

Vitus SIA-025 Integrated Amplifier

By Chris Thomas. Photography by Simon Marsh

Tempus certainly does fugit. I was amazed to discover that it is now over five years since I reviewed the Vitus SS-010. This was a 25 watt Class A power amplifier with a built-in volume control, allowing it to be configured as a rudimentary two-source integrated amplifier, or a stand-alone power amplifier. One of my most abiding memories though is of its incomprehensible weight for such a relatively small unit that required a two-man lift for safety. But that Vitus was a marvellous amplifier; beautifully composed, tonally quite rich, with realistic control and a rhythmic flow that was totally alluring. In Class A mode (it was switchable through A/B to A), it could be extremely sweet and rather beautiful sounding and Hans Ole Vitus' legendary and almost obsessive devotion to transformer technologies bestowed the amplifier with some stunning musical capabilities.

While resolution was of a high order, it ultimately lacked a sense of super focused and highly detailed articulation. To achieve this and move its performance into the super-amp league you really had to electronically disconnect its pre section to use it as a power amplifier alongside a dedicated high-end preamplifier. Then, of course, system synergy became a more critical issue if you were considering anything outside the Vitus range. But I loved it as an integrated for its simplicity and fantastic musical cohesion although to Vitus himself it was always primarily a power amplifier with a volume control – and let's face it – he was its designer.

These days the whole Vitus family of electronics has grown into a more complete proposition with three individual ranges and a custom-built fourth tier on the way. I am very glad to report that, although itself discontinued, the genesis of the SS-010 continues and its spiritual successor is the SIA 025 (stereo integrated amplifier) and if I thought the previous amplifier was good then this continuously proved nothing short of sensational, especially for a single-box component. This is from the Signature range of products and though it may look like the SS-010 at first glance, a quick check of the back panel shows that this is a completely integrated design.

The colossal UI transformers (UI indicates the shape of the unit) that have always constituted a large part of both the weight and the sound of Vitus amplifiers are its beating heart. Hans Ole employs them more like a surgeon's scalpel than a tree-feller's axe. The one in the SIA-025 is capable of delivering precise and wonderfully accurate doses of perfectly allotted dynamic power throughout the bandwidth. This gives it great appeal and prevents it straying anywhere near the path of clinically detailed amplification that is trodden by so much high-end audio these days. In a time where the cliché has been somewhat over-used, it truly is an amplifier you can listen to all day, providing the rest of the system is up to the task.

There are now a full five inputs with three of them being balanced XLR and the remaining two are single-ended RCA sockets. The speaker connections are the superb standard Vitus types (perhaps my favourites), allowing for 4mm or spade connections quickly and efficiently, without the need for additional tools. I am happy that Vitus has done away with the old Phillips Pronto unit in favour of a custom made all metal rechargeable design that works from anywhere in the room and doesn't require line-of-sight. This is probably rarer than you might think and a constant bugbear of mine. The angle of acceptance has been enormously increased making the control of volume, change of input or the class switching operation easy and consistent. When you switch the amplifier on or take it out of standby it automatically defaults to Class A/B so switching is something you will need to do every time. But, I do believe this to be one of, if not the best remote control I have ever used and it needs recharging extremely infrequently. ▶



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▶ The front window display though is not as accessible. As you can't actually read it very easily, if at all, from across the room and especially if you are way off axis, then its usefulness in these situations is questionable. But you will certainly need it when you are in front of the unit engaged in the initial set up of all the parameters, through the menu system. From here you can access the inputs, turn off those you are not using, name them, select their sensitivity etc, and you can change the brightness of the display and other parameters.

I have been told that most people, including 12 year-olds can master the menu within a few seconds, but I still don't like it. I have been caught in sections that I can't get out of on a few occasions. Now I know that Fraser and Mark at Kog, the UK importers, will be laughing when they read this and Vitus himself will be shaking his head while muttering Danish expletives, so let me apologise to them here and now. I operate many menu systems and like them to be simple and intuitive. No sooner do I think I have it when I push the wrong button and off I go again. I shall move on with my head hung in shame.

I have lived with the SIA-025 now for several months of listening. I have used three different CD players, a turntable set-up and four sets of stand mount speakers ranging from the truly diminutive Kiso, through the beautifully balanced Lindemann BL-10, a pair of Raidho's classy Eben C1.1 and Focal's powerful Diablo Utopias. Cable looms varied too, between Vitus' own Andromeda and a couple of Nordost set-ups and I even got a couple of weeks with Crystal's flagship cables, Absolute Dream. One thing that shone out through these changes was the SIA-025's stunning consistency and ability to do its "thing" regardless – and its "thing" is considerable.

