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Turntables / Arms / Cartridges

Unison Research Giro (£2750)

By Steve Harris & Paul Miller

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A slice of cool acrylic wrapped in real wood, topped off with a carbon fibre arm... Italian valve amp manufacturer Unison Research unveils its striking debut deck

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Valves and vinyl go together like the proverbial horse and carriage, so it isn't too surprising that one of Italy's best-known tube amplifier manufacturers recently decided to offer its own turntable, arm and cartridge. You could say that Unison Research has carved its own niche because, apart from the tubes, its amplifiers are notable for the use of real wood as a styling element.

When British manufacturers say 'real wood', they usually mean a thin slice of rosewood or whatever, glued to a thicker piece of chipboard. Not so the Italians, who still seem prepared to hew speaker cabinets out of solid trees, as Unison does its amplifier ornaments. Anyway, although the Giro is made for Unison Research by Clearaudio, it has a generous helping of wood, and some other special touches too.

FANCY FOOTWORK

The Giro's main turntable bearing and tonearm are mounted on a one-piece chassis, relying on special feet to reduce sensitivity to acoustic feedback. This main chassis is a piece of acrylic 20mm thick. Bonded on top is the sculpted wood section, made up of three laminations with a total thickness of 15mm.

Also machined from acrylic but measuring around 40mm deep is the platter. This sits on a metal hub, which has a broad flange to support the platter and fits precisely with hardly a trace of rocking movement. Inside the hub, an inverted bearing uses a captive ball running on the flat top of the shaft which projects upwards from the base. (This turntable does not incorporate Clearaudio's magnetic bearing.)

There is no mat, and neither is there any special provision for clamping the record, but the review sample came with a Souther Clever Clamp, supplied as an extra. This is a simple clear plastic device which grips the centre spindle when pushed down over it.

A chunky metal housing for the motor forms a separate freestanding unit, placed snugly in the cut-out at the rear left corner of the chassis. Drive is via a long, soft, round-section neoprene belt, which encircles the platter. In use, the motor pulley is hidden by a cover with three stalk-like feet, easy to remove and replace as it is held in place magnetically. But even if you play 45s a lot, there's no need to fumble with the belt and motor pulley, as electronic speed change switching is provided.

Unison's tonearm is pretty similar to the Clearaudio Satisfy, although with a different counterweight assembly. In this case, the main arm tube is made of carbon fibre, which is one of four material options offered on the Clearaudio product. Also retained is Clearaudio's rather neat headshell design, where the cartridge is first bolted firmly to the carrier, which is then attached to the arm by a single hex bolt. With this bolt slackened off it is easy to adjust the cartridge alignment using the protractor provided.

Bias force is applied magnetically. Set into the right side of the moving bearing housing are three small button magnets, while a large adjusting bolt is threaded into a fixed bracket nearby. This bolt is magnetised, with the polarity of the other magnets arranged so that the one ahead of the bearing is attracted to the bolt while the two behind repel it.

This means that the cartridge end of the arm is always being impelled outwards, away from the centre of the record and towards the edge to give an appropriate 'antiskating' effect. Screwing in the bolt brings its end nearer to the arm magnets and so increases the force applied.

For this review, the importer also supplied the Unison Research wood-bodied cartridge. This is a moving-magnet type of normal output and so should be a good match for Unison's own tube phono stages. Recommended tracking force is 2.2g.

WELL SHAPED

I started listening with Jennifer Warnes and 'The Ballad of the Runaway Horse' from Rob Wasserman's Duets [GRP 97 121]. There was a good sense of intimacy with Warnes' vocal, her voice sounding comfortably well-shaped, the system conveying the singer's always-delightful range of expression as she delivers the lyric, seemingly at her leisure, as naturally as talking. The sound certainly gained realism from the way you could hear tiny breath sounds, although I did not feel I was really getting the total ambient picture, the sense of the studio environment, which is possible with this recording. Wasserman's bass was clean, sounding comfortably well-pitched and steady, the rhythmic aspect not really to the fore but the sound by no means sluggish.

