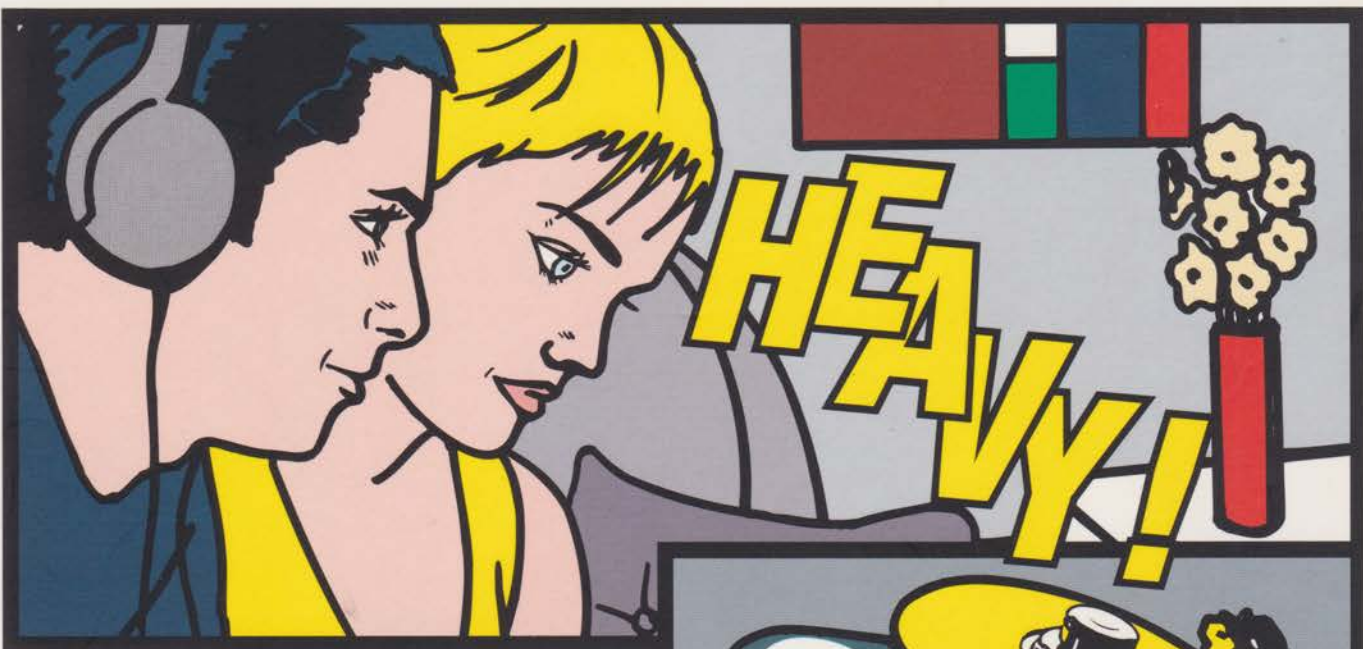


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AWARDS ISSUE

REPRODUCING THE RECORDED ARTS



The **Blue Pearl Turntable** was supported by **Reimyo**, **Audio Research** and **Vitus Audio** electronics. Not forgetting the **Alon**, **Ferguson Hill** and **JMLab** speakers, or the new **Naim** budget components. Just right for **Talking Heads!**



Vitus Audio Statement Series Line and Phono Stages

by Roy Gregory

Vitus Audio may be a name familiar to you as the provider of the optional phono-stage offered with the Nordic Concept turntable. On paper at least, it's an option that looks like something of a bargain. Ostensibly similar to the unit reviewed here (but without the exquisite casework and £8600 price-tag) it'll cost the Nordic Concept owner a mere £2800. Sounds good? Well, actually no, it doesn't. Read the review and you'll discover that despite its fabulous tonal purity, its lack of dynamic range and authority actually preclude it from serious consideration.

