

VTL MB-750 Reference Amps: Brunnhilde Rides Again!

How painful it can be for a reviewer to drag himself away from listening and sit down to write, when he's been beguiled by components like the MB-750 Brunnhildes. Go ahead and jeer. But be aware that the time taken to write this report was brutally and courageously carved out of many delightful listening sessions.

At the summit of VTL's all-tube power-amplifier line stands the mighty MB-1250 Wotan. Upon hearing of the birth of the as-yet-nameless MB-750 Reference, our august Editor promptly christened it "Brunnhilde," for Wotan's daughter. The 750 is no longer gender-neutral.

Brunnhilde, to bring you up to speed, is, in Wagnerian lore, the boss lady of the Valkyries, those equestrian goddesses who gallop across Teutonic battlefields retrieving slain heroes for Wotan's Wehrmacht. As punishment for disobedience, Wotan puts Brunnhilde to sleep on a fiery rock, to be awakened and bedded by the young hero Siegfried on his first overnight away from home. She is (1) the first woman he has ever seen and (2) his aunt. Enough of *that* R-rated story for now, children. Before you worry yourselves to sleep over how these exploits relate to audio hardware, I will confess that after listening to the 750s for only a few minutes, I applauded HP's witticism for its aptness as well as its humor. Brunnhilde the amplifier has great genes. She tempers her ample legacy of Wotan's godlike dominance with her own feminine charm. Call me Siegfried.

You'd expect a Valkyrie to be stacked, and, sure enough, the statuesque Brunnhildes consist of two chassis on each side, set into a sturdy frame, power supply below and amplifier above. A big, rubber-sealed Signature power transformer dominates the lower half and twelve 6550C output tubes the upper. The 750's surprisingly modest 20" by 12" footprint is easy to place near side or front walls behind the speakers. Since VTL eschews techno-glitz, casual shoppers can mistake its handsome but somewhat retro designs for sonic obsolescence, what a boner *that* is! Brunnhilde may have originated in Medieval legend, but her contemporary incarnation is Twenty-first Century state-of-the-art in performance.

The MB-750's previous incarnation was the "Signature"; the new Reference's distinguishing feature is its three separate power-supply circuits for input, driver, and output stages. Its two-stage power switch delivers power to the amplifier in two steps, reducing strain on your circuit breakers. Brunnhilde also boasts selectable RCA and XLR input jacks, an input mute switch with LED indicator, and VTL's unique triode/tetrode switch. Each output tube is individually biased with a fairly convenient trimpot. But this needn't be done often; VTL suggests every 500 hours. As with all VTL amps, tubes are operated quite conservatively for cooler running and reliability. Nevertheless, twenty-four 6550s will heat up a room, and users should provide ventilation. Luke Manley has spoken about designing ded-

icated ventilating hoods for these amps, but so far, no soap. My only design criticism: I wish the three front-panel LEDs were more conspicuous. And a triode/tetrode indicator would be helpful, too. Otherwise Brunnhilde is Siegfried-friendly.

All of VTL's big double-chassis amps are descendants of David Manley's original VTL Deluxe 500, a late-Eighties design that broke ground in domestic tube power but whose darkish sound lacked finesse and quickness. Rated at 800 watts, the refined 750s hail from another universe. They join the effortless dynamic bloom of deep power reserves with the rich, supple textures of tubes and – most surprisingly to me – the delicacy and grace of the classic 60-watt tube amp. In fact, the Brunnhilde is a package of 60-watt qualities blown up to 800-watt proportions. It sounds like a nimble and sweet little amp that maintains its composure when a solo flute gives way to a 100-piece orchestra plus chorus and organ. Power with subtlety.

You've seen reviewers lament that components that break ground in overall realism deflect attention from themselves to the music and have no single distinction to emphasize. As a writer in these pages once remarked, VTL's amps have a "simple" musical sound. That means a single, coherent tonal, spatial, and dynamic character from top to bottom. No attribute or range stands out at the expense of others. This has been characteristic of the brand from its beginning, and Brunnhilde carries on the tradition. So my list of attributes is almost arbitrary; pick a category of subjective performance – spatial recreation, dynamic finesse and power, transparency, neutral balance, transient responsiveness, absence of boom or glare – and these amps will probably excel in it, but no one category dominates.



For one thing, the Brunnhildes have superb image density, the ability to create an almost infinite number of images, next to each other or across a crowded room, while giving each one full dynamic freedom and timbre. I don't hear this ability to organize images coherently so fully realized in some other high-quality amps, particularly the low-powered SET variety, where small ensembles can come to life in space but orchestral images overlap. This capability of multiplying musical loaves and fishes produces what to me is the amps' miraculous ability to pack more musical events into the same room space. My walls and ceiling haven't moved an inch, but the stage I hear and visualize is larger, more densely packed, yet with less elbowing than before. Somehow the 100 pieces of an orchestra and the 200 voices of a large chorus have more room to perform within the same local area, no shoehorn required.

