



UNISON RESEARCH REFERENCE PREAMPLIFIER & MONOBLOCK

These statement amplifiers from Italy's Unison Research deliver unique styling and heavenly sound

PRICE £32,495 (Reference Preamplifier: £9,995; Reference Monoblock: £22,500 per stereo pair) CONTACT UKD, 23 Richings Way, Iver SL0 9DA ☎ 01753 652669 @ www.unisonresearch.com

Consider, for a moment, the conditions that gave life to the amplifier you see here. Italy. Good start. A mission, established by Unison Research over 15 years, to bring true high-end values to the market, through valve and solid-state electronics, with all the design flair, craft and passion for music – not to mention the best Barolo and espresso – being a small, specialist Italian company implies. Lovely. But inevitably there comes a point when, egged on by its customers, Unison Research has to show the world its 'best game'; the finest amplifier it knows how to make. And, things being the way they are in Treviso, that means two things. First, an all-valve, pure Class-A power amp with some real, drive-anything muscle. Second, a preamp of identical quality and indisputable transparency.

The response is the Reference Monoblocks and matching Reference Preamplifier. You can appreciate from the photographs, to some extent, the contrasting wood and brushed stainless steel textures. What's less apparent is that the Monoblocks are the size of skateboard ramps and weigh 80 kilos each. Statement hi-fi, we love it!

The Reference Preamplifier isn't exactly svelte either, but then there's a lot to pack in and a lot to keep apart. The valve complement comprises no fewer than 18 signal triodes as well as two 300B power triodes. The triple chassis, dual-mono design fully separates the line and phono stages from the power supplies. The inclusion of the 300B, almost universally used as a power valve, in a preamp is highly unusual; Unison says it chose it for its excellent driving ability and linearity.

The RCA phono input and output terminals are gold-plated and balanced connections are also possible through transformer coupling. Interestingly the use of metal and wood is more than merely aesthetic. The stainless steel chassis cover, for instance, is non-magnetic with low thermal conductivity to ensure that the heat from the 300B doesn't affect the circuitry below. The solid wood parts are said to help limit vibration within the chassis, again with the benefit of reduced microphony.

Each Reference Monoblock power amp is a minimum feedback design capable of delivering 80 watts of pure Class A into eight ohms. The input stage uses twin triode ECC82s

for voltage amplification and, in the following stage, another pair of 82s are biased to drive the four directly-heated 845 triode valves and two 400-watt transformers working in parallel. A luxury product? Try this. The bias system for the triodes is fully independent for each valve to compensate for that valve's individual aging characteristics. And four independent circuits regulate the four grid voltages to maintain an optimal level of anode current for each triode.

Even if high-end audio is your natural habitat, this is a shockingly good amplifier. It isn't the clarity that startles. In fact, that's the whole point. It doesn't sound as if it's trying to impress by ramming its hi-fi credentials in your face. Its

won't make a meal of the imperfections. Genius, however, shines through more brightly. No veneer, no rose-tinted filter, no innate desire to butter things up – just a bloodhound's nose for the musical trail.

True, the overall balance can seem a little laid back but that shouldn't be taken as a negative. It's mostly because the sound has no artificial edge or hardness. Perhaps one should call it an absence of hype. Huge dynamic swings are accomplished with such a sublime nonchalance, it's easy to underestimate what's going on. With suitably large and capable speakers (Unison owns Opera speakers, so we used the truly massive £22,000 Caruso

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impact is altogether more transcendent and founded in the beautifully natural portrayal of tone and texture, a sense of balance and grace that draws you into the beating heart of the music. If it's the objective of the very best audio hardware to make you forget about the medium and connect with the music, the Reference combo pulls it off with talent to spare. Plenty of good-quality hi-fi makes a very fair fist of sounding natural and 'real', but this sounds as if the real thing is in the room with you: solid in three dimensions, a palpable presence.

An easy listen? Sure and, despite what some hard-bitten audiophiles might try to tell you, there's nothing wrong with that. Listenability and an unerring ability to be truthful aren't mutually exclusive. This amp will unearth detail right down to the inky black noise floor, yet it's also a musical communicator of the very highest order. If a recording is less than masterfully produced it will let you know but it

flagships) the deepest bass has the solidity and impetus to recreate the scale and reverberant characteristics of a venue – and that's a rare and thrilling treat.

Every type of music is given the same incredibly generous, unfettered treatment, but a current favourite – John Mayer's duet with Herbie Hancock, *Stitched Up* – has seldom sounded better. It's a well recorded track with startling life and colour but, through the Reference combo, it takes on an entirely greater sense of authority with breathtaking presence and, again, those effortless dynamic swings.

For the increased emotional intelligibility alone, listening to Unison's best amp system is a frankly wonderful experience. And so very dangerously addictive. As we discover time and again when we compile *The Collection*, there's the high end and there's hi-fi heaven. This one belongs very firmly in the latter category. ■

David Vivian

