

# Unison Research Unico 200

*This innovative Italian dual-mode amplifier can trade output power for quality*

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**T**he vital statistics just about say it all. The Unico 200 costs £3,250, weighs 55kg, stands some 43cm wide, 26.5cm tall and 55cm deep. It has five line inputs, almost no toys apart from the obligatory remote control – and an output rating of 350 watts per channel. All of which means the Unico 200 is a big brute of an integrated stereo amplifier. But this isn't the whole story.

The Unico 200 is as much brains as brawn. It is a dual-mode amplifier, one that has two output configurations. This is based on a power supply that changes itself on the fly to give 200 watts per channel rated, or 350 watts in practice, according to Unison. But then, there's the alternative high-current mode, which is limited to 50 watts per channel nominally, or 85 watts per channel in practice, again as the makers claim. It is the lower power mode that is said to offer the best available sound quality.

Unison is best known for its valve or hybrid valve/solid-state designs. No change here: the Unico 200 is a hybrid amplifier, with the tried and trusted arrangement of a valve front-end and a MOSFET output to do the heavy lifting. The input is a triode cascade in a common cathode arrangement with a triode cathode follower. This is followed by a current-feedback Class A solid-state driver stage, and finally, there's the MOSFET output with a sliding bias arrangement to prevent crossover distortion. This seems a particular favourite configuration of many of the leading Italian amplifier marques.

In lower power mode, a reduced voltage power rail is used. There's also a series or parallel arrangement of the power supply bridge rectifiers, according to mode. It is safe to switch between low and high power modes as the amplifier is playing, not least because there is a lot of circuitry dedicated to guaranteeing the amplifier's stability

under all conditions of use. According to Unison, this is achieved without intruding on sound quality. The amplifier is DC coupled, and has a massive output reservoir bank.

## SOUND QUALITY

Perhaps the valve based front-end is responsible for this, but there is an attractive valve-like quality to this amplifier, a smoothness and euphony that you would not expect from a solid-state design. The difference between the two operating modes can be surprisingly subtle, but in the end the lower power mode is preferred when the extra headroom is not required. Conversely, the amplifier acquires an almost tangible sense of stature and scale at higher volume levels in the higher power mode. The effect is not dissimilar to the Class A and Class B amplifier output configurations that were once popular when power was more at a premium than it is now, but the differences here are more subtle.

**“It is easier on the ear and has massively more power on tap when the occasion demands.”**

In our original test, we compared the Unico 200 to another large amplifier, the even more costly Denon PMA-SA1 (see p122), which is roughly comparable in output power to the Unico 200 in low-power mode. In fact, they are at opposite ends of the spectrum in terms of sound. The Unison's almost blowsy grace and euphony contrasts with the

Denon's smaller image scale but razor-sharp reflexes, up-front presence and remarkable transparency. If it is a clear picture of the source that you want, the Denon is undeniably the better tool for the job, while the Unico 200 is a little more selective and lossy in nature, but arguably smoother and easier on the ear – and it has massively more power on tap when the occasion demands.

An excellent amplifier then, with few gimmicks, but plenty of raw grunt when required. The Unico 200 is capable of an easy yet enjoyable style

of music making that appears to work with virtually any kind of music, and with almost any loudspeaker, regardless of sensitivity and power handling ability. **HFC**

*Alvin Gold*

See HFC 269 (August 2005) for our original review of this product

