

Unison Research Unico Integrated

DECEMBER 2002

Component of the Year 2002

From our Italian peers of high style comes the suave, shockingly affordable Unison Research Unico 80-watt integrated with radio-frequency (i.e. wall-penetrating) remote and 12AU7 triode-based twin-tube input & MOSFET output stage. Then add the following: Sandblasted, very substantial natural aluminum fascia with wooden logo insert. Super-chunky yet immaculately contoured knobs with luxu action. Understated silver-gray silk screening. Wooden handset. \$100 optional phono stage. Four inputs, one tape loop and dual-pair speaker terminals. All for a paltry \$1,395 without phono...

Many competitors will likely manage an unfriendly public smile in acknowledgment while silently contemplating assassination attempts. Once they'd lift the bed sheets -- er, Unico's top cover -- such temporary insanity fantasies would hopefully soon be replaced. With professional disbelief and envy. How the heck ever *does* Signore Giovanni "Diavolo" Sacchetti do it? No corner cutting on the insides either. Instead, techno-geek poetry and artful rather than terminal execution.

Even his own landmen at Audio Analogue -- certainly no slouches when it comes to delivering well-built, high value/ performance gear -- couldn't be too happy these days. Worse (but great for us consumers), his team at Cereda di Cornedo/ Vicenza won't leave good enough alone. Expect an unapologetic 1-2 follow-up with the imminent release of the matching Unico CD (\$1,795). The word is that it'll be based on 24/192 upsampling, a new industrial-strength CD/ROM transport and Unison Research's own transformer, tube output stage and unique "La Dolce Vita" styling. > >

[Photo of pre-production unit. The final appearance of the Unico CD's front baffle will likely be a bit different and the nomenclature silk screen may change size and placement.]



Back to today's stereo integrated. With 2-100,000Hz bandwidth, 9.5dB of feedback and the firm's "improved dynamic Class 'A' symmetrical stage with complementary power MOSFET pair" architecture, the Unico consumes 340 watts at full boogie, weighs a stolid 35 lbs but only measures 17" x 13.5" x 3.75" WxDxH.

To appreciate my own too-good-to-be-true (and while-the-going's-good) hasty acquisition reaction (to drive my radical but power-hungry AKG K-1000 earspeakers that still appreciate tubes somewhere in the chain) let's walk 'round the Unico as though it were parked in a ritzy lot drawing undue attention. You won't get *my* keys, but the review will take you on a passenger-seat joy ride nonetheless.

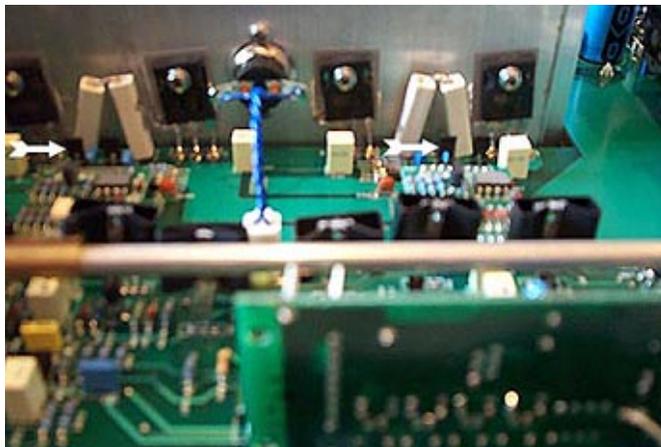
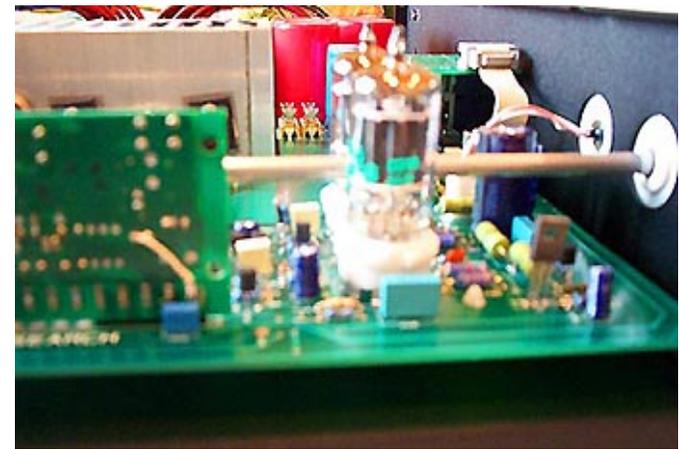
But first, final operational notes before I fire 'er up. With the aft power switch flicked, the unit undergoes a 20-sec thermal stabilization phase during which both small green LEDs up front flash furiously and the volume control should be set to mute/zero. When the lights go solid, the sonic curtain rises - unless the LEDs should flash again. That would indicate thermal protection and result in intermittent auto shutdown until the condition has passed or been remedied. Unwitting mains interruption or brief power failure will automatically trigger the start-up cycle once AC flows again. The Unico is further fitted with a loudspeaker short protection circuit whose internal jumpers JP16/17 can be removed for bypass if desired.

