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& Record Review

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Investigation, p18



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# hi-finews GROUP TEST

For many enthusiasts, the magic of tubes means nothing else will satisfy. This month we put six valve integrateds to the test, including two of the best newcomers from China

## INTEGRATED VALVE AMPS £1450-£2000

### TESTED THIS MONTH

ARIAND PRO-845SE	£1450
ICON AUDIO ST40 MKIIIM	£1550
MING DA MC368-BSE	£1995
MYSTÈRE CONCEPT IA 11	£1450
PATHOS CLASSIC ONE MK3	£1990
UNISON RESEARCH SIMPLY ITALY	£1500



Cutting-edge gear, cherry-picked by the *Hi-Fi News* editor



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The stage of maturity which valve amplifiers have now reached is surely reflected in a stylistic convergence met by the six models in this month's group test. The black painted chassis with transformers atop at the rear, and valves on show at the front, is now as much of a cliché as the knob-festooned, brushed alloy fronted solid-state integrateds that poured out of Japan in the 1970s. After some years of experimentation, the look and feel of the modern valve amplifier does seem to have become standardised.

Fortunately, there are still plenty of differences between the protagonists. Ariand's Pro-845SE offers a genuine single-ended triode configuration which has a rated power output of around 20W for a modest £1450, something that would have been unthinkable not so long ago. Icon's latest version of its long-running Stereo 40 model uses powerful KT88 beam tetrodes in a push-pull ultralinear configuration, a topology which represents the state of development that valve amplifiers had reached when they were supplanted by solid-state designs the

first time round. It also uses a valve rectifier to power its preamplifier stages, just like the Ariand, and is 'fully loaded' with features, to boot.

Another push-pull ultralinear circuit with big tetrodes, KT90s in this case, is used by Ming Da in its MC368-BSE, which has the highest rated valve output stage in this test with a claimed output of 70W. Dutch-designed but made in China, the Mystère IA 11 employs the Philips-originated EL34 in a classic push-pull pentode circuit which, according to the manufacturers, can deliver '40 watts of the sweetest, purist sound you'll ever hear'

These last three designs can be considered to be the most conventional, whereas Unison's Simply Italy is quite unusual in being a single-ended ultralinear design, also based on the EL34 pentode. Finally, the Pathos Classic One Mk3 is the wild card in this month's pack, being a hybrid arrangement which combines a valve input stage with a solid-state power amplifier

### MUSIC AND SYSTEM

Once the preserve of the niche listener the valve amplifier of today

is now a universal commodity and so must relate well to a range of musical styles.

My selections for the tests, therefore, were the *Adagietto* from Gustav Mahler's Symphony 5 [DG 423 608-2], Katie Melua's 'Call Off The Search' from the album of the same name [Dramatico DRAMCD0002] and 'Children Say' by Level 42, from the album *Running In The Family* [Polydor 831 593-2], which between them offer a wide range of listening experiences.

Supporting equipment consisted of a Cyrus CD8 SE 2 CD player and Monitor Audio PL100 loudspeakers, linked with Chord Company Calypso interconnects and Chord Odyssey 2 cables: a realistic setup for amplifiers in this popular price bracket.

Note that even though the some of our photographs show the units with the covers over the valves removed, they should never be operated like this at home; otherwise, hot metal carrying very high voltages could be exposed in the event of a valve breakage.

REVIEWS BY TIM JARMAN  
LAB TESTS BY PAUL MILLER

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# Ariand Pro-845SE



A single-ended triode amplifier with 211 valves and no global feedback for under £1500? A few years ago this would have seemed like nonsense but now that these big triodes are back in production in China, here is a very keenly priced amplifier to use them. The Ariand Pro-845SE can also be ordered for use with the similar looking 845 valve but since circuit changes are required, the two types cannot be interchanged after purchase.

Dual mono construction with separate power supplies is specified for each output stage, although both channels share an ECC83 double triode in the preamplifier while the low level stages are powered by a 5U4G rectifier valve in a similar arrangement to that employed by the Icon Audio Stereo 40 MkIIIm [adjacent].

Fixed bias is used and the level can be checked using a built-in digital meter; adjustment of both this and the hum balancing controls proved to be especially straightforward. As the 211s get very hot and run at over 1000 volts, the optional cage to protect them is an absolute *must*.

