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VTL TP-2.5i Phonostage

Affordable Tube Bliss

[Equipment report](#) by [Jacob Heilbrunn](#)

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VTL products, in one form or another, have been a steady companion during my audiophile journey. Years ago, I employed both the VTL MB-750 and MB-1250 amplifiers. I've also reviewed the VTL Siegfried amplifier as well as the 7.5 Series III preamplifier for TAS. This gear represented VTL's top-drawer products and was quite pricey. The \$5000 TP-2.5i phono preamplifier, whose design is based around 12AU7 and 12AX7 tubes, represents something different—an attempt to create, in a fairly small package, excellent performance at a moderate price. How has VTL done?

Quite nicely, indeed. Tubes and vinyl are, in a sense, ideological soulmates, and right out of the box VTL's latest progeny demonstrated a jaunty alacrity, coupled with a weighty sound, on a number of jazz cuts that had me tapping my toes. My TAS colleague Neil Gader has observed that he's often flummoxed when listening to lesser-priced tube gear next to solid-state equipment. More often than not, he told

me, the tube gear sounds much better than you might expect, leaving its solid-state brethren straining to keep up.

One area where VTL has not compromised is parts quality. Instead, to save on cost, VTL has simplified, dispensing with a number of switches that it could have installed on the front panel. To adjust loading and gain, you must unscrew the top lid and set jumpers. There are two stereo RCA inputs and one stereo RCA output. VTL offers the option of using a fully tube section with an external step-up transformer that can be run into the moving-magnet section or a JFET/tube combination. I used the latter. The TP 2.5i also has a mono switch and a rumble filter.

To an aficionado of mono LPs like me, the mono switch is decidedly a good thing. I have a Cobra tonearm on my Continuum Caliburn turntable that is outfitted with a Miyajima Infiniti mono cartridge, which delivers superlative performance. There is a snap, punch, and solidity to mono LPs that I cherish. Not that I'm one of those fellows who only listens to mono. There is a certain period sound to a number of recordings, but in some strange ways they can also sound superior to contemporary LPs.

So the first thing I did was pull a number of mono recordings off the shelves, including the Prestige two-LP set *Jazz Interplay*, which features John Coltrane and several other stars. A local jazz collector named Harry Hasbun tipped me off to this album years ago and it's well worth acquiring. On the cut "Potpourri," for example, I was agog at the blazing trumpet work of Bill Hardman, which the TP 2.5i delivered with panache. A hallmark on all of the cuts that I listened to on this album was the crisp authority with which the VTL rendered drums and cymbals. There was a sizzling quality to the proceedings that made it seem as though time itself were suspended, if only for a moment. Even though this was a mono recording, I also have to say that the delineation of the various instruments was superb. On the song "One By One," a classic 16-bar minor blues, Idrees Sulieman's trumpet was clearly distinct from Coltrane's accompaniment.

Another oldie but goodie that I whipped out was Duke Ellington's *Bal Masque*, which appeared on the Columbia label. Talk about ambiance. This album was recorded at the Americana Hotel in Miami Beach in the Bal Masque supper club. The VTL phonostage projected an immense soundstage and excellent dynamics. In fact, on the tune "Satan Takes A Holiday," I've seldom heard a more forceful rendering of the Ellington orchestra. The TP 2.5i made it sound on some passages as though Ellington himself were taking a sledgehammer to the piano, as you could hear the instrument resounding from the impact of his playing. The performances on this disc are truly remarkable, with trumpet sections offering sassy interjections, while saxophones wail away. The clarity of the TP 2.5i was remarkable; its ability to capture the work of such great artists as Harry Carney, Jimmy Hamilton, and Paul Gonzalves with real verve was striking. On some cuts—"The Peanut Vendor," for example—Sam Woodyard's Latin-style drumming was so vivid you could almost imagine yourself back at the original venue.

Another, almost literally atmospheric, mono album that the phonostage reproduced with excellent verisimilitude was Red Garland's *All Kinds of Weather* (Prestige), and, yes, for those of you who follow such things, I played the double-deep groove original. The cut that I focused on was "Stormy Weather," which surfaces in the movie *All About Eve*. Garland's piano playing was weighty and meditative, but

what really impressed me was the ability of the VTL phonostage to nail the bass playing of Paul Chambers. He has a lengthy solo about midway through this song that the VTL excelled at situating in the recording studio. There was no blurriness, no flabbiness in the sound. Instead, the intonation was spot-on. The notes were taut with just the right amount of decay, and you could mentally locate them in reference to the piano and drums.

So far, so good. But what about more modern stereo recordings? For grins and giggles, I listened to an original copy of Curtis Mayfield's *Super Fly*, which I picked up in Los Angeles. On "Pusherman" and "Freddie's Dead," the VTL did a good job of sorting out some fairly complex passages. The drum shots on "Pusherman" came through loud and clear, and the string backing on "Freddie's Dead" was appropriately sinuous and sweet. The first time I listened to these cuts I did so through the moving-magnet section of the TP 2.5i in tandem with an external Ypsilon step-up transformer. The second time I employed the mc input. I preferred the latter. The sound lost some dynamic heft but it was purer and more refined. In addition, the soundstage was less forward when I ran the Atlas super-low-output cartridge through the VTL's mc input.

On orchestral works, the VTL once more demonstrated exceptional prowess at reproducing the original venue. A case in point was a marvelous LP that I recently picked up of Dale Clevenger, who was for many years the first chair of the French horn section of the Chicago Symphony, playing with the Franz Liszt Chamber Orchestra on a Teldec disc. There was nothing to fault here. The TP 2.5i faithfully reproduced Clevenger's sovereign command of the French horn and the call and response between him and orchestra. You could hear the notes from Clevenger's temerarious horn-playing resounding off the back wall of the recording studio. What's more, the instrument's grip—the meaty, deep growl that it produced on the low notes that Clevenger sounded—was exceptional. The same went for the nuanced way that the VTL introduced the pianissimo accompaniment of the harpsichord.

Still, for all its prowess, the TP 2.5i doesn't quite have the same degree of refinement as a number of its higher-priced brethren. This wasn't just apparent in resolution but also in an almost evanescent sense of lingering beauty that superior gear will offer. When compared to the big boys—costly gear from Boulder, Ypsilon, and so forth—I can't tell you that the VTL is some kind of giant-slayer. But the comparison isn't fair, or to put it another way, it's only enlightening in showing that gear in this price range comes tantalizingly close to achieving the performance of far more elaborate designs. Anyone looking for a superbly enjoyable but moderately priced phonostage with a touch of tube bliss would do well to consider the TP-2.5i.

Specs & Pricing

Gain: Selectable 46dB, 56dB, 62dB, or 65dB

Selectable cartridge load: 100, 250, 470, 1k, 4.7k, 47k, 100k ohms

Minimum recommended cartridge output: 0.2mV (mc), 1.5mV (mm)

Vacuum tube complement: One 12AU7, two 12AX7 (one 12AT7 output)

Inputs: Two pairs single-ended RCA

Outputs: One pair single-ended RCA

Output impedance: 375 ohms

Frequency response (+0 -1 dB): 10 Hz–100 kHz

Max output voltage (<1% THD): 8V

Channel separation: > 60dB (20Hz–20kHz)

Dimensions: 19" x 3.75" x 14"

Weight: 25 lbs.

Price: \$5000

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