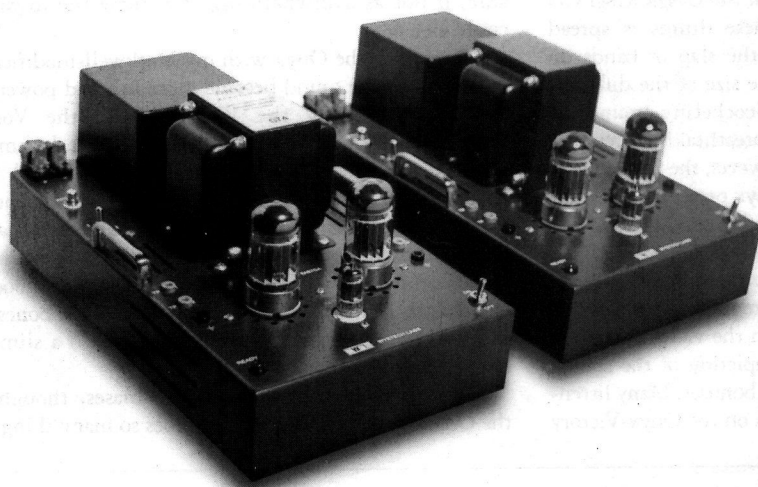


Wytech Onyx Amplifier: Single-Ended – With a Difference



Wytech Labs' 13-watt single-ended triode Onyx monoblock amplifier defies expectations. Put aside thoughts of the stereotypical SET's euphonic colorations and flabby bass. The Onyx is a lean machine, with extended frequency response and, mated to the right speaker, tight, powerful bass. The overall sonic impression it leaves is of cool efficiency, on the slender side of neutral in the continuum of cold to hot. In a blind-listening test, you'd be forgiven if you thought you were hearing a top-rated solid-state amplifier.

Think of the Onyx as the little engine that could. But not without huffing and puffing when I inserted it into my reference system anchored by the Von Schweikert speaker rated at 91 dB sensitivity. So, given the requirements of low-powered SETs, Coincident Speaker Technology's Victory loudspeakers detoured *chez* Davis en route to Scot Markwell for review. At a nominal 14-ohm impedance and 97 dB sensitivity, the Victories match well with the Onyx.

Like its big brother, the 23-watt stereo Topaz, the Onyx is a pure triode design featuring top-quality custom components, hand-mounted and -soldered PCB boards, no negative feedback, and short signal paths. Separate DC power supplies isolate the voltage/driver stages from the output stage. Each output triode (either 6080s or 6AS7s) has its own independent automatic biasing circuit. Wytech says this produces the purity you get with a single triode. It's

thoughtfully designed, with external toggle switches for instant speaker-impedance selection and handy grip bars on the sides, although at 31 pounds, it doesn't really need them. The Onyx is the same distinctive mauve shade of other Wytech products, including the Opal preamplifier with which I've had a requited love affair since reviewing it in Issue 127.

Critical listening began with my favorite stress tests – violin and soprano voice. If a piece of equipment can't reproduce them

without hardness, I don't want to listen to it. A killer test is the closely miked Cassandra Wilson rendition of Sondheim's "The Ladies Who Lunch" on Don Byron's *A Fine Line* [Blue Note 26801]. She starts *parlando*, accompanied by Byron's growling bass clarinet, then the voice swings up the scale to the highest registers, then down again, deep and husky at the bottom, bright and clear at the top. Getting the tonal shadings, vocal and instrumental nuances, and spatial relationships right is a challenge. So's the wide dynamic range and plentiful transients such as sticks on cymbals, sharp, explosive rim shots, and the kick drum's hammering. This is an overwhelming track, musically and sonically, that I can't recommend too highly. The diminutive Onyx and the Victories met the challenge, producing sound vivid and true, if slightly lean.