One must also be careful not to switch the amplifier back on promptly after switching it off, since the delicate thoriated tungsten filaments of the expensive 211s can easily be damaged by doing this.

**RIGHT:** Wood trim and remote control are nice touches at the price. The amp is available with 845 or 211 power triodes



## CLEAR WATER

The Pro-845SE has a bright, dry sound which made 'Children Say' sound vivid, if a bit lacking in weight. The effect was like a toned-down version of that given by the Unison, the other SE amplifier in this test.

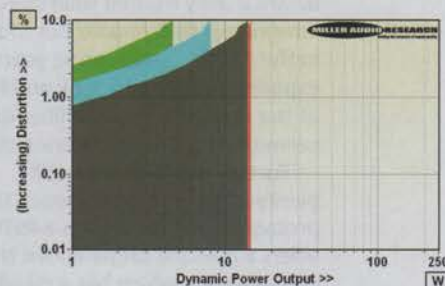
There seemed to be sufficient power available for most normal domestic requirements, which is an unusual thing to be able to say about a single-ended triode amp! A clear presence lift really brought Katie Melua's vocals to the fore the overall tonal balance was a little bright but this did a good job in clearing any muddle away from the bottom end, leaving the crucial midband water-clear. The Mahler *Adagietto* was very well presented, not only tonally and texturally, but also in the sharply-focussed images of the players and great sense of acoustic space crafted by the Ariand.

Sound Quality: 82%



## HI-FI NEWS LAB REPORT

Depending on where you look – user manual or website – the specification for the Pro-845SE differs slightly, its output either 18W/5% THD, 20W 'continuous' or 25W 'continuous'. The output configuration of these single-ended, directly-heated 211 triodes also complicates measurement as both 'red' and 'black' taps are floating; nevertheless this implementation demonstrates extremely fast thermal settling, reaching a steady 0.75% THD at 1W/8ohm within 30 seconds, unchanged 30 minutes later. As distortion climbs with power, the latter rather depends on the acceptability of the former – the amplifier achieving 1.5W at 1% THD, 4.5W at 2% THD, 9W at 4%, 12W at 5% THD and 15W at 10% THD (all 8/4ohm via 8 and 4ohm taps). The low frequency response rolls-off below 50Hz to -1.7dB/20kHz with a similar 'sweetening' of -1.7dB at 20kHz, increasing to -5dB/20kHz into 4ohm (via 4ohm tap). The output impedance hovers around 4ohm through the audio band while hum and noise rather compromise the A-wtd S/N ratio – just 69dB re. 0dBW. PM



ABOVE: Dynamic power output versus distortion into 8ohm (black trace), 4ohm (red), 2ohm (blue) and 1ohm loads (green)

Power output (<5% THD, 8/4ohm)	12W / 12W
Dynamic power (<5% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)	11W / 11W / 5W / 2.5W
Output impedance (20Hz–20kHz)	2.5–8.0ohm
Frequency response (20Hz–20kHz)	-1.7dB to -1.25dB
Input sensitivity (for 0dBW/10W)	39mV / 130mV
A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBW/10W)	69.3dB / 79.0dB
Distortion (20Hz–20kHz, 1W/8ohm)	0.62–1.4%
Power consumption (Idle/Rated o/p)	260W / 265W
Dimensions (WHD)	320x160x400mm



**LEFT:** A choice of three line inputs and both 8 and 4ohm loudspeaker output binding posts is offered. The outputs are floating, so must never be used with a 'grounded' crossover or powered ESL

# Icon Audio ST40 MkIII m

hi-fi news  
EDITOR'S  
CHOICE

The 'm' variant of the long-running Icon Audio Stereo 40 series has a small front panel meter so that the user can easily check and adjust the bias applied to its four KT88 output valves. This can also be used to show the output level – averaging the two voltages at the 8ohm speaker terminals – which is arguably less useful. Since the switchable negative feedback is also taken from this point, these are the outputs used for my listening tests, with the sensitivity set to low.