However closely state-of-the-art playback may appear to approach live music, there will always be a difference in the subjective perception of space. Stereo relies on the brain's ability to combine two sound sources into an illusion of one, but live sound emanates from an array of single point sources. Live, we aren't conscious of "images" or of "hall sound" but perceive the instruments and voices as occupying the stage and hall the way we hear a group of chattering people occupy a cocktail party, their voices distributed but commingled. Microphones warp space, funneling sounds into artificial relationships we characterize as "imaging." We listen for the contours of their event horizons as indices of the accuracy and resolution of our systems.

The 750s reproduce this parallel playback universe as accurately as any other amp I have heard, but with greater tonal naturalness (defined as the general impression of live tone rather than as ultra-fine detail). They yield as convincing a recreation of real sounds in space as home audio is likely to provide in the year 2000. Flutes are flutier, brasses brassier. The stage floats free of the speakers. Each voice or body of voices occupies its own location within a single undivided space. Sounds are clearly audible and harmonically right, all the way back into the deepest recesses.

This effect is strikingly evident in the quiet opening of the "Song" section of *Háy János* by Kodály [Mercury 432005-2, CD], Track 3. A vibrantly stringy viola opens the soulful melody and is joined by an oboe and a cymbalom – that plonky Hungarian string percussion instrument that makes me think of chicken *paprikash* – each in a well-defined location on the stage, all distinct, differentiated, but harmoniously blended statements within one space. Really gorgeous, almost as luscious in texture, as lucidly immediate, as the demurest SET amp, but then the brasses and bass drum-rolls open up majestically in the next track, "Battle and Defeat of Napoleon," with no apparent injury to delicacy of texture. If a full ensemble accompanies solos, the solos sail on with unabated resolution. Each instrument controls its own expressive level, rising and falling continuously at its own pace, and with its own tone shadings and harmonics – as if it had its own little power amp. And without analytical etch-

ing, just naturally, serenely, easily. Despite their massive power, these electronic goddesses (shamelessly mixing my mythologies!) are from Venus, not Mars. They also reproduce hall acoustics from the top to the bottom (reflected bass sound) with bounteousness and precision.

Heard in a dealer's showroom, a system including these amps struck me as bass heavy. I wondered if they would do the same here. They don't. It wasn't the amps, it was the dealer's showroom and electrostatic hybrid speakers. My Alón Circes have dynamic woofers that handle transients well, plus a clean crossover. The woofers match the upper (dynamic) drivers more coherently than will any hybrid's. The Brunnhildes control woofers as firmly as the woofers themselves allow, which wasn't very firmly in that showroom. Here the Brunnhildes refuse to simulate deep bass or midbass; if it isn't on the record, don't expect to hear it. This is tube sound without alluring romanticism.

An audiophile aggravation of the silly sort: A non-audiophile visitor sees your big amps and asks, "What are those things?" Amplifiers, you say. "My! They must play very loud!" Is it worth trying to explain that the point of the big amps is not to play loud but to cope effortlessly with the dynamic demands of acoustic music at normal listening levels? Even a 30-watter can play loud enough to drive you from the room, but the Brunnhildes, like other high-powered amps, flesh out the vocal and instrumental peaks, maintain focus, texture, and minute dynamic shadings with the inefficient loudspeakers most of us like to use. But to make 800 watts usable for music, an amp has to trace the music signal accurately from input to speakers. This the Brunies have – dynamic bloom plus dynamic agility.

Records that always sounded congested now expand boldly into the room and flex their biceps. On the other hand, records that barely got by in the past can be reduced to rubble by the 750, which has the resolving power, dynamic responsiveness, and tonal neutrality to expose sonic faults in a dramatic way. For this reason, the Brunnhildes put a premium on first-rate recordings and smooth-sounding cables that favor liquid textures over cutting-edge detail. Nordost SPM Reference speaker cables make a great match, albeit on the detail side. Discovery Essence interconnects incline the other way, and the Brunies like these, too.

Though speaker power ratings are not rigid barriers to your choice of amps, you should check with your speaker manufacturer for advice on using one so powerful. The Circe's woofers are rated at 200 watts, and I guard against any non-musical eruptions that could damage them. One of the revelations of the 1996 CES was the Wotans driving Alón Vs in Mercury's spectacular CD [434360-2] of Tchaikovsky's *1812 Overture*, cannons and all, without casualty to anything other than certain preconceived notions.

