



# Life and soul

*Unison Research likes hybrids, so why not mix Italian design with plenty of Latin temperament?*

**PRODUCT** Unison Research Unico SE

**TYPE** Integrated stereo amplifier

**PRICE** £1,325

**KEY FEATURES** Size (WxHxD): 43.5x13.2x34cm  
 Weight: 16.5kg • Four line inputs (inc. tape loop) plus optional phono • Two sets of speaker outputs (for bi-wiring) • Power output: 150W per channel

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**U**nico is more of a range than a model. In *HFC 252*, we looked at the 'junior' Unico P, and liked what we heard. The new Unico SE is a substantially different animal, if only in output power – 150 watts instead of 50 watts is quite a hike in anyone's book. Apparently the basic design ethos is much the same, though. Both are hybrids using both transistors and valves, the latter a pair of ECC82 small-signal bottles which do their stuff at the earliest stage of the circuit. They're followed by bipolar transistors and then MOSFET output devices – pretty much a group set of amplifying components!

So why the diversity? It's all about sound, of course, and Unison Research waxes lyrical on the subject in a technical discussion of the Unico range. The valves are claimed to banish

the 'metallic' sound of transistors, while a low level of feedback around the circuit allegedly helps keep the amplifier's distortion signature biased towards low-order harmonics. This is more in keeping with valve thinking than transistor, as solid-state amps are more likely to use relatively high feedback, though there are exceptions.

Another area where Unison Research has proved ingenious is the biasing of the output transistors, using a system called 'Dynamic Class A'. Full-on purists will tell you that any word preceding 'Class A' effectively means 'not', but it does depend how you interpret the definition. Although this amp runs at a Class AB-type standing current of around 80mA, it is arranged so that no output transistor ever completely turns off. This arguably justifies a Class A label, while maintaining the low idling dissipation of Class AB.

On a more prosaic level, the Unico SE features just five inputs, one of which is a phono stage (optional, but fitted to the review sample – if you want the line only version, it costs £1,275). The phono stage accommodates both MM and MC cartridges, but you have to get inside the case to adjust it. Once there, you can also tweak overall phono gain by 10dB for

relatively low-output cartridges of either persuasion. With the lid off you can also admire the high standard of construction (except for four precariously-mounted sub-boards), the remarkably butch mains transformer and the enclosed heatsink. You can even, if you like, apply some damping material to the rather resonant lid – something the manufacturer itself might care to consider in the future.

After a recent run of integrated amps at roughly the same price, which mostly offered pretty similar measured performance, we were brought up short by this one and its very distinctive fingerprint. Most obviously, distortion is not banished to the underworld of 0.01% and below; by contrast, it unashamedly hovers around 0.2%, give or take a little, over a wide range of frequency and power levels. What's more, claims of low harmonic order are contradicted by a spectrum that extends to at least 50th order harmonic distortion at almost detectable levels. There's a higher level of both hiss and hum, and at high output power the mains transformer hums like a bee. Output exceeds 150 watts per channel and bandwidth is very wide, at least two octaves more than notional 20Hz-20kHz audio at each end.



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enough to complain of, but a frankly diminutive soprano with a pure and crystalline voice suddenly seemed to have a head about six feet wide and a worrying habit of leering forward of the speakers, when in fact she had been some way from the microphones.

Other recordings of known

provenance and long familiarity told a similar story, with images frequently diffuse and insecure, and a forward character affecting voices. A particularly familiar opera recording illustrated a variety of symptoms: the chorus was more widely spread across the image (though less deep), a passage for two violins sounded like half a dozen, vocal solos were unusually prominent and big climaxes were truly gigantic, though lacking in insight.

The overall effect can be impressive, with a certain grandeur, and on returning to more ‘conventional’ amplifiers, one often feels that something has been lost. But after a couple of minutes, the realisation creeps in that what was lost is faux excitement, while what is gained with the new amplifier is precision, detail, stability and, in the end, that wonderful sense that the music is working its own way into your system rather than imposing on you.

Although you may be frustrated at its unwillingness to let the music speak for itself, the Unico SE is greatly excitable and loses no opportunity to glam things up a bit. That can work impressively with some music styles, but with almost any acoustic-originated music, it’s a mixed blessing at best. A symphony orchestra or a jazz band, or a small voice-and-instruments combo, is a precision assemblage of finely honed musical technique and feeling, and to have an extra layer of froth imposed over it seems a questionable gain.

We shouldn’t forget to credit this amp’s excellent bass – a true glory, with plenty of depth, drive and colour. Perhaps it’s a little enhanced too, but in the nicest possible way. Treble, especially at low levels, is cleanly extended and overall tonality is not a problem. It’s the very strong character of this amp that will attract or repel you and that in turn will depend on your tastes, not least in music. Line and phono sources fare similarly – the phono stage is decent and free of obvious flaws. We’ve no wish to be unduly disparaging of an amp that’s clearly been carefully designed to perform in a particular manner, but if you are seeking musical honesty over sheer excitement, keep looking. **HFC**

Richard Black

**SOUND QUALITY**


The high measured distortion was not so surprising after our first sonic experience of the amp – it tends to favour excitement over accuracy and analysis. We don’t want to get too judgmental about this and excitement has long been a marketable commodity in audio, but it is important to be clear about exactly what one should look for when evaluating this model.

Perhaps the most dramatic proof of its positive contribution came when played through synth-rich pop. The energetic style of this music was ideally complemented by the Unico SE’s drive and sheer ‘slam’, contributing a punch which subsequently seemed completely lacking with other amps. Michael Jackson also benefited similarly, if not quite so impressively, but there’s no doubt that with a lot of modern sounds, this amp can really deliver some kick.

But – and it’s a big ‘but’ – those ‘modern sounds’ have frequently never seen a microphone. They were generated and processed electronically and, in a very real way, the replay equipment is a part of the original sound generation.

What the SE does with acoustic sounds is a rather different matter. One of the most obvious demonstrations of this was on a brand new recording of solo soprano and piano, recent enough for the live sound to be fresh in the ear. In terms of tonality, there was little



<b>VERDICT</b>	
<b>SOUND</b> >> 77%	 <p><b>PRO</b> Truly larger than life, with a persuasively energetic way of looking at lively pop in particular. Great bass, backed up by plentiful power.</p> <p><b>CON</b> Ask yourself: do you always want larger than life? Accuracy takes something of a back seat while scale expands, albeit impressively.</p>
<b>FEATURES</b> >> 67%	
<b>BUILD</b> >> 87%	
<b>VALUE</b> >> 74%	
<p><b>CONCLUSION</b> For some, this amp will be the answer to a prayer; to others, anathema. It’s an acquired taste, so audition with care – and with your own music collection. Material value is high but if the sound grates that’s cold comfort.</p>	
<p><b>HI-FI CHOICE</b> &gt;&gt; <b>76%</b> OVERALL SCORE</p>	