The Stereo 40 is very well specified with three line-inputs plus a proper tape loop, a remote volume control, a low power 'standby' mode and a switch for triode or ultralinear configuration of the KT88s. I used the latter which offers roughly double the output power with little change to the sound quality.

An interesting technical point is that the 6SL7 input stage and the two 6SN7 drivers are powered by a big 274B rectifier in the centre. In common with most modern amplifiers the output stages still have their needs met by conventional silicon diodes, however. In common with the Ming Da MC368-BSE [p43], point-to-point wiring is used throughout.

### POWER FOR POP

In my setup, the response yielded by the Stereo 40 seemed to be a bit 'up and down' with the Level 42 track,

**RIGHT: Icon's 'm' series is distinguished by its combined bias adjust/ power meter. Our sample was fitted with KT88s**



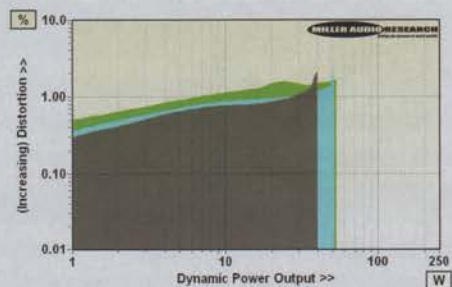
bass was heavy and vocals vivid but the lower midrange sounded slightly 'sucked out' as did the extreme treble. In practice, this turns out to be a fair balance for much rock and pop music where the Stereo 40 comes across as a strong and lively performer able to make good use of the available power. Its mains transformer does get rather hot after a few hours of use, however. Stereo imaging and soundstaging was similar to that offered by the Pathos, centred about each speaker

A presence lift raised Katie Melua well clear of her backing group even if her voice wasn't quite as silky sounding as with the Mystère. But if you prefer your music with a crisper edge then this may well be more to your taste. And even if Mahler's strings could not match the drama of Melua's vocals – they could seem slightly lost – the sound was always smooth and detailed.



### HI-FI NEWS LAB REPORT

Evidently, while Icon Audio was retrofitting its ST40 mkIII amplifier with an integral bias meter, numerous other 'tweaks' were implemented. This new version is actually very slightly *less* powerful than its forebear, its power output almost precisely matching its 40W specification into 8 and 4ohm loads under both continuous and dynamic conditions up to 2% THD (the ST40 mkIII offered a little closer to 45W). More importantly, the amplifier's response has been 'flattened', up from -2dB/20kHz to -1.1dB/20kHz into 8ohm, and hugely extended into the sub-bass from -1.7dB/5Hz to +0.25dB/5Hz here. Its performance into variable loudspeaker loads also benefits from a reduced output impedance of just 0.75ohm – a worthwhile drop from the ST40 mkIII's 3ohm. Another indication that the ST40 mkIII's feedback has been tweaked is suggested by the reduced 0.35-0.75% distortion (20Hz-20kHz, 10W) and the substantially improved 94.4dB A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBW). Stereo separation is also boosted by a good 20dB over the older model. PM



ABOVE: Dynamic power output versus distortion into 8ohm (black trace), 4ohm (red), 2ohm (blue) and 1ohm loads (green)



**LEFT: Three line level inputs and a tape loop, plus outputs for 4 or 8ohm loudspeakers. The small switch near the centre sets the overall gain to either high or low by altering the feedback**

Power output (<2% THD, 8/4ohm)	40W / 40W
Dynamic power (<2% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)	40W / 40W / 51W / 54W
Output impedance (20Hz-20kHz)	0.75-1.05ohm
Frequency response (20Hz-20kHz)	-0.1dB to -1.1dB
Input sensitivity (for 0dBW/40W)	155mV / 1080mV (Low sens mode)
A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBW/40W)	94.4dB / 110.5dB
Distortion (20Hz-20kHz, 10W/8ohm)	0.35-0.75%
Power consumption (Idle/Rated o/p)	222W / 320W
Dimensions (WHD)	390x210x410mm

# Ming Da MC368-BSE

**M**ing Da is one of the most famous Chinese hi-fi brands and its range of valve amplifiers now includes a wide choice of models. The MC368-BSE seen here uses KT90 output valves, a recently developed beam tetrode which, in this application, gives a claimed 70W/channel when used in ultralinear mode (a lower power triode mode is also available).