Such power would be wasted without low-noise, low-distortion parts and circuitry. These reveal their presence in transparency and fine resolution. The amps' combination of ultra-low noise and ultra-high power enables them to articulate low-level performance and environmental details like reverberant

decay without worrying, so to speak, where their next watt is coming from. A happy, relaxed power supply means a happy, relaxed listener. A CD of Mahler's *Fifth* bears this out: Inbal's [Denon 33C1088], where, at 10:00 in Track 1, the solo tympani, centered way back behind the rest of the orchestra, tap out the funeral-march theme *pianissimo* in ghostly beats and rolls. So ghostly that older analog recordings used to bring up the gain (and the hiss) at this point, and modern digital ones may use a spotlight microphone. Denon evidently does neither, yet every stroke and muffled roll is audible in pitch, fixed in space, and drumlike in timbre. A minute or two later, the full orchestra rings forth uncompressed.

A real surprise: The Brunnhildes' power and finesse clarify vocal groups in this room beyond any expectation. My reference Herron VTSP-1A line stage is capable of extremely fine definition all the way to the back of the stage, and so are the Brunnhildes. The result is that choruses with or without accompaniment take on a remarkable clarity and dimensionality along with finely registered and non-clashing harmonic textures. That lovely sonorous blend of the many individual voices in a live chorus is now on display right here. Choral recordings I had regarded as just adequate take on new vividness, like Mendelssohn choral works on Hyperion [CDA66359, CD]. This combines a chorus, organ, and ensembles of various instruments in a church acoustic that had sounded, like most choral records, somewhat blurred or even muddy. Now a bright sea of voices, each anchored to its spot, spreads across and deep into the church, the orchestra laid out before it. Which combinations of instruments are used in each piece, which sections of the chorus are singing when and where – this is all clear. An altogether novel playback experience!


Likewise DG's wonderful laserdisc of Leonard Bernstein's *Candide* conducted by the terminally ill composer [072523-1, 2 LD]. I have heard this set many times but never before with such sparkling and revelatory orchestral, choral, and solo sound. Though multi-miked and somewhat artificial spatially, this colorful audio track's constant transient demands hardly faze the Brunnhildes. They blithely mingle deep-rooted sustained tones with explosive percussion, brass, and voices and present the full-throated choral passages as well as the solos with perfect intelligibility and balance.

"Multi-miked" reminds me that the Brunnhildes' combination of definition and gentleness extends even to multi-tracked and multi-miked recordings, especially on vinyl, that my past systems tended to render unpleasant by calling attention to spotlighting, phasy artificial spaces, implausible locations of groups of instruments, etc. The 750s, particularly with the Circes, help multi-tracks like producer Andrew Kazdin's 1970s-1980s recordings of the NYPO (on Columbia/CBS) and Louisville Orchestra (on Louisville Records) to share one space, yet without concealing detail or harmonics.

I find myself using those fascinating triode/tetrode switches quite often. They alter the output-tube wiring mode to select full-power

tetrode¹ or 350-watt (push/pull, not SET) triode. The sound of triode, with suitable program material, is more intimate, with vibrant surfaces, juicier wind and voice textures, wetter, gutsier, all to the delight of detail and ultra-presence lovers. Suitable music is smaller ensembles, solos, jazz groups, small choruses, and the like, with limited power requirements. Tetrode is a bit blander and less dimensional but gives everything it has to a full orchestra or heavy metal at full tilt. Triode shows its stuff on discs like M-A's *Sera una noche* [M-A 052A, CD], where a tango ensemble closely recorded in an especially airy acoustic sends shivers down the spine with its ripe, full-bodied clarinet, vocal solos, bandoneon, and Latin percussion. Benny Goodman's classic reading of Stravinsky's *Ebony Concerto* for jazz band [CBS MK 42227, CD] has in triode richer harmonics, rounder images, a closer and denser stage, and more saturated instrumental timbres but is less clean at the climaxes, less pinpoint in image definition than in tetrode. You have your choice: Triode has more zing but runs out of steam just where tetrode's 800 watts begin to fly. VTL recommends switching when the amp is off, but otherwise the changeover is essentially instantaneous.

Listeners knowledgeable about VTL's history may speculate about the Brunnhildes' use of 6550C tubes instead of the KT-90s that were used in VTL amps until the Yugoslavian factory fell under an embargo still in force. Sonically the KT-90s are more "blatant" than the 6550s, have a more neutral, open, or "naked" midrange, produce slightly rounder images, and pack a bigger dynamic kick. The 6550 has plenty of punch but leans toward finesse and sweetness where the KT-90 leans toward frankness and pure, stark textures. The 6550s are slightly more complex and "hi-fi," with shinier highs and warmer bass, but VTL exploits them artfully in the service of neutral balances. I don't miss the KT-90s in the Brunnhildes, having been captivated by the amps' musical dynamism and charm. What colorations they have are euphonious and subtle.

Yes, euphonious and subtle – nice talk, nice talk! But altogether fitting and proper. Not everyone will have the means or the space to bring home Wotan's favorite daughter, even without her horse. But I recommend seizing any opportunity to hear her war-cry. Take along your most demanding music. 

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Price: \$16,500 per pair

¹ Luke Manley of VTL explains that he actually uses pentode, or five-element, tubes in their tetrode, or four-element, mode.