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U.S. EXCLUSIVE



VITUS AUDIO SL100

TRUE BALANCED LINESTAGE

Reviewer: Linnman

Source: Zanden 2000 premium transport; Zanden 5000 Signature DAC

Preamp: Vitus SL-100

Power Amp: Vitus SM-100 monoblocks

Speakers: Kharma Midi Exquisite Reference

Cables: Argento Serenity Master Reference (digital, power, interconnects); Serenity Master Reference Extreme Edition speaker cables (biwire)

Racks: Finite Elemente Pagoda Master Reference

Powerline Conditioning: None, just a simple AC strip without any filter called MTP-6 from Oyaide of Japan

Sundry Accessories: None.

Room Size: 11' w x 15' d x 10 h'

Review Component Retail: Vitus SL-100 \$30,000 (Vitus SM-100 \$45,000/pr)



Silence before the Crescendo

This review was written after 14 days of around-the-clock burn in of the SL100. Major incremental improvements were observed during the first 3 days and then began stabilizing towards the end of the 1st week. From the 2nd week onward, my ears sensed no dramatic changes and I have since been completely captivated by the vividness of music portrayed via the SL100. In order to do a credible review, I also invited J. Lam (a professional musician by training) to contribute a few paragraphs on his impressions of the SL100 from a musician's perspective. This is followed by Marvel, a respected Hi-End icon in the local high-end scene who shares a second consumer's point of view.

The Vitus RL100 -- which just won Roy Gregory's *Product Of The Year Award* in England's premiere magazine HiFi+ -- has been my reference linestage ever since the Goldmund 22M departed in January of 2004. I have long anticipated the arrival of the fully symmetrical SL100 with two transformers for each channel housed in a single chassis. My partnering amplifiers, the SM-100 monos, are a fully balanced design whereas my older RL100 is an unbalanced preamplifier. Nevertheless, the RL100 offered me a spectrum of emotional variations that I couldn't find with my previous reference. The Goldmund 22M excelled primarily at the *quantity* of microscopic detail, presenting a sense of exclusivity as though the performing artist was owned entirely by the listener, playing solely for him or her. Sometimes I felt as though placed in the middle of the orchestra rather than sitting in the audience. It was, however, a very exciting experience despite certain perspectives of the original presentation being somewhat distorted.

Music, to my understanding, is ultimately a *real-time* exchange between the performer and the listener. The experience is direct. Regardless of whatever form of distortions appear in-between that may affect any part of the frequency spectrum, what concerns this reviewer the most are the following: the original textures of the performing instruments; the coherence and interaction amongst the performers; and the overall dimensionality that houses each individual musical object in its own defined space.

With the Vitus SL100, the violin strings accompany its wooden resonance, the piano tip-toes on its notes with reverberation, the oboe differs from its clarinet/bassoon counterparts, the piccolo ascends to highly pitched notes with finesse, double basses decay on rhythms. With the RL100, one can see the pianist handling the keyboard with pristine clarity as if one were watching the performance from a high definition



monitor. With the SL100, we can actually feel varying finger pressures dancing and strolling on the keyboard in a continuous fashion to transcribe a lyrical experience from the keys. With each passing turn of the fingers, the universe is born anew and dies away. And this short moment is filled with an unprecedented degree of harmonic richness underlying each tone. The experience is simply live, as though you were there with French pianist Helene Grimaud who -- in her recent recording called *Credo* on DGG -- is able to inject a sense of youthfulness and tenderness to balance the complexity of Beethoven's composition. (I was listening to the *Piano Sonata No. 17 in d minor, op. 31 no. 2* "The Tempest"). Now remember that I am reviewing a solid-state preamplifier.



Such subtle luxuries are achieved without sacrificing the big picture of the musical scene. The overall dimensionality is frameless, the performance venue thoroughly sketched. Each individual musical object exists in complete absence of image overlap or intermingling while maintaining its inherent instrumental characteristic as elicited by the respective performer. In short, complexity is unfurled into its components; intensity is developed into the overriding structure; music is delineated via its calm beauty.

The famous Chinese proverb *silence is golden* can be rightfully applied to the SL100. Silence portrayed by the SL100 is a thing of beauty. This is not the kind of stale tranquility achieved by filtering out all unwanted noises. Imagine the kind of morning where one wakes up to the sound of mocking birds flying high in the sky as opposed to waking up to loneliness, without the rustling sound of fallen leaves and the sighing sounds on the winds. It is this kind of precious silence that enables us to experience the true sense of *silence between notes*. The performer's state of mind is revealed through microdynamics and nuanced details that may sound trivial to many but do elevate the communicative power of music. With such silence, the SL100 can effortlessly demonstrate the ascent of any instrument's note to its peak before decaying within the instrument's harmonic texture. Yet this speed remains integrated with the musical notes to give the silence a sense of strength or presence.

Vocal performances via the SL100 are stunningly real and resemble very closely human freshness. Feeling the discrete intake of breath and the lip movements of the vocalists is not the most difficult part. However, reproducing them in a manner that links each word/movement to form a complete line of expressive lyrics with emotional variations in a three-dimensional manner is a daunting challenge. It thus requires the retrieval of the smallest microdynamic fluctuations and excellent handling of the

shortest bursts of transient energy that can be neither overdone nor underplayed. This is especially important in reproducing soprano voices [Magdalena Kozena *Love Songs* - Dvorak, Janacek, Martinu on DGG]. In another recording, male/female choir layers demonstrated the blending of voices within the church acoustic without compromising the natural timbre of individual singers.



Abundance of detail is common among high-end gear of this caliber. What segregates the Vitus from the competition is its ability to render a solid foundation of the soundstage based on the minuscule tonal property values of various instruments and vocals. On Diana Krall's *Live in Paris* [track 3 "Indeed I Do"], it was apparent that I was sitting some distance away from the drums. I could feel the impact and vibration of the drums spreading across the stage instead of coming straight at me. The vibrations from the drums peaked and died down a bit before traveling across the great mass of the piano to reach my ears. The transient edge of various instruments was allowed to develop its body before subsequently diffusing into the surrounding space. The exact same observation applied to *The Best of Holy Cole* [track 9 "Train Song"]. The listening experience truly resembled a live performance. The instruments and vocals became a reference point for one another that formed a well-proportioned soundstage with proper width, depth and height.



Why did I headline this review "Silence before the Crescendo?" I tend to save the best part for last. The best part of the SL100 is its ability to strike a perfect balance between *strength* and *finesse*. Audiophiles are often carried away by those thunderous bass episodes of orchestral music to assess the dynamic capabilities of any given gear. This often negates the importance of musical plots characterized by constant changes of tempi and rhythm before leading the listener into the climactic crescendo. [Stokowski's *Rhapsody* on RCA/Victor's Gold Disk 1996 edition - track 1 "Hungarian Rhapsody No.2 in C-Sharp Minor" by Franz Liszt; and track 5 "Tannhauser: Overture and Venusberg" by Richard Wagner.] The undercurrent of bass instruments is very resolute and tunefully blends with the woodwinds and massed strings. The virtuoso treatment of the cadenzas for clarinet and flute of Stokowski's ingenious arrangement is fully revealed by the SL100's effortless ability to portray dynamics *in the upper octaves*. Positioning of instruments is very stable but not to the point of freeze-framing. It still conveys a feeling of human touch behind the instruments. Each of the sections occupies its own space performing the required responsibilities but never lacks the vitality of

communication between all sections. The interchange of intimacy and intensity is delicately controlled without omitting any steps and progressions.

All this leads to the ultimate realization of the composer's exquisite theme via the hand of the conductor. The crescendo of the orchestra suddenly bursts forth just like a tornado calling on all the fallen leaves and particles to form one formidable force. Similarly, rapid decrescendos are achieved within the blink of an eye, with all participating instruments quietly disappearing into airy silence before starting to roar again to whisk the listener into another frenzied climax. [*Mephisto & Co* on Reference Recording, trac .9 "Tam o' Shanter" conducted by Eiji Oue and the Minnesota Orchestra.] The macrodynamics of the SL100 are simply unmatched. Bass instruments play with proper collective weight and color. The resultant sumptuous orchestral motion liberates emotions from the listener whilst the SL100 frees the sound from the physical boundaries of the room (and remember, our Hong Kong apartments are sized such as to really benefit from spatial *transcendence*).



Music, space and beauty suffer no analysis. They are timeless. And so performs the SL100. This is what music lovers *should* pay for though under the current reign of consumerism, I am not entirely discounting the importance of craftsmanship. Make no mistakes about the SL100. The craftsmanship of the beautifully engineered chassis makes this object d'art weight close to 60 pounds after de-crating it from the wooden case. I am fully aware that this is my debut review for 6moons but I honestly cannot find fault with the SL100. This is a serious piece of machinery for the mature listener who cares about music and nothing else. If my previous preamps are considered references (Mark Levinson 380s, Gryphon Sonata Allegro, Goldmund) I have no hesitation to place the SL100 into the category of *Absolute Reference*.



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