The optional phono board replaces the standard AUX input and offers gain provisions for both MM (50-60dB) and MC (40-50dB) via clearly marked jumpers. +/- 10dB gain fine-tuning is possible by changing links JP102/10 on the board. MC input impedance is 100Ohm @ 440pF, the equivalent MM values are 47kOhm @ 220pf. RIAA equalization is compound passive/active, tolerance said to be within +/- 0.1dB.

Ready for some window shopping? Hover your mouse over pix for commentary.







As you can see, Unison Research only skimmed on breaking your wallet. 80 watts is plenty stout for the kind of speakers audiophiles shopping for amps in this range are liable to partner up with. Fit'n'finish are first rate, the sheer heft of the piece, with its honkin' tranny and unusually thick case work, further gratifications for the American morale of "that's heavy, man".

Which leads us now to its sonics. In combination with the entire package -- looks, functionality/features, price, value -- Sam Tellig's plea to Stereophile Editorial, to award the Unico Component of the Year, expectedly feel on deaf ears due its entry-level pricing. But Sam's voice in the wilderness didn't go unheard.

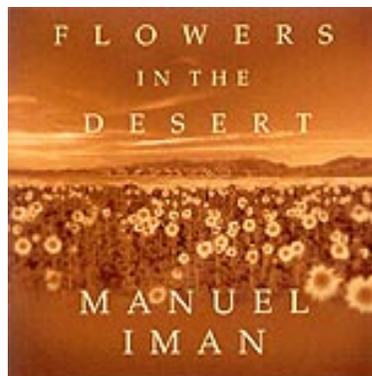
The Unison Research Unico would have gotten our Blue Moon Award without breaking a sweat. Seeing that its review turn

coincided with the end of the year; and browsing our shortlist of previous winners to identify the one single overachiever whose highlighting of a "Best of Year" distinction would benefit the greatest number of readers? 'twas was the proverbial lobotomy - Italian-style, where they fill your brain with Gelato and Cappuccino after frying it in pesto oil. Hence, give it up for 6moon's first-ever "Component Of The Year". Con brio. Con fuoco. Con amore!



Cutting the mustard

Passing the >103dB noise test with my Avantgarde DUOs nicely -- a bit of tweeter hiss sticking my ear into the horn but inaudible from 2' away; a minor turn-on thumper subdued enough to allay alarm -- the Unico instantly proved its rock credentials on Manuel Iman's *Flowers in the Desert* [EverSound 2120]. From Iberia's nuevo flamenco generation as headlined by Ketama's Habichuela clan, Iman mixes Flamenco, Rock and Jazz. He switches as gracefully from Spanish to electric guitar as he does from lyrical ballads to hard-driving grooves, with Eduardo Del Signore's growling bass and Steven Di Stanislao's tight drums'n'percussion at times augmented by further percussion, keyboards and vocals.



The title track covers the whole spectrum. It showed off the Unico's obvious strengths like walking down a delicatessen aisle with a shopping cart loaded up: Superior image density spread solidly across a gargantuan soundstage. A vim and vigor presentation of pay-attention thereness. Great transient definition and speed. Taut, extended bass that packed extra whomp & wallop. The harmonic midband fullness you'd expect of tubes. A top-end never irritating yet not shaded either.

The *overriding* impression? Great drive, rhythmic coherence and balls-to-the-wall solidity. Instead of exuding the airy effervescence and tender sublimity of micro-power triodes, the Unico displayed striated musculature. But unlike the slightly thick push-pull tube sound that can cast a similarly gigantic stage, the Unico was endowed with the faster reflexes of high-current solid statesmen or well-designed SEs.

And wouldn't you know it? Compared to the no-tube Audio Analogue remote-controlled Puccini SE, the tubed Unico displayed more solid-state slam and incisiveness. As though, in a more traditional vein, the Puccini deliberately went after a "tubier" sound. Monsignor Giacomo Puccini of Madame Butterfly fame also runs out of steam quicker. He's politer and softer sounding. He seduces you with charm, warmth and refinement whereas the Unico opts for the frontal assault of impact.

How does the Unico depart from affordable solid-state expectations? It eschews common flatness, what to me rings of sterility: Great sewing-machine precision and outer-space-vacuum silence, but not enough get-up-and-dance color. The Unico's driver tubes imparted just enough thermo juice and tube dynamics to fill out these welcome transistor traits of precision, control and timing accuracy.