The circuit uses fixed bias but as this is only adjustable using unlabelled internal controls the task is best left to a dealer: the two meters just show the output voltage at the 8ohm loudspeaker sockets. This is also the feedback reference point so I chose to connect the loudspeakers here for my tests.

Four line-inputs are provided and the volume control is motorised for remote operation via a simple handset. The amplifier, which is nicely finished in satin black, has been assembled using neat point to point wiring. The bulbous 6SN7 driver valves are famously microphonic, so the amplifier should be placed on a stable surface well away from the loudspeakers. Tube rollers may well consider trying out different 6SN7s in pretty short order as the rest of the design clearly warrants the improvement.

## **EVEN PRESENTATION**

It comes as no surprise that the MC368-BSE has a big, confident sound. The Level 42 track was driven along with plenty of gusto and even though the high volume levels that

**RIGHT:** An awful lot of tube amp for the money – Ming Da couples four KT90 beam pentodes with ‘onion bulb’ 6SN7 triodes as driver and phase-splitter

could be achieved were similar to those available from the Icon, the bass seemed to stay tighter for a greater part of the available range.

Comparisons with the Icon Audio Stereo 40 were interesting: the two units share the common trait of a clean, slightly dry midband and a noticeable bass lift, but the costlier Ming Da sounded more even in its overall tonality. Despite being (in valve terms at least) a ‘muscle amp’ the MC368-BSE rendered Katie Melua’s voice as rich and seductive, set against a colourful landscape of backing instruments. Vocal clarity was excellent, helped in no small part by an absence of grain or harshness in the upper registers.

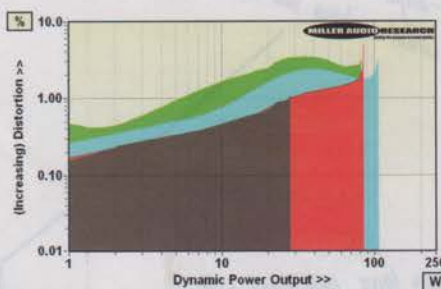
The Mahler showed a similar spatial character to the Icon and the Pathos amps, although the central part of the image was notably stronger and easier to tune-in to.

Sound Quality: 80%



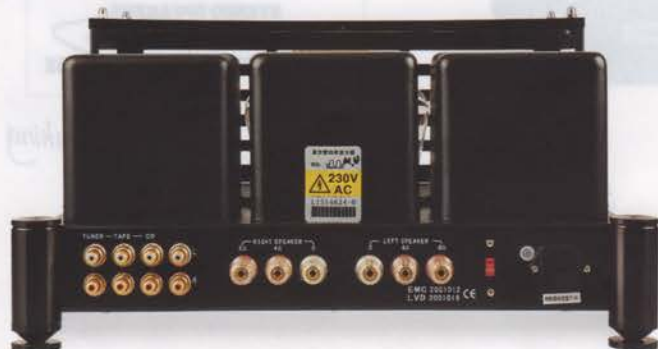
## HI-FI NEWS LAB REPORT

Tested in ultralinear mode, the pairs of KT90 beam pentodes struggled to meet Ming Da’s rated 70W output under continuous conditions, achieving 2x15W/8ohm at 1% THD to 2x50W/8ohm at 3% THD. Under dynamic, music-like, conditions the MC368-BSE did shine a little brighter, achieving 30W/8ohm at 1% THD and 86W/8ohm (through the 8ohm tap) and 84W/4ohm (through the 4ohm tap) at 3% THD [see Graph]. At 10W/8ohm, distortion varies from ~0.5% through the midrange to 1.5% at low bass frequencies (20Hz) and 2% at high treble frequencies (20kHz) but it’s the 4-6ohm output impedance that’ll exert the biggest impact in tonal response depending on the impedance trend of the attached loudspeaker. Into flat 8/4ohm loads via its 8/4ohm taps, the response shows good bass extension (-0.25dB/20Hz and -3dB/3Hz) while the high treble rolls gently away (-0.5dB/20kHz). The A-wtd S/N ratio was poorer on the (weaker) right channel of our sample at 77.5dB but good at 84.5dB via the left (re. 0dBW). PM



