

VTL Siegfried

Reprinted with permission from Peter Montcrief
IAR Newsletter April, 2004

Vanishing act.

Siegfried and Roy became famous for their act, making huge white tigers vanish before your very eyes. Siegfried, the new flagship monoblock from VTL, achieves similar magic. Siegfried's imposing large towers utterly vanish, before your very ears.

In recent years, many high end companies have been making their flagship high power amps in a massive tower format. They are all visually impressive. And most are quite good sonically. But none come close to truly vanishing aurally. The VTL Siegfried is the first high power amp to truly vanish, bringing you directly in touch with your music.

In recent years, program sources and loudspeakers have become dramatically better, revealing more music with better transparency and higher resolution. Thus, they have also become more revealing of sonic shortcomings in today's power amplifiers (and indeed all audio electronics). Audio electronics that may have seemed faultless in years gone by are clearly shown by today's best systems to no longer qualify as state of the art. Our high resolution lab system of today has taught us new high levels of aural discrimination, and most of today's best audio electronics are revealed by today's best program sources and best loudspeakers to be imposing undesirable sonic barriers between you and your music.

There are now only two power amplifiers in our experience which are capable of truly vanishing in the service of music, as judged by the standards of today's best program sources and loudspeakers. The first to achieve this was the Audio Research VTM 200 monoblock, which we praised as sounding like there is nothing but air between you and the music. The VTL Siegfried now joins this select club, and at a significantly higher power level (800 watts instead of 200), as well as of course a significantly higher price (\$40,000 per pair instead of \$16,000 per pair).

The VTL Siegfried far surpasses the sound of other flagship tower or high power amplifiers, such as those from Levinson, Halcro, Krell, Edge, etc. Indeed, with Siegfried VTL has handily surpassed the sound of its own various previous models, including the praiseworthy Wotan [MB-1250](#) (which was especially impressive driving Martin Logan Statement loudspeaker panels). Siegfried marks a stunning advance by the VTL engineering team, and a stunning achievement in the whole field of state of the art amplification. You too will be stunned, as Siegfried's mighty towers, at first so visually dominating, totally disappear from your consciousness the moment the music starts, because you become so enthralled by the music itself that Siegfried utterly vanishes.

When you listen to Siegfried, you can simply enjoy listening, and revel in being so directly in touch with the music. But it's part of my job to analyze the sound and tell you about it. I'm known as a very perceptive, critically discriminating, and analytical

listener. So even as I enjoyed the music coming from Siegfried (and from VTL's highly praised TL-7.5 line section), I also, by trained instinct, ruthlessly probed and examined every facet of what I was hearing, searching for sonic weaknesses, on exceptionally difficult program material. Here, then, a report to you on our critical and probing sonic analysis.

As we go through the details of Siegfried's sonic analysis, you'll notice that the highlights consist of what Siegfried doesn't do. Siegfried reveals and communicates the music directly to you -- without intervening with its own personality, artifice, or sonic weakness, as virtually all other electronics can be heard to do when subjected to our ruthless probing. So Siegfried's total sonic achievement consists of all the many facets of musical reality it reveals, while not committing the sonic errors or imposing the sonic thumbprints that virtually all other electronics do.

First, Siegfried is supremely transparent, revealing subtle details of real music that utterly elude virtually all other amplifiers. Yet, unlike other amplifiers, Siegfried does not wear its transparency on its sleeve. Virtually all other amplifiers, even though less truly transparent at revealing true musical information than Siegfried, flaunt or show off what transparency they do have by imposing an artifice that seems to shout from the sidelines that they are a fast or sharp or clear amplifier. This artifice in other amplifiers usually consists of spurious brightness and/or hardness that is added to and imposed upon the music. Siegfried does not sound spuriously hard or bright, so it does not advertise its transparency, and after listening to a few ordinary musical notes you might even think that Siegfried does not hold the promise of extraordinary transparency (the usual clues, which are actually sonic artifices, simply aren't there). You might even think that Siegfried doesn't sound bright enough, and perhaps is even too dull.

But then along comes a truly difficult musical note, say a delicate cymbal tap. And you suddenly hear from Siegfried subtle inner detail in this cymbal tap that you've never heard before. And this remarkable extra depth of musical detail is revealed effortlessly, without the added artifice that you've heard from virtually every other amplifier. Then it is that you realize that Siegfried is supremely transparent, so transparent that it can effortlessly reveal more of the music while imposing less of itself than other amplifiers. As we discussed at length in IAR issues 76-79, the true mark of audio greatness is heard when difficult signals are handled with effortless ease, like Fred Astaire dancing. If you've ever listened to a master tape, you know that it likewise can at first seem to sound too dull, because it lacks the bright artifices we hear from most consumer media (vinyl, CD, etc.), but then, when you hear more musical detail from the master tape in spite of it being less bright, you realize that this is what truly natural reproduction should sound like.

