

LISTENING by ART DUDLEY

Veni, Vidi, Volti

Volti Audio's Vittora, a borrowed pair of which now sit at the far end of my listening room, is a great loudspeaker *and*, at \$17,500/pair, a seriously great value. After a few weeks with the Vittora, I find myself convinced by the naturalness, momentum, and force that it found in every record I played: This is surely one of the finest horn-loaded speakers made in the US.

The Vittora is designed and built by Greg Roberts, a longtime audio enthusiast who bought his first pair of Klipsch La Scala loudspeakers when he was 14. (He has owned a number of pairs of Klipschorns in the years since, having settled on an especially nice-looking set from 1967.) A woodworker by training and a homebuilder by trade, Roberts began, in 2001, to offer his services as a commercial restorer of Klipsch's "heritage" products: the Klipschorn, the Belle Klipsch, the La Scala, and the Heresy. In time, restoration turned to modification, as Roberts developed a midrange horn and other components to improve the performance of classic Klipsches that hadn't always been built to *perfectionist* standards. Not long after that, Roberts decided to incorporate what he'd learned into a completely new, if unabashedly Klipschian, loudspeaker of his own design. Thus, over several years, did Volti Audio and the Vittora loudspeaker come into being.

The Vittora is a three-way, fully horn-loaded loudspeaker in two enclosures per channel, both made entirely of Baltic birch plywood. The bass cabinet is a single-fold bifurcated horn in which a rear-facing woofer fires into a splitter that, according to Roberts, took considerable time to develop—as did the shape of the bass horn: "The size of the mouth is a big determinant for lower bass: It is what it is," he says. "But I found that upper bass was something I had control over, and I used cheap OSB [oriented-strand board] to build multiple prototypes." The result is a design in which the sides of the enclosure—and thus one surface along each of two paths—are curved. The high-sensitivity, 15" bass driver has a stiffly suspended paper cone—Roberts estimates its Q as approximately 0.3—with a free-air resonance in the neighborhood of 40Hz.

The cabinet's curve is repeated in the sides of the upper enclosure, which houses the Vittora's midrange and treble horns, both of which are derived from Roberts's modifications of Klipschorns. The rectangular midrange horn, made of plywood and bendable hardwood, has a tractrix flare, and is driven by a 2" compression driver (a BMS 4592) with a phenolic diaphragm. The elliptical treble horn is made of composite and is driven by a 1" compression driver with an aluminum diaphragm. The two horns fit side by side, the latter secured in an opening that Roberts designed into the former.

The upper enclosure also contains the Vittora's crossover network, which is user-adjustable for treble output: By substituting different preassembled resistor modules—which work within the Vittora's capacitor- and autoformer-based network



The Volti Vittora loudspeakers, with optional subwoofer, in bubinga veneer.

THIS ISSUE: Art Dudley is already mourning the departure of the horn-loaded Volti Vittora speaker from his system.

to create different L-pad configurations—the owner can suit room or taste by raising or lowering the tweeter's output across its operating range, from 6000Hz up. The crossover network is accessed through a panel on the back of the upper cabinet, and the resistor modules are connected with integral gold-plated spade lugs, making soldering unnecessary. Roberts says that the bass portion of the crossover also includes an adjustable contour filter—a notch filter, really—that helps flatten out a known response peak.

The Volti Vittora is built in a shop—as opposed to a garage, a driveway, or somebody's mother's basement—solely dedicated to the production of loudspeakers and loudspeaker components, and which Roberts has equipped with state-of-the-art power tools and an air-filtration system. Cutting and shaping are done with high-tech European table saws and bandsaws. Wooden parts are bent to shape in a vacuum-bag system—also used to apply veneer—and catalyzed polymer finishes are applied in a separate, room-sized spraybooth. The build quality of my review pair, finished in bosse cedar, equals that of the finest American loudspeaker cabinetry I've seen, DeVore Fidelity and Thiel Audio included. Roberts makes his own wooden cabinet feet, and even irons and applies his own vintage-style grillework—it all contributes to one of the best-built audio products I've had in my home. Forgive the ham-fisted cliché, but even my wife, who was at first put off by the idea of a speaker that takes up more space than a front-loading clothes-dryer, was impressed.

It rained. Of course.

Janet was also impressed with Vittora's sound, going so far as to call it the best horn speaker she's heard. But that's getting ahead of myself—before any listening got done, Greg Roberts and I had to get the Vittoras through the door, which meant that we uncrated them in my driveway. It rained. Of course.

The crates themselves were well made, each containing a single channel's bottom and top enclosures, separated from one another with sheets of sturdy foam. Carrying inside the 60-lb

CONTACTS

Volti Audio
 PO Box 544
 Fairfield, ME 04937
 WEB: www.voltiaudio.com

top enclosures wasn't too terrible, but the 127-lb bottom enclosures gave us a spot of trouble on the way up to my porch, especially as the enclosed stairway is 31" wide and the uncrated enclosure's depth (its smallest dimension) is 29". A few knuckles were scraped that day, a few curses cursed.