From that audiophile miracle I turned rather perversely to Bob Marley and the Wailers Live! [Island ISLPS9376], which has the sonic limitations of its era but nonetheless encapsulates an amazing performance. I was able to wallow in Marley's sheer communication and the band's freedom and directness, so effortlessly pulling together, with high spots like the fabulous, oblique guitar solo on 'No Woman No Cry'.

While you could become aware of the underlying grunginess and overlying glare, you had to admit that the engineers actually did a great job extracting what they did, and with the Unison Research combination it never got tiring.

Next I dipped into a couple of Clapton albums, also from the 1970s. 'Motherless Children', the amazing slide guitar workout which opens 461 Ocean Boulevard [RSO 2479 118] was enjoyable but somehow didn't completely catch fire the way it can. You could certainly hear Carl Radle playing the bass line, but it didn't seem to be propelling the music. From



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four years later, Backless [RSO RSD5001] gives you the same rhythm team but a completely different sound, thanks to producer Glyn Johns. Heavy at the bass end and generally rather thick and muddy, it's always a bit of a challenge. Here the Giro did well enough in making the music intelligible, if not really exciting.

CLASSICAL CONTRAST

By contrast, but also from 1978, was a favourite record engineered by Tryggvi Tryggvason for a small audiophile label, the Bach Orchestral Suites Nos 3 and 4 with the New Chamber Soloists conducted by George Malcolm [Merlin MRF 78901]. This brought out the best in the Giro, with its ability to sound clear and informative in the treble region without lapsing into harshness. There was a great feeling of unhurried mastery in the playing, bringing those stately dance rhythms to life.

Larger-scale orchestral music was also quite rewarding with this player. On the old LSO/Kertesz recording of Dvorak's The Water Goblin [Decca SXL 6543], the strings sounded sweet and seductive while the pizzicato effects and the gruff sounds in the lower reaches were clearly conveyed. When the music reached a galloping climax, there was no sense of strain, and there was a good sense of space.

An all-time classic classical recording is Barbirolli Conducts English String Music [EMI/HMV ASD 521], with the Sinfonia of London in 1963, music played beautifully in a sympathetic hall acoustic. With the mellow sound of the Giro you could just surrender willingly to Elgar, with the feeling that the music was wafting over you in some idyllic Arcadian grove.

Back to rock sounds. Having explored Clapton, I had to try Stevie Ray Vaughan's 'Tin Pan Alley', from Pure Pleasure's audiophile double album version of Texas Flood [PPAN 38734]. Vaughan's voice here had strength, depth and again a notably mellow quality, while the Giro allowed you to sit back and wonder at that utterly luscious guitar sound. On this spare but cunningly atmospheric production, the drums sounded impressive rather than impactful, but the bass guitar sound was pure and weighty enough.

SWEET BUT NOT LOW

In the end, I did find I could enjoy all kinds of music on the Giro. With the arm and cartridge supplied, it offered a sound that flowed sweetly, and could be quite seductive on vocals. Yet it has to be said that smoothness did verge on blandness at times and while you couldn't actually say it dragged the beat, it did not have much in the way of rhythmic aplomb.

While the midrange is appealing and the treble is pleasing, the bass end is I think rather undistinguished, and it won't be a good choice if you listen to rock music with a heavy bass and at the same time expect it to set your feet tapping. Incidentally, I didn't feel that the Souther Clever Clamp did much for the sound, and while it was easy to put on it was fiddly to pull off.

Having said all that, the Giro combination does achieve a well-balanced sound, which should be a good subjective match for Unison's electronics. And of course, if you're already hopelessly in love with a wood-trimmed valve amplifier, it will be an essential purchase.

VERDICT

Having combined wood, metal and glass in its upmarket amps, Unison Research has added wood to metal and acrylic to create one of the best-looking turntables around. The Giro's sound is pleasing rather than sparkling, with a rather soft bass quality. Whether the wood makes any useful contribution to sound quality is debatable, but it does make the deck more expensive than its plain-acrylic competition.

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