Why then, you might well ask, would I waste my time reviewing the vastly more expensive Vitus Audio version, along with its equally pricey partnering line-stage? The answer's quite simple: On a recent trip to Denmark I enjoyed the opportunity of hearing these units in the designer's own system. If they lacked any grip or authority then I couldn't detect it. Clearly, something wasn't the same, but more of that later. More to the point, who exactly are Vitus Audio and why do they think that someone might part with £18500 for one of their four-box pre-amps?

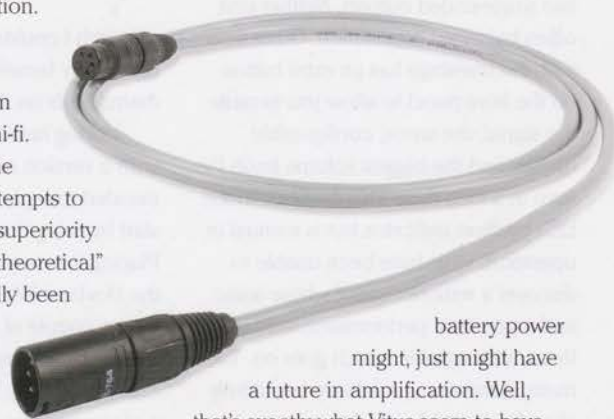
Vitus Audio might be small, but they're also perfectly formed. This is a long, long way from your average small-scale manufacturer. Just one look at the casework that wraps these units should tell you that. Fit, finish and presentation are as good as anything in the high-end. Although the company might have started small it clearly has big plans, the expertise behind the internals being derived from designer Hans-Ole Vitus's day job with one of the largest semi-conductor manufacturers. Besides manufacturing their own range of

electronics (there are mono-block power amps too) they are also the Danish importers for the highly regarded dCS digital products, Oracle turntables and electronics, SME and Soundlab: It's clear the company they wish to keep. Externally at least, they've got it right so far. Indeed, they carry all the hallmarks of the highest-end. Firstly there's that casework. Then there's the software driven controls and multi-configurable display. There's the plethora of audiophile components and the quality of the internal construction. But most of all, there's the power supplies.

Batteries are far from new when it comes to hi-fi. Indeed, the history of the hobby is littered with attempts to harness the theoretical superiority of battery power. I say "theoretical" because they've generally been messy, impossibly complex, unreliable or hopelessly flawed. The most obvious examples came from Pink Triangle (whose pre-amp and turntable power supplies seemed intent on locking the owner out) Crimson (who seemed incapable of generating any run-time) and Rowland (where the supplies were so intelligent they often refused to communicate with mere humans). Even DNM, perhaps the highest profile of battery users, abandoned them in the end, able to extract superior performance from a carefully designed mains supply.

However, recent attempts have proved far more promising, with both the Amazon and Nordic Concept turntables proving totally trouble free

in operation. Both also delivered excellent sound, although how much of that was down to the chosen power source it's impossible to say. Nevertheless, they gave grounds for hope, especially in the light of the sonic performance of the musically supreme (but supremely impractical) Final Music amplifiers. If only someone could get round the practical issues associated with keeping batteries charged and the sonic issues of their declining performance as they discharge, then



battery power might, just might have a future in amplification. Well, that's exactly what Vitus seem to have done, with both the Phono and Line stages running from internal, rechargeable cells, trickle fed from the smaller, external supplies. A front panel switch selects between charge and operate, with an automatic override if you forget to engage it when the amps are not being used: Simple, effective and above all, failsafe.

The phono-stage offers two, independently user configurable inputs, again selected from a front-panel button. They can be configured for moving-magnet or moving-coil, with parallel sockets allowing you to alter capacitive loading for magnets, or impedance for coils. Despite the front-panel display ▶

▶ that allows you to name each input (as well as showing charge status) actual input sensitivity is fixed, an indication of the straight-line simplicity of the circuit. The display can be dimmed or switched right off, only activating when a button is pressed. Internally the unit is entirely dual-mono and built from discrete components. Even the banks of rechargeable cells are separate. This is the big difference between the Vitus Audio phono-stage and the one supplied in the Nordic Concept. The Vitus has twice the battery on tap and it shows.

