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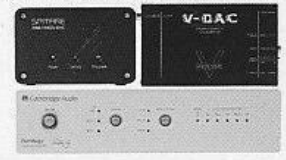
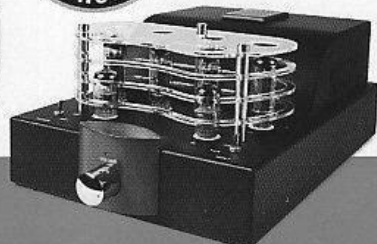


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Magnifico

Jimmy Hughes brushes up on his Italian with this ultimate dream combo

This month's *Beautiful System* hails from Italy, and offers something *Tutto Italiano*. Now that's not to say the music sallies forth with a strong Italian accent – *definitivamente non*. The connection comes from styling and the look and feel of each component.

LA DOLCE VITA

Yet, under-pinning everything is a certain relaxed charm and confidence. The three components that comprise this month's *Beautiful System* are certainly *serioso*, but (one hopes) not the least bit *disperato*. Each has a stylish 'retro' look that oozes *fascino* and *eleganza*. But, this system has substance and style.

The sound has that same relaxed easy charm and insouciance; that unexaggerated naturalness, allied to a smooth, clear, well-balanced tonality – no rough edges, no harsh jagged corners. Yet also, there's immediacy, clarity, and separation. The music sounds clear, open, neutral – and very true to life.

THE VOICE OF THE MOON

Sampling the Unison Research CD player, before setting up the system, revealed a veritable *Maestro di* refinement. It sounded deliciously smooth and homogenous with a silvery-sharp musical presentation; immaculately clean and groomed.

There was nothing showy or flashy about the sound, yet clarity was excellent – voices and instruments exuding a quiet precision that ensured the music was focused and articulate. The sound wasn't falsely 'busy'. If the music was simple, that's how it sounded. But lots of fine detail could be heard.

The Unico CDE's analogue output is slightly lower than average. This makes the sound seem a tad understated – even after raising amp volume levels, but you can increase the output by +9dB via a button on the back, giving the sound a bit more punch and attack.

Now in Mk III guise, the Pathos Classic One has long been a favourite

integrated among those with an eye for performance and value. It's a tube/transistor hybrid offering around 70 watts per channel output into eight ohms (130 watts into four ohms), and can be bridged to give 180 watts into eight ohms (270 watts into four ohms).

VARIETY LIGHTS

The preamp circuit features two ECC83 tubes that glow nicely. The circuit is fully balanced, operates with no feedback, and is powered separately from the power amp. Silver cabling is used internally. The solid-state power amp runs in Class A/AB, and during normal use the chassis gets moderately warm.

The Pathos Classic One has an unusual shape, being some 44 centimetres deep from front to back – maybe even 55 centimetres deep if you factor in the protruding knobs and cables at the back – yet is only 23 centimetres wide. If a bit impractical, the elongated shape lets the tube preamp and solid-state power amp sections be kept entirely separate.

Interestingly, the Pathos amp had a similar sonic signature to the Unison Research CD player, being smooth, refined and well-balanced. While the sound doesn't bristle with detail, this is deceptive; the presentation is actually very detailed and clear – it's just that 'detail' is not thrust in your face.

BEN EQUILIBRATO

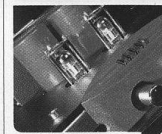
No – not Manchester City's latest multi-million pound signing, but the tonal 'signature' of the Pathos Classic One. Overall, the sound is very well balanced in terms of bass/treble extremes. The amp is not obviously 'toppy', while bass is firm and clear – tight and clean – without being excessively lean.

The amp (and CD player) comes with handsome wood-clad remote-control handsets. The volume control is motor driven and has an illuminated display that runs from 0 to 99. The makers claim the volume control's resistors are laser trimmed for accuracy, ensuring perfect left/right channel balance. ▣



Unison Research Unico CDE integrated CD Player
£2,195

CD player based around a TEAC CD5010A Transport, with Crystal CS4392 24-bit/96kHz DAC and Crystal CS8420 digital interface for reduced jitter and audio data correction. Tube output stage – 4x ECC83 tubes.



Pathos Classic One Mk III amplifier
£1,975

Integrated tube/transistor hybrid amplifier offering 70 watts per channel into eight ohms. Has four unbalanced inputs and one balanced input, plus tape out. Electronic volume control. Preamp uses 2x ECC83 tubes and has no feedback.



Opera Callas Diva Loudspeakers
£2,880 plus £545 for stands

Two-way reflex loudspeaker featuring six drive units. Unusual design with three rear-mounted tweeters. Cabinet made from solid wood, plywood and MDF, with high-gloss lacquer finish in Cherry or Mahogany.



Inputs are switched electronically via special relays developed for VHF telecommunications and operate instantly and silently. The amp has four unbalanced line inputs, plus one set of balanced line inputs. As the Unico CDE has a balanced analogue output, you can run the system balanced.

Normally, 'going balanced' results in superior sound quality – and a slight increase in gain. Unusually, with the Pathos/Unison Research combination, there seemed to be no difference between balanced and unbalanced, at least none I could hear. Very puzzling!

ITALIANO REALE

For style, the Opera Callas Diva speakers are the most 'Italian' of the trio. The rounded corners and lack of plane surfaces creates an unusually attractive shape. The cabinet shape also increases rigidity, reduces internal standing waves and improves dispersion.

