

Vitus SM-101 Monoblock amplifier

The Thunder and the Silence

part One
January 2007



I promised myself some 10 years ago that once this endeavor of writing about audio stopped being fun, I would recede quietly into the inky black night. After all, my enjoyment of music was far too important, and vital to contaminate it with frustration, or even worse, benevolence. Luckily, my inability to keep to such virtuous proclamations has kept me in the game, and what a game it has been. This year has proven to be bottom of the ninth, bases loaded and a full count for all the components that have come to bat. Like some dream team line up, there has been one clutch hit after another. From the Focus Audio Master II loudspeakers, the Von Schweikert VR7 loudspeakers to the Nova Acoustics Memory Player, I have been introduced to a whole new level, a flier into what is possible in high end audio.

Coming off the review of another heavy hitter, the Karan Acoustics KA S450 which raised the bar for both price and performance, I was presented with the opportunity to review the new \$50,000 Danish monster in the Vitus Audio SM-101, 100 watt mono-blocks. A relative newcomer, I heard some pretty positive things about Vitus Audio from fellow instigator Dave Thomas who mentioned them at the '06 CES. Being that the North American importer is Focus Audio, it seemed a good fit, as I still had possession of the venerable Focus Master II. After a protracted wait due to production schedules and over zealous customs agents, the SM-101 amps arrived. Uncrating these beasts really should be a two-man job, but for what I have lost in the last ten years in brute strength, I have gained in the understanding of physics and leverage. This enabled me to extract the SM-101s from their boxes and wrestle them into position without hurting anything of significance. Lined up on either side of the Karan, they made this otherwise brawny amp look down right diminutive.

Taller than the typical amp, the extra height goes a long way in setting the Vitus amplifiers apart, lending stature to the strength of the wonderfully austere design. My amps came in black, though they are available in silver as well. The SM-101's front panel sports three buttons on the left side of their recessed acrylic center strip which embodies the Vitus Audio "V" reads: Standby, choose between Class A, A/B and Output status via single-ended or AES/EBU. You can also adjust for brightness of the display as well. The rear of the SM-101 sports some great binding posts. Why doesn't every manufacturer use these? It is a total mystery to me. If it adds \$100 to the cost of a high-end amp, it would be well worth it. I cannot imagine any potential purchaser not willing to pay for such a well thought-out feature. And if there is any question about the "I take myself way too seriously" attitude embodied by many high-end designers, then look no further than the description behind Vitus here: www.Vitusaudio.com.

Yes, the build quality is exemplary. The casework is freaking lust-inducing gorgeous. But by my math, \$50K per pair breaks down to \$500 a watt, by far and away the highest price per watt ratio I have listened to—in or out of my home. Quite frankly, I had no idea the amps were rated only 100 watts per channel when I received them. I probably would never have agreed to review them, as I know for a fact that 100 watts could never, ever even on a good day drive the VR7 in my huge room. Perhaps the Focus Master II, but they were waiting to be upgraded so my first impressions came via the VR7.

Right out of the box, I knew something special, very special was happening. While perhaps a tad cool and a bit on the lean side, the sound was so clean, so clear and focused, my system no longer sounded familiar. I simply was not prepared for the dramatic change. After all, while amps are important, their differences are usually pretty subtle, more often differentiated by shifts in tonal balance and the varying characteristics related to power/control. This is a simplification of my experience, for sure. However, I have listened to probably a dozen or more amps in the last few years. Some of them were very good, a couple great and in the case of the last amp I reviewed, the Karan Acoustics KA S450 a phenomenal piece of gear.

Then came the Vitus SM-101

What sets the Vitus apart? First off, within it's limits, and every component has them, the bass control /transient speed and dynamic impact is the best I have encountered from a solid state amplifier. It is truly astounding, astonishing or just go ahead and make up a word that goes beyond these adjectives to describe the performance those 100 pure Class A watts provide. Every disc I played to evaluate the bass of these amps was transformed. The absence of any coloration, darkening, bloating, spreading of warmth into the mid-bass or lower midrange allowed for intense rhythmic pace and swing. Track one "War Heads" from Extreme's Three Side to Every Story (A&M31454) explodes after the intro with a kick drum dominated back beat. I have listened to this track at least a thousand times, and I am here to tell you, it has never sounded anything like this. Some amps make it sound big and bold, some make it sound a bit leaner but tighter and drier. The Vitus gets it perfectly balanced. The lower registers are fast, with chest thumping power yet perfectly defined and resonant without the drying out of the drums natural bloom. The interplay with the bass guitar is so perfectly integrated and clear. This is no small task as the recording of the bass line is extremely tight, not to mention the precision and speed with which the bass is played.

