



£1,535 ☎ 01753 652669 🌐 www.pathosacoustics.com

PATHOS CLASSIC ONE MK3

Affordable hero fares well against its higher-priced competitors

There are valve amps and there are solid-state amps and there are hybrids, which combine both technologies. Pathos specialises in the last type and while the company's proprietary 'INPOL' configuration is reserved for upmarket models, this more modest unit still combines small-signal valves with power MOSFET, not to mention bipolar transistors in between. There are plenty of unexplored possibilities in this direction and we're happy to see people investigating some of them.

The appearance has plenty of old-style valve amp about it, and we find those little cages over the two valves rather charming, but the overall effect can seem a little fussy. Behind the red capacitors, a slotted metal cover distinctly reminiscent of a valve cage covers a heatsink which carries, on its bottom face, one pair per channel of MOSFETS. They and the rest of the circuitry, are attached to a circuit board, which occupies most of the internal space with a small separate board carrying input and output sockets and also the input selection relays.

Uniquely in this group, the Classic One uses an electronic attenuator for volume control, giving accurate half-dB steps from full volume down to inaudibility. It makes volume adjustment a little slow, but the digital display means you can find your preferred setting easily. That display is shared by the input selector and, in normal use, there's nothing to show which input is in fact active. One of the five inputs is balanced.

Although components are not extravagant, there are some nice touches in this unit such as the use of non-magnetic stainless steel for the chassis and a pair of very upmarket op-amps in the circuit.



SOUND QUALITY

Few of the comments on this amp suggest that it is qualitatively different from the others in any particularly solid-state way. On the contrary, its big sound picture and generally smooth presentation are very much classic valve characteristics. Although its attack was thought to be among the best, it was not necessarily the very pinnacle of the group (according to our 'blind' listeners) and bass control attracted a little mild criticism.

Perhaps the treble is the most 'transistorised' area. It is just a touch bright, but its extension is welcome and gives a good shimmer to delicate sounds like small percussion instruments and a real sense of acoustic 'air' to well-mixed recordings.

Very low bass is good, extended and tuneful and this served the orchestral track well and also the Miles Davis. The bass control issues apply mostly to the higher bass regions, making rhythm occasionally a little unclear.

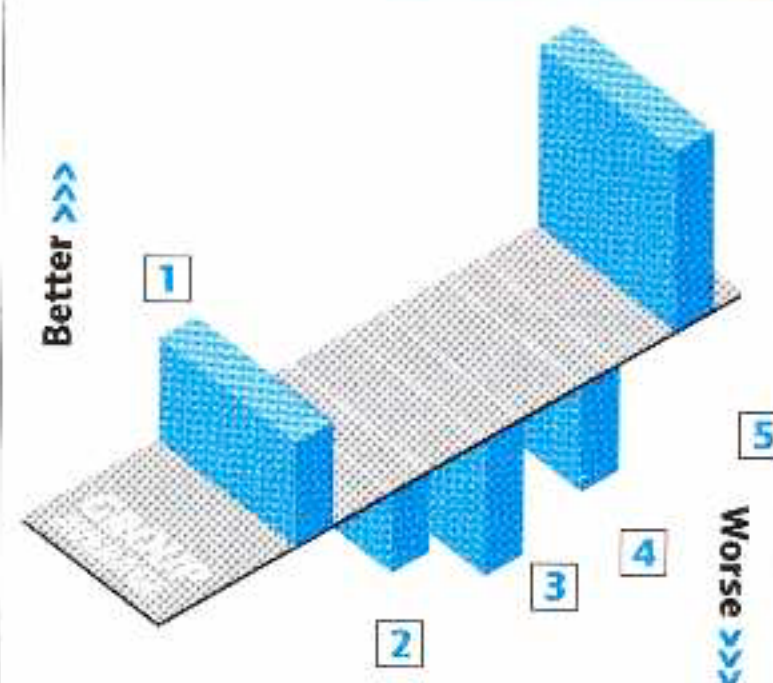
Detail is also among the best of the group. In fact, we were very taken with the way the Classic One presents detail; unfussy and, on the whole, playing second fiddle to the overall musical picture. Imaging is broad but not ultra-precise, a trade-off we found pleasant. Pathos does indeed seem to have achieved a marriage between valves and transistors which is sonically biased towards the former. **HFC**



LAB REPORT

That this amp should have something of a valve sound will be no surprise if you believe, as we do, that distortion measurements have at least something to do with sound perception. This is by no means the lowest-distortion amp in the group and it puts out quite a rich spectrum of distortion down to less than 1W output. Where it does show its solid-state nature is in the output impedance, which is by a factor of nearly 20, the lowest in the group and will, at least, make for a loudspeaker-invariant frequency response. Noise is the weakest of the group, but the figure is still decent enough by the general standards of current amplifiers. And, of course, output power is higher than any of the all-valve models, with considerably greater dynamic power into low impedances thanks again to the low output impedance.