ABOVE: Dynamic power output versus distortion into 8ohm (black trace), 4ohm (red), 2ohm (blue) and 1ohm loads (green)

Power output (<3% THD, 8/4ohm)	50W / 50W
Dynamic power (<3% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)	86W   84W   105W   82W
Output impedance (20Hz-20kHz)	3.9-6.0ohm
Frequency response (20Hz-20kHz)	-0.25 to -0.50dB
Input sensitivity (for 0dBW/50W)	30mV / 220mV
A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBW/50W)	84.5dB / 101.5dB
Distortion (20Hz-20kHz, 10W/8ohm)	0.52-2.4%
Power consumption (idle/Rated o/p)	173W/300W
Dimensions (WHD)	550x480x380mm



ABOVE: Four line-level inputs are offered alongside 8/4ohm loudspeaker taps on 4mm binding posts. Ming Da’s Triode/Ultralinear mode switch is on the side

# Mystère Concept IA 11

**D**esigned in Holland but built in China, the Mystère IA 11 is an interesting design whose chassis is finished entirely in a high gloss black. Even the valve cover (not shown here) is painted to match, and looks like a properly considered part of the design rather than a clumsy add-on, but it does get very hot after a few hours of use!

The circuit uses two 6SN7 double triode valves per channel in its input stages, which drive a push-pull pair of EL34s connected as normal pentodes (*ie*, not ultralinear or strapped as triodes) in an arrangement which is rated at 40W. The EL34s are controlled by a solid-state bias servo which yields many of the benefits of fixed bias operation without the need to check and adjust anything manually.

Four line-inputs sources can be accommodated but there is no record output, while the volume control is unusual as it's a proper switched attenuator. Negative feedback is taken from the 8ohm loudspeaker terminals so these are the ones I used here.

### VOCAL CLARITY

I was instantly struck by how balanced 'Children Say' sounded through the Mystère: the extreme ends of the tonal range were clipped but what remained was impressively even, with no obvious

**RIGHT: A solidly-built and purposeful design finished in a luxurious gloss piano black. Tried-and-tested EL34s provide the power**

peaks or dips in response with my choice of loudspeaker. There was some suggestion of instrument modulation with heavy musical beats but, despite this, there is plenty of power available. So the IA 11 easily plays 'loud' matching the Ming Da and Pathos amplifiers with easy-to-drive speakers.

The strings in the Mahler piece hung beautifully in the air with the Mystère, which offered up a broad and consistent soundstage. There is not perhaps as much depth as the Unison can give but, all the same, it's a strong performer. Similarly, Katie Melua sounded superb with excellent vocal clarity and no unpleasant side-effects. An ideal balance seems to have been struck in this design which renders plenty of detail without incurring any harshness or grain by way of penalty.

Sound Quality: 84%



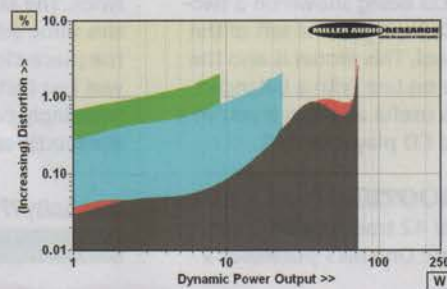
**RIGHT: No chance of confusion here – four line-level inputs on RCA alongside 4mm speaker sockets/ binding posts optimised for 8ohm and 4ohm loads**



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OUTSTANDING  
PRODUCT

### HI-FI NEWS LAB REPORT

With a very traditional, auto-biased EL34 push-pull output stage coupled to a pair of very decent transformers, the IA 11 meets its 2x40W/8ohm specification at 1% THD but continues to offer more power until its true clipping point (closer to 2% in practice here) at 2x64W into 8ohm and 4ohm via the 8 and 4ohm tap, respectively. There's slightly more juice available under dynamic conditions at 70W into 8/4ohm loads but the output falls away quickly into lower impedance loads. This is at least partially indicated by the IA 11's very high 9-12ohm output impedance (8ohm tap) which also largely invalidates its flat ( $\pm 0.2$ dB) 20Hz-20kHz response – in practice the system response, and tonal balance, will largely be determined by the swings in impedance of the attached loudspeaker. The IA 11 offers low noise (88dB A-wtd S/N ratio, re. 0dBW) and a sensibly limited +32dB gain but, and despite the stepwise attenuator, channel balance is out by 0.6dB (re. 0dBW) and separation weak at 34dB/20kHz. PM



