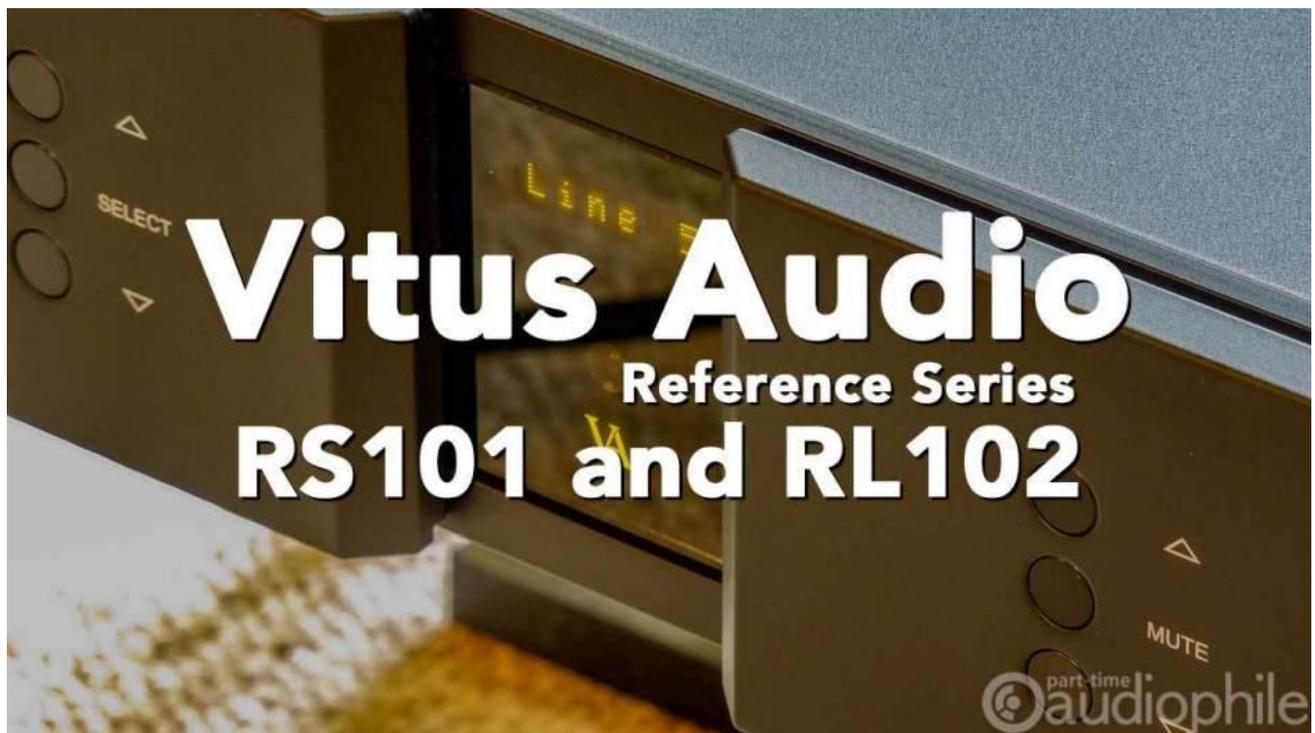


VITUS AUDIO RS101 AND RL102 | REVIEW

Entry-Level Summit-Fi, Revisited

Posted on July 7, 2019 by John Richardson



Looking at the **Vitus Audio** RS101 amplifier, or the matching Vitus Audio RL102 linestage (updates to the line that included the RS100 and RD100, which we reviewed a few years ago), it's hard to dispute that Hans Ole Vitus is a no-compromise kind of guy. According to his brief online biography, the Danish-born designer cut his teeth early on high-end audio, having taken apart, re-built and modified his share of components as a youngster. This interest led to a degree in electronic engineering, followed by a technical career with Texas Instruments. However, it wasn't too long before he decided that it was time to throw his entire creative weight into designing and building what he believed to be the finest quality high-end audio components possible.

Thus was Vitus Audio born, way back in 1995. It's telling that even with the advent of the company, Hans Ole didn't release his first commercial amplifier design until 2003. Such a move informs me that as a designer, Vitus wanted to get it right- the first time.

