

Trilogy VTi integrated

British valve amp maker Trilogy always had great sound and a lot of class. Now it's got style too

COST	£2495
SUPPLIER	Trilogy Audio Systems
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Funny how a cash injection can transform one's philosophy. Not that tube wizard Nic Poulson has suddenly become a fire-breathing capitalist, and the fact that he now drives a staid vehicle with four wheels instead of two mustn't be regarded as a sign of incipient old age. It's just that his company, Trilogy, has attracted sound financial backing, so the stakes are higher as the responsibilities now involve others. While I've long admired his adherence to no-nonsense styling of a purist mien — even his budget 900 series stuff never seemed cheap because of its clean look and superb finish — I have to admit that the almost Germanic futurism of the new VTi remote control integrated amplifier heralds a more commercial chapter in Trilogy valve amplification.

Before contemplating the innards, we must discuss what will surely be one of its key selling points: the carbon fibre base and feet. Now carbon fibre is nothing new to audio; elder farts will recall the Infinity Black Widow tonearm, while Wilson-Benesch has made it a company fetish. And the stuff is good fun, especially if it can be used to provide more than mock-GTi go-fasterness. We're all too familiar with the genuine article to be wooed by mock-carbon fibre, as certain car makers are prone to use in buzz-box hot hatches to suggest motor-racing connections. Poulson, being too serious by half, wouldn't dream of using it for mere effect, and he told me with a straight face that it was employed for its self-damping characteristics. And when he told me how much he pays for the single, folded-corner sheet of carbon fibre used per VTi — over £100 per unit — I had to assume that he believed in it. But what most observers of the carbon fibre element will appreciate is not its sonic worth (rattles and microphony are things you note only when they're present, not banished) but its aesthetic contribution.

Without prodding, Nic Poulson unashamedly told me that he and his colleagues were inspired



❶ A single sheet of carbon fibre forms the base, its corners turned down to form the two front feet and a single foot at the rear

by Nordost Pulsar Points, feet substitutes which he feels are absolutely capable of delivering what they promise. But adding the carbon fibre sheet rendered any improvement by the Nordosts inaudible. The unit is absolutely stable; it's never in need of levelling and the design obviates every tweaker's native craving for aftermarket feet. That may seem a back-handed compliment, but Poulson remains convinced that the Pulsar Points are wonderful; you just don't need 'em under a Trilogy VTi.

It's a handsome beast, with a large rotary knob to the extreme left, the on/off-from-standby button in the middle, and an arc of seven tiny press buttons, six for the line level sources including two tape/processor loops with bi-directional dubbing, and the last one which toggles between monitor and record for each source. Trilogy has opted for tiny blue lights to indicate on/off — warm-up is accompanied by a minute's worth of flashing — and a single light comes on below each button to indicate which input is being used. At the back is the mains on/off switch, gold-plated inputs for each source and sufficient multi-way binding posts to allow

connection for 4 or 8 ohm speakers. The top is slotted to permit adequate ventilation; but even so you will need to allow more space than the 380x380x406mm (whd) dimensions: the front feet splay out an extra inch on each side. Just what this does for the performance I don't know, but the company proudly boasts that the chassis has 'near 50/50 weight distribution in both planes'.

In keeping with the dual-mono design, the layout is mirror-imaged, with modular construction consisting of six discrete PCBs 'for optimum channel separation and ease and speed of servicing'. The VTi's case features entirely non-magnetic construction: the base and internal mountings are made from 2mm stainless steel while the lid uses 3mm anodised aluminium.

In the three weeks I used the VTi, it demonstrated nothing less than perfect behaviour, whether driving quirky loads such as BBC LS3/5As, Wilson WATT Puppies or Quad ESLs. As a source, I fed the VTi from the fixed outputs of the Krell KPS25sc — I'm gonna get as much use as I can out of the World's Best CD Player until they collect it — as well as the SME 10 turntable

with Lyra Cartridge and SME Series V, through a Musical Fidelity X-LP.

£2500 is a lot of money for an integrated amplifier by anyone's standards, even though you can spend two or three times that on the new Mark Levinson or other exotic high-end single-chassis packages; for this kind of dough, there are at least a half-dozen stonking Italian Jobs, all manner of quirky British units and plenty of pre/power combos. So what is it about the Trilogi that gives it a fighting chance? Especially if you factor out superb build quality, comprehensive remote control (rather than just playback level), handsome styling, the novelty element of carbon fibre, anticipated longevity, utter quietness, modular construction to facilitate upgrades, and those cute blue LEDs? I mean, you have to ask?

In the end, it all gets down to sound, for everything else is almost incidental. If you wanted just the styling and the features, you'd buy B&O. If all that mattered was build quality and reliability, you go solid-state via Japan.

What Trilogi offers is a very subtle, almost deceptive finesse which not only marks it as a British amplifier of the old school, it also renders it — absolute power aside — a true high-end contender. While the Wilsons demanded more on the dynamic front than the VTi could muster, it dealt with less hungry/ambitious but no-less-refined speakers like the old Quads and the LS3/5As with the sort of guiding hand which inspires confidence. And though I don't know why, given that Poulson doesn't strike me as a bass fanatic, it starts with the VTi's lower octaves. (By 'hungry', I don't mean just a need for sheer wattage: the Wilsons are easy to run in that they have high sensitivity. But the load is quirky, and they seem to work best with amplifiers of seemingly unlimited reserves of power, to best preserve the speed and dynamic contrasts.)