ABOVE: Dynamic power output versus distortion into 8ohm (black trace), 4ohm (red), 2ohm (blue) and 1ohm loads (green)

Power output (<2% THD, 8/4ohm)	64W / 64W
Dynamic power (<2% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)	70W / 70W / 23W / 9W
Output impedance (20Hz-20kHz)	9.3-11.5ohm
Frequency response (20Hz-20kHz)	+0.0dB to -0.26dB
Input sensitivity (for 0dBW/40W)	70mV / 480mV
A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBW/40W)	87.9dB / 103.9dB
Distortion (20Hz-20kHz, 10W/8ohm)	0.30-2.4%
Power consumption (Idle/Rated o/p)	160W / 280W
Dimensions (WHD)	320x200x385mm

# Pathos Classic One Mk3

The Pathos Classic One Mk3 is the only hybrid amp in this test. It uses a pair of 6922/ECC88 double triode valves in its input stage, followed by an electronic volume control and a conventional solid-state amplifier with a Class AB MOSFET output stage rated at 70W. Oddly, some of the Pathos literature describes the output stage as 'true dual-mono' although both channels share a single power supply.

In common with many CD players and DACs that include a low-level valve stage, the 6922s in the Classic One are run at a very low voltage about one-tenth of a typical all-valve design. This is not a problem, since the valves are not required to deliver very much actual gain; instead they are used to colour the sound with 'warmth, naturalness and musicality' which is then faithfully reproduced by the transistor stages.

Source selection and volume control can be performed either remotely or by the two main knobs which have a centre sprung action, the effects being shown on a two-digit LED display to the left of the front panel. This model is also the only one on test with a balanced input – a useful addition if you've a high-end CD player or DAC.

**SMOOTHED TOP END**  
 The Level 42 track showed that the Classic One Mk3 possesses a

**RIGHT: Rotary encoders govern stepwise volume and input selection. A pair of 6922 triodes form the line input stage but the driver stage and power amp are solid-state**

firm control over its bass, defining each beat clearly with an obvious beginning and end. In this single respect of visceral bass 'clout' the Pathos amplifier leads the group. Similarly, percussion revealed a smooth top end which was well integrated, if a little veiled when compared to the brighter sounding models in this test such as the Ariand and Unison Research.

The amplifier's tonal balance was otherwise impressively even and Katie Melua was aided by a fulsome but neatly ordered backing. Yet her voice seemed just a little flat amongst it, with graininess audible around the edges of some of her lyrics. The Mahler benefited from this same solid low-end precision as the piece closed but the soundstage was less tactile than with some, seemingly centred in pools around the loudspeakers.

Sound Quality: 77%

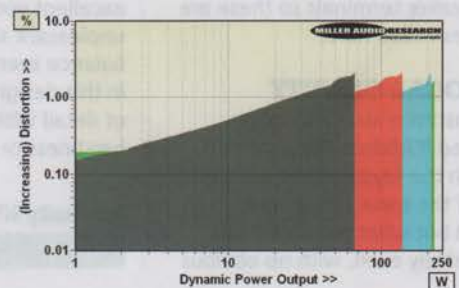


**RIGHT: Four line inputs (one balanced via XLRs) are provided alongside tape in/out and a single set of 4mm speaker binding posts mounted onto the top plate**



## HI-FI NEWS LAB REPORT

Combining the 'warmth' of valves with the robustness of a solid-state output stage is the boast of many hybrid amps, even if there's some artifact at work. While triode-based preamp stages can be engineered to offer very low distortion, Pathos has evidently tailored its design so that the MOSFET power amp faithfully tracks the 'colour' of the preceding valves. Distortion, then, is still higher than it might be at <math><0.6\%</math> from 20Hz-20kHz at 10W/8ohm but this figure is maintained from a subsonic 5Hz to an ultrasonic 40kHz – not something you'll see with a full tube amp unless it has impossibly large output transformers. The output impedance is usefully low at 0.02ohm through bass and mid, increasing to 0.1ohm at 20kHz, but this does mean the Classic One's  $\pm 0.1\text{dB}$  response (20Hz-20kHz) will vary rather less into complex speaker loads. Finally, the rated 70W power output is just achieved into 8/4ohm loads but there's more on tap under dynamic conditions – 135W/4ohm and 200W+ into 2/1ohm. PM



ABOVE: Dynamic power output versus distortion into 8ohm (black trace), 4ohm (red), 2ohm (blue) and 1ohm loads (green)

Power output (<math><2\%</math> THD, 8/4ohm)	73W / ~70W (protection)
Dynamic power (<math><2\%</math> THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)	68W / 135W / 212W / 225W
Output impedance (20Hz-20kHz)	0.019-0.110ohm
Frequency response (20Hz-20kHz)	-0.03dB to -0.12dB
Input sensitivity (for 0dBW/70W)	105mV / 910mV
A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBW/70W)	78.1dB / 96.6dB
Distortion (20Hz-20kHz, 10W/8ohm)	0.38-0.55%
Power consumption (Idle/Rated o/p)	45W / 240W
Dimensions (WHD)	150x230x450mm

# Unison Research Simply Italy

Unison Research has been involved in the valve revival for longer than most and the Simply Italy is in many ways a reprise of its classic Simply Two model. In common with its famous predecessor the Simply Italy has a single-ended output stage which uses one EL34 per channel. With only one ECC82 double triode driver for each EL34, the Simply Italy has by far the clearest signal path of any amplifier here and is constructed using quality components mounted on a well finished PCB.

The output stage features traditional auto-bias which keeps the circuit simple, but this – coupled with single-ended operation – is not the most efficient way to use the valves (or output transformers). Consequently the output power is low: just 12W into 6ohm is claimed. Negative feedback is taken from the loudspeaker terminals and the user can select how much effect this has by using a toggle switch.

Five line inputs and a recording output are provided, as well as a universal-type remote control which is housed in a large block of wood. Despite its multitude of keys, the only function of the Simply Italy that it can operate is the motorised volume control.

### TELLING VOCALS

In the test system, the Unison did not suit Level 42 and gave a gritty,

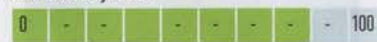
**RIGHT:** Inspired by the Simply Two integrated, this Simply Italy model employs EL34 pentodes in a single-ended ultralinear configuration. Includes IR control

fizzy treble and loose, wayward bass. Switching to maximum feedback (Position 1 tidied up the bass and was a very worthwhile improvement.

Excellent vocal clarity suggested that the Katie Melua track would be more enjoyable and to a large extent this was true. Each word was packed with detail and the underlying instrumentation was smooth and nicely proportioned; only the occasional sibilant highlight remained to set my ears on edge.

It was with the Mahler movement that the Simply Italy really shone: it had a seemingly boundless soundstage that allowed each performer to be placed perfectly, as its key strength. The presentation of the strings was also outstanding with the full range of dynamics being handled without any descent into harshness or confusion.

Sound Quality: 75%

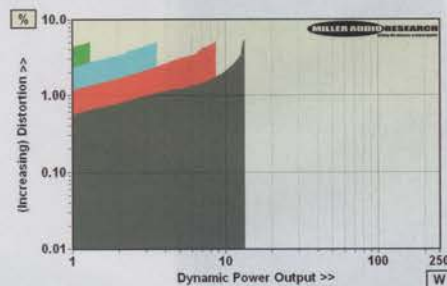


**RIGHT:** Four single-ended line inputs are complemented by a tape output and a single set of 4mm loudspeaker binding posts. There are no 8/4ohm speaker taps – the Simply Italy is optimised for 6ohm loads



