

Vitus MP-201 masterpiece D/A converter

by Chris Thomas



Masterpiece is a huge label to hang on any component, especially by the designer and manufacturer himself. But, over the years I have listened to and reviewed many of Hans-Ole Vitus' products and doubted that he would throw such a description around lightly. Masterpiece he named it and after hours and hours of experiencing it I would say that there is no exaggeration within that title, because a masterpiece it surely is.

The MP-201 DAC is typically Vitus. It's heavy, impeccably constructed inside and out and features let's say a generous deployment of metals and alloys within its semi-industrial design. Two hefty front panel side-elements house the six on-board controls while the small display sits in the middle as per usual. There are the expected set of inputs on the

rear panel allowing it to be connected to just about anything digital through a 24/192 USB or S/PDIF, both RCA or XLR. Everything that comes into the MP-201 is upsampled to 24bit/792kHz. Analogue outputs are via XLR or RCA.

There is also the intriguing option of fitting a module that provides a couple of pairs of analogue inputs (RCA and XLR) and a high quality volume control allowing it to function as a DAC/preamplifier. The MP-201 has a standard on-board volume for level trimming, but the optional preamplifier in one box option is much better and uses a series of discrete resistors that don't eat into resolution. This essentially means that you could forgo the expense of an undoubtedly expensive separate preamp and drive the power amplifier(s) from the DAC.

Vitus really knows what it is doing with volume controls and over the years we have found that volume control quality is critical to the performance of any pre-amplification. Factor in the cost of associated paraphernalia that a preamplifier brings and for the £2k that the additional board costs, the value of the MP-201 begins to look a lot better. Unfortunately for me, the review sample did not come equipped with that Analogue board but, if I was a potential customer, I would seriously look at it as an option, bearing in mind that brilliant sounding high-end preamplifiers are among the rarest and priciest components out there and that Vitus already makes some of the best. ▶



► We listen to systems, not individual components. How can we make any sort of accurate determination as to the interplay between audio electronics when there are so many of them in operation at the same time, all doing such complex jobs with music, one of the most intricate, and transient art forms around?

I streamed Tidal from a Roon Nucleus straight through the USB and listened to a high-end CD player through the digital XLR input. Amplification was a Dartzeel pre and power (a fantastic thing that I shall return to in a future issue). The electronics sat on a Stillpoints rack and the cabling was all Nordost. If you think this sounds like an interesting amalgamation then let me confirm that it certainly was that and much more. Rarely have I had such an intriguing music machine at home.

Let's talk system resolution for a moment. I believe that the word means different things to different people and barely an audio discussion passes without its absolute desirability being dropped into the mix. For me it encompasses just about everything that comes out of the speakers. It's not so much that you hear new details that you haven't heard before but rather that you hear them in a new light, perhaps with a new relevance to the piece. A high-hat figure from a drummer, a vocal inflection or a phrase from an instrument might suddenly knit a rhythmic passage together or resolve and answer a question asked within the music. It may be positioned within the soundstage differently to the way you heard it before. The Vitus can and will do these things. It really doesn't matter how complex and deep the music is, or how seemingly simple, this Vitus will get right in there between the notes to show you what is happening and not in a chilly forensic way either. Just about every facet of the way the music moves through time in a digital system, be it streamed or CD based, falls under the control of the DAC and the way it deals with the data that flows through its inputs. Having said that, I did have someone tell me recently that it's just a stream of ones and zeros so all DACs should sound the same. Good luck with that one.

As time has passed and sensibly configured digital-based systems have become a very serious option, the possibilities have grown and grown, alongside the very real sonic improvements from subscription services like

Tidal and Qobuz. It seems that we are really beginning to appreciate the absolutely vital role that the right DAC plays as the system conductor. The musical differences between them are as important as those you will find between other components and no amplifier or speakers can replace resolution that the DAC misses out on. Early DACs could be rather thin and mean-sounding devices, shimmering with unrealistic and brash detail that gave many of us a headache. They helped in no small way in giving digitally sourced music such a bad name, especially among analogue enthusiasts. As I said though, things have changed beyond all recognition and with products like this Vitus, the DAC finds itself at the heart of all top quality digital based systems by controlling everything further downstream, from timing to tone.