HOW IT COMPARES



- 1] Dynamic power >> +30%
- 2] Frequency response >> -20%
- 3] Dynamic range >> -40%
- 4] Distortion >> -30%
- 5] Output impedance >> +60%

SPECIFICATIONS

Measurement	Rated	Actual
Power output (8 ohms)	70W	69W
Distortion (1kHz/ 8 ohms)	0.05%	1.5%
Frequency response (20Hz-20kHz)		±0.5dB

VERDICT

SOUND

★★★★★

PRACTICALITY

★★★★★

BUILD

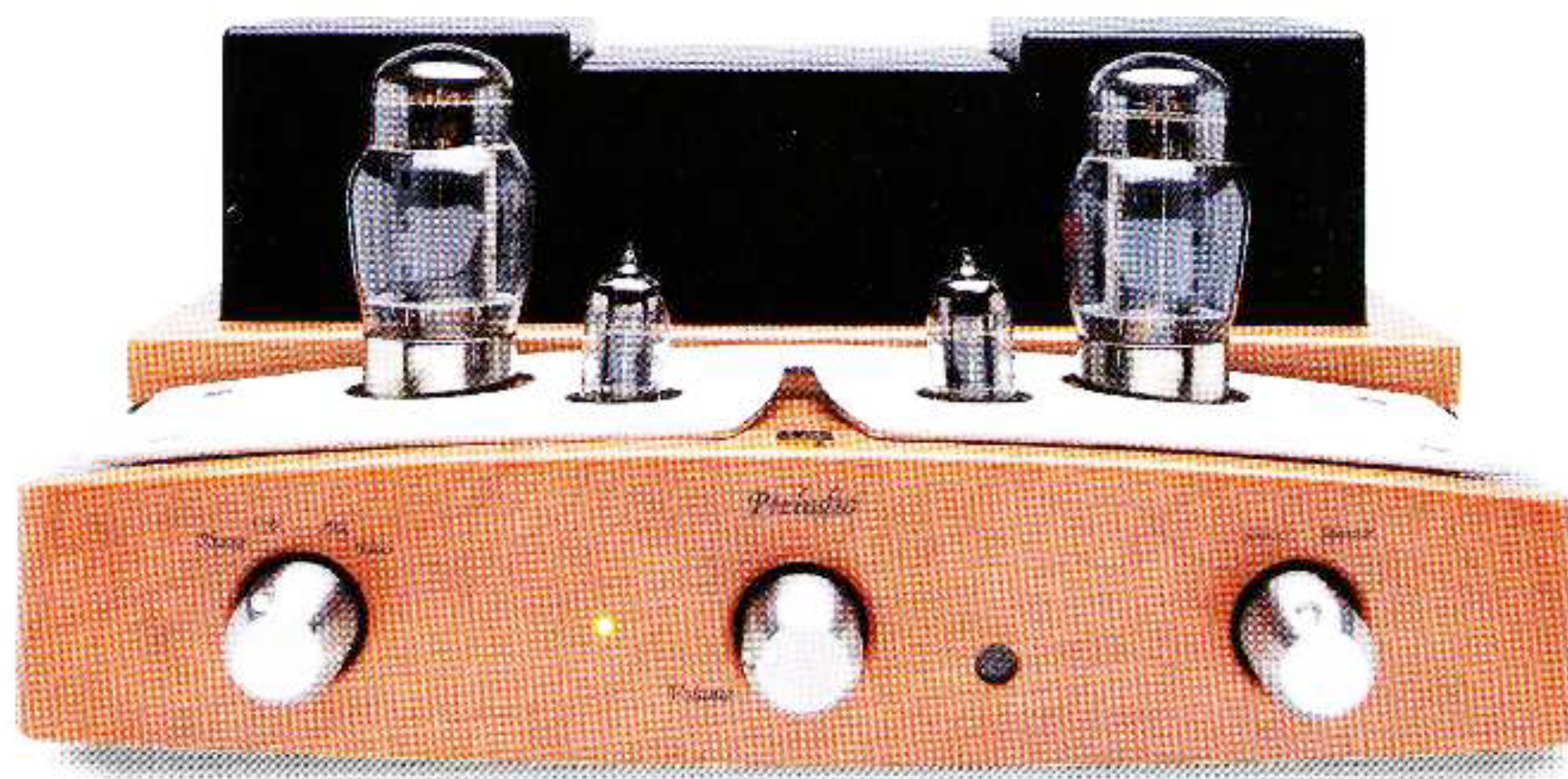
★★★★★

VALUE

★★★★★

Marrying all the strengths of classic valve and solid-state amps would be a tall order, but this attractive amp gets close, offering beautifully musical presentation with good tonality and detail. Warmly recommended.

HI-FI CHOICE
OVERALL SCORE
★★★★★



£1,825 01753 652669 www.unisonresearch.com

UNISON RESEARCH PRELