

EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Vitus SS-103 Power Amplifier

by Chris Thomas



Every so often an amplifier arrives at my home for review and after a healthy period of listening I realise that this one is going to be difficult to write, purely because there are no discernible negatives to the experience at all. Put simply, the new Vitus SS-103 is so accomplished, so involving, and so entertaining that, even looking under the smallest musical grains of sand, I can't find anything I don't admire about it. It has its own way with music that is very 'Vitus' and anybody who has

had the pleasure of listening to any of Hans-Ole's creations will recognise his style as it moves through the music and the mysteries and fascinations it resolves while doing so. It manages to sound both compact and expansive at the same time and there is a sense of commanding power in the way it employs its considerable reserves of power entirely to the benefit of the music.

But, let me not get ahead of myself here and gush too exuberantly before a brief introduction. The SS-103 replaces ►

“It is, by most standards, simply enormous and will probably find itself sited on the floor in most installations.”

- ▶ the older SS-102 at the top of the Vitus Signature series of power products and it shares the traditional Vitus hallmarks of being an enormously refined stereo power amplifier built around a simply massive UI-cored transformer and housed in an immaculately constructed and finished (industrial themed) enclosure. Build quality is truly exceptional but it's not what you might call compact. It cuts a striking figure through its sheer size and 'armour-plated' construction and style, leaving it beautiful, but visually imposing. When in place, it is indeed an enormously precise hunk of audio architecture and the review sample came in a gorgeous contrasting champagne finish which I thought was by far the nicest I have ever seen on a Vitus product.

At a back-breaking 90 kg you are going to need at least one friend and possibly two, to help unpack it and heave it into position. It is, by most standards, simply enormous and will probably find itself sited on the floor in most installations. You can buy a 50 watt amplifier that is about the size and weight of a box of cornflakes, but the Vitus sets new standards of serious weight and dimensions. A set of Stillpoints Ultra 5's should be your friends here. They sound great and lift the Vitus physically and sonically. "An amplifier that size producing only 50 watts?" said almost everyone who gazed upon its mighty presence. But, as with every Vitus amplifier I have used, the power output figures are, I would say, conservatively rated. The integrated SIA-025 I have grown used to, is claimed to be a modest 25 watts per channel into 8 ohms. Not a lot you might think, but that figure tells only a small part of the story and it will drive most speakers very adequately. Bigger rooms and less efficient speakers bring new challenges and requirements, so when I say that the SS-103 can provide 50 watts of Class A power into 8 ohms, believe me when I say that this is considerable. Switch to Class A/B and the output shoots up to 150 watts into the same load. With Vitus you are unlikely to be wishing for more power where domestic needs are concerned.

As well as the output class switching Vitus have included an intriguing option of two 'sound modes' which is unusual but actually rather fun. Although Hans-Ole has named them Classic and Rock modes they should really be thought of as alternative views of the music. Personally, I would forget the idea of either being entirely suited to classical or rock music and think of

them as options that enhance the amplifier's versatility. Add these voicings to the Class A or A/B settings, all accessible through the amplifier's menu system and the SS-103 becomes very configurable for a power amplifier. The difference between the two is probably best described as a change of listening perspectives and flavour and this is certainly going to depend on the rest of your system (in its entirety), your room, music, and personal taste. The Rock choice is unsurprisingly more forward in its presentation, while the Classic is more erm.. classic, speaking in general terms of course. I can easily envisage situations where you might flip between each mode several times during long listening sessions. You will have your own preferences but, whichever one you use, you will not be disappointed as both have those key Vitus values when it comes to getting to grips with the music. This amp is all about focus, complete dynamic shape, and movement *in extremis* no matter how you configure the amplifier.

The SS-103 is the result of just about everything that Vitus himself has learnt over the years. It is balanced from front to back and modular in design and construction, enabling any internal component upgrades to be interchangeable. It goes without saying that every individual transistor and resistor is both the finest available and impeccably matched to its partner on the opposite side of the amplifier. The local shunt-regulated power supply has been redesigned to incorporate new technologies and having spoken to Hans-Ole on several occasions and understood how meticulous and fastidious he is where transformers and their associated circuitry are concerned, it is clear that as usual this is truly the beating-heart of the new amplifier. If that extra sense of quiet and blackness to the musical experience is one of the results of the improvements he has wrought then it has been a noticeable success. The SS-103 is as unobtrusive, noise-wise, as I have heard from a power amplifier, especially one of this tremendous potential.