Second, Siegfried is effortlessly fast, yet it does not sound fast. Truly fast speed in a great audio component sounds delicate, because high speed musical transients are handled so quickly and effortlessly that they are over with before they register much on the human ear/brain. If some audio component sounds superficially fast, impressing naïve listeners with bright, hard transients, it is actually not effortlessly fast, because this

brightness and hardness, imposed as an artifice upon the music, is a sign that that circuit is lingering too long at the transient peak, and is not fast enough to dissipate the energy and quickly come down the back side of the transient peak. Siegfried's ability to track the fastest musical transients, up and then down, while sounding delicate, and refusing to add the artificial transient snap so typical of most electronics, is a sure indicator of its true speed. Siegfried does not add any artificial edge, sharpness, or hardness to fast transients, as some amplifiers do, nor does it round, dull, or soften the leading corners of fast transients as some other amplifiers do.

Third, Siegfried is superb at articulating and delineating transients and musical subtleties as individuals, without smearing them together, as most other electronics do (via time smearing which is due to energy storage in various circuits and circuit parts). Again, Siegfried achieves this superb articulation and delineation without adding typical artifices such as hardness, and without sounding artificially analytical. Siegfried far transcends other amplifiers in its ability to reproduce a massed chorus of individuals, such as massed strings or a vocal chorus. Siegfried reproduces the massive sonority of the assemblage, but it also reveals the unique sonic signature of each individual instrument, player, or singer within the assemblage, so you can clearly hear and count the individuals, and you can recognize Aunt Sarah's voice stage left amidst the chorus.

Fourth, Siegfried is superb at reproducing and maintaining intertransient silence, the blackness that naturally occurs between micro-bursts of musical energy. Siegfried's superior intertransient silence has several sonic benefits. Its superior silence between transients helps to individuate each transient better, since each transient is framed by blackness (an absence of time smearing energy), rather than being blurred into previous and succeeding transients by bridges of time smearing energy filling in what should be black and relatively silent void. Additionally, the silence between transients creates a blacker background, which is closer to the black background you hear from live acoustic music. This also increases true and perceived dynamic range, since each musical transient now rises higher above what is now a much quieter noise floor. And this also improves overall clarity and transparency of each transient, since each transient is now heard against a quieter background with less cluttering garbage.

Furthermore, since there is less cluttering garbage between major musical transients, thanks to Siegfried's superior intertransient silence, you can now hear subtle musical details, minor transients, which in other amplifiers are simply buried and obscured by that cluttering garbage between major transients. These subtle musical details, revealed so superbly by Siegfried, include the natural subtle noises that musical instruments and human singers make, noises that define the timbre, texture, and character of the instrument and singer, and thereby make them sound much more real and live. Siegfried is supreme at effortlessly revealing subtle textural details, such as the noise that rosin causes when it makes the bow grab for traction and subtly skip, as a bowed cello or viola is played. You might think that such subtle noises are not important, but you do hear them live (even if you don't consciously notice them), whereas you don't hear them through most amplifiers, so it is the presence or absence of these subtle musical textural realities that tell you ear/brain (subconsciously perhaps) that this is real, but that is merely

canned hi-fi. Siegfried brings the reality of music home, and thereby itself vanishes in the service of music.

These subtle musical details also include subtle imaging cues, such as hall ambience, localization and depth information, and even information about the air and space surrounding each performer on stage. Needless to say, Siegfried's imaging is superb, revealing felicities from well miked recordings that totally elude most other amplifiers. On a good recording, Siegfried reveals rich layers of ambience, space, and depth all around the performers, and thereby even further enhances that total sense of eavesdropping on a real, live musical event which Siegfried already achieves so well thanks to its effortless transparency.

Fifth, Siegfried manages to be delicate and musically natural without being soft or defocused. There are other amplifiers that try to deliver a delicate or musically natural sonic experience, but they are almost invariably too soft or defocused, especially in the difficult trebles. Siegfried achieves that very rare combination of being delicate and musically natural, while still being articulate and accurately precise.

Sixth, Siegfried is superbly clean and pure, but without being antiseptic or clinical. The sterility one hears from many other low distortion amplifiers (especially those that are partly or wholly solid state) is actually an artifice that indicates a kind of distortion (perhaps expansive high odd order distortion). Meanwhile, amplifiers that sound fuzzy, Grundy, or slurred are evincing other kinds of distortion. With Siegfried, the music simply emerges as pure music, with none of these distorting artifices imposed upon or added to the music.