It's hard to convey how a system's sound can have real weight and mass without being overpowering. Even with no subwoofer and through small speakers, the Trilogi builds up a sturdy foundation to support bombastic works like the *Glory* soundtrack, while at the same time demonstrating a type of restraint. Not mean reticence, or a truncation of the bass; it's more a case of correct proportioning. Let's face it: neither the LS3/5A nor the old Quad would satisfy even the most rudimentary requirements of the latest dance groove creation. Even so, the VTi's sheer solidity and coherence flattered those speakers, while it could exploit the Wilsons' prodigious bass until asked to play too loudly.

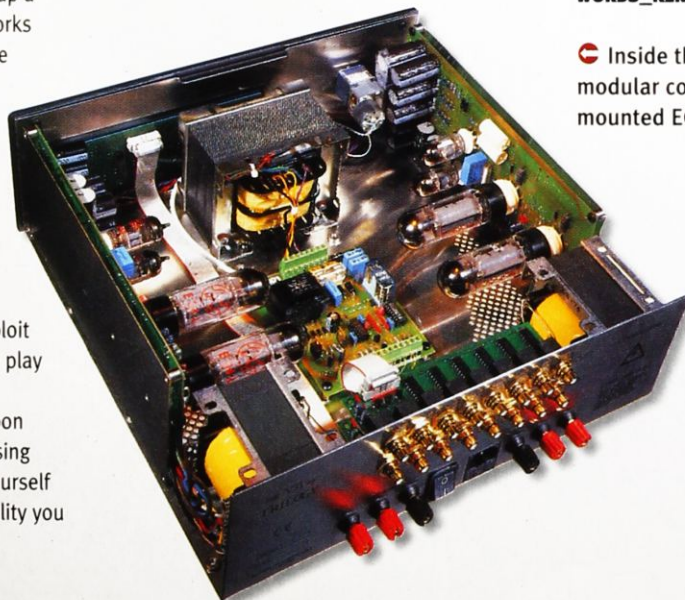
So matter-of-fact is the bass that you soon factor it out of the equation when in assessing mode: you simply don't have to concern yourself with it. Rather, to identify the VTi's personality you

look to the midband and treble region. Or, to be unabashedly honest about it: the very regions which led you to consider valves in the first place. You know what's coming: the VTi loves reproducing voice, especially textured ones with character — think Louis Prima, Johnny Cash, Nat King Cole. If anything, crystal clear voices of the distaff redneck variety are almost too easy, too sweet, too clear. What struck me about the Trilogi was the sheer palpability of male voices, even when sourced from mono. And without wishing to invoke the rules of PRAT, I have to acknowledge that the VTi likes to swing. Hell, this unit should come packed with a CD of Prima's classic 'Just A Gigolo' to demonstrate its prowess.

But that wouldn't show you how wide and deep is the Trilogi soundstage, more so through the LS3/5As and Wilsons than via Quad. The latter seems unchanging in its portrayal of space, probably because it radiates in a more wide-open manner. With hot seat specialties like the LS3/5A and the Wilson, the Trilogi performs a magical disappearing act, rendering the speakers invisible. Quite audibly, the sound in both cases was definable a good yard behind the line of the speakers, and a couple of feet on either side.

If the VTi has a downside — beyond the way that you will never find CD player that's an aesthetic match until Trilogi makes one — it's that you can reach its limitations too easily. Try blasting it with anything of less than 90dB sensitivity and it goes limp — not through nasty clipping, but a sensation that it's run out of juice and would you mind lowering the volume? Or buying a pair of Lowthers? In this regard, it reminds me of the long-forgotten, ultra-rare Lentek Class-A integrated of 20 years back: it could be its clone in everything bar the use of valves instead of transistors.

So, is Trilogi's second decade on to a good start? Absolutely. The VTi is something special, the sort of product which, despite its clean appearance, will keep you on a



THE TECHNOLOGY

With true dual-mono operation, the VTi includes four separate secondary windings per channel in the common mains transformer. Two pairs of ECC83s serve in the pre-amp section, while JJ-branded (ex-Tesla employees) E34Ls are fitted as output valves, with servo bias rendering user bias adjustment unnecessary; the valves are mounted horizontally below the vents. The unit is rated conservatively at 50W/ch into 4 or 8 ohms. Multiple parallel Nichicon electrolytics in the power supply are said to give a 'faster and more seamless balance', while mains filtering includes separate discrete supplies for all standby, remote and servo electronics (The remote handset wasn't ready when we took our pictures.) An onboard circuit will turn off the VTi if any of the valves should become problematic and will indicate which valve is causing the problem.

KEY FEATURES

- Built-in carbon fibre base forms a stable, resonance-deadening three-point support platform
- Two EL34 valves per side give a comfortable 50 watts per channel into most loads
- Built to very high standards with modular design for easy maintenance

path of discovery for a long time, the unit revealing itself slowly. But, like Unison Research and Nightingale amps, its appeal will be restricted until there's a matching source component. Why? Because, like a Savile Row pin-stripe among neon shell suits, it makes everything else seem too damned fussy.

WORDS_KEN KESSLER

☞ Inside the unit: dual mono layout and modular construction with horizontally-mounted ECC83 and E34L valves