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# Trafomatic Audio Rhapsody

REVIEW Alan Sircom | Oct 07, 2024

There are two kinds of people in audio: those who only look at the price and power output of the Trafomatic Audio Rhapsody and those who've heard it. The former group shake their collective heads at the stupidity of audiophiles. Who else would spank down twenty grand on a twenty-watt integrated amplifier? Meanwhile, the latter are too busy laying down the cash to care what the others think. This 20W, parallel-single-ended, 300B-driven integrated amplifier looks the part. Be an idiot and just look at the spec sheet if you like, but if you want your music to sound like music and not vaguely organised noise, this sits at the top of the list.

To give the Trafomatic Audio amp its full name, it's the 'Rhapsody M2-15 Anniversary Stereo PSE 300B tube amplifier', but that's a bit of a mouthful. It does, however, do a lot of explaining. Launched in 2022, the amp celebrated twenty-five years of Trafomatic Audio. The Serbian brand was founded in 1997. It's a stereo amp, using two pairs of 300B tubes per side in a classic parallel single-ended layout. And the '15'? Initially, Trafomatic Audio expected to make just 15 samples of this amplifier. Then, people started hearing just what it can do, and it's now a firm fixture in the Trafomatic Audio line-up.

## The clue is in the name

A layer above the full designation for the Trafomatic Audio Rhapsody, the company's name itself is telling. 'Traffo' is a contraction of the word 'transformer'. So the name 'Trafomatic Audio' speaks of a company that knows its way around a transformer. It's one of the few companies that makes its transformers from scratch. It doesn't 'spec' them to a transformer manufacturer (or claim it specifies custom transformers while using off-the-shelf models). It builds its transformers in-house. That puts Trafomatic Audio in a tiny, very elite group of manufacturers.

Making your own power and output transformers comes into its own when you make tube/valve amplifiers. This is even more true when the company decides to make its 25th anniversary project its first-ever 300B design.

The choice of tubes/valves is relatively straightforward, with just two 6SN7 drivers and two pairs of 300B power triodes. Unlike amplifiers with more exotic (read: unattainable) devices where replacement is punishingly expensive and unpredictable, these are well-known and widely available devices.

## Tube rolling

This affords the Trafomatic Audio Rhapsody owner tube-rolling options and allows them to use both newly manufactured and New Old Stock classics. As we've had a hiatus in obtaining new Russian valves recently, knowing the Rhapsody's valve seats will never go empty is a bonus.

However, do not mistake a straightforward choice of output device for simplicity of circuit. This is not some 1930s cinema amplifier reborn and painted bright red. A toggle switch marked 'mesh' or 'solid' sits before each 300B. This is because not all 300B power tubes are alike. Originally, the 300B used a mesh control grid between the plate and the cathode. There are many examples still in circulation, but buying two matched pairs of Western Electric triodes will set you back around three thousand (in dollars, pounds or euros). Many other extremely good (and more modern) 300B designs have a solid control grid instead.

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## Anode dissipation

The difference is a change in anode dissipation voltage: 28 watts in the 'solid' setting and 22 watts in 'mesh'. Most modern 300B designs choose the higher voltage or fluff the matter by going for a 25/26V dissipation. Unfortunately, I don't have many different brands of 300B to hand, but by toggling between them, you could hear when the tube and dissipation voltage matched.

The other significant change from re-imagined old amp designs is using Panzerholz in the chassis. Typically, amps are made of pressed steel or aluminium billets. Sometimes, they are made from bits of copper (to help conduct heat) or even silver or titanium (for the super-rich). But the Trafomatic Audio Rhapsody is made out of hyper-compressed – and bulletproof – plywood. This extremely heavy 'tankwood' is an excellent material to machine and finish and is also remarkably good at controlling resonance. This is why it's becoming popular in manufacturing turntable plinths and even some loudspeaker enclosures.

The downsides to Panzerholz in these settings are its cost and weight and that – in a loudspeaker setting – it's often too good at its resonance-control job, creating a cabinet that can sound overdamped and dead. However, these properties make it an ideal proposition for a tube amp, where any prospective microphony robs the sound of its sonic purity. The chassis isn't completely made of Panzerholz. There are internal metal panels, too, but they are there more for safety reasons than as part of the physical structure of the design.

## Red ones go faster!

On the subject of 'design', the Trafomatic Audio Rhapsody is certainly a 'looker'. The combination of red and black with the contrasting off-white twin VU meters on the front panel gives the Rhapsody a timeless and classy appearance. A near-total absence of hard edges (thanks again, Panzerholz) only adds to its visual appeal. Other amplifiers hide their valves away with an ugly tube cage that is often removed. The Rhapsody has an understated Perspex screen with the logo in the bottom right corner.

I think most people will shy away from this to get the most from the amplifier's elegant lines, but if some kind of shielding from the tubes is required, this is a good solution. This isn't the kind of amplifier that ends up being hidden away in a cupboard. A matching remote handset joins it with limited functionality but is similarly easy on the eye. Of course, the Trafomatic Audio Rhapsody's colour scheme is fixed, so if bright red is not your bag, this is not your amplifier, but in fairness, it's one of those products that looks better in the flesh than even the most retouched photos can do credit. But, yes… bright red is not for shrinking violets.

It is a minimalist design, however, with just four inputs (three single-ended, one pseudo-balanced), WBT terminal taps for four and eight-ohm loudspeaker loads and nothing in the way of built-in DACs, phono stages, or even balance controls. You turn it on or off with a switch at the side, and aside from a volume and source selector, that's it! There's not even bias adjustment. It's just a pure, damn good amplifier in bright red livery.

