FIRST CLASS
Unison’s turntable debut!

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Reflecting increasing interest in vinyl replay, Unison Research has added a turntable to its portfolio

PRODUCT: Unison Research Giro
TYPE: Turntable, arm and cartridge
PRICE: £2,750 and £375 URI cartridge (optional)
KEY FEATURES: Size (WxHxD): 43x15x39cm
- Weight: 52.4kg
- Tonearm shaft is carbon fibre tube
- Magnetic bias compensator
- Cartridge alignment is very easy
- Motor separated from turntable
- Thick acrylic platter, belt driven around its edge
- Convenience positioned on/off/speed control

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The latest entrant from the latter group is electronics brand Unison Research, a company based just outside Treviso in North East Italy, which shares premises, ownership and management with Opera loudspeakers. Unison URI1 moving magnet cartridge an optional £375 extra, on top of a turntable/arm price of £2,750. (A high output moving magnet cartridge tends to be an easier match to valve phono stages.)

"...makers of turntables suffered quite badly, as consumers deserted in droves to the sexy new silver digital discs..."

It was more than twenty years ago that an otherwise intelligent PR person from a major consumer electronics brand assured this reviewer that vinyl would be dead by 1990. Certainly the makers of turntables suffered quite badly for about a decade after the late 1980s, as consumers deserted in droves to the sexy new silver digital discs, boxing up their vinyl collections and consigning them to the attic. Indeed it is said that only three British turntable makers survived the 1990s shake-out unscathed, which may well be true.

Since around the Millenium, however, interest in vinyl and sales of record players have been slowly picking up, with most territories showing steady growth. Increased availability from both existing manufacturers and dealers has played its part. But major brands sourcing turntables from OEM suppliers and reintroducing them to their product portfolios have also helped increase visibility.

has a comprehensive Unico line of solid state amplifiers and loudspeakers, but is perhaps best known for its single-ended valve amps.

These differ from the herd, not only in their fine sound quality, but also in the unusual application of shaped hardwood pieces to add a uniquely distinctive and attractive style. And incorporating similar motifs within an already very classy looking turntable means the Giro is an exceptionally pretty vinyl spinner.

Maintaining this hardwood styling device was considered essential, because many customers like the separate components of their hi-fi systems to look well coordinated. That also helped determine that the Giro would be a complete record player (i.e including tonearm and cartridge), selling for around the £3,000 that customers typically spend on their valve amps. In fact, late in the day (possibly responding to rapid shifts in exchange rates), it was decided to make the

However, for the duration of the review programme the URI1 had been deemed an integral part of the package, so most of the review work was carried out using this cartridge. Appropriate matching might have been a problem, since this reviewer has long favoured low output moving-coil cartridges and is not normally geared up to handle the higher output types. Happily, Unison brought along a couple of prototype MM phono stages which allowed the use of regular pre and power amplification. One of these, powered by an output supply, is the latest version of the valve-based Simply Phono, incorporating an extra input triode to improve the noise performance. The other unit was solid state – an early prototype of the Unicophone, and powered by rechargeable batteries. Both proved very interesting and effective in practice, but most of the work was done with the valve unit since the solid state unit.
We spoke to Professor Giovanni Sacchetti, the original founder and designer of Unison Research's valve amplifiers, about the Giro turntable.

HFC: Unison has long been known as an electronics specialist and it's well known that you take particular pride in your single-ended valve amplifiers. The Giro is clearly made for Unison by German company Clearaudio, but do you have any experience in turntables or tonearms?

GS: Back when I was teaching at high school, the mechanical engineering department had a high-quality lathe and I experimented by making a number of tonearms. A very long one gave rather good results!

And turntables?
Turntables are rather more difficult; need much more costly machinery and are also difficult to produce in quantity.

What sort of relationship do you have with Clearaudio?
We've known the company for a long time and then about three years ago I put forward some turntable design ideas of my own. This was the starting point and we gradually developed the Giro from then.

To what extent is the Giro an 'off-the-shelf' Clearaudio design? Has Unison made any significant contributions?
The Giro is loosely based on Clearaudio's Performance, with the latest motor development, but we have incorporated some of our own ideas too. The feet are a unique solution to isolating the turntable from shelf-borne vibrations without the inconvenience of springs. They combine three hard spheres in a concave seat with soft plastic – we experimented with ceramic spheres but steel proved more practical and cost effective. We also use laminated hardwood to damp any resonances in the main chassis.

What type of rechargeable batteries do you use to power the Uniphone?
We've chosen lead-acid because, with careful charger design, it's more reliable and has a longer service life than Lithium types.

The Giro arrived fully charged, but without any means of recharging.
It was pretty obvious from the ingredients that the Giro had been sourced from leading German manufacturer Clearaudio. Although Unison has had its own input on both the engineering and the styling of the Giro, checking the Clearaudio catalogue suggests it's related to the latter's Performance model.
It certainly shares the Performance's Satisfy carbon fibre shaft tonearm and the UR1 is a wooden bodied moving magnet cartridge from the Clearaudio range, though the turntable proper is rather harder to pin down. A glance through Clearaudio's very extensive range shows how many subtle variations on several basic themes are available by using a generous parts bin. The Giro has an outboard motor drive like a Performance and a similarly thick acrylic platter, but the platter main bearing here replaces the anti-magnetic approach with a tight-fitting inverted steel shaft and ceramic sphere. The main structure is thick acrylic bonded to Unison's trademark shaped and polished hardwood sections, the latter deliberately made from three layers laminated with different grain directions. Unison has also had significant engineering input on the design of the feet (see interview on this page). Regrettably, no dust cover is supplied, though we dare say it will be possible to find something suitable.