What I see is a company that moves slowly and deliberately, not releasing anything to the unsuspecting masses until it's ready to be released. I'm reminded of certain classic US companies such as Shahinian Acoustics and Klyne Audio Arts, both of which I regard highly for getting groundbreaking designs right the first time and then only mildly modifying them over the years. Why mess

with near-perfection? The Shahinian Obelisk speaker was first designed and sold back in the '70s and can still be had in a strikingly similar configuration that has only evolved as newer and better technologies have emerged. Given that some of the product awards associated with Vitus Audio's existing components go back nearly ten years, I'm thinking their designs are moving on a similar trajectory.

From a value perspective, I like this process. Isn't it upsetting to spend top dollar on a component only to find out that the "Mark Whatever" version gets launched six months later? And the "upgrade" will (only) run you half the original cost of the component!



Vitus Audio Revealed

Vitus Audio offers up three tiers of components: the Reference, Signature, and Masterpiece series. Within each tier exists digital front-end options, phono stage, preamplifier, integrated amplifier, and power amplifier models. As one might expect, higher tiers offer more power, visual refinement, better parts, and the like.

The components I have here for review are the RL102 line-stage preamplifier and RS101 power amplifier. Both come from the Reference, or entry-level, tier. I use the term 'entry level' quite loosely here, as neither of these components look, feel, or sound anything like what would normally be deemed "entry level," even in the sometimes absurd world of high-end audio. They're hardly inexpensive by any normal person's reasoning, either.

Anyhow, here's the skinny on each.

Vitus Audio RL102 Linestage

The \$14,400 Vitus Audio RL102 is a linestage preamplifier with three sets of balanced (XLR) inputs and two sets of single-ended (RCA) inputs. It also boasts a set each of balanced and single-ended outputs. Looking straight on at the unit's front panel, we see two columns of three push button controls, each column flanking an LED display panel. That's pretty much all there is to it; the preamp is a model of European simplicity and straight-forward sensibility. The RL102 doesn't strike me as artistic or beautiful in its outward appearance, but rather seems functional in a no-nonsense sort of way.

Dig a little deeper under the fascia, and we find that this audio tool is really all about versatility. In today's world with streaming audio and dedicated stand-alone phono stages, I sometimes wonder about the necessity of an old-school full-function preamp. Digital converters now feature high-quality volume control in either the analog or digital domain, and many even offer an extra set of inputs or two that let the converter serve as a simple preamp. That's all well and good in a pinch, but...

Sometimes we require the real versatility of a "true" preamplifier. I'm talking about features such as actual voltage/power gain, precision analog volume control, and even the simple option to utilize both single-ended and balanced inputs and outputs when desired. It's all about convenience of function, when and where I need it, without having to pinch hit. In other words, it's about versatility, and that's precisely what the Vitus Audio RL102 serves up so effectively.

In its programmable menu, the RL102 provides the listener with an unusual level of control and myriad options. It took me a bit of time to get used to the menu navigation, but once I did, I had nearly unlimited control over options such as sensitivity (gain), voltage offset, volume range, and display brightness. For example, one could easily account for the differences in voltage output between consumer and professional source components at different inputs of the preamp such that both operate within a common (normalized) volume range. Each input is also independently addressable with regard to each of the variables I mentioned above.

The provided remote controller is the standard Apple remote. It's universal and easy to use, but it is a bit cheap as a default option for a component of the quality and price of the RL102. Apparently, a higher-end version is available for additional money.



Vitus Audio RS101 Power Amplifier

The Vitus Audio RS101 (\$14,640) is a power amplifier that puts out 300 watts per channel into eight-ohm loads, doubling that output into half the impedance. Like the RL102 preamp, the RS101 is understated simplicity in its black-box appearance- no obvious audio jewelry on display here. Operations-wise, the user can, using front-panel controls, choose between XLR and RCA inputs, as well as mute the unit and place it into standby mode. That's pretty much the whole shebang.

The amp appears well built and is heavy, weighing in at 40 kg (that's about 88 lbs). Like many modern class-AB designs, the RS101 runs class-A for the first few watts before transitioning over to

AB operation. I also found it to run quite cool; the chassis never got more than mildly warm to the touch no matter how hard I drove it.



Setup and Use

Setup of the Vitus Audio components was quite straightforward. My digital source was a **Bricasti** M12 DAC/Source Controller (Platinum Series) run directly into the RL102 preamp, which then fed signal to the RS101 amplifier. The RS101 amp then, in turn, drove my passive **ATC** SCM100 SL studio monitors.



