

BEST BUY

HI-FI CHOICE
magazine



High-power hybrid

This massive new integrated amp from Unison Research offers switchable power settings

PRODUCT Unison Research Unico 200

TYPE Integrated stereo amplifier

PRICE £3,000

KEY FEATURES Size (WxHxD): 43x26.5x55cm

• Weight: 55kg • Valve/bipolar/MOSFET hybrid
• Five line inputs (inc. tape) • Switchable power output modes (nominally 50W or 200W per channel)

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In the past, the exotic regions of brute-force hi-fi amplification were dominated by the Americans. If you bought a big amp until recently, chances are it would have been from the USA, or possibly Canada. Things are changing and this mighty integrated amplifier delivers the sort of power many a Krell would be proud of, but delivers it with a distinct Italian accent.

The Unico 200 is a new high-end integrated amplifier of truly heroic proportions. A hybrid design, it tips the scales at 55kg net, which makes it a two-man lift. In due course, there will be a further developed version of the existing top of the range CD player that will act as a natural partner for this new beast.

Operationally, the Unico 200 is a straightforward remote controllable unit, with

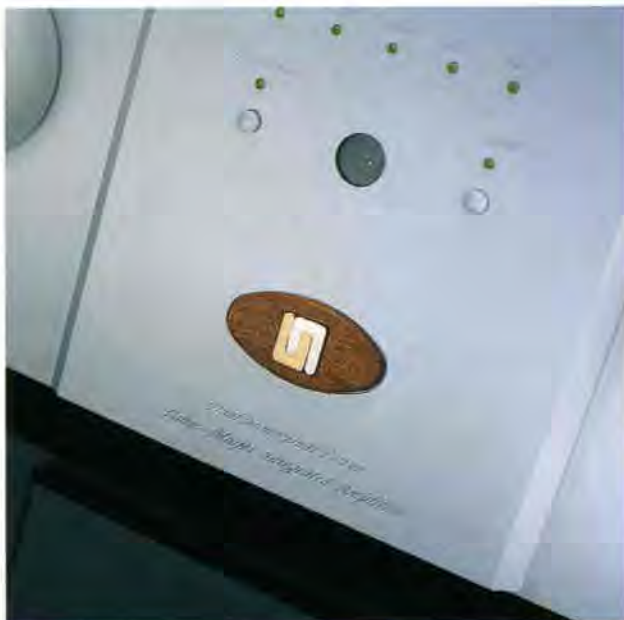
four line inputs, a tape circuit with tape monitoring, and a volume control. The main power switch is on the back and standby/operational switching takes the form of a large, backlit pad whose illumination levels track the warmup phase of the little glowing bottles inside – the only external indication that there is a thermionic valve content to the design. Theoretically, one of the inputs can be adapted to be used as a phono input by adding a plug-in PC board, but in practice most users with turntables have taken the external step-up option. However, we did discover from the manufacturer that there will be a development of this amp at some point with two balanced inputs. This would be useful, if only to increase the range of inputs, but as the Unico 200 lacks a true balanced-mode internal architecture, there is unlikely to be a significant sonic improvement with normal length cable runs.

Initially, it seemed this was to be an amplifier with switchable low-output Class A and high-power Class AB operating modes, but it turns out that when you hit the high power switch, something more subtle happens. This involves reconfiguring of the power supply regulation. In lower power mode, output is reduced to a nominal 50-watt output, though

the actual figure is closer to 85 watts per channel into eight ohms. In high-power mode, output is increased to a nominal 200 watts (actually more like 350 watts per channel), but it's the lower power mode that is designed to offer the highest current delivery, and also the best sound quality – see later.

The input section, where the audio signal is at its most susceptible to noise and distortion, consists of a triode cascade in common cathode configuration and one triode cathode follower. This stage is direct-coupled to a current feedback, solid state Class A gain stage, which in turn is followed by a complementary MOSFET sliding bias output stage with a theoretical 60 amp peak rating before current limiting is applied. The 50-watt mode uses a lower rail voltage, and the amp engages either series or parallel connection of the bridge rectifiers in the power supply, depending on operating mode. With continuous automatic rebiasing of each circuit stage, stability is guaranteed under a broad range of abnormal conditions, and the power mode can be safely and transparently switched on the fly.