The outboard motor is a pretty hefty affair, and showed no obvious evidence of vibration while it was running. It's a synchronous type with electronically synthesised drive (to effect 33/45 rpm speed change), and it's certainly significantly larger than those usually used, though that may just be down to substantial casing, or indeed the speed control electronics that are presumably housed inside. It takes its power via a very modest plug-top transformer, and a grooved pulley drives the platter's outside edge using a clear polymer elastic belt. This separately sited motor is spaced by about 10mm from a scallop-shaped cutout in the main structure. This approach should reduce motor vibration reaching the turntable chassis, especially when both motor and turntable are mounted on something as solid as the Vertex A2 Kinabalu granite platform used for this review. The down side, of course, is that it's impossible to control belt tension precisely.
The Satisfy tonearm seems to have good-quality bearings and plenty of opportunity for adjusting alignment in various planes, albeit at some expense in mechanical integrity. The Unison-badged cartridge could be any one of a several similar satin-wood-bodied, aluminium cantilever models in Clearaudio's Aurum range; no specific information was provided.

**SOUND QUALITY**

Set up is relatively simple, though a little more information – for example a recommended bias compensation setting for the supplied cartridge – would have been welcome.

Start-up is initially a bit of a surprise. Switch the front-left lever from 'off' to '33' and, for a while, nothing much happens. You wonder: does it need a little push to get it going? No: just a little patience. After a second or five (it varies), it swings into action and gets up to speed quite quickly. Although there's plenty of inertia to keep it turning without drive, the motor acts as a brake, so it also stops quickly. This is handy, since there's no separate platter mat, the record resting directly on the relatively hard acrylic, so it's best to turn it off when changing or turning over discs. Because the fixed cartridge cantilever protrudes from the front of the cartridge, cueing (and, for that matter, initial alignment) was greatly facilitated, though this does make it vulnerable to accidental damage.

Most listening was done with the complete Giro package, plus supplied phono stages. From the phono stage's line outputs, signals were fed to Naim NAC552 / NAP500 amplification and thence to PMC IB2i loudspeakers. Brief checks were also carried out by substituting a Rega Apheta low output moving-coil cartridge via a Naim Superline phono stage.

The sound quality is rather good, with fine timing, wide dynamic range and a notably lively and dynamic midband. This vinyl spinner is an immediate reminder of the reasons why this format has stubbornly refused to die and is currently making a comeback.

While the broad midband is handled with enthusiasm and gusto, the music as a whole drives along with good pace and momentum, definition and detail does start to ebb away as one moves towards both frequency extremes.

Lead instruments and voices are confidently projected – perhaps a little too confidently – as these are main components of the mix could become a little too strong. Here, the presence zone verging on the aggressive as it becomes more complex when extra instrumental layers are progressively added.

On the late Lowell George's splendid solo album 'Eating In Heaven', several tracks start very simply and gradually build up, steadily adding layers of backing male vocals and brass sections as the track evolves. The Giro player seemed happier when the track was relatively simple and the brass, in particular, began to sound a little uncomfortable and congested as complexity increased.

A similar effect was also found on the Maazel/VPO Sibelius Fifth Symphony, where again stereo depth perspectives seemed somewhat constrained and both the brass and violin desks seemed to become a little edgy and uncomfortable when approaching the loudest passages. Once again the midband and presence seemed to take precedence over the low bass and upper treble.

This overall character seems reasonably consistent, although there is also a clear difference between the sonic character of the two supplied phono stages. On balance, the battery-powered Unicophono stage was marginally preferred. It doesn't quite have the midrange sweetness or the warmth of the new Simply Phono design, but it does seem rather more neutral overall, cleaner in the bass region and with less forwardness in the stereo image. Had we been using a valve amp, the preference might well have reversed.

Substituting the Apheta/Superline cartridge/phono stage allayed much of the criticism, confirmed the slightly bandwidth-limited, but wide dynamic range of the turntable/arm combo, but also strongly suggested that the moving magnet cartridge may well be the limiting factor in the overall sound quality. This thoroughly entertaining turntable is blessed with good styling and although it's primarily intended to match Unison's valve amplifiers, it will look amazing in any hi-fi system. Greater sonic performance may well be available by using a higher quality cartridge, and some less costly turntables could also match its performance, but we'll bet no alternative package will look as good.

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**VERDICT**

**SOUND**

4 stars ★★★★★

Gorgeous styling, not merely as a partner for Unison valve amps, but also its own right. Nice ergonomics, with easy cartridge alignment and cueing.

**FEATURES**

4 stars ★★★★★

Tonearm lacks some mechanical homogeneity and integrity. Sound quality is rather mid-oriented, perhaps due to cartridge.

**BUILD**

4 stars ★★★★★

4 stars ★★★★★

**VALUE**

4 stars ★★★★★

**CONCLUSION**

Gorgeous-looking turntable has a lively and entertaining sound, albeit a little mid-oriented and upfront with some lack of detail and solidity using supplied cartridge. Easy cartridge alignment and cueing, but no dust cover.

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**OVERALL SCORE**

4 stars ★★★★★

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Paul Messenger

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