I should note here that the Bricasti M12 can itself function as a preamp, as it has extra sets of inputs and a volume control, as well as two onboard DAC modules. Here, I chose to use it as a digital source component, opting to let its adjustable gain “ride” on top of the gain I dialed into the Vitus Audio preamp. I should mention here that one of the options of the Vitus RL102 is its ability

to operate at a user-controlled fixed gain setting. I actually kept the gain variable, so I could change it when desired, thus leaving the volume on the Bricasti M12 at a static level. The external gain of the RL102 is a nice option, however, when dealing with a low-gain power amplifier such as my First Watt SIT-3 driving less efficient speakers such as the ATCs.

Initial Impressions

I was admittedly keen to experience how well the Vitus Audio amplification duo would drive my ATC monitors. Admittedly, I can get with quite nice sound at low to reasonable volumes when using low-wattage amps such as Nelson Pass' First Watt designs as long as there's some additional gain at the preamp end. What I give up in this scenario are overall loudness and macrodynamic excitement. When I want more of the latter, I need to pull out a bigger gun, namely the Pass Labs X250.8 power amp. There is no argument that ATC speakers can be power hungry and that they respond well to high-power class-AB amplification when one wants to achieve realistic concert hall dynamics.

I fully expected the ATC monitors to play nicely with the Vitus Audio RL102/RS101 combo, and I was most definitely *not* disappointed. Running both amp and preamp together, I got a smooth, non-peaky, overall lovely presentation with notable bass slam and definition. I could tell right off the bat that I was going to be in for some real fun and sonic fireworks.

While the Vitus gear sounded just fine out of the box, I just knew that this setup was going to be the of the variety that doesn't jump out at me at first listening, but rather likes to settle in and lap at my sensibilities over the longer haul. Experience has taught me that nine times out of ten, this is the scenario that leads to the best long-term relationship between listener and system.



Listening specifics

With the Vitus Audio RS101 and RL102 amp and preamp together driving my big ATC monitors, I felt that I had more than ample headroom to go however "big" the speakers were willing to take me. That's saying something, as the ATCs like to perform their best when playing loud! This is territory that I don't often frequent, as I tend to do most of my listening at night with the volume turned down. My listening experience, therefore, tends to be of a more intimate nature, especially when my spouse is trying to sleep in the bedroom below.

Get my partner out of the house though, and I can occasionally crank things up a bit. That's exactly what the Vitus/ATC combo was begging me to do. Whether at high or low volume, the music was fully present, leaving me with no feeling that some part or another of the experience was somehow missing, or even suppressed. Even-handed was the word and that was across the whole frequency spectrum. Run the volume up, and everything just gets bigger, both in terms of overall volume and scale. There's no distortion, hardening up of the sound, or any other nasties to mention.

The Vitus gear does a lovely job of projecting a highly dimensional and fleshed-out soundstage. I noticed a more forward presentation of the soundstage from a spatial perspective, with images sometimes cast out in front of the speakers instead of behind them. I found this effect to be interesting and highly enjoyable. Individual instruments and/or performers were enveloped nicely in their own three-dimensional spaces, though the integration of the sounds was well rendered in an overall sense. In short, the overall feeling of spaciousness was realistic and satisfying.



Sample tunes

As of late, I've been exploring the music of Polish jazz violinist Adam Baldych on the European ACT label. Having grown up listening to the virtuosity of electric violinist Jean Luc Ponty, either with Frank Zappa's Mothers of Invention or out on his own, the like-minded Baldych has been a welcome find. His compositions are melodic, yet forceful, and highly satisfying on a musical level. Much of the driving force behind Baldych's music comes from his deftly-written bass lines, which are made up of an interesting combination of bass guitar and percussion. As such, the bass can be a real workout for any audio system.

Check out, for example, the cut "Concerto for Viola and Orchestra" from Baldych's most recent album, *Sacrum Profanum* (ACT, 88.2 kHz file, streamed via Qobuz). This tune highlights beautifully the very best of what the powerful Vitus Audio/ATC combination has on offer. This music is complex, yet the system fleshes these complexities out deftly while retaining the unity of the piece. The bass drum goes deep, displaying lush harmonics which the Vitus amplification highlights with the greatest nuance. This recording is also exceptionally dimensional, and the Vitus Audio gear renders it accordingly. I can easily discern individual instrument lines, as each inhabits its own space in the recording, with no sense of muddling or smearing. Listeners who crave both harmonic and spatial detail and resolution will totally dig this setup!

