

Arts and crafts

Valves and vinyl often make for happy bedfellows, but this pairing really is a match made in heaven

In comparison with other categories of home technology, the rate of development in audio is better viewed as consistent rather than breakneck. Even so, the system you see here would struggle to be described as cutting edge. In technological terms, almost every design concept it contains and material it uses wouldn't alarm an enthusiast from 40 or 50 years ago – back when valves and vinyl were

more commonly referred to as source and amplifier.

What might be seen as odd is that neither Pro-Ject nor Unison Research – which also provides the speakers in the form of sister company Opera – are anything like that old. Despite the supposed advancements in audio reproduction, both brands have carved out a reputation for going their own way. Both claim that when older techniques are done properly, they still have a huge amount to offer.

Pro-Ject can lay claim to being an integral part of the vinyl resurgence with many a rediscovery of the black stuff starting with one of its affordable models. The Signature 12 you see here, however, is the sort of turntable you might end that journey with. This is the culmination of its technical development and design experience in a single compromise-free form.

This means the Signature 12 has (as the name suggests) a 12in arm designed and built inhouse. The



COMPONENTS

PRO-JECT SIGNATURE 12 £7,000

The Signature 12 is the flagship of the extensive Pro-Ject range and uses a pulley-based, belt-drive system to spin the massive magnetically suspended platter. The 12in arm is designed and built inhouse.

UNISON RESEARCH S6 £3,100

The S6 is an integrated valve amp that is built around the unusual compliment of six EL34 valves. These are run in a single-ended configuration that produces 30W per channel.

OPERA CALLAS £4,000

The Callas is the standmount version of Opera's flagship loudspeaker, which uses a 7in mid bass and a soft dome tweeter in a beautifully finished and impressively inert cabinet.



enormous platter sits on a magnetic bearing and is rotated by an elaborate pulley system. The vast and exquisitely finished plinth rests on specially designed feet that completely isolate the deck from the outside world. If you were playing turntable top trumps, this would be the killer card.

Compare and contrast

By contrast, Unison Research's S6 is almost self effacing. This is one of the smaller integrated amps in the company's range and is relatively unusual in that it is a single ended type – a design decision that usually results in fairly low power output – but thanks to a trio of EL34 valves per channel, it has a healthy 30W to its name. With five line inputs and full remote control, it is usefully equipped too. As none of the inputs happen to be a phono stage, a Phono One fills in, helping the system demonstrate another slice of retro cool.

The Phono One is designed for moving-magnet cartridges, while the Signature 12 sports an Ortofon Cadenza Black moving coil with a much lower output. To provide the required boost in signal, an Ortofon ST-80 step-up transformer sits between the two and turns current into voltage to ramp up the signal

from the cartridge passively. This is how all moving-coil cartridge systems used to function and the process still has its adherents to this day.

Judged by the technical thinking doing the rounds in the rest of the system, the Opera Callas is almost conventional – dare I say it, modern. As Opera is part of the same company as Unison, the relationship between the two is symbiotic and the Callas

The good news is that this system seems completely unfazed by what you throw at it

should get the most from the S6. This two-way standmount partners a polypropylene mid bass driver with a soft dome tweeter in one of the most exquisitely finished cabinets I've encountered in quite a while. It is free of adornments or gaudiness, but the more you study it, the more attention you realise has been lavished upon it.

Now I come to mention it, the whole system is a visual treat. The Pro-Ject has the sort of room presence you would usually associate with a sculpture and placing records on it has an almost ceremonial quality. The

Above left: The S6 is packed with some gorgeous design details

Above centre: An elaborate pulley system gives the Signature 12 perfect pitch

Above right: The Callas is as visually and sonically striking as its namesake

twin banks of valves on the Unison brings to mind a V6 engine that will power the Opera not with watts but with horsepower. For all the sense of whimsy, though, everything works with a precise and well-oiled feel and when you power it all up and leave it idle, it is completely silent – something a valve and step-up system often finds very hard to do.

Silence is golden

Of course, buying a system like this to enjoy its silence would be perverse, but there is a method in the madness. Kicking off with Fink and the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra performing *Berlin Sunrise*, the piece builds gently from near silence. This system has the basics in place to deliver it as it needs to be done. As the string section comes in, you realise that there is a lot more going on here than just a vague feeling of nostalgia. There is a sense of immediacy, of realism, of general 'bloody hell!' that makes a lot of other equipment sound very two dimensional in comparison.

Where the appeal deepens is that the presentation itself is exceptionally natural and even handed regardless of what you choose to throw at it. Keeping a Netherlands theme to proceedings and selecting *Loves*

Voodoo by My Baby shows that this system is just as happy with small scale as it is on a grand one. Cato van Dijck's snarling vocals on *Mad Mountain Thyme* are delivered seemingly without anything so mundane as a process of amplification happening. There is a paradoxical situation where this setup suspends the illusion that you are listening to a recording so effectively, that this in itself becomes a source of disbelief.

Information technology

The Pro-Ject hoovers information out of the groove and turns it into something you feel you can reach out and touch. This is helped in no small way by the Unison S6 and Opera Callas having the ability to sound far larger and more assured than a pair of sensibly sized standmounts driven by 30W should. The punching beats of *Wild Beasts' Alpha Female* are proper thwacks to the chest rather than just the sound of drums, and the speed and drive that this system musters is a source of constant joy. All the positive attributes of a well-designed valve system are here, while any negatives appear to have been completely ameliorated.

This means that on occasions this combo can perform the hoary old



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cliché of letting you hear things on a recording you've never heard before. A recently purchased copy of *Bedlam Ago Go's Estate Style Entertainment* grudgingly reveals that beneath the late nineties bleakness, Leigh Stephen Kenny has a voice that is quite unlike anything that contemporary bands can muster. The spoken sections of

The speed and drive that this system musters is a source of constant joy

Season No5 are delivered as clear as a bell before his soaring chorus fills the room with a skin prickling intensity. The presentation is so effortlessly open that the finest of details is readily accessible but also convincingly part of a wider whole.

For those with genre-hopping collections of variable mastering quality, the really good news is that this system seems completely unfazed by what you throw at it. With truly great pressings, the Signature gives you everything that is contained in those grooves with a near forensic level of accuracy, while it has the uncanny knack of managing to forgive

material that isn't so blessed in quality terms. Listening to Biffy Clyro's *Only Revolutions*, the turntable and its supporting cast manage to convey that while many times better than the CD in terms of dynamic range and spaciousness, this is still not a recording for the ages. The clever bit is that they do so in such a nigh-on apologetic way, you can still enjoy the album for what it is. I'm sure there's a record somewhere that doesn't sound good on this system, but I'm confident that I don't own it.

Vintage vision

This then is not merely an anachronism or piece of whimsy. This system uses vinyl, step-up transformers and valves because if they are done with sufficient integrity, they sound staggeringly good. If this setup had the appearance of something that's been made in a shed it would still be beautiful because of its ability to reproduce any genre of music with ear-popping realism. That it combines exceptional materials, wonderful industrial design and a sense of quality that makes you feel special simply by interacting with it, makes it a masterpiece. I'm no Luddite, but this time it seems like the old ways get the job done. **ES**