

Unison Research Unico CD

After the Unico integrated comes this stunning valve CD player

PRICE	£1100
SUPPLIER	UKD
CONTACT	01753 652669

Why should I make you wait until the last paragraph? Unison Research has done what I thought was impossible: followed the universally praised (no, make that adored) Unico integrated tube-hybrid amplifier with a matching CD player. And I don't mean 'matching' just in looks and dimensions: the Unico CD corresponds to the integrated in performance *and* value for money, which makes it another world-class bargain. It just might be *the* CD player to buy if you're shopping at around a grand.

It's not just a case of slipping someone else's sub-assemblies and modules into a fancy enclosure. Somehow, Unison Research has managed to cram the thing full of designer bits, radical solutions, a cutting-edge transport, valves and more, but at a sane price. When you read what Unison has done, you can but marvel. Even its bare-bones description would do justice to a £2500 machine. So forget anything I've ever told you about settling, *circa* 2003, for a compromised, sub-£1000 universal SACD/DVD-A player. This is the way to go until the record industry gets its head out of its ass.

As in the past, Ing. Sacchetti has collaborated with Prof Leopoldo Rossetto of the University of Padua's Dept of Applied Electronics. The two settled on a design using: a proper CD-ROM mechanism; a fully balanced, pure triode valve

amplification stage, with true balanced analogue output; a 24-bit/192kHz Crystal D/A converter; their own sophisticated microprocessor control; a unique, high-quality power supply worthy of a power amplifier; and the kind of construction we're grew to love in the Unico integrated. It even boasts a serious heat sink on the back... just like an amplifier.

Sacchetti and Rossetto tested a number of drives before deciding that the only way to go was with a CD-ROM mechanism, especially because of the digital output that this type of transport offers. It required a redesign of the interface between transport and DAC, but this in turn allowed the player's performance to be kicked up a notch by inserting a 're-conversion circuit' and PLL circuit, resulting in a significant reduction in jitter. Additionally, the CD-ROM

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mechanism is more robust, offers superior disc reading accuracy, operates with better quality brushless, low-noise synchronous motors, uses a glass laser lens instead of a plastic one and the CD tray runs on lapped metal guides — again, not plastic.

The Unico CD uses an upgradable Philips 64kB Flash memory chip, which also enabled the designers to fit a distinctive and highly legible, green-lit, personalised graphic display. It can

show the company logo and visual information such as 'valve warm-up' and countdown when the Unico CD is first switched on, as well as 'time elapsed', 'time remaining' and the usual track information. I was slightly disappointed that the review sample's display wasn't in Italian!

All of this good stuff wouldn't mean much if Unison Research had neglected the ergonomics. Worry not: this machine is an absolute delight, from the side-mounted On/Off switch to the luxurious infrared remote. The latter is a piece of sculpted, solid hardwood [seen on page 19!] that stands up, like one of B&O's remotes.

The front panel of the CD player itself contains just the basic transport functions; the remote covers those plus all minor operations. It's been pointed out that the remote's legends are produced using a galvanic print process 'so

the colour is absorbed into the metal and won't fade over time'.

A hefty unit at 11kg, it measures 96 x 432 x 343mm (hwd), dimensions and weight that are accounted for by for the high component content, plus a case made from 1.5mm-thick sheet steel and a 15mm aluminium faceplate. The mechanism support is made from 2mm-thick sheet steel and is 'anchored' to the front panel for maximum rigidity. It doesn't feel like anything



less than a high-end player of indisputable pedigree, notwithstanding the plastic tray itself, despite a ridiculously low price. (Or maybe everyone else's are ridiculously high...)

The review sample was one of the first run without digital output but by the time this sees print, the Unico CD will have digital output. Additionally, there'll be user upgrades to activate the remote for use with the Unico integrated and to select switchable filters.

Because it has fully balanced capability, I was able to run it alongside the Copland CDA822 and the Marantz CD12/DA12 via XLR into the Jadis JPS8/JA50 pre-/power, a completely balanced path with wiring courtesy of Siltech, driving a pair of Wilson WATT Puppy System 7 speakers. However much its price would suggest homes in complete systems below £2500 or so, the Unico bloody well sang in a system costing as much as a loaded Porsche Boxster.