Another modern European composer of a slightly different vein I've been listening to a lot lately is Einojuhani Rautavaara. A composer of modern orchestral works, Rautavaara wrote with an accessibly melodic, yet characteristically ethereal tonality. Such writing carries through in his many symphonies (I have most of them...), and certainly in his *Symphony #8* (BIS, 44.1 kHz file, streamed via Qobuz). The somewhat mysterious orchestral complexities of this work are nicely captured via the Vitus Audio RL102/RS101 preamp/amp combination. So are the big dynamic swings of the orchestra; my system goes from soft to loud in an effortless crescendo that does justice to a live performance. The effect is spine-tingling to say the least, and it is one of the truly stimulating pleasures of high-end audio when done right.

A little experiment

One thing I wanted to do as part of this review is to remove the Vitus RL102 preamp from the audio chain and evaluate the Vitus RS101 amplifier on its own, driven solely by the Bricasti M12 Source Controller.

Among the preamplifier's many jobs is to do no harm. Hence, the preamp should function as intended, but not degrade the musical experience in any way. This is a tough request to place upon a piece of gear that has so many ancillary, yet important functions. By its very nature, the preamp introduces a complex layer of electronics into the audio chain.

Fortunately, I have only good news on this front. I actually felt that I lost a smidgeon of the musical excitement and presence I had experienced with the RL102 in place once I removed it. My impression was that the musical presentation benefited from some extra "oomph" and dynamic realism with the RL102 in the chain. Perhaps there's just some synergy that exists between the Vitus Audio components that is lost upon removing the RL102, but I heard what I heard. Take it for what it's worth, but I sensed no apparent sonic degradation when the RL102 was in the audio chain, but only benefit.

A brief comparison (or two)

As I had the similar Pass Labs X250.8 class-AB amplifier on hand, I decided that it would be a waste to not attempt a brief comparison between this well-reviewed American amplifier and its Danish compatriot. I simply swapped out the Vitus Audio RS101 for the Pass Labs amp, still driven by the Vitus RL102 preamp.

Switching in the Pass X250.8 provided an ever so slightly warmer, softer, and more palpable presentation of the music. Bass seemed just as extended as with the Vitus RS101, but just a bit looser. On the Baldych *Sacrum Profanum* album, instruments were just as well delineated spatially with the X250.8, but I felt the front-to-back soundstage to be drawn further back behind the speakers.

All in all, I felt that both amplifiers had a similar tonal characteristic. If you like the Pass, you'll probably also enjoy the Vitus. If you prefer a slightly cooler, crisper, more direct presentation of your music, the scale will most likely tip in favor of the Vitus RS101. Either way, both amps are profound conveyors of musical accuracy and enjoyment.

Just for fun, I lastly replaced the big Pass Labs X250.8 amp with the much smaller First Watt SIT-3, still driven by the Vitus Audio RL102 preamp. After a bit of fussing around, I got the little amp up and going. There's something about these tiny class-A amplifiers that's just on-point. Yes, the gain is low (had to crank the gain on the preamp way up), and the dynamic swings were less than whip-cracking (to be expected), but the SIT-3 has an immediacy and poignancy that just warps my mind. The First Watt amp definitely benefitted from the extra juice provided by the Vitus preamp, as there were moments in the Baldych album that actually made me momentarily look up to see if the sound I was hearing came from an actual instrument in the room. Yes, these moments were fleeting, but they were there.

So, yeah. High-end audio is a search for perfection punctuated by an endless series of unavoidable trade-offs.



A few final thoughts

I truly enjoyed my time with the Vitus Audio Reference Series RL102 preamp and RS101 power amp. While each can (and will) perform admirably in an independent role with other high-quality components, I found them to have a particular and delightful synergy when used together.

As with all high-end audio choices, it comes down to a matter of system compatibility and personal choice. That said, I can't imagine most critical listeners not being thrilled with the Vitus Audio amplification duo. Together, these components provide a clean, powerful, and eminently musical performance. My ATC speakers are highly revealing studio monitors; they tell the truth. And here, the truth was only accentuated in the most positive way with the Vitus Audio gear in play. This is fantastic gear.

In short, I value musical accuracy and engagement, and the Vitus Audio amp/preamp duo gave me exactly that. Coupled with accurate speakers, these components will satisfy the most demanding customer.

Highly recommended.

Vitus Audio: <http://www.vitusaudio.com/>

For comparison:

- Mini-Review: Vitus Audio SIA-25
- Review: Vitus Audio RS100 and RD100

North American Distribution: <https://highendbyoz.com>