Seventh, Siegfried is very neutral in its tonal balance and tonal quality. It does not make the upper midrange polite and recessed, as some other amplifiers do in trying to seem more musical. Siegfried's upper midrange is accurate, and therefore music sounds direct and stage front, if that is how it was recorded. Trumpets keep their realistic dynamic bite, and a Steinway keeps its flinty brilliance. On the other hand, Siegfried does not overemphasize the upper midrange and lower treble, as some other amplifiers do (and in so doing put all the music too far forward and oppressively in your face).

Siegfried's honesty in the upper midrange also further helps the accurate depth layering of its imaging, since some performers are accurately portrayed as more stage front than others (other amplifiers with a polite, recessed upper midrange put all the music farther away, and thereby reduce the portrayed depth differences among the performers). Additionally, Siegfried's honesty in the upper midrange also helps its accurate portrayal of concert hall ambience. The natural reflections and reverberation echoes from a concert hall's harder surfaces are rich in upper midrange energy, so an amplifier must have honest upper midrange reproduction for you to be able to easily hear and appreciate this subtle ambience information that frames the portrayal of the music on stage and gives it a believable spatial hall environment.

Note that the 6550 type output tubes, used in Siegfried and by many other tube amplifiers, always require significant break-in playing music (regardless of which amplifier they're in), and prior to being broken in they typically do exhibit some excess energy and some hardness in the upper midrange. Siegfried, being so revealing about everything, naturally also reveals these sonic foibles of the 6550 tubes prior to their being broken in, so you shouldn't judge all aspects of a new Siegfried's sound when you first start playing it. Most of Siegfried's other superlative sonic aspects are immediately apparent right out of the crate, so you'll still have plenty of new, great sonic experiences to appreciate, while you're playing music through Siegfried during its break-in period.

Eighth, Siegfried delivers bass that is superb on all counts. Siegfried's bass is rich and full, not overly lean and tight as with some solid state amplifiers. Siegfried's bass is also superbly defined and articulated, not boomy, loose, or flabby as with many tube amplifiers. And Siegfried's bass is very extended, deep, and powerful, with superb kick in the stomach impact. Then, even while it excels at powerful bass, Siegfried also is superb at capturing and reproducing the subtleties of delicate bass. For example, the bass from a bowed bass viol sounds from most amplifiers like a vague bass boom or bass hum, leaving us wondering just what instrument is producing this bass (it might as well be a sine wave generator playing through a loudspeaker on stage). But Siegfried clearly reveals the subtle nuances that tell you that the bass is coming from a large wooden cavity and a vibrating string, so even delicate bass is more musically real from Siegfried.

Ninth, Siegfried has outstanding dynamics. The same sense of effortless, relaxed ease that Siegfried evinces in handling the subtlest or fastest details (as discussed above), it also evinces in handling all levels of loudness, and all levels of signal complexity, as well as quick transitions in loudness and/or complexity. Many other amplifiers start getting congested when the signal gets loud or complex, long before they start overtly distorting or clipping. And many other amplifiers start compressing music's instantaneous dynamic peaks (again long before they reach overtly distorting or clipping levels), thereby squashing the very high crest factor that gives live music its special open, dynamic quality. Thus, Siegfried with its effortless dynamic majesty again sounds more like real live music, leaving other amplifiers sounding more like canned hi-fi.

In all nine ways discussed above, Siegfried vanishes in the service of music, revealing more music to you, while intruding less than other amplifiers do. All these sonic achievements add up to an overwhelming musical experience from Siegfried, an experience that you can instantly recognize as something you have not heard from other amplifiers, and an experience that leaves a lasting impression. We evaluated Siegfried driving a pair of Wilson's midline Maxx loudspeakers, and Maxx sounded far better than we had ever heard it before (indeed, Siegfried raised the Wilson Maxx to a level that we had previously experienced only from Wilson's far more costly Grand Slamm system). We also evaluated Siegfried driving small, moderately priced mini-tower loudspeakers, and again Siegfried made them sound like much better, more expensive loudspeakers, even eliciting surprising bass depth from them.

As Siegfried reveals so much, and as Siegfried itself vanishes, all that's left is the music. And the music that Siegfried gives you stands atop a rarified pinnacle of reality, veracity, and accuracy to the sounds of real live music. Consider Siegfried's reproduction of piano, notoriously one of the most difficult sounds to reproduce truly well.