The enclosure is made from a mix of real wood, ply wood and MDF. The sides are 30-millimetre thick ply, while the back is 60-millimetre thick MDF. The top and bottom are 40-millimetre thick real wood and the front baffle is covered in black leather. Cool! The review speakers came finished in high-gloss Cherry Mahogany. The Callas Diva is a very

interesting loudspeaker. A smaller version of the floorstanding Calla Divina, it's a two-way design with no less than six SEAS drive units. The five inch (130-millimetre) bass/mid unit has a magnesium cone and solid copper phase plug. The tweeters use ferro-fluid-damped one inch (25-millimetre) Sonotex domes, with neodymium magnet assembly.

The tweeter's small size enables close placement to the bass/mid driver for better integration. There are two tweeters on the front and three on the back. The aim is to create a less directional HF response by distributing the treble energy over a wider area. The result? Clear brilliant sweet-sounding highs without harshness or 'beaming'.

MARIA WOULD HAVE LOVED 'EM...

The Callas Diva certainly produced a very integrated and homogenous sound. Even close up, it was hard to 'hear' the individual drivers – the sound was totally seamless, almost as if there was just one drive unit. The high frequencies have presence and bite, yet do not obtrude.

The speakers measure 38 centimetres by 36 centimetres by 23 centimetres. There's a 12-decibel/octave roll off for the bass/mid driver with a nominal turnover frequency of about 1.5kHz.

Interestingly, the front tweeters have an 18-decibel/octave roll off while those on the back are 12-decibel/octave. Clearly, the whole design – from crossover to cabinet – has been very finely tuned.

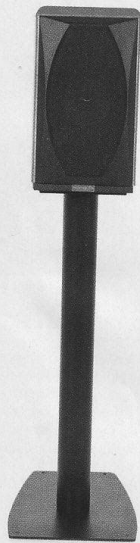
Sensitivity is on the low side at about 86-decibel/one-watt, but – with a nominal impedance of just under four ohms – this is less of an issue assuming your amp can double its power into lower impedances. With the Pathos Classic One, output increases to about 130 watts into four ohms – so there should be enough power.

PLACE DI CALLAS

The bass unit is reflex loaded with two rear-facing ports. The makers warn against placing the speaker close to corners to avoid bass resonance issues, suggesting a minimum distance of 50 centimetres. The Callas Divas may prove sensitive to slight movement, due to their rear-facing high frequency drivers.

Bass output is very decent given the enclosure sizes, coping surprisingly well with a 20Hz sine wave and producing clean output with only a little doubling. While the deep bass lacks the massive heft you get with bigger speakers, it's impressively full-sounding for a small box.

More important than absolute depth, the low frequencies sounded very clean.





Playing Seiji Ozawa's Schoenberg *Gurrelieder*, the mid/bass was strikingly clear and open.

AND THE SHIP SAILS ON...

The Callas Diva produced a surprisingly big deep soundstage for small speakers. The exceptional stereo detail heard on last month's GamuT system was absent. Instead, the combination produced a broad atmospheric stereo spread, with excellent front-to-back depth.

Overall, the system delivered impressive clarity and separation, but not at the expense of tonal smoothness and integration. The sound was detailed and open, yet tonally sweet, well-balanced, natural, and seamlessly integrated – almost regardless of how close you sat to the speakers. Matching 73-centimetre tall steel stands help get the speakers at the right height and cost around £545.

With a speaker company called Opera making a model named after the Diva of Divas, it would be highly remiss not to sample at least a Maria Callas recording.

I DID WHAT I DID FOR MARIA

Starting with Bizet's *Carmen*, Callas' voice was recreated with crisp articulation, while subtle colouring of the words sounded remarkable. The system was equal to the challenge.

Although recording came late in Callas' career and the recording was not one of EMI's best, the sound was surprisingly ripe and richly detailed.

Next, something Italian; Puccini's *Tosca* – the legendary 1954 mono recording. Not all modern hi-fi systems deal favourably with old mono recordings – the danger is, you hear more of what's wrong rather than what's right. But here the result was full-bodied and clear.

VISSI D'ARTE

Hearing Callas sing *Tosca* reconfirmed how great the performance was – and how good this system is at reproducing vocal music. Of course, the sound showed its age, but it was mostly strikingly clear and detailed, with impressive presence and surprising impact and dynamic range.

It was a vivid reminder of how exciting and dramatic 1950s mono recordings can still sound on a system that plays to their strengths. The closing few minutes of *Tosca* were thrilling beyond belief, and the clarity of the sound – its sense of space and depth and the way it conveyed the music's passion and drama was remarkable.

The reflective rear tweeters of the Callas Diva helped create a sense of 'spread' and width from the original

mono recording – avoiding that thin line of sound impression some stereo set-ups can produce on single-channel material. The central image was still quite solid, but the sound wasn't lacking in ambience.

EMOTIONAL CORE

This system displayed an uncanny ability to convey atmosphere and mood, tension and feel. The precision and control apparent with classical music was also beneficial on rock and jazz. Recordings that sounded coarse and messy on other equipment were reproduced cleanly, with outstanding clarity and focused cohesion.

In this respect, the total result was greater than the sum of the parts – everything stayed focussed and under control, yet the emotional core of the music seemed liberated too.

Presentation was tidy and clean, but it never felt like the music was being squashed or suffocated for control.

There's sufficient power to fill large rooms, yet the system should perform well in smaller rooms where you're sitting close to the speakers. It's at once civilised and smooth, yet deceptively dynamic and very detailed. It gives you the music without unwanted extras – and does so at a realistic price. **HFC**

Jimmy Hughes