### HI-FI NEWS LAB REPORT

Unison's 12W rating is fractionally out of reach for the Simply Italy under continuous conditions where it achieves 10-11W up to 2% distortion into 8ohm and 8W/4ohm up to 4% THD. Relaxing the THD limit even further under dynamic conditions, it manages 13W, 8.7W and 3.6W into 8, 4 and 2ohm loads through its single tap output. Nevertheless, while distortion is moderately high (0.65% at 1W/8ohm to 1.4% at 5W and 2.6% at 11W) the Simply Italy has the best channel matching of all the amps in our test – the characteristics of left and right are almost identical. With more than a few tube amps, left and right often measure like two different amplifiers... Output impedance is moderate, again, but uniform at ~1.3ohm across the audio band while the A-wtd S/N ratio is good enough at 81.9dB (re. 0dBW). Into non-reactive loads it also shows a gentle, low-bass rise of +0.3dB/20kHz and is flat out to -0.2dB/20kHz and -4dB/100kHz. Partner with sensitive loudspeakers and it'll surely sing. PM



ABOVE: Dynamic power output versus distortion into 8ohm (black trace), 4ohm (red), 2ohm (blue) and 1ohm loads (green)

Power output (<2% THD, 8/4ohm)	11W / 7W
Dynamic power (<5% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)	13W / 8.7W / 3.6W / 1.3W
Output impedance (20Hz-20kHz)	1.57-1.09ohm
Frequency response (20Hz-20kHz)	+0.27dB to -0.20dB
Input sensitivity (for 0dBW/12W)	48mV / 180mV
A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBW/12W)	81.9dB / 92.7dB
Distortion (20Hz-20kHz, 5W/8ohm)	1.12-3.0%
Power consumption (Idle/Rated o/p)	105W / 103W
Dimensions (WHD)	260x190x350mm



# GROUP TEST VERDICT

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**P**rioritising which of these amplifiers to buy is not straightforward, since they have all clearly been designed with different preferences in mind, making the ideal choice the one where the designer's goals most closely match your own needs.

The Pathos is arguably the most technically competent amplifier here, as well as being the smallest and the neatest. Yet its resolutely rational solid-state presentation may well not be what the diehard valve fan is looking for. If, however, you prefer your valves to be a side dish rather than the main course it could prove ideal.

At the opposite end of the spectrum, the Unison Research Simply Italy is a valve amp through and through and so has much of the character that one would expect. It excelled in the area of imaging but with some music I found the treble to be just a bit too fierce for really relaxing listening. This may well make it an ideal match for 'full range' single drive unit loudspeakers, or for traditional types which are otherwise too 'relaxed'.

The Ming Da MC368-BSE and the Icon Audio Stereo

40 are difficult to separate – not surprisingly since they share a common background. The costlier Ming Da doesn't sound much more powerful in practice but has the capacity to offer a marginally more evenly balanced sound, making it my preference for sound quality.

Against this, the Icon is better featured, more versatile and supported by an organisation famous for making valve amplifier ownership as easy and straightforward as possible. For anyone new to valves this may well be the compelling reason to choose this model above all the others.

## SHARING THE HONOURS

This leaves two very different amplifiers to share the top honours. I enjoyed the Ariand Pro-845SE a great deal. As with many amplifiers which run very low amounts of feedback, the measured performance looks a bit dubious but with the right partnering equipment and very sensitive speakers the sound is brisk and involving. With a well chosen phono stage I could see

the Ariand slotting very nicely into a sweet-sounding LP replay system.

## OUTSTANDING WINNER

My pick of the bunch though is the Mystère IA 11, which really surprised me with the smoothness and neutrality of its presentation as well as the quality of its finish and the care which has also been taken over

styling. Its sound is ideally suited to long term listening, especially if you have a preference for the gentler musical genres.

There is plenty of power

available which means that you are not restricted to very sensitive loudspeakers, although matching may require some experimentation due to its high output impedance.

Only the rather basic facilities let the IA 11 down – a recording output (also useful for driving a headphone amplifier) and a remote volume control would make it easier to build a system around; but these are minor considerations when you hear how this amplifier sounds. In my book, it's outstanding. ☺

*'With sensitive speakers the Ariand is brisk and involving'*

hi-fine  
OUTSTANDING  
PRODUCT



**ABOVE:** The Mystère IA 11, an outstanding design rated at 40W but capable of 60W. Build, finish and sound are exemplary

hi-fine  
HIGHLY  
COMMENDED



**ABOVE:** The Ariand Pro-845SE and Icon Audio Stereo 40, with its improved performance, are both 'high value' tube amplifiers

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