The same is true of the line-stage. Twin battery packs feed the dual-mono, discrete circuitry, but this time offering five, single-ended inputs and two single-ended outputs. Neither unit offers balanced connection. Other than that, the line-stage has an extra button on the front panel to allow you to mute the signal, the same, configurable display and the biggest volume knob I've seen in a long time. This carries a subtle LED position indicator, but is manual in operation. Vitus have been unable to discover a remote control whose sonic and ergonomic performance satisfies them, although the search goes on. The matte aluminium panels are beautifully chamfered and finished to create a box with entirely flush faces apart from the dark-grey relief panel that supports the display and provides visual contrast to the flying front-plate. This is some of the nicest casework I've ever seen, and along with the carefully chosen socketry goes a long way towards establishing the products' high-end credentials. This is external appearance executed to superb standards rather than simply to impress. Having said that, it impressed the hell out of me. If these units sound half as good as they look and feel, Vitus will have justified their price.

I used the Vitus Audio electronics with a variety of associated equipment, but predominantly the Clearaudio

Master Reference and Blue Pearl record players, the latter fitted with the Triplanar tonearm and Lyra Titan cartridge. Power amp was the Hovland RADIA driving either the Reference 3A Royal Virtuoso or Revel Performa F50 loudspeakers.

Cabling was Nordost Valhalla throughout,



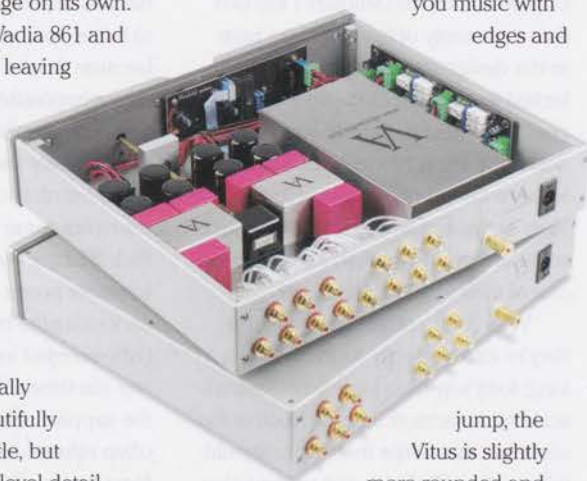
although I couldn't detect any benefit to using the mains leads on the battery supplies!

Having had some past experience with a version of the phono-stage, I decided to separate the two units and start by using the line-stage on its own. Placing it between the Wadia 861 and the Hovland RADIA and leaving it for a couple of days to warm up, I was ready to start listening. What a pleasure: I was greeted by a wide, wide sound-stage and a wonderfully clean acoustic space, totally devoid of grain. Music was presented with a totally convincing tonality, beautifully coherent and full of subtle, but superbly integrated, low-level detail. Playing 'The Thing You Love...' from Dolly Varden's superb *The Dumbest Magnets* (Flying Sparks TDBCD 052) I was astonished by the wealth of inner detail in the chords played by the strummed acoustic guitar. The subtle cymbal work was equally impressive, the horizontal dispersion of the closing

hi-hat almost uncannily realistic. Diane Christensen's voice is solid and convincingly present, her harmonies with Steve Dawson perfectly pitched and spaced. Indeed, the whole performance was remarkably impressive, and for once I wasn't missing the Vibe and its ability to cut to the musical quick. Time for a little experimentation.

Swapping back to the Vibe with the Pulse power supply provided a fascinating contrast. Rarely have I heard two units that are so similar (in terms of musical communication and level of resolution) but so different in their presentation. The Vitus can't match the inky blackness of the Vibe's background, or the agility and absolute authority of its micro-dynamics. In its place it relies on what I can only describe as poise and musical confidence. Whereas the Vibe is uncompromising, even stark, the Vitus is gentler and more beautiful.

