

Unico CD

A most stylish Italian

By Michael Wong

Unico CD player. \$3699



On paper the tube/solid state hybrid CD player encompasses the best of both worlds: all the benefits of digital technology with the smoothness and musicality of vacuum tubes. The reality with hybrids can be quite different. Most of the hybrids I have heard ended up having the worst aspects of each technology such as excess noise, unreliability and high frequency brightness.

A recent arrival to these shores is Italian company Unison Research, a manufacturer of predominantly tube based audio equipment. For over 15 years they have combined the renowned Italian eye for aesthetic excellence with good technical nous to produce an acclaimed range of products that pleases the eyes as well as the ears.

Parent company Unison Research established the affordable Unico range of mainly tube/solid state hybrid components: integrated and separate amplifiers, a CD player and an FM/AM radio tuner.

The stylish exterior starts with an elegant fascia of luxuriously thick aluminium, sparsely populated with the main transport buttons, a wonderfully legible, backlit LCD display and the wood and metal Unison Research logo. The main power switch has been banished to the left hand side of the cabinet, out of sight.

The rear is equally simple; a pair of RCA single-ended outputs, a pair of XLR balanced outputs, a pair of RCA digital In/Outs (enabled by a slide switch next to the sockets), a large heat sink and the IEC mains socket.

Fit and finish is exemplary, the only blemish being a loose IEC socket. The chassis and lid is made from heavy duty steel giving the player rigidity and freedom from a rattling lid. The remote control is carved out of solid wood with a slender metal panel holding the buttons. It is a piece of art, beautifully finished, carefully rounded to fit the hand and flat bottomed so that it can stand on its end.

Inside Unison uses a Crystal DAC chipset with Philips microprocessors. The transport is a CD-ROM drive, with glass (as opposed to plastic) optics and quality spindle motor. The disc tray is just like that on any computer drive, a cheap, thin plastic affair albeit on lapped steel guides and supports instead of plastic. The transport is suspended on rubber

to reduce external vibration. Options include an oversampling board and user selectable digital filters.

The signal travels through a gain stage with two 5814 tubes (a milspec version of the ECC82/12AU7, one per channel) and finally to a mosfet output stage with proprietary power supply and precision non-switching regulators which can handle voltage variations of up to +/- 20%, hence the need for a rear heatsink.

Countdown to...

Switching the Unico on for the first time brings the large display panel to life. The backlighting comes on, the words "VALVE WARM UP" appear and a numerical counter counts down from 30 as the player undergoes a controlled warm up prior to playback.

For this review my usual Krell/Magnepan system was employed, with a Marantz CD-23 as reference CD player. No balanced cables were available so all listening was done via the single ended outputs.

...wonderful music

From the first disc there was a slight but definite tube signature: gently rolled-off highs, a warm, silky smooth midrange, reasonable bass extension and definition, coupled to good dynamics and soundstaging. Any sonic compromises seem to be cannily chosen as the music flowed with an ease and naturalness that made every disc listenable, even poorly recorded stuff like The Corrs.

Disc after disc was enjoyable in a way that eluded the universal disk players I've heard. Female soloists like Kiri Te Kanawa, Jennifer Warnes, Eden Atwood, Holly Cole and Norah Jones all sounded gloriously beguiling. Complex soundtracks by Herrmann, Sakamoto were reproduced with ease, losing only a little in *n*th degree detail and dynamic shadings.

When compared to the much more expensive Marantz reference the only real niggle to be found was with the Unico's presentation. The Marantz can produce a huge acoustic bubble that puts the listener right into the performance. The Unico couldn't quite manage that, instead the listener is outside the bubble looking in.

No oil leaks or breakdowns

Despite the above, the Unico makes listening to CDs a joy. Unlike some European audio equipment in the past, the Unico performed flawlessly over the review period.

For the money I can think of a few CD players that have more features but none that match the Unico's musicality. And while it is not without flaw, the Unico CD didn't make me want to switch back to my favoured source of music (vinyl records), which is what usually happens when affordable CD players come visiting.

I can't give any CD player a much higher recommendation than that.

AudioEnz (July 2004)