Angela Gheorghiu's version of "Mercè dilette amiche" from *I Vespri Siciliani* on her *Verdi Heroines* recital [Decca 466952] left a similar positive impression. The Onyx reproduced her soprano voice beautifully, with sparkling highs and mellow richness in the lower mid-voice. The Onyx's excellent dynamic control guaranteed no blurring of Gheorghiu's rapid trills.

The often acerbic strings of period instruments are exacerbated by cold, ruthless equipment and falsified by overly warm systems that erase differences with modern strings. With the Onyx, strings of the chamber ensemble from *Europa Galante* were just right in the outstanding disc of Luigi Boccherini's

String Quintets [Virgin Veritas 45421], with overtone structures intact and a marvelous depiction of the interplay among the instruments.

Jazz and chamber music played to the Onyx's strengths. The warm intimacy of the Jimmy Giuffre 3 was compelling – turn-out-the-lights-and-wallow music full of delicate nuances and subtle tonal shadings [ECM 1438/39]. Schubert's *Trout Quintet*, [Classic Records LP RCA LSC 2147] added to those virtues outstanding microdynamics and natural spatial representation of the instruments, with Victor Babin's piano placed slightly behind the strings and the perfectly-reproduced double-bass anchoring the ensemble at the right, just as you'd expect from one of the better shaded dog LPs.

Onyx's accurate soundstage was a constant delight. In "Conga descarta," on the *Conga Kings* CD [Chesky 217], a consort of these drums is spread across the stage and you hear the slap of hands on drumheads, the position and the size of the different instruments, and their sounds ricocheting around the studio walls, all rendered with breathtaking accuracy.

Turning to bigger works, however, the first hints of trouble began to surface. The Onyx presented a satisfying rendition of the unique Heifetz sound in Rózsa's *Violin Concerto* [LP Classic Records RCA LSC 2767]. The cutting edge of Heifetz' intense tone and the rich baritone huskiness of his lower register came through nicely. The mini-dialogs between the violin and other instruments and the accurate depiction of the spatial relationships between them were bonuses. Many listeners will find this close to Nirvana on the Onyx-Victory

combo, but I felt a slight thinness of textures and light-weight tonal balance compared to the warmer, fuller sound of this LP on my reference system.

Dynamics were somewhat attenuated in the "Clerks" track of Schnittke's witty *Gogol Suite* [Pope 1007]. The enormous dynamic range of the music, from soft start to cataclysmic climax, was less wide than on my reference system, though still full of impact. Even more telling was Paul Dukas' *The Sorcerer's Apprentice* on Reference Recordings *Mephisto & Co* [RR-82]. This has become a favorite test piece because it has everything – pungent trumpets, resonantly woody string basses, triangle and cymbal transients, deep bass, wide dynamics, and overpowering orchestral climaxes. On first hearing, the Onyx-Victory combination was enjoyable, if not as overwhelming as I knew the music could be.

Replacing the Onyx with my Markwell-modified Jadis JA80s, the sound became more full and powerful. And replacing the Victories with the Von Schweikert VR 4 Gen IIs produced still wider dynamics, richer, deeper tonal and image density, and a resultant leap forward in emotional involvement. Here we are treading the rough terrain of personal preferences, for I favor sound on the slightly warm side of neutral. What I hear from a good seat in a good hall has a solid layer of flesh covering its bones. Others may prefer (and define as "accurate") a slimmer, lighter sound.

Setting aside personal listening biases, though, the Onyx embodies paradoxes. It does so many things

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*Jonathan Valin, *The Absolute Sound*, Issue #121

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right — but they're not always the things you expect, and it can fall short where you expect it to excel. This low-powered amp exhibits far more muscle than others of its breed, even delivering tightly controlled and defined bass. It's satisfying in chamber music and small jazz ensembles, although it doesn't have the warmth and abundant tonal fullness SETs usually supply. It defies expectations with a fat-free sonic signature that sounds more like a solid-state product than a tube amp, much less a SET. If your preferences are in accord with those characteristics or if most of your listening tilts toward small-scale jazz and chamber music, the Onyx's manifold strengths strongly suggest that you give it serious consideration.