Sheer accident led me to inaugurating the listening with a JJ Cale disc, as I normally listen

TECHNOLOGY

As is Unison Research's practice for its Unico range, the Unico CD's amplification section is pure triode valve, while the output stage is solid-state. These stages are all-new — the Unico CD has been in development for a couple of years by my reckoning — and use twin triodes for each channel in a balanced Class A circuit. Unison Research chose 5814/A twin triodes, the military-spec version of the familiar ECC82/12AU7 tubes, carefully matching the pairs. Another unexpected-at-this-price-point bonus is an overkill, proprietary power supply, consisting of six separate, fully independent sections based on precision linear non-switching regulators. It's built to cope with voltage variations of $\pm 20\%$, which accounts for the heat sink on the rear panel (to dissipate heat from the stabilisers). The 85W mains power transformer has been designed and constructed using grain-oriented cores and low flux dispersion. A copper electrostatic screen separates the analogue and digital windings. For the digital heart of the Unico CD, Sacchetti and Rossetto selected the Crystal CS4392, which is able to deliver voltages suitable for use with balanced output stages. To satisfy the requirements of the CD-ROM drive's re-conversion and PLL circuits, they chose the Crystal CS8414 chip.

KEY FEATURES

- Valve output stage
- Intelligent ergonomics
- Awesome value for money



Construction and finish are to a higher standard than you'd expect at this price: this is a plastic tray, but it glides on metal runners

Both normal and balanced outputs are provided here



Twin triode valves are used in a balanced analogue output stage



to Cale only when I need to fall asleep. (His song 'Cocaine' is so sluggish you have to wonder if he ever tried the drug.) But the music, a new CD of a previously unreleased 1979 session, came out so languid, so sweet that I could only think of its scarily close resemblance to a decent moving-coil playing mint vinyl through a tube phono stage. Yes, the Jadis system is the embodiment of sweetness, but the Unico sounded even silkier than the other players I tried it against.

Indeed, the differences between all three were so marked that I quickly arrived at one of those unsatisfying but inevitable points where taste and preference become the arbiters. The Copland, for example, bettered both for bass in terms of quantity and control, especially the snap and slam when tested with Kodo percussion and Steve Gadd's magnificent work on the recent live Eric Clapton set, *One More Car, One More Rider*. The Marantz? Audibly better bass extension. The Unico CD fell in-between — which is no mean feat for the least expensive player in the group.

If you had to brand the players by music type, then the Copland would suit a funk/jazz/dance/hip-hop fan, the Marantz (if you could find one) would be the one to go for with a diet of classical music, while the Unico was more even-handed and less genre-dependent. I think that's what's called a 'compromise'; for normal people with normal budgets and normal listening habits, and that's a recommendation — not a criticism.

On to the crucial midband, and the Unico was warmer and therefore more voice-friendly and less wholly analytical than

the others, but there was a tiny sacrifice in the form of slightly less detail and precision. This was barely noticeable on sparse works, such as *The Persuasions Sing The Beatles*, but complex, crowded pieces can come across as slightly confused.

Elsewhere, the Marantz won hands-down for the scale of the soundstage, and in every dimension, but the Copland was damned close. In some ways, it was more convincing, 3D being the Copland's forte. The Unico? Not quite so wide as either, but bettered only marginally by the Marantz for stage depth. All three allow the speakers to disappear, while none suffered from the 2D which plagues certain UK-made players.

For me, the real test of a CD player is the level of aggravation caused by the top end. The Copland pulls off the natty trick of having fast, cut-glass treble without a nasty edge, while the Marantz makes you swear it has a tube output section. The Unico, on the other hand, does have a tube section and isn't afraid to exploit its ability to dulcify. It doesn't sound as extended as the Copland, nor is it as lightning quick as the Marantz, but for all that the Unico is unlikely ever to cause fatigue. The justification for that last statement? Even before I'd run it in, my initial listening session ran to three hours, ending only because it was after my bed-time.

This player is nothing short of inspired. If your budget doesn't stretch to my sub-£2000 favourite, the Copland CDA822 at £1600, then the Unico CD at £1100 might be your ticket to happiness. Even if £1000 is your absolute ceiling, find that extra £100. You won't regret it.

WORDS: KEN KESSLER

