

Vitus RI-101 integrated amplifier

by Chris Thomas



It's interesting how having a high quality streaming capability and a Tidal account changes your style of listening. As a result, I have been on a bit of a retro kick recently and looking more deeply into the complete works of Steely Dan. I always liked the albums and had massive respect for the musicians they assembled to bring the songs to life. Then they slipped out of my consciousness for a while. I would occasionally catch an audio glimpse of them and be reminded that it was time for a re-visit and this, courtesy of Roon and Tidal, grew into a renewed fascination as I have become more intrigued with their songs. Time has actually leant them a new depth for me.

It was during this musical period that I took delivery of the RI-101, the latest version of the entry-level integrated amplifier from Vitus. This is the successor to the eight-year-old RI-100.

I have lost count of the amount of Vitus products that have passed through my hands since their arrival in the UK, and I am a big fan of the way they go about their business. Their SIA-025 has become an integral part of my whole listening experience and has been both fed and has driven many, many high-end components for years now. It is a real classic amplifier of the modern era design, fully deserving of the many accolades that have been heaped upon it.

I liked the RI-100 when I first heard it several years ago. It didn't have the Class A switching, perhaps so vital to the SIA-025's creamy smoothness and tonal subtlety, but replaced it with sledgehammer driving power and a firework display of dynamics and grip of the rise and fall of musical movement. Who needs 300 watts? Well, the RI-100 can provide an answer to that question every time you sit back to ▶

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▶ listen. The seemingly bottomless well of power gives its own sense of ease. My abiding memories of that amplifier is that it ultimately lacked a bit of resolution and crisp articulation and it was perhaps a little flat and dark in musical perspectives. Certainly in comparison to the SIA-025 which, it must be remembered, is a considerably pricier investment.

When the new RI-101 arrived it seemed like a case of “Meet the new amp, same as the old amp,” but looks are inevitably deceptive. From the outside, the new version has little to distinguish it except, I am told, some extra cooling vents. The chunky industrial design, finished in black for the review sample, makes a bold physical statement with a very familiar and unmistakably Vitus look. Aluminium slab fronts merge into the small central illuminated control window while three flush buttons per side provide the control inputs, volume, and settings. An Apple remote, supplied as standard, offers fuss-free access to essential functions, including standby.

Internally, as you might imagine, there have been many improvements in critical areas. As usual, this Vitus is a modular design. It is beautifully assembled and laid out internally, so much so that it would actually look great with an acrylic top. The heart of all Vitus products is the transformer, and anyone who has spoken to Hans Ole will know just how meticulous he is where these are concerned. This one, an improved version of that found in the RI-100, has an EI-core instead of the UI-core found in the Signature series. The lettering indicates the shape of the core. It really does sit at the very centre of what the Vitus is all about and in the latest amplifier also provides an impressive 300 watts (at least) with extensive and complex modifications to the voltage regulation aimed at reducing noise at this critical stage. This leaves an even inkier black backdrop. But, perhaps the more notable differences between this and the amplifier it succeeds come in the preamplifier section. When you make as many products as Vitus does and arrange them into different categories, upgrading each of them as time passes will undoubtedly incorporate a degree of trickle-down technology. This means a constant striving towards new levels of perfection across the whole range. As one component is improved, so the next level will also be undergoing experimentation to raise performance. No company embodies this quite like Vitus. As such, the ultra-low-noise power supply in the R1-101 is further

complemented by the inclusion of the high-resolution volume control from the SL-103 and MP-L20. The whole section of the amp that handles the inputs is improved too. The result is an amplifier that builds on the original with noticeably increased resolution. It was this that caught my ear as I made my way through my Steely Dan renaissance.

Connections are comprehensive and the rear panel, in stark contrast to the simplicity of the minimalist front, is crammed full of sockets of one kind or another. There are three pairs of balanced (XLR) inputs and two single-ended (RCA) ones. There is a balanced XLR line output too which can be used should you feel the need to go for a bi-amped set-up which would be fascinating. Speaker connections are a model of excellence as you can employ 4mm or spade terminals with ease and superbly solid connections. They are some of the best out there.

To further enhance the amplifier's versatility there are two optional modules available either on delivery or as a half-hour retro-fit by your friendly dealer. Vitus has an excellent reputation where DACs are concerned, and for around £2k you can enhance the possibilities of the RI-101 considerably by adding one. For £3k you have the option of adding a DAC / streamer. These include additional digital inputs and allow the amplifier to function as a digital hub. Now that streaming has really come into its own I can imagine many customers being very interested in this option. The review sample had not been fitted with these modules though.

From the box, I thought the new Vitus to be rather flat sounding and quite dry, which I had anticipated. It was as powerful as expected and the promise of fine detail sitting atop a low-end of unusual power, and impressive grip needed several days to come together and a few weeks of musical work-outs before finally expanding into the joyous, muscular device that sits atop some Stillpoints as I write. Just have a bit of patience and it will come good as the whole scope and presentation of the amplifier moves to another level, the focus clicks into place, and the recorded ambience opens wider and wider. It's about now that it really begins to flex its considerable muscles at all levels and gets to grip with really 'driving' the speakers.

