

UNISON RESEARCH S6



The Unison Research S6

Uses Single 'Ended operation, which eliminates crossover distortion, so it really is quite a lot different from the norm. - and pure Class A. Unison keep size down to manageable proportions, especially considering that there's no less than 28watts per channel from three EL34s working in parallel per side.

The amplifier is monstrously heavy, because the output transformers must contain plenty of iron!

The output valves and input double triodes lie under a neat, hinged grill. On the front panel are a volume control and input selector; the power switch is on the rear. The case is comparatively narrow, but deep.

There are four inputs, all at line level, plus a tape in/out with accompanying monitor switch. Unlike the Soro, if you want to use LP then an external pre-amp will be needed. valve or solid-state. Outputs are provided for 40hm and 80hm loudspeakers and, nowadays, even in the UK it is wisest to use the 40hm tap, since most - if not all loudspeakers use 40hm bass units.

The S6 is a sonic step up from the Audionote Soro SE, It's actually a pretty close rival to the Audio Research Vsi55. Whereas the latter: is a big, bruising American powerhouse of an amplifier, the S6 is ! an altogether more finessed and fragile Italian exotic.

The Rachmaninov disc was a revelation. Whereas the Soro gave a different presentation to the A21, the S6 gave a comprehensively superior one. From the opening bar, it's so open and uncoloured - much in the same way as the Sugden. yet more so.

On Mike Oldfield's remastered "Tubular bells part 1", for the first time I could explicitly hear the full envelope of the notes from the opening keyboards, not just the attack but the decay too. There was a lot more detail and clarity, taking me right into the recording. While the A21 had a good stab at this, it was ultimately just a little looser and more veiled in the midband, but the S6 seemed relentlessly incisive. It was able to eke out oodles of very subtle detailing, and - importantly- string it together in a brilliantly cohesive way. Its genius was its ability to show the rhythmic accents of those keyboard parts. Its dynamic prowess was superb too - startling speed allied to real welly made for a very forceful and emotive performance. It has real bass power and punch to match its excellent grip.

The only downside is just a touch of brightness in the midband - and I do mean just a touch. The S6 ' has a 'well lit' upper mid, although it isn't actually bright or forward as such. The EL34 output valves are probably the cause, since they are known to be a trifle hard. Many will ameliorate this with vinyl and sympathetic 'speakers, so I wasn't particularly troubled by it. Overall though, the 56 is superb and something I for one would love to live with.

If anyone tells you that valve amplifiers are necessarily 'warm', 'woolly', 'rose-tinted' or 'coloured', then they obviously haven't heard this little lot. Here is conclusive proof that tubes can sound just as different as transistors - in fact, I'd say the differences between the Audionote

Soro and the Graaf GM20 are easily greater than, say, Sugden's A21 a and Arcam's FMJ A32. The fact is that whether an amplifier uses valves or not does not prescribe its sound. Rather, it's the fundamental circuit topology, type of tubes, make of types and the quality of the output transformers which determine the sound, and not simply the fact that they glow in the dark and make a clicking noise when you switch them on or off.

All amplifiers - either solid state or tubular - are compromises. Each one is a particular take on the eternal price vs. performance dilemma. In the 1,000 bracket, you have a wealth of choice. There are lots of 'super integrations' from the likes of Cyrus, Naim, Arcam, Myriad et al, and the Sugden A21 a is probably the most charismatic. It's not the best all rounder at the price, but given the fact that you have a smallish room and sensitive loudspeakers, and you value transparency and finesse over power and punch, then it's the best you can do. It doesn't sound like any other tranny amp I've heard, but then again it doesn't sound like any valve amp either - so it's a fascinating foil to the likes of Naim's Nait 5 (on the lean and punchy side) and the Audionote Soro SE (on the warm and sweet side).

Indeed, the Audionote Soro SE is essentially a 'my first valve amplifier' it's a great way in to the world of glass audio, and has real merit. If you've never heard a tube amp before, but have formed an idea in your mind from anecdotal information, then this is probably the closest you'll get to how you imagine it. Yes, it really is warm (and all the other clichés at the top of the page). Put simple acoustic music on at relatively low levels and users of even very tasty transistor amplifier users will be surprised at its wonderfully beguiling and enveloping sound they'll think, "hang on - why is this so good?" Put thumping, kicking dance music on and it trips over itself and betrays its budget status, however. The trick is to buy it if it suits your music tastes and system, but leave well alone if not.

Moving to the Unison Research S6, and here you have a reasonably powerful product with exquisite styling and the ability to play any music and make it natural and enjoyable. It's very engaging, lucid and lyrical - yet has plenty of punch and grip in the bass, commanding soundstaging and fine dynamics. It does both the musical stuff and the hi-fi stuff so very well that many will wonder why they should ever spend any more... This, allied to its delicious styling and fine build make it the best value for money in the group by far.

The Audio Research is slightly less accomplished in the midband and treble - there's less incision and finesse - but it still works better overall than the Unison Research thanks to its tremendous power and scale. As I said last month, it's 'valves without tears' - you get much of the excellent liquidity and musicality of the 56, but with wall shaking, flareflapping levels of power. It will drive any modern loudspeaker reasonably loudly, and if you have a decent high sensitivity design (as indeed you should), then it will be the life and soul of your party.

This leaves the Graaf. For me, it is easily the best here. Take the strengths from both the Unison Research and the Audio Research and sum them, then multiply by two. It has tremendous power and articulation, allied to a startlingly clean and clear midband. In a sense, it sounds as stark and 'transparent' as any high resolution transistor design, yet lacks the inevitable 'mush' or 'clang' of solid-state. It is a resounding answer to those who trot out those aforementioned valve clichés - sit them in front of this and their jaws will be on the floor! Factor in a quality of finish that would shame an 5ME Series V (yes, really) and the look of those incredible 6C3CC triodes glowing away, and it's a stunning thing to behold. Funnily enough, its brilliantly clean and open nature is somewhat reminiscent of Sugden's A21a, albeit on a far grander scale!

VEREDIT:

Tremendously musical and lithe sound with real finesse and subtlety too. Fantastic value.

Hi-Fi World & Computer Audio (November 2003)