With the bass foundation established, all types of music benefitted from this transparency and lack of noise. And it all come back to down to the noise floor folks. The best components designs have dealt thoroughly with this issue, as have all great audio systems. I have recently included the PS Audio Harvesters in concert with the Shakti Audio Stones. Each addresses noise from different angles. The Harvesters are in-line AC devices the remove noise from the flow of electricity. The stones are passive objects placed on or under components removing EMI/RFI. With them, the majesty of the Vitus' vast silence reveals a level of texture, detail and

space that has left me using such glowing terms over and over to describe these amps.

Head man Clement Perry and I often talk about how a great system can never be geared towards or play one type of music over another. Sound is sound whether being created by an oboe or a Stratocaster. It is understandable if the listener listens only to classical or jazz for instance, to settle on components that may mimic one characteristic or another, but at this level, the component in question should be the servant, never the master when answering the music's demands. In this vain, the Vitus utterly succeeds. From the very depths of the bass through the ultra sonic high frequencies, the lack of distortion allows the Vitus to personify what neutrality could and should be in the best sense of the word. It is truly uncanny and once experienced, there is no going back.

Within the context of these products, the system really came together with the inclusion of the Vitus Andromeda interconnects, speaker wire and AC power cords. Designed by partner Anders Grove, founder and designer of the highly regarded Argento brand of cables is considered a talent who knows his way around wire. As with the amplifiers, the effect is immediate and unmistakable. Naturally warm, open, exquisitely detailed and unrestricted dynamics come together in equal measure. There is a lack of any grain or tonal unevenness to get in the way. An entire review could be dedicated to the Vitus wire and when time permits, I will elaborate further, perhaps when I review the Vitus preamp and the soon to be released Vitus CD player.

I have yet to hear an analog/solid state amp that is able to unravel and so tightly focus individual sounds and images within the mix while at once sounding of one piece and coherent. The freedom from the overlay of noise gives each and every corner of the soundstage space to breath and "light up" as the music demands. The Grieg Piano Concerto from Chesky Records(CD050) demonstrates this well. While not the finest classical recording, the performance is passionate and the soundstage is wide and deep, if a bit recessed. The Vitus SM-101s delineate the piano and anchor it to the stage with surprising clarity. The horns that seem to appear out of no were light up the rear of hall, again with great precision and focus. This is an amp that banishes ambiguity into a distant memory.

If there is a rub, and if it's made by man there's one, it is the absence of distortion and coloration may be difficult to keep from straying into the lean or cool side of the spectrum. The Vitus wire's natural, even handed balance helps a great deal in this regard. As would a speaker with an open fleshed out mid-band. The Focus Master II with its upgraded crossover coil in place really fit the bill. The Von Shweikert VR7, while no slouch sounded a bit pinched and edgy when partnered with the SM-101. With the Master II comes a synergy that leaves little doubt as to either component's proficiency. The Master II posses a mid band and treble that is as smooth as can be allowing voices soar through the frequency range without any ringing or "shouting". With the help of the Tact 2.2x room correction preamp, I can further correct for spectral imbalances and contour the sound with little penalty. A terrific example of the Vitus/Focus mid band strength is Willie Nelson's "Healing Hands of Time". The moment the song moves beyond the opening and the performance opens up with the full orchestra supported by a wonderfully potent and extended bass, the sound through the Vitus amps can only be described as majestic. This is a disc that is really easy to get wrong. Nelson's voice is very closely mic'd and carries an edge that can be grating if the component embellishes in that direction. While the Vitus amps clearly reveal this in the recording, it tracks the intensity of the mid band forwardness with a very precise touch, while getting every thing around this narrow band of trouble just right .

Conclusion

This first look at the Vitus SM-101 mono block amplifiers has been a real eye and ear opener. 100 watts of Class A amplification that behaves like 300 watts or more. A noise floor reduced by a magnitude creating a un-mistakable sense of precision, speed, neutrality and control all add up to a compelling musical presentation un matched in these areas by any analog solid

state amplifier I have yet to hear. Partner this amp with suitable components and a uniquely high-end musical experience is forever on tap.

In part two, I will look into the unique technology employed in the SM-101, as well as a report on the inclusion of the Vitus SL-101 preamp and hopefully, the new Vitus SCD-010 CD player. We will also get to know the man behind the designs, Han Ole Vitus.

Greg Petan

Technical Specifications :

Vitus Audio Power amplifier SM-101

- Inputs:
1 x unbalanced (RCA) - 1 x balanced (XLR)
- Input resistance:
10Kohm RCA - 600ohm XLR.
- Outputs:
2 Pair pure copper bindingposts pr. ch.
- Output power:
More than enough!
- Sensitivity:
1.3Volt RMS
- S/N Ratio:
> 110dB
- Openloop bandwidth:
~DC-800Khz
- Slew Rate:
> 35V/us
- Distortion (THD+N):
Better than 0.01%
- Power Consumption:
Standby ~ 3W
Class AB ~ 100W
Class A ~ 400W
- Dimensions:
310 x 435 x 610 mm (H x W x D) (Each)
- Total weight:
~74 Kg. (Each)

Price: 50,000 US

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