To say that this is a good DAC would be an understatement as it has such wonderful scope and potential for the music to develop and work its magic. The soundstage is broad, very, very deep and full of energy, ambience and pure airspace. Transparency and rhythmic movement are superb and its bass performance is epic. Rock solid stability and a feeling of tremendous power, bandwidth and sheer weight bring a real sense of involvement as do the musical complexities it unravels right in front of you. Tonality is a system thing really but the Vitus, despite its considerable and organic musical density, seems about as neutral as I have heard. It's this connection with the system that makes it all worthwhile emotionally. A really good system is one that has the capability to talk to you personally and the MP-201 is right on message here and what it has to say is profound.

Take the seeming simplicity of a single musical phrase whether it be from an instrument or a voice. It's all part of the story that the composition is telling. The Vitus spins the yarn explicitly. It seems to revel in showing the smallest details, joining them up and relating them to the whole, even on the simplest of songs by the most introspective ►

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▶ of singer-songwriters. It has an almost surreal way of explaining the piece through the language of music and where the art itself is concerned the Vitus is supremely eloquent. High-end systems like this are simply wonderful at unravelling musical relationships and their place in the passing of time, or we may call it rhythm or tempo. The Vitus is brim full of nuance and subtlety but it is certainly dense where sheer musical information is concerned. From the texture and colour to the way that individual notes, whatever their source, are born, live and then fade to be replaced by something new. This is absolutely great when you listen to soloing and appreciate what a precious gift true phrasing is and how it is the very root of expression and pure musicianship.

The MP-201 is very, very quiet and the blacks are as inert as I have heard. There is no sense of a highly detailed and processed digital stream of data being reconstituted. It has the ability to adapt completely to any musical form. A simply miked recording of a singer with an acoustic guitar can literally shake you with its realistic scale, intimacy and beauty as it has this way of drawing you toward the artist by giving them shape and physical form within the soundstage. They exist as a three dimensional feature and not just a mouth and a guitar. Depending on the quality of the recording there can be something so captivating and so emotionally powerful here. But give it bigger work to do, like an orchestra at full throttle and it digs deep and gives the amplifier a lot of dynamic work to do while maintaining levels of instrumental detail and separation that is truly special.

Like all great audio products it is endlessly dynamic but this doesn't only mean that can go loud or soft. Instruments or voices rarely maintain level evenly, but the Vitus copes heroically with no problem. It's the way it allows each instrument such latitude and freedom of power and expression that remains one of its most captivating charms. But, when I talk about its exceptional abilities I am also talking about getting the small and the very, very small things right. The beauty of note decay or subtle vibrato and the way that such delicacy sits very comfortably next to explosive transients bringing a real feeling of relaxation and once you have confidence in the system's potential and you know it isn't going to sound stressed or at its limits, it becomes so very easy to listen to.

Yes, the Vitus MP-201 is a masterpiece product as the name states but it can only work within the limitations of the system it sits at the heart of and this means that its likely destinations are high-end systems, or in other words, expensive systems assembled by those fortunate enough to be able to afford them. You are going to need to make sure that every detail has been thought through. This means from the router onwards. You really need to give the conductor the right tools and there are no short cuts. I have heard so many systems that cost more than a house that failed to deliver anything other than a loud and rather tiring facsimile of music. Brimmed full of the most outrageous

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Single box DAC/Pre

Inputs: USB, S/PDIF-RCA, S/PDIF-XLR
with optional RCA and XLR analog inputs

Outputs: 1 × XLR, 1 × RCA

DAC: Master Clock – Vitus module – upgradeable

Sample rate: 792khz

Resolution: 24-bit

DAC: 4 × AD1955 in mono configuration

Dimensions: 135 × 435 × 430mm
(H×W×D)

Weight: 25kg

Finishes: Silver or black

Price: £24,000

Manufactured by: Vitus Audio

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Distributed by: Kog Audio

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detail but totally lacking in soul or humanity. Digital-based music can still be like this. It has always been that way since Digital began to show its (then) ugly face to the world through recordings on vinyl. I read the reviews and rushed out and bought this early stuff and ended up hating it, for years in fact. Early CD too was shockingly bad. But, where we are now is light years away from those days. What hasn't changed is that realising the potential out of any system includes the painstaking business of considering the infrastructure that surrounds the electronics themselves.

Credit where it's due. For me the Vitus MP-201 is a brilliant and notable product simply because it is so very emotionally engaging and attractive to listen to. If you are in the market for such a DAC/Pre you would be very wise to give it serious consideration by adding it to your audition list. I doubt you'll be disappointed. +