DAN DAVIS

MANUFACTURER INFORMATION

Wyetech Labs

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www.wyetechlabs.com

Source: Manufacturer loan

Warranty: 2 years parts and labor, 1 year tubes;
extended warranty (timely registration required):

7 years parts and labor

Price: \$4,500/pair

SPECS

SET monoblocks

Output power: 13 watts RMS per channel

Frequency response: ± 1 dB > 9 Hz to 22 kHz;
 ± 3 dB > 6 Hz to 38 kHz

Output impedance: matches 2-12 ohms and up
via external toggle switches

Input impedance: 60 kilowatts

S/N Ratio: Not given

ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

Forsell Air Reference turntable; Koetsu Rosewood Mk II cartridge; Plinius M14 phono stage; Metronome T-20 Signature transport, C-20 Signature DAC; Wyetech Opal line stage preamplifier; Jadis JA 80 amplifier; Von Schweikert VR4 Gen II and Coincident Technologies Victory speakers; Siltech and Harmonix Technology interconnects, cables and AC cords; Harmonix digital cable, footers and room treatment devices; Solid Tech footers; Shun Mook and Harmonix record clamps

Scot Markwell Comments


I am in close accord with Dan Davis on the Wyetech Onyx. I have heard the amps in his system with the Coincident Speaker Technologies Victories, a new ribbon-tweeter-equipped 97 dB/watt effort that features an impedance of 14 ohms (never dropping below 10 or going above 18, so it works well with

SETs), and with the same speakers in my system. I used a Plinius CD-LAD SS linestage and M-14 phono stage and the Forsell Air Reference II CD transport and EAD TheaterMaster digital-to-analog converter.

As Davis says, the Onyx resembles, as did its big brother, the Topaz, a really fine solid-state amp, yet it has the liquidity and lack of grain of tubes. Certainly these things sound nothing like a typical SET design. They reminded me of the Edge NL-10 solid-state amplifier that HP so favorably wrote about in Issue 127. Taut, fast, honest, and just on the lean side of neutral, this amp, like the Topaz, is not likely to find favor with the "hard-core" SET set, who crave a bit more warmth and even gooeyness in their triodes. But if you want genuine low-distortion SET monoblocks that perform like greased lightning in a bottle, these things may do the trick.

The best characteristics of the Onyx are its lack of distortion and excellent extension in the highs, and its superb articulation and pitch definition in the upper and mid-bass areas. Ultimate low-frequency punch and weight are not their forte, though to be fair, the Coincident Victories themselves taper off rather rapidly below about 40 Hz. I listened to these amps also with the Alón Exoticas, and the bass, although tight and well-defined, seemed to roll off in the same area.

But what they do well, as Davis says, is truly worthwhile. On the 33 rpm Classic Records LP reissue of *Lady in Satin* [Classic Records LP CS 8048], Billie Holiday's voice and its acoustic envelope are rendered as well as I have heard them, with a well-balanced harmonic structure and dynamic thumbprint that belies the 13-watt rating of these little beasts, and with a transparency that is remarkable. Big orchestral fare is not quite as comfortable, even on the Victories. The overall balance of the Onyx is just a little too lightweight to be truly convincing here; things like the CD soundtrack of *Gladiator* [Decca/Universal 289 467 094-2], although well-defined and superbly transparent, lack the oomph and weight to be completely convincing. Listeners who play more jazz, both instrumental and vocal, pop, and smaller-scale classical compositions will find this fare extremely well-suited for the Onyx.

Overall, not the equal of its bigger brother, the Topaz, but a fine effort at half the price, and with one of the most honest characters I have heard in an SET design. 

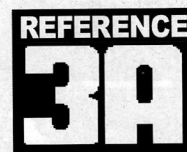
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