Whereas the Vibe gives you music with edges and



jump, the Vitus is slightly more rounded and rather more genteel. The problem is that such descriptions almost inevitably overstate the case. As I said, in terms of detail, resolution and absolute dynamic rang, the two units are hard to separate. What sets them apart is the way they deal with the astonishing amount of sheer information on offer. The Vibe ▶

► excels in terms of leading edge placement and definition, preserving the timing cues that establish the form and relationship within the music and performance. Its micro-dynamic control gives an intimacy and directness to the playing that communicates the energy and creative tension at work. The Vitus is supreme in terms of the overall shape and especially the decay of notes. If it doesn't place the initial transient with the laser like precision of the Vibe, it's unerringly accurate in its centring of notes, thus matching the Tom Evans design when it comes to unraveling the overall structure and strands within a piece. Just listen to the timing and juxtaposition of the phrases that make up the opening to the Dolly Varden

track and you'll see what I mean. The overall shape of the musical strands as well as the way in which they mesh together is beautifully captured, but at a note by note level. So convincing is the structure, harmonic identity, spacing and shape of each note that the whole to which it contributes becomes a given. That's what I mean about musical confidence. The Vibe oozes authority because its music is grounded so obviously. You can hear each note start from nothing. With the Vitus the effect is

different: almost like reverse engineering. Here, the notes slip so effortlessly into the prescribed pattern that it's almost like constructing a musical jigsaw. Which came first, the notes or the structure as a whole? With the Vitus you almost start to wonder.

Clearly, the next stage was to factor in the phono-stage, and once again

I used the Tom Evans units for comparison. Initially,

I'll admit to a degree of disappointment

but that



Moving-Coil Cartridges and Impedance Loading

The critical impact of cartridge loading on overall system performance is finally receiving the attention that it deserves. An increasing number of phono-stages now include user adjustment of loading as standard, often employing either dip-switches or, as in the case of the Vitus, plug-in resistors (either as external plugs or directly onto the board). If we can only get them to treat precise gain matching equally seriously we'll actually be getting somewhere! Especially if, alongside the adjustable option they provide a couple of solder posts so that once the user has settled on the precise value required, they or their dealer can hardwire a high-quality resistor of the preferred value into place. The problem is that cartridge loading is a system parameter rather than just a cartridge one. The load applied to the cartridge effects the damping of its generator mechanism: Not hard to understand how that is going to have a pretty profound effect on the sound as a whole. But think beyond the cartridge interface to the dynamic performance of the tonearm and indeed, the system as a whole and it should become clear that these factors also influence the choice of load. I say "should" because it's only just dawned on me, despite nagging away at the back of my mind for some years now. The final decision on

loading must be based on the dynamic performance of the system as a whole, something that makes specific recommendations on the part of the cartridge manufacturer almost impossible. Experience with the Vitus really brought this home. Whereas with the Groove I am perfectly happy to load both the Clearaudio Insider Reference and the Lyra Titan at 100 Ohms (there are internal electronic reasons to do with the chips used) the Vitus displayed clear preferences for more precise matching with dramatic sonic benefits in evidence. I ended up with the Clearaudio running into 300 Ohms, the Lyra looking at 500 Ohms. Yet the rest of the system, pre-amp aside, was identical. Consider then, the possible influence of amp and speakers on proceedings. These changes were the result in the differing dynamic potential of the Vitus phono-stage in particular, and to a lesser extent, the line-stage. What do you reckon? Incidentally, this whole issue throws an interesting light on the transatlantic debate regarding cartridge loading. To what extent is the oft-stated US preference for 47K loads with MC cartridges a function of the relatively slow dynamic response of the huge amplifier and wide bandwidth speaker systems so often in use. The massive absolute dynamic range on offer needs all the help it can get in terms of front-end speed, while the large-scale sound-stage that results from the 47K load will actually be in appropriate proportion to the enormous dynamic swings on offer. Hmmm...

quickly evaporated once I'd optimised the cartridge loading (See sidebar). In fact, the performance of the phono-stage mirrors the line-stage virtually point for point. The sound-stage is even deeper and impressively dimensional, with nicely scaled and solid images within the acoustic, but I suspect that that's more a function of the superior source material than the electronics themselves. Playing the Colin Davis *Tosca* reveals that the Vitus combination falls short of the sheer drama you get from the Groove, but the scale, dimensionality and the naturalness of the vocals is adequate compensation. Noise performance is fine, although I wouldn't recommend the use of really low output cartridges. I reckon that around 0.3 mV would be a sensible minimum, with the likes of the Ortofon MC7500 definitely being below the acceptable threshold. The loading system works, although a hard-wired option would be nice, as would some control over gain. On the

▶ positive side, the two independent inputs were an absolute blessing, especially for those who want to optimise mono replay, while the provision of a proper, indeed a WBT, binding post for earth termination was also welcome. Why can't more people get this simple thing right (Mr Evans take note!).

If I was to pick sonic holes in the performance of the Vitus they would centre on the smoothing of bass textures, which

don't show the same insight and inner detail as the mid and treble. The top-end is sweet and unforced, but again, if anything lacks the last ounce of edge, bite and air. Do these things concern me? Not one iota, because they contribute to the sheer, addictive listenability of the Vitus pre-amplifier. This is a solid-state, battery powered combination that delivers all the seductive musicality normally associated with the best valve units, levels of detail and resolution that approach the best solid-state competition and fit and forget practicality to match any mains powered units.

I've spent some time comparing the sound of the Vitus electronics to the benchmark performance of the Vibe, Pulse and Groove Plus. That in itself should tell you a lot. That they pass the comparison unbowed, asking questions of their own should tell you even more. Across all the music that I've played, the Vitus combination

has never disappointed and never failed to reveal the beauty and emotion in a performance. The pacing and phrasing, the delicacy, shape and grace of Yvonne Lefebure's playing has never been so apparent, her Bach never so beautiful. The power and emotional depth of Caballe's *Tosca* is equally as seductive, while Leontyne Price IS

Carmen. And the Men They Couldn't Hang? As irrepressible and irreverent as ever. Do I really need to say more?

Vitus audio may be small; they may be the new kids on the high-end block, but that they deserve their place is indisputable. The name might not be that well known but I've a feeling that that's only a matter of time. Take the trouble to seek them out and I'll be surprised if you are any less impressed than I was. More evidence indeed that the status quo in high-end audio is on the move. These electronics might seem expensive, but unlike so many of their price peers, they deliver full value in both engineering and musical terms. I loved them!



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Statement Phono-Stage

Type: Battery powered
Solid-state phono-stage

Inputs: Two, independently configurable

Connections: RCA phonos

Outputs: 1 pr RCA phonos

Output Impedance: 80 ohms

Gain: MC 61dB / MM 30dB

Input Loading: Via RCA plugs on rear panel.

Run Time From Full Charge: Aprox 48 Hours

Battery Life: 10 years

Dimensions -

Phono-Stage (HxWxD): 80x435x370 mm ,

Charger (HxWxD): 80x148x360 mm,

Weights -

Phono-Stage: 12Kg

Charger: 2Kg

Finish: Natural Alu w. dark grey inner front or inverted. Other colours available upon request at additional cost.

Price: £8600 / €12700

Statement Line Stage:

Type: Battery powered Solid-state line-stage

Inputs: 5x single-ended RCA phonos

Input Impedance: 10Kohm

Overall Gain: 6 dB - 12 dB optional

Outputs: 2x single-ended RCA phonos

Output Impedance: 80 ohms

Run Time From Full Charge: Aprox 48 Hours

Battery Life: 10 years

Dimensions -

Line-Stage (H x W x D): 80x435x370 mm,

Charger (H x W x D): 80x148x360 mm

Weights -

Line-Stage: 13Kg

Charger: 2Kg

Finish: Natural Alu w. dark grey inner front or inverted. Other colours available upon request at additional cost.

Price: £9800 / €14400

Manufacturer:

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