

VTL MB-125

MONOBLOC AMPLIFIERS

Reviewer Edgar Kramer

Vacuum Tube Logic, better known as VTL, has been in the business of making outstanding valve amplification products for around a third of a century. It was back in the early 1980s, in South Africa, that father and son team of David and

Luke Manley produced quality valve amplification pitched at local professional film and music recording studios. From there, word spread and soon the Manleys were building amplifiers for the domestic market in Europe. Further success, especially after 1986's CES, saw the company moving to the US for full-scale production on a global scale.

REVIEW

SIMPLE AS POSSIBLE AND NO SIMPLER

The entry point of VTL's exulted amplification line, the MB-125 monoblocs, are almost diminutive in contrast with the high-end's almost ubiquitous 'bigger is better' approach. Be that as it may, the unpretentious MB-125s are built to very high standards. The amps are as simple as they are elegant, the nicely curved brushed-aluminium fascia featuring a large central smoked-glass window — a viewing porthole to the innards and the glowing glory of the EL34 power and 12AT7 signal valves.

Other than the window to valve goodness, the faceplate's only departure from total

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barrenness is a power switch flanked by a small blue LED. Equal simplicity applies to the sparsely populated rear panel where only a single-ended RCA provides signal connectivity, an IEC socket provides AC connection and a well-machined pair of binding posts caters to your speaker cables.

A toggle switch provides the option of running the amplifier in either low-powered triode or full-power tetrode modes. Experimentation here is advised, as the sonic differences between each mode will vary depending on speaker load and character. Generally, it's thought that for a purer, perhaps more full-bodied presentation you'd choose triode, while more punch and dynamics can be had by running in tetrode mode. But as they say, your mileage may vary...

The MB-125s run in Class-AB1 and are specified as being capable of 55 watts and 100 watts into 8 ohms in triode and tetrode modes respectively, and has been quoted as applying between 20Hz and 20kHz at ± 0.1 dB. Power increases to 65 watts and 130 watts at 4 ohms. The power specifications derive from an array of four EL34 valves per monobloc, which are driven by two 12AT7s. The amps are quoted as being able to drive down to a 2-ohm impedance load. Input impedance is a high 145 kohms, which makes these amplifiers suitable to run with almost all preamplifiers.

Overall the fit and finish is of a very high standard, and the units feel substantial in terms of their weight and their torsion strength. Care should be taken when lifting the units as they're disproportionately weighted towards the rear where the substantial custom transformers are housed.

On a side note, VTL is not only about high-level signal amplification. The company's two-box TL-7.5 preamplifier, now in MkIII iteration, has received universal acclaim as being of reference level and among the very best available. Similar technologies apply to the preamps on lower rungs, so very sound one brand pre/power combinations are on offer.

ON THE REAR PANEL, A TOGGLE SWITCH PROVIDES THE OPTION OF RUNNING THE AMPLIFIER IN EITHER LOW-POWERED TRIODE OR FULL-POWER TETRODE MODES.



The VTL MB-125 monos offer an understated elegance mixed with solid engineering and all-American manufacturing (in Chino, not China)





SIMPLICITY APPLIES TO THE SPARSELY POPULATED REAR PANEL: A SINGLE-ENDED RCA PROVIDES SIGNAL CONNECTIVITY, AND A WELL-MACHINED PAIR OF BINDING POSTS FOR SPEAKER CABLES.



A PERFECT MATCH?

In the world of audio, where the pursuit of sonic excellence is achieved via both scientific and creative avenues, the concept of synergy can be either a blessing or a curse. Insert a new component into an existing system and it could be heaven or hell, with the former leading to long-term bliss and the latter to an expensive and bumpy seat in the gear-swapping carousel.

The MB-125 has the reputation, pedigree and specifications to work with an almost universal set of speakers, and they certainly sounded outstanding with the 'on-paper' difficult-to-drive

Wilson Sasha W/P. Here were two *simpatico* components that greeted each other, shook hands, and went about producing some of the best sound we've had.

The MB-125s would have to be one of the sweetest yet most hard-driving valve amplifiers around, given its moderate power rating (we also run a 750-watt solid-state monster — from the sublime to the ridiculous). The amps exerted impressive control, not only over the twin high-power 8-inch woofers but with the overall sonic presentation, especially in the dynamic contrast domain. Demanding musical fare was just a walk in the park for these amps, the VTLs managing to tread a path

of profound detail, resolution and instrumental separation, within a warm, full-bodied, yet quite fast and furious sound. Drums and percussion, toms and kick in particular, displayed a 'roundness' and a vigorous attack without excess bloom or boom — a more expressive yet less-dry presentation than some high-damping solid-state amplifiers, but one just as powerful-sounding and, in this case, more satisfying.

In that last sense, the MB-125s sound like far more powerful beasts than their specifications would suggest. And that, surprisingly, was in triode operation, our preferred mode of listening, with the tetrode mode bringing a bit more punch while losing some 'bloom' and magic in the midrange — just a tad.

And there was plenty of magic in the all-important midrange. Whether vocals or brass, or the lower violin and upper cello notes — and so much more — the MB-125 monos were always resolute and sweet. Rarely have we experienced such a total lack of grain or etch, and again, stressing the solidity of the images, the large sense of space, the superb instrumental separation and the surprising dynamic modulation.

In our experience, some amplifiers at this price point exhibit a limitation of *some* form; sometimes it's a touch too much bass bloom (possibly associated with cost savings and compromises in the transformer design) or a coloration or lack of transparency in the mids or highs (the association there may be related to circuit and component compromises). The MB-125s just played music; always involving, always utterly listenable.

CONCLUSION

In our opinion, having at least one item in the system chain sporting valve circuitry brings the magic. The crowded Australian market offers plenty of valve amplifiers, and certainly a whole host of budget fare in over-the-top-bling livery from China. But what the VTL MB-125 monos offer is an understated elegance mixed with solid engineering and all-American manufacturing (in Chino, not China).

Few amplifiers have had the impact or had our reference system singing to the triumphant levels that the visually unassuming MB-125s have. Call it synergy, within the microcosm of my reference system, or call it all-round potential excellence in the audio world at large. One thing's for sure — shopping at this price point and not trying the MB-125s is totally at your peril because, in the world of the high-end, the VTL MB-125 little monos are one hell of a bargain. £

SPECIFICATIONS

OUTPUT POWER: 55 watts Triode and 100 watts Tetrode into 8 ohms, 65 watts triode and 130 watts Tetrode into 4-ohms (20Hz–25kHz ± 0.1dB < 3% THD, stable to 2-ohms)

CLASS OF OPERATION: AB1

INPUT SENSITIVITY: 0.75V/145 kohms

DIMENSIONS: 400 × 318 × 178mm (WDH)

PRICE: \$8999 a pair

WARRANTY: Two years; six months on valves. Optional five-year warranty upon registration of the product with Advance Audio Australia

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