## Sound per pound

There is a rule of thumb that holds surprisingly well throughout 'hollow state' audio: the heavier a product is, the better. Some logic backs this up. The heaviest parts of a tube amplifier are typically its transformers; the more iron in those transformers, the better.

The issue is clouded slightly here by the added mass of the Panzerholz chassis. Still, despite that extra weight, the load is uneven, and the transformers contribute much to the Trafomatic Audio Rhapsody's 'healthy' 32kg weight. Bear this in mind when extracting it from its packing crate!

Typically, amplifiers with 300B tubes come with a set of 'riders' or limits on their choice of speaker partner. Often, they are used with large horn loudspeakers, not just because of the comparatively low power of single-ended triode 300B designs but because the lack of iron in those transformers inevitably gives them a lightweight sound. This has become such a signature sound of the tube, it's easy to think that this bass-light performance is intrinsic to the 300B design.

Just a few bars into music played on the Trafomatic Audio Rhapsody, and you know just what the 300B is capable of, and we've been sold a lie about its bass. This tube is capable of great speed and refinement, but both aspects extend further than you ever thought possible. And those 20 watts… they pack a punch too! While this isn't an amplifier you would use on an insensitive loudspeaker in a large room, it quickly passes the 90% rule; it's all you need in 90% of systems in 90% of rooms. In other words, to paraphrase Paul Rudd in *Anchorman: The Legend of Ron Burgundy*; sonically, ninety per cent of the time, it works every time!

## Confession time

I must confess something about the Trafomatic Audio Rhapsody; I was not looking forward to it. Yes, it received some glowing reviews. And I heard it briefly sounding excellent with a pair of DeVore Fidelity loudspeakers (I can't remember which models). I've never liked 300B designs because of their low power and bass lightness. They always sounded lithe in the midrange and clean right across the board, but the leanness of the sound put me off. And now I have to retrace my steps because the Rhapsody is one of those amplifiers that sounds so damn lovely, it makes you reconsider everything you thought you knew about audio. Thanks to the Rhapsody.

What makes it so unique? It's the combination of an expressive and occasionally shockingly 'real' dynamic range, that almost magical sense of a live musical experience in your listening room, an innate sense of melody that draws you into the musical mix, and an over-arching sense of sonic accuracy. A few good amplifiers might manage to nail one or at most two of these aspects of performance, but the ones that get them all right are either the Trafomatic Audio Rhapsody… or cost as much as an Aston Martin.

## Shocking, twice over

That dynamic range is shocking, in a good way, twice over. It's surprising in that even music you know well – Rachmaninov's Symphonic Dances, for example [Zinman, Telarc] – can sneak up on you and send your pulse racing when the orchestra strikes. But what's also shocking is just how much dynamic range is on fine recordings, and how little we get through most systems. The Rhapsody gets out of the way of the music and lets it dance around the room. This, in part, contributes to that 'you are there' sense of being in the live space with the musicians themselves.

I don't want to make the association with classical or jazz recordings in case people draw the wrong conclusion and type-cast the Rhapsody as a 'not for rock' amplifier. It does rock well (it has to; designer Sasa Cokic is a keen rock guitarist, and his team looks like they will be playing a four-night gig at the Marquee soon). It's just that when you get recordings of live, unamplified instruments in a natural, physical space through the Trafomatic Audio Rhapsody, the hairs on the back of your head start to stand up. And here, Chet Baker was in the room with me. That was remarkable.

## Jack of all trades, master of most!

And then out came 'How To Disappear Completely' by Radiohead [*Kid A*, Parlophone]. I don't talk about *Kid A* as much as I should. It's one of those albums I play for listening and not critical listening. Nevertheless, it's a superbly recorded album, and this track, in particular, is outstanding. I returned to the first track – 'Everything In Its Right Place' – and played the entire album. Then, I did it again in stunned silence.

The 'stunned silence' was because I hadn't heard that much from the album since the first time I played it. It was so impressive through the Rhapsody and as a recording in its own right. Stepping down from Mount Trafomatic and playing the same album showed how fleeting this stunned feeling was. It had left me, and it was just another good album.

Downsides? You will need relatively efficient loudspeakers to get the most out of Rhapsody. They might be the meatiest 20W you'll ever get from a pair of 300Bs per side. But 20W is not 200W or 2kW, and that will limit the pool of first-class loudspeakers. And, if you play PA-loud in a big room, that power ceiling also applies.

But such things miss the point of the Trafomatic Audio Rhapsody. Just as dismissing it as 'an amplifier for the refined' is missing the point. The Trafomatic Audio Rhapsody is a class act. Cherry red case aside, it draws attention to itself purely through the music. The Rhapsody plays with such a vivid 'realness' that you might never want to listen to anything else.

## Technical specifications

- Output power  2×20W
- Operation  Parallel Single-Ended (class A)
- Tubes complement  4× 300B, 2× 6SN7
- Inputs  3×RCA + 1×XLR
- Outputs  4 – 8 ohm
- Input sensitivity  0.5V rms THD %  0.55% – 1W
- Frequency bandwidth  10Hz-75KHz (-3dB)
- S/N Ratio  80dB
- Input impedance  100K
- Size  470 × 370 × 260mm
- Weight  32kg
- Price  £19,998

Manufacturer

Trafomatic Audio

www.trafomaticaudio.com

UK distributor

Absolute Sounds

www.absolutesounds.com

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