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## HI-FILES No. 51

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# VTL IT-85

## AUDIOPHILE COMBO

American company VTL is known by its tube amplifiers, but also by the concept that tubes can be user-friendly. Here we have basic integrated amplifier named IT-85

Very often, your audiophile friends, will advise you not to buy the first, basic model of any manufacturer. However, if the price range goes beyond the amount of 5.000 euro, then there is probably no reason to worry – you can be sure than nothing was second best.

VTL has four models of preamplifiers, two phono preamplifiers, three two-channel power amplifier and four monoblocks in its offer... and only one integrated amplifier IT-85. This amplifier model is not new, we have found data of first version online dated early 2002. New model is visually different only by front plate, which now looks completely different, but the manufacturer mentions also some other changes under the hood.

## DESCRIPTION

VTL IT-85 is packed in the case of somewhat more narrow dimensions than we are used to with standard hi-fi components. 38cm width gives the impression that it's a compact amplifier, but don't be fooled, this amplifiers weights 30kilos and we do not recommend that you lift it by yourself. Front plate was made of grind material and had 5 cut-ins through which one could barely see the light of tubes. The new model, which we have on test, has characteristic design of modern VTL amplifiers, which can be described best as "modern retro". The light of tubes now comes from darkened glass on front panel, same as with popular stereo power amplifier ST-150, which had been heard by our visitors during last year's show.

There is also characteristic silver panel, large VTL logo, but also fair number of switches which announce the versatility of this amplifier. Input choice has 5 positions, and the shaft of this switch goes all the way to the back panel, by which the path of the signal is shortened and therefore also the unwanted noise. There is also a headphone plugin with appropriate switch, volume pot, "mute" switch, main switch and switch marked as "processor", which will be explained additionally.

Otherwise, volume pot is motorised, and is controlled by remote control, has the diameter of 27mm which is, as they say in the company, better solution than standard pot of 16mm diagonal.

On back panel, besides IEC plug, we also have five stereo RCA inputs, as well as one for tape monitor. Preamplifier and amplifier section are separated, therefore IT-85 can be connected to another power amplifier or can be used solely as power amplifier. The most interesting input for us is marked as processor – namely, if you own home theater as well as stereo system, it is easy to connect the output of your processor or AV receiver to VTL, where this amplifier would then power up front stereo pair, and AV receiver would power up the other surrounding channels. Very nice solution that brings peace between high end generation with younger audience. Above these eight pairs of chinch plugs are high quality terminals for loudspeaker cables which are placed on slanted edge.

This solution is pretty suitable because it allows easier connection with cables terminated by forks.

The user has the possibility of easy access to two protective fuses, which is really commendable. So much on the bodywork.

Tube space is covered by metal casing with hatches for cooling. This frame is relatively easy to remove, one only has to remove four screws from the side and two screws on front plate. When this is done, a set of tubes appears before us, as much as three large EI transformers and two big capacitors. Regarding the fact that IT-85 is created as combination of power amplifier ST-85 (ST is short for stereo) and preamplifier TL 2.5 (TL short for two line stage), you will notice large number of tubes under the hood. Tubes used are Electroharmonix, four EL 34EH, four smaller ones ECC82 (12AU7) and two ECC82(12AT7).

As far as internal construction is concerned, it classic cascade. This means that the first part moves the second part. First half of first tube ECC81 is buffer, and the other half is input section for power amplifier. Second ECC81 is phase splitter for push-pull output, and after that comes the EL34 for each phase. Large capacitors were made by Nippon Chemicon and their value is 1.600 microfarad. Four control points are visible where a voltmeter should be plugged in, measure the output and adjust the tube bias with small screwdriver. If you think you are not good enough to do this, regardless how easy it may seem, you can ask the distributor to perform these fine adjustments. Or, even better, let him teach you how to do it yourself, in order to control it and adjust it on every few months, on your own. Interesting fact is that VTL sets the bias very low, as much as twice lower than the competition, on 30 milliamps, which should significantly prolong the tubes lifespan.

An average power cable is delivered with the amplifier, but the distributor gave us for testing Transparent Power Link MM2 with great connectors, but without network.

The remote control delivered with the amplifier is small, with only three keys which control the volume and attenuation. There is no possibility to change the source. Otherwise, it is written on the remote that it's made in Korea. The only thing missing are balanced outputs, but we are sure that they would increase the price of the final product.

## **Reproduction**

At the same time we were testing the new model Opera Grande Mezza which is, to be honest, not in the same price range, but are true "match" in volume and characteristics, just like our Dynaudio Focus 220. Our source was M2Tech Young D/A converter connected with optimized laptop for music reproduction. We were going through different genres and decades, from Ella Fitzgerald to newer production of Foo Fighters. Sound projection was fantastic, from big stage to all those fine micro details. Stage went all the way in depth, and somewhat lesser in height. Bass reproduction is firm and excellently defined, therefore we weren't able to recognize the fact that we are listening to tubes, at first. Mid range seemed very natural and unobtrusive, except when needed, while swaying of high tones was evident. However, when we listen to the music, we listen it as one whole, and not parts of tone spectrum, therefore the complete impression was that VTL deals with all types of music material exceptionally. If you listen to Crossroads performed by Cream, you will feel excellent rhythm and jig. Of course, the sound on Dynaudio loudspeakers was somewhat more dry and more analytic than with Operas, but on the other hand, that is the matter of personal choice. What we liked the most is that sound wasn't "wrinkled", every musician on the stage had enough space to breathe. The song that we liked to the unspeakable on this system is "Let it die" by the band Feist, and such atmosphere was really hard to describe.

We should also mention that IT-85 has excellent headphone output, it's not there only to have it as a form. We listened it with Philips Fidelio M1 headphones, which we tested recently, and we were truly impressed.

## **Conclusion**

There is some serious competition in this price range, as well as large number of small companies which should be considered during purchase. On the other hand, VTL is not on the market since yesterday, it is serious company and you can fully trust their products, they will serve you for decades. What you get for money invested is fantastic base for high-end build up. We feel that VTL managed to make more friendly for large number of users. As someone said long time ago: "The fact that we can't afford hi-fi component, is not the problem of manufacturers, but ours". VTL IT-85 is on top of the list of devices we didn't want to return to the distributor.

## **Plus:**

- Fantastic design and craftsmanship
- Musicality, universality and specificity

- Excellent amplifier for headphones

**Minus:**

- No balanced outputs

**System:**

- Opera Grande Mezza
- M2Tech Young
- Oehlbach XXL1

**VTL IT-85**

- Continuous power: 2 x 60W at 80hm in tetrode
- Frequency range: 1 Hz – 75 kHz
- Class: AB1
- Number of line inputs: 5
- Number of loudspeaker outputs: 1
- Dimensions (WxHxL): 380 x 195 x 280
- Weight: 29.5kg

**Key characteristics:**

Tubes

- 4 x EL34EH, 4 x ECC81, 2 xECC82

Number of outputs:

- 5 x RCA

Output power:

- 2 x 60W