Other circuit features include the use of 10 parallel-connected reservoir capacitors to minimise output impedance and to improve



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reaction time. The amp also uses servo regulation, which avoids the need for blocking capacitors in the signal path. Warm-up and other operating parameters are monitored by what is claimed to be a non-intrusive microprocessor based protection system, with fuses providing a belt and braces safety factor.

SOUND QUALITY

As a benchmark for this test, we used another large and even more costly but lower power amplifier, namely the new Denon PMA-SA1, which will be reviewed in *HFC* in the near future. In many ways, the Unison Research is the more immediately likeable amplifier. It sounds more relaxed and distant, though conversely it lacks the Denon's remarkable combination of resolving power and presence. The character of the bass from the two amps also helps underpin the differences – the Denon firm and integrated, the Unico more relaxed and softer. But this is not altogether a matter of better and worse, more one of character. The valve powered front end is perhaps partly responsible for an overall performance from the Unico 200 that is smoother, more relaxed and in some ways more amiable, but which tells a slightly more selective, smoothed-over view of the music. It is perhaps a matter of what the respective designers regard as key to the reproduction of music. The Denon ultimately sounds more unforgiving, while the softer Unico is more consistent with a wider range of recordings.

The differences between the higher and lower power output settings were not always as obvious as we had expected when we first

assumed, wrongly, that the change was between Class A and Class AB operation. The differences are fairly subtle, and at low volume levels were not always immediately obvious at all. Changing the setting while the music is playing is usually inaudible, as the effect appears to turn itself on over a period of seconds rather than immediately, perhaps because of the time constants built in to the power supply reservoir.

In the end, however, Unison Research's belief in the ability to switch this way is justified by the greater ability to roll with the punches in high-power mode. This was particularly obvious with uncompressed orchestral recordings played at high volume through insensitive speakers, where the Unison's high-power mode was responsible for a much more seamless and consistent performance through orchestral crescendi. It just sounds like a bigger, more powerful amplifier, which should come as no surprise. But overall, unless the extra power is strictly required, the lower power mode yields a quality of sound that is simply more organic and expressive, and which for some reason is slightly but unmistakably less grainy. The sound appears to settle down, and given that something close to 85 watts is available even when switched to the nominally 50-watt setting, this mode was able to cover the vast majority of musical situations that arose during the test.

The Unico 200 is a curious concoction, a massively powerful integrated amplifier of considerable refinement with a built-in 'low-power' mode of even greater refinement and subtlety. There is perhaps a touch of

euphony with this design, which hints at its hybrid valve internal architecture. But overall, we found it virtually impossible to catch out irrespective of music genre, chosen replay level or the character of the speakers, whose sensitivity figures ranged from 82-90dB/Watt at 1 metre. At the same time, there are no obvious shortcomings of the kind sometimes associated with valve amps – microphony for example – and power delivery is definitely in the prodigious category. The only small fly in the ointment for some will be the lack of built-in phono provision (unusual for Unison Research), and the knowledge of a forthcoming revision that will include two extra (balanced) inputs, but may not be retrofittable. **HFC**

Alvin Gold



VERDICT

SOUND >> 89%



FEATURES >> 80%



BUILD >> 93%



VALUE >> 86%



PRO
Realistically priced, with a tank-like build, enormous power yield and refined sound quality which improves further in low-power mode.

CON
Basic equipment levels (but more inputs promised for the future), and no internal phono stage; though most typical users will not be adversely affected.

CONCLUSION
A marvellous mix of valve and solid-state technology in a single box, this is a 'can do' amplifier that shines in virtually all surroundings, but a truly ideal amplifier would surely combine the virtues of the two operating modes into one.

HI-FI CHOICE OVERALL SCORE >> 88%