I had wanted the full-fat Vitus listening experience so the nice man from Kog, the UK distributor and myself manhandled both the power amplifier and an SL-103 line stage into position before we both slumped, tea in hand, onto the sofa, grateful that our backs had survived the ordeal. I employed the wonderfully musical dCS two-box Vivaldi CD/streaming front end and spent the following weeks listening to CDs and ▶



▶ whatever took my fancy through TIDAL. My advice is to leave the amplifier switched on once it has come up to temperature and then have fun with the class and mode settings. I must confess to a preference for the creamy, seamless and tonally rich benefits of Class A myself and I like both listening modes, depending on mood and music. The smaller speakers I used were both remarkable, but alternative examples of what a modern high-end stand-mounted design can achieve. The Wilson Audio Duette Series 2 and the Raidho D-1.1 are so very different, but both offer the potential and musical intensity and involvement that really must be a huge part of any system, let alone one of this pedigree. Both speakers loved the Vitus and I am always delighted with the kind of immersive and joined-up experience that these systems can offer. Suitably sourced, both systems really do rock along but the extra weight and bandwidth of the Duette 2s is impossible to ignore. Both combinations – like a great book that you simply can't put down because you are so intrigued and don't want to miss what comes next – show that the SS-103 is an intense and compelling amplifier indeed. Yes, it has power to burn

but it never sounds enormously powerful for the sake of being so. If this seems like a contradiction, I would point to the way it employs its considerable reserves. It simply produces what the music requires, with no extra fat or excess. Any dramas lie within the music and not the equipment. It is certainly as tonally rich and flavoured as any solid-state amplifier I have heard but part of its charm lies in the way it realises its dynamic potential by bringing the relatively small to life and animating the subtleties. A gently brushed cymbal that you may have heard many, many times is opened up with a dynamic precision and specific sense of focus that is delightful. Where it may have been nothing more than an embellishment the Vitus renders it as a vital component of counterpoint purely through the way it applies its sense of the 'dynamic within the dynamic' nuance and a supreme command of the envelope. The cymbal has a life, a duration, a decay, and more importantly, a relevance to the whole. The cymbal, or whatever delicate seasoning was present certainly sounded different through each speaker system but the intensity, resolution, and focus (there's that word again) never wavered. ▶

“It is all about the way the SS-103 employs its resources. At lower levels, it breathes rather than drives.”

► The amplifier’s abilities when dealing with anything from a sweeping musical landscape to a solo instrument were always entirely in perspective and its sense of shape has a beautiful feel of unforced control. Grip is superb but might be too extreme a word really as it could imply a certain degree of electronically enforced emphasis. It is all about the way the SS-103 employs its resources. At lower levels, it breathes rather than drives. It can shock when called upon to swing a series of mighty transients with staggering speed and instantaneous transportation of dramatic, but controlled, musical drama. Dynamic contrasts are its thing really. It enables each component of the recording impressive freedom and tonal colour and it also gives serious attention to the term ‘headroom’ as you will never hear the amplifier run out of it and this is part of its charm and further sign of its enormous musical potential.

I can remember, many years ago when I first reviewed the SS-010 integrated which was the forerunner of the SIA-025 that I described the way it dealt with tempo like a running river and I would stick with that. There are many amplifiers with remarkable resolution and an ability to draw and resolve the finest of filigree detail from the recordings and there are also many that have enormous control, impact, and command from the big to the infinitesimally smallest of things. The Vitus certainly is supremely capable in these areas but there is something rather wonderful about the way it moves the music through time. This is where the flowing water analogy came from. Tempo, timing, and musical phrasing are all massive weapons in any musician’s list of gifts and I think that appreciating them lies at the very core of our emotional relationship with the music we love to listen to. Every musician aspires towards expression regardless of technical ability. Few amplifiers can swing like a Vitus in full flow and the SS-103 seems to have gained an extra edge of speed here. It is enormously articulate at its leading dynamic edge but also in its recovery, so the amplifier can utilise its considerable assets to full rhythmic effect whether the tempo itself is high and percussive, gentle and slow, or anywhere between.

The very best systems also have an uncanny way of realising implied rhythms composed of nothing more than colour and textures through very sparse passages of music. Often they let these quieter, more contemplative periods slip

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Solid State power amplifier. Switchable from Class A/B to Class A. Two user-selectable modes. Classic and Rock

Output power: 50W Class A, 150 watts Class A/B

Analogue inputs: 1 × XLR, 1 × RCA

Input impedance: 10 Ohms

Output connections: 4mm or spade terminals

Signal to noise: >100dB

Dimensions (H×W×D): 31×43.5×61cm

Weight: 90Kg

Finishes available: Silver, black, Champagne

Price: £30,000

Manufactured by: Vitus Audio

URL: vitusaudio.com

UK Distribution: Kog Audio

Tel: +44 (0) 24 7722 0650

URL: kogaudio.com

by almost unnoticed. I have heard this rhythmic numbness on many super-expensive systems that veer more toward the high fidelity than the realisation of fine art. Those colour-washed backdrops that you may find in a composer like Mahler or within an electronically constructed musical landscape by any number of artists often contain intervals and passages unmarked by a definitive time-marker such as a drum or any repetitive instrument. The Vitus pulls these incredibly relevant passages into the room and I reckon that it brings a greater sense of understanding to the nature of the music. This sense of involvement with the recording is where the high-end of audio really must tread and triumph and it is just one of the details that make equipment of this class and cost relevant to lovers of music who have pockets deep enough to even consider an amplifier like this marvellous Vitus. I can’t afford them but am happy that they exist at all. The SS-103 is a triumph and that’s it in a nutshell. +