And that, my friends, is a wickedly honed edge to walk. On balance, more sand than glass if you assigned percentage points. But with just enough -- and the right kind -- of the latter's virtues to go beyond what you usually can expect of pure silicon designs in this range. Simply, the Unico is commensurate with \$2,500 separates. By focussing on the bare essentials -- remote volume, manual source selection -- and by tonally opting for the down-to-earth vitality of a Scorcese over Bertolucci's brainier brand of transcendence, the Unico combines what's great about solid-state with key elements of tube glory.



Counting the beans

Qualifiers? You can get airier treble. No argument there. Better bass? For the money? I don't think so. In fact, here I'd *double* the bet. Midrange magic, what a reader dubbed "liquid sex"? Well, you can get blasted by more overt come-hither vibes from the Cary-school of triode sound. But the way I see it, that's really a function of deliberately skewed tonal balance. Subtract the requisite amount of dBs in low bass and upper treble to give off "that glow". Clearly, the Unico doesn't affect this type of romanticized sheen. Its radiance is of a far brawnier, huskier kind. Translation? Awesome image density and charliehorse kick. The important extra? It's *also* got leading edge zip. Often those twain don't meet: Fullness but throttled-back speed; blazing reflexes but low-calorie leanness.

Our Italian friend insists on both. In my experience, that's a rare stunt to pull off. *Especially* in this sector. I bet using just two MOSFETs per channel trims the fat. More power often equates to a subliminal sense of ponderousness. Heft but non-explosive reaction times. Giving you 80 watts is plenty in trade unless your loyalties lie with the wrong speaker camp.



Listening for hours on end just having fun, whatever tunes I threw at this integrated provoked notes like "vibrant"; "tight"; "involving"; "strapping in fact". Then I adjusted the volume at whim by aiming the handset into my arm pit; out the window; up at the ceiling. I shook my head in appreciation over the simple elegance of appearance. Ev'ry visual element is perfectly balanced. Functional yet elegant. Understated yet refined. And I had plenty of go-juice on hand to drive the appreciative-of-power nOrh SM6.9s to levels unbecoming my in-door miniature roses...

No bean counters here

It's been a while since a component like the Unico's come through that elicited this type of admiration over completely realized balance. It combines practicality with hybrid esoterica. It performs without flaws and doesn't send you into hock. From wailing e-guitar to Sabine Meyer doing the Brahms *Clarinet Quintet*; from Take Five to The Pat Metheny Group; from Prokofieff's *5th Symphony* to L. Subramaniam's *From The Ashes* and the Techno/Tango fusion of Gotan Project's *La Revancha Del Tango* - the Unico couldn't be tripped into favoring one genre over another.

And now, add - nuttin'. Zero complaints! No funky binding posts, no klutzy remote. No ringing sheet metal, no black boredom. No retina-peeling LEDs, no ungainly logo. No humming transformers, no what ifs. No "a bit more of this", "a bit less of that". No nits or quibbles.

Perhaps now you can appreciate why naming the Unico "Component of the Year" was really no brain surgery? It wasn't even a close call. Monsignore's Tellig & Kessler beat me to the punch. Not only on breaking this story but also by proclaiming the amp an unqualified winner. Truth be told, I have nothing original to add. The Unison Research Unico's a classy overachiever, in a category that's made a major comeback ever since the mighty super-power of Krell signaled to the rest of the global provinces that pre/power amp integration was cool again even if you didn't speak proppa English.



But leave it to the Italians to demonstrate how it's done with panache *and* sans designer label tariffs. If the Unico CD were equally superior, one could assemble a true no-compromise system by adding a pair of Triangle floorstanders. Call it quits for under \$5K. Be off the adolescent merry-go-round for good.

Now *that'd* be something to write home about. Unfortunately, the audiophile upgrade virus is one hardy bugger, as is the self-administered "affordable equals mediocre" migraine. However, should you remain unaffected by either disease, aim your crosshairs squarely on the Unico. I can't see how you could possibly go wrong. Count all the money you saved tapping your toes to your favorite tunes. Then glance at your stack to get a wakeful jolt of pride over how good it looks - sure sounds like a winning combination to me.

Did I mention that driving the \$18,000/pr Avantgarde horns this way was truly wonderful? My \$10,000 AUDIOPAX monos, I will admit, go further still -- as better they should -- but if I didn't have 'em, I'd live with the Unico as my main squeeze in a heartbeat. I know I'm an audio floozy but that surprised me. I didn't think I was *that*, er, cheap. But it's really this good. Merry Christmas!