So, I am trying to learn the 'Kid Charlemagne' guitar solo (from *The Royal Scam*), played by Larry Carlton, courtesy ▶

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▶ of Tidal and the RI-101 has taken over amplification duties while a dCS Vivaldi DAC is giving it every musical chance to perform. Down in the basement of the song lurk Bernard Purdie and Chuck Rainey, the drummer and bass player, and I became entirely fascinated with the semi-shuffle pattern they are laying down. The Vitus has complete control over the song and the recording. Bernard is the master of doing everything while seeming to do very little. His little pushes and angular rhythmically hypnotic skips are really what drive the song and give it such a classy feel. The RI-101 punches this rhythm out, and the way that his very understated bass drum works with Chuck Rainey's astonishingly precise bass guitar is nothing less than magical, bringing a really locked-in feel. This amplifier allows you to delaminate the song if you want. This is a rhythm section like very, very few others and I cannot think I have ever heard better. The sense of movement through time and the way that these guys bring their utterly superb skills to the song, with so little apparent fanfare, move it to another, timeless level. I love the way the Vitus resolves all these components and that the increases in resolution and quietness have been so brilliantly incorporated to the benefit of the music. It's not

so much the extra detailing of the instruments but more about highlighting the way that the instruments are being played for me. It is also very good at allowing you to easily follow each and every line while maintaining a clear view of the whole. As for the guitar solo? It is one of the greats in my opinion, but I'm still struggling with that one I'm afraid.

The amplifier can swing a mighty 300 watts into 8 ohms and this, of course, is one of its significant features. As I asked earlier, who needs 300 watts? In my small room, I probably don't, but that bottomless well of power makes itself felt even at modest levels to give a notable sense of ease to the dynamics. It's that sense that you really need to hear to appreciate. Such a well of power is not only about volume. Add the increases in amplifier resolution and a purer sense of clarity to the rest of the onboard improvements, and you'll realise that this has released the amplifier to open new musical details and subtleties and quite often, that's where the magic lies.

The bass delivery is excellent and even better when you realise how joined-up it is with the entire bandwidth. It is about as tight and grippy as I have heard, but there is not ▶

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▶ even the slightest hint of compression or any compromise in extension. Tonally it is superb too. Push the RI-101 and it will ask big questions of the whole system. Play some music with thunderous bass and some serious drive and the RI-101 shows what it is all about. I have spoken in the past at the way the Class A Vitus amplifiers have such a beautiful way of unfolding rhythms, tempos, and sheer pace and have often described them as being like a fast flowing river of movement. The improvements to this new amplifier suggest that the Class A setting is not wholly responsible for this. This Vitus is a driving, punching rhythm machine. It delivers timing emphasis with ease and has the speed of recovery to match its sense of impact and note shaping. I can't help but feel that this comes under the general heading of resolution that I see as covering a lot more than instrumental or vocal detail. The vital way that Hans Ole's products illuminate musical movement inevitably has something to do with the inordinate amount of care taken with the power supply in his amplifiers. Add the lower noise floor and the excellent leading-edge control, ask it to drive a system fully capable of responding to high-end musical demands, and the new amplifier seems to be a much more capable performer that operates at a higher level altogether than the model it supercedes.

Many factors make just about any significant purchase a tricky decision and a serious audio amplifier is no different. Price is a prominent place to start. The reputation of the manufacturer is indeed another. The appearance and general presence of the product, its future compatibility with the rest of the system, perhaps the potential for an upgrade and the reality of how it compares with rivals. All these things are likely to play a part. But, maybe the most important thing for me is just whether I enjoy listening to it. A strange comment perhaps. I can't remember the last time I heard an amplifier that was "bad". By that, I mean an amplifier that left me emotionally cold and disinterested. Desirability though is a different matter and carries a lot of intangibles that are personal to each of us. This new integrated Vitus knocks it out of the park on so many levels, and the ability to supplement

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Solid-state two-channel integrated amplifier

Analogue Inputs: 3 × balanced (XLR), 2 × unbalanced (RCA)

Power Output: 2 × 300 watts RMS into 8 Ohms

Frequency Response: DC - 500KHz

Signal To Noise: >100dB

Input Impedance: 22k

Optional Inputs: Dac or DAC / Streamer (consult dealer for details)

Dimensions (HxWxD): 195 × 435 × 470 mm

Weight: 40Kg

Price: £11,800

DAC: £2,000

DAC/Streamer: £3,000

Manufacturer: Vitus Audio

URL: vitusaudio.com

Distributed by: Kog Audio

Tel: + (0)24 7722 0650

URL: kogaudio.com

its capabilities with a genuinely excellent onboard retro-fittable DAC or streamer shouldn't be underestimated, especially taking into consideration the extra costs concerning space and cabling that a separate DAC will incur. It also has that sense of drive—anything power and stability and a seriously engaging sense of very fine detail with something of an iron fist behind it. Musically it has all the Vitus hallmarks of really elastic rhythmic focus and precision coupled with excellent tonality and balance. I can see it being an excellent investment for the serious music lover for years and years. When an amplifier is this good, it has to get a recommendation from me. +