Virtually all amplifiers reproduce a piano note as a single sound, a homogenous, congealed kind of "plang". But a real piano note sounds far more complex than this. A piano is, after all, a percussion instrument, and so, as with other percussion instruments, the initial transient attack of the percussive strike has a very complex sound, a sound that should reveal all the physical materials involved in the percussive strike, and their diverse sonic characteristics. Through Siegfried, you can clearly hear that metal strings are being attacked by hammers made of both wood and felt. You can clearly hear the distinct sonic characteristics of the wood subtly ringing after the strike, and of the felt damping this sound. You can clearly hear the metal strings crying out in protest as they are first struck, a sound that is very different from the sustain portion of the note that these metal strings make as they continue to resonate. Thus, by revealing all these distinct complexities of the percussive strike, Siegfried allows the piano note to sound much more physically real than other amplifiers, which simply emit a simple, congealed "plang" sound.

Moreover, when a pianist hits the same note on a keyboard harder, the sound of a real piano doesn't merely get louder, but also actually changes in sonic character. The strings cry out with a different harmonic structure when they are struck harder. Makers of the best quality electronic pianos (samplers and synthesizers) know this, and so they program in a literal change of harmonic structure to the struck string sound, for harder and louder strikes of the same note on the keyboard. Siegfried clearly reveals this change in harmonic structure, whereas with other amplifiers the "plang" simply and merely gets louder, without changing character much, when a piano note is struck more forcefully. Thus, Siegfried reveals much more clearly the true change in sound as a piano is played louder and more forcefully. In so doing, Siegfried gives a whole new dimension to a pianist's artistic interpretation, since there is now a complex, multidimensional change in sound when the pianist emphasizes a note in his interpretation, and this more complex change realistically emphasizes, and calls your attention to, the pianist's interpretive emphasis of this note.

Furthermore, this forceful change in the piano note's character also emphasizes the increased loudness, so it allows the true dynamic range of the louder note to clearly emerge and be appreciated by you, since with Siegfried the louder note also sounds (accurately) different in character, with the true added force of the attack impact ringing out as a cry of protest with a different harmonic structure. If you were to strike a person harder, he would probably cry out not only more loudly, but also at a higher pitch of protesting yowl. A real piano does the same thing, and Siegfried, by accurately revealing this change in piano string sound, more realistically portrays a piano's huge dynamic range. Siegfried already has superb dynamics, and this revealing realism further enhances the great dynamic range you can perceive and appreciate from Siegfried.

It's instructive to contrast Siegfried's sound with that from Halcro's highly praised dm 58/68 (its largest amplifiers), which we have auditioned several times driving the Wilson Grand Slamm. Halcro's premium amplifiers are also very clean, transparent, and wide range (and incidentally sound much better than the smaller Halcro dm38 stereo amplifier). This Halcro reveals a lot of information about music. But the Halcro does not reveal music. Its output does not sound like the real thing, like live acoustic music actually sounds. Without going into our usual detailed analysis, the Halcro's sound can be summarized as being artificially electric, illuminating the music in a too bright artificial light at too high a color temperature, thereby rendering the musical information with some artificial hardness and glare. Siegfried is far removed from this sin, and Siegfried's rendition is in a much higher league of musical naturalness, while still being accurate and fully illuminating.

Siegfried incorporates a rich array of automatic controls, including a staged slow turn-on sequence and auto-biasing of all tubes. There are 12 volt trigger and RS-232 remote controls, so Siegfried is ready to take its place in an ultimate surround sound or home theater system. A simple push of a button allows you to change Siegfried's output stage from higher powered (800 watt) beam power tetrode operation to lower powered (400 watt) triode operation, and the changeover is accomplished automatically (with automatic power down and sequenced power up).

We directly compared the sound of Siegfried's triode mode to its tetrode mode. With every other amplifier where we have made this comparison, the triode mode has won, being more musically natural, more dynamic, and more open and airy (which then gave you the hard choice between higher power or better quality sound). But, interestingly, with Siegfried the tetrode mode sounds clearly better in every way, especially being more dynamic (with better bass impact) and more transparent (the triode mode seems too smoothed down by comparison). This means that Siegfried gives you the best of worlds, and does not force you to make the hard choice between higher power or better quality sound. With Siegfried you can have your cake and eat it too.

As you might expect, Siegfried works wonders with all good quality stereo recordings. Siegfried reveals musical nuances from all your classic vinyl discs that you have never heard before. But Siegfried is also especially well suited to surround sound and home theater. As we've extensively discussed in other IAR articles, surround imaging makes even higher demands upon perfectionist high end sonic performance than stereo imaging does, if it is to be truly believable, so it can give you the magic experience of being aurally transported out of your listening room and into an alternative venue. Siegfried's superb transparency and superb spatial imaging pays huge dividends in convincingly re-creating a true surround image, both for surround music and for surround film soundtracks. Moreover, even with the sonic compromises inherent in most film soundtracks, Siegfried's superior revelation of detail without artifice can still be clearly heard and appreciated. Thus, your ultimate high power surround sound and home theater system would employ seven or eight Siegfried towers. You only live once.