In Class A/B the amplifier can deliver 100 watts of power into each channel but for sheer quality it has to be shifted into Class A mode. It's the absolute essence of the SIA-025 for me. From stand-by, straight into Class A I would say that you are looking at a half hour before it really begins to sing and then it just seems to keep getting better. Even after a solid afternoon and evening's listening I would swear that the amplifier was growing more fluid, textural and resolute with better dynamic contrasts, tonal shading and the delicacy of its musical message just seems to become more profound. At this point I feel compelled to add that a set of four Stillpoints Ultra SS resonance control devices sat under this amplifier offer one of the biggest musical bangs for your buck and I see them as a mandatory inclusion.

Now, I am more than big on system synergy as a concept for musical contentment. But I must admit that, to some extent, the Vitus tends to buck that trend by being excellent in just about every situation I put it in. Its musical attributes seem unhindered regardless of what speakers it was driving and through which cable loom. It maintains a feeling of total relaxation and ease and perhaps even more surprisingly, it never loses its impeccable tonal balance and this is no small feat. I must say that my listening was done in a smallish room and the speakers were all high quality stand-mount models so I cannot speak for fuller-range systems operating in large rooms, perhaps with inefficient speakers. But. Although that 25-watt Class A figure might be enough to dissuade many from even considering it, I would warn against being too hasty in writing it off as underpowered.

Perhaps I can mention Melody Gardot's new album *The Absence* at this point. This new release has a decidedly Latino feel, but it's the way that Melody uses her voice that gives it a very special flavour. Yes, she has a great way with lyrics and her phrasing



is certainly wonderfully relaxed but producer Heitor Peirera has done a fantastic job in giving her a beautiful and totally sympathetic opportunity to express the songs. He has understood what she, as an artist, is capable of and constructed a musical stage for her to open herself and her feelings into the music. Cleverly placing her close to the microphone he uses the sound of her lips shaping the words as a seductive textural palette which makes us lean forward to hear the nuance and the tiny dynamic shadings he incorporates wash the music with subtle colours that fit the mood of each song so wonderfully. It reveals a master-class in production and a lesson as to what a producer brings to a performance and why their true value is so often under-rated. The SIA-025 is absolutely marvellous in communicating this level of expression and performance. It seduces us with its uncanny ability to show each individual element in its full glory, yet maintain such a tremendous sense of cohesion that extends right through its explicit feeling of rhythmic flow and movement, to an alluring confidence in the way it allows the music to breathe. That it can do this without employing the iron-fist grip or dissembled bandwidth that encourages us to think in terms of bass, middle and top is, for me, one of its greatest qualities. It is also one of the things that keep bringing you back for more, as it seems to include you in the story and makes you want to hear more of it.

Listening to the track 'Night Sweats' from Larry Carlton's *Sapphire Blue* album just reinforces the very special feeling of close confidence that the SIA-025's way with music brings to a system. If The Absence utilises space and the darkness between for atmosphere, then this is a full-blown production, full of power, scale and presence, tonal contrasts and focus. I love the way the beautifully played bluesy, walking bass is established as a rock solid bedrock for the vamped Hammond organ, with its percussive leading edge to sit back off the beat with the drummer. The way the Vitus deals with the rhythm section and its fake suggestion of looseness is certainly critical. But it's when the rich pushed horn stabs change the emphasis of the tempo, suggesting a shuffle that you begin to understand where this amplifier can take you musically. It is so magnificently composed and lucid but has such fast, but relaxed control of the leading edge of notes. There is no snatching or confusion – just energy and flow.

The Vitus' appeal for me has got nothing whatsoever to do with the weight of the bass, its extension or exactly how much of it there is. It also has nothing to do with the usual hi-fi terminology and the vocabulary that most use to differentiate between equipment. The SIA-025 is about showing you the music and bringing you performance insight in a totally accessible way. Get the system right and it will find you sitting in your chair, closing your eyes, letting the music grab you emotionally to take you somewhere else.



If the price looks steep for a 25 watt integrated amplifier I think that you should still get a serious listen to it even if you were thinking of separates. It is that good. The Vitus SIA-025 is really about musical connection and emotional involvement and that is quite a compliment for any piece of equipment because those special experiences really are beyond words. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Integrated amplifier.
Inputs: 2 x unbalanced (RCA), 3x balanced (XLR)
Rated power: 2x25 watt Class A / 2x100 watt Class A/B
Freq. response: DC to 800KHz
S/N: >110dB
Remote: Yes, RC-010 – rechargeable.
Input sensitivity: 2, 4 or 8V RMS
Input impedance: RCA=10Kohms / XLR= 10Kohms
Power consumption: Class A/B: 50W; Class A: 250W
Dimensions: 130x435x430mm (HxWxD)
Total Weight: 42Kg
Finishes available: Consult importer
Price: £18,000

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