Once inside, the setting-up was fairly easy. Roberts shares my preference for using felt pads on the bottoms of his loudspeaker feet (provisions exist for those who endure in preferring spikes), so the heavy lower enclosures were easy to slide on my hardwood floors. The upper enclosures are fitted with spikes, the points of which correspond with dimpled discs atop the bottom cabinets; fitting together the two enclosures is a two-person job, but neither person need be terribly clever or strong, merely possessed of good depth perception. (I scarcely filled the bill.) In order for me to have the complete Vittora experience, Roberts also brought a matching sample of its optional subwoofer (\$2900 without its corresponding Marchand amplifier/crossover), beautifully finished in the same bosse-cedar veneer. That said, we began our fine-tuning and our first few hours of listening without it.

The Vittoras

Bass extension with the Vittoras alone (Greg Roberts says they reach down to 50Hz, in room) was superb from the get-go: The bass horn loaded the room exceptionally well, with no egregious dead zones. Our work was confined to selecting the optimal distances between the speakers and the front and side walls; we noted, without surprise, that when those two dimensions were too similar, bass notes lost some of their distinctness of pitch and clarity. Our best results were had with the cabinets only a few inches from their respective sidewalls, and with about 26" between the back of each cabinet and the wall behind it. A gentle to moderate amount of toe-in was preferred, the handed enclosures arranged so that their treble horns were on the outside edges of the midrange horns.

At the far end of my room, driven by the 25W Shindo Corton-Charlemagne amplifiers, the Vittoras sounded nothing

short of wonderful. Their trebles were smoother and altogether softer than those of my metal-horned Altec Valentias, while their bass range had the same touchtone, vintage magic: a little less sharp and a little more colorful than the Altecs, and just as big, just as full of impact and nuance and feeling.

Thus it was with slight skepticism that I assented to hooking up the Vittora subwoofer, whose downfiring 18" driver is installed in an uncommonly solid enclosure measuring 27" tall by 24" wide at the front and 6" wide at the rear, and driven by an outboard Marchand MB42 300W amplifier (\$1500). The Marchand, which works off a line-level signal (my Shindo Masseto has only one pair of outputs, so we used a pair of Y-connectors), includes adjustments for crossover, damping, and phase. The subwoofer is also available in a front-firing version.

Once it was dialed in, the Vittora sub did, in fact, enhance some recordings. It allowed the orchestral bass drum in Itzhak Perlman's recording of Berg's Violin Concerto, with Seiji Ozawa and the Boston Symphony (LP, Deutsche Grammophon 2531110), to sound a bit more menacing, and made the stage seem larger during the climaxes it punctuates. Precisely the same could be said of the Peter Pears and Benjamin Britten recording, with the London Symphony Orchestra and Chorus, of Elgar's *The Dream of Gerontius* (LP, London OSA 1293). And piano LPs and CDs, in a general sense, gained in scale and presence. Roberts had brought with him a copy of Don Byron's *Bug Music* (CD, Nonesuch 79438-2)—a great album that I hadn't heard before—which was also suited by the sub.

That said, at the end of the day, literally and figuratively, I didn't feel as though I *needed* the Vittora subwoofer—I didn't really miss it when it wasn't there. I thought the sound of the Vittoras alone was beautifully balanced, and more than eminently satisfying in terms of bass volume and power. Don't take the "50Hz" thing too literally: The Vittora had much more bass than that specification suggests.

Letting it bleed

On the evening of the Vittoras' first full day here, with the subwoofer removed from the mix for the time being, I played the Rolling Stones' *Let It Bleed* (CD, ABKCO 80042) somewhat more loudly than my usual listening habits dictate—and, at a more moderate



The underside of the Vittora subwoofer, showing its downfiring 18" driver.

volume, Berlioz's *Les nuits d'été*, featuring the remarkably beautiful voice of Régine Crespin, accompanied by Ernest Ansermet and L'Orchestre de la Suisse Romande (LP, Decca/Speakers Corner SXL 6081). Both sounded, in their own ways, more compelling than usual. With the former, the Vittoras allowed Charlie Watts's drumming to sound as forceful as it should—in which regard the Vittoras were in a very small class of speakers I've had in this room, next to my Altecs and not a whole lot else—while also sounding utterly clean and free from harshness: a blessing. On the Berlioz, the Vittoras did nothing less than prove themselves the elusive ideal: loudspeakers with the musical strengths of horns—Crespin's dynamic nuances throughout "Sur les lagunes" were breathtaking, as were the plucked double-bass strings behind the second verse—that were both free of egregious colorations and capable of casting a beautifully deep, convincing stereo image.

The next day, I remembered to try through the Vittoras an even better-sounding recording of a similar song cycle: Britten's *Les Illuminations*, with Heather Harper, Neville Marriner, and the Northern Sinfonia (LP, Angel S-36788). That, too, sounded wonderful, with the big Voltis doing a remarkable job of portraying the delicate manner in which Harper's voice traced line after challengingly chromatic line, and giving a very good sense of the positions of the string players behind her. The Vittoras did an equally good job with a very different record, one that I hadn't listened to in a very long time: the eponymous debut by the B-52's (LP, Warner Bros. BSK 3355). One could argue that only a horn—and only an LP—can honor the style of guitar playing found in this recording: heavy-gauge strings, generally set up with high action, struck with considerable force, and amplified with minimal distortion and

maximal reverb. The Vittora also gave fine, impactful realism to other sounds in this recording (I'm thinking: *bongos*), but Ricky Wilson's decidedly electric guitar playing stood out.

These experiences reminded me that listening to a speaker such as the Volti Vittora—and the old Altec Valencias, too, of course—is like hearing your favorite musicians take off the three or four heavy overcoats that you didn't know they'd been wearing all that time: Suddenly, the music is unencumbered. Alive. The musicians *drive*, passionately, through the music; tempos aren't faster, of course, but they sound it, because there's more muscle behind each note. The Volti Vittora was like bugs without the amber.

Another isolated example: In "Lime-Tree Arbour," from Nick Cave & the Bad Seeds' *The Boatman's Call* (WAV file ripped from CD, Mute/Reprise 46530), there are a couple of moments—most notably after the words "It flows through life like water"—when organist Cave switches from a steady fill to a brief rhythmic pattern of staccato chords. Listening through the Vittoras, that nuance caught my attention as never before—not as some superficial sonic detail that this product thrust at me louder than some other, but as an integral and ultimately exciting part of the musical landscape. A very small thing. But horn speakers find dozens of such small things every minute—so



The Vittora's adjustable crossover is mounted in the upper enclosure.

many that the music gains back a lot of the dynamic texture and interest that are otherwise lost.

Nor were such observations limited to popular music and jazz: The *scherzo* from Vaughan Williams's Symphony 5, with Sir John Barbirolli and the Philharmonia Orchestra (LP, EMI ASD 508), was also scooted along by the Voltis, the big speakers following the notes with all due briskness—and force, both subtle and unsubtle. And the sheer physical tension communicated by the timpani in the Herbert von Karajan/Berlin Philharmonic recording of Brahms's *Ein deutsches Requiem* (LP, Deutsche Grammophon 2832 006) was electrifying, especially at the climax of the second movement.

Value?

Which finally brings us back to the subject of value. I suppose I'm qualified, if not obliged, to make two sorts of comments: general observations regarding the ratio between a product's asking price and the apparent cost of its design and manufacture, and personal observations on the ratio between that price and the quality of its sound. In fields—woodworking among them—in which I have useful experience, I can say whether a thing is priced fairly or not, relative to the cost of its making; but when it comes to sound quality, my value judgments are restricted to personal opinion—as are yours. Thus, if, from the technological sanctuary of his parents' house, an audiophile has outwitted every professional manufacturer by transforming a

spool of RadioShack wire and an empty Quaker Oats carton into the cheapest and best-sounding loudspeaker of his own experience, I offer both my congratulations and my assurance that that is an opinion to which he is entitled. But I'll endure in reserving the right to remain uninterested in hearing the thing, if only to avoid stealing from that modern-day Tesla the pleasure of sniveling that he is underappreciated, only because the press is too corrupt to declare his genius. (I'm very considerate that way.)

And so to the first question: As a mere *product*, is the Volti Vittora a good value? Considered in the light of its cost of manufacture, the answer is an unambiguous and enthusiastic *yes*. Even though \$17,500 is the highest price yet applied to this loudspeaker—which continues to evolve as a commercial product—it is still a bargain, given the time, materials, and techniques that have gone into it.

The other question remains: Relative to the competition, is the Vittora a good value on the basis of its sound? Considered as a music-playback device, I endure in thinking that the Vittora is an exceptional value. There are other excellent loudspeakers that perform in a similar manner and cost considerably less, chief among them DeVore's Orangutan O/96. But to find another new speaker that delivers *this* combination of scale, impact, openness, freedom from overt distortions, and sheer, consistent listenability, one must spend considerably more than \$17,500—or so experience tells me.

I'm impressed with this loudspeaker. So have been any number of visitors to my home during the Vittoras' stay here. Though for the most part these have been garden-variety music lovers, one is a member of the audio industry who imports and distributes a number of expensive products, including high-sensitivity speakers. I know and like this man, and I know that he genuinely admired the Vittoras.

I first heard the Volti Vittora at an audio show. If nothing else, therefore, it seems we finally have an answer to a heretofore rhetorical question: Why do we need so many audio shows? Today, I'd say it's to give as many people as possible, in as many places as possible, a chance to hear products such as this, whose absence from my home I already mourn. ■

Art Dudley (art.dudley@sorc.com) listens to music old and new, on equipment old and new, in upstate New York.



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Careful design, and a unique approach to building the midrange horn, the bass horn, and the crossover network has resulted in a horn speaker that gives us all we love about horn speakers, minus the horn vices.

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