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 fourbox 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...
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 Howland 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 Howland 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 soundstage 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 Sparx TDBCD 062) 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 Christiansen'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 gentee. The problem is that such descriptions almost inevitably overstate the case. As I said, in terms of detail, resolution and absolute dynamic range, 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
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 points 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 a 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 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 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 hardwired 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 unbowled, 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’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!

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### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

**Statement Phono-Stage**

- **Type:** Battery powered
- **Inputs:** Two, independently configurable
- **Connections:** RCA phono
- **Outputs:** 1 pr RCA phono
- **Gain:** MC 61 dB / MM 30 dB
- **Input Loading:** Via RCA plugs on rear panel.
- **Run Time From Full Charge:** Aprox 48 Hours
- **Battery Life:** 10 years
- **Dimensions:** Phono-Stage (H x W x D): 80 x 435 x 370 mm, Charger (H x W x D): 80 x 148 x 360 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:** £8800 / €12700

**Statement Line Stage:**

- **Type:** Battery powered Solid-state line-stage
- **Inputs:** 5x single-ended RCA phono
- **Input Impedance:** 10Kohtm
- **Overall Gain:** 6 dB – 12 dB optional
- **Outputs:** 2x single-ended RCA phono
- **Output Impedance:** 80 ohms
- **Run Time From Full Charge:** Aprox 48 Hours
- **Battery Life:** 10 years
- **Dimensions:** Line-Stage (H x W x D): 80 x 435 x 370 mm, Charger (H x W x D): 80 x 148 x 360 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:** £8800 / €14400

**Manufacturer:** Vitus Audio

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