.* [RR-82]. The very first notes of Liszt's *Mephisto Waltz* virtually exploded from the loudspeakers. The energy of the Minnesota Orchestra and especially the lower strings bespoke qualities new to my home-listening experience. Here was the real thing, an orchestra in full cry, seemingly, briefly, right in my living room! After the shock faded, I noticed the way high-pitched bells and triangles cut through the ensemble the way they do at Carnegie Hall. The rumble of the bass drum was now heard, not simply sensed. Vast dynamic range, from ear-shattering climaxes to delicate *pianissimos*, left me speechless.

I was also left convinced that the Opal is an extraordinary instrument, one to set among the best High End components. At \$8,400, the Opal is priced more reasonably than many of its competitors in this mad, mad world of High End. If you *must* have analog as well as CD, you can pair it with a good, reasonably priced line stage, and the total cost will still be considerably less than some of the five-figure preamps the Opal outperforms.

Give it a hearing to taste greatness.



DAN DAVIS

#### MANUFACTURER INFORMATION

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Source: Manufacturer Loan

Warranty: 3 years parts and labor; for 20 years parts and labor, register purchase within 15 days

Price: \$8,400

##### SPECS

Tubed line-stage preamplifier; four line level inputs,

1 tape input, all unbalanced

2 pre-amp outputs, 1 tape output, 1 line level output, all unbalanced

Gain: front-panel master gain controls variable from 9 to 15 dB in 1 dB steps; 24-position stepped volume control with 12 steps of 1.5 dB per step

Input impedance: 50 k/ohms minimum

Output impedance: 425 ohms

Signal-to-noise ratio: None given

##### ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

Metronome T20Sig transport and C20 DAC; Forsell Air Reference turntable; Jadis JP80 preamplifier; Plinius M14 phono preamplifier; Jadis JA-80 amplifiers; von Schweikert VR4 Gen II speakers; Siltech digital cable, interconnects, and speaker cables; Harmonic Technology Pro Silway II interconnects; Harmonix digital cable, footers, and resonance control devices; Shun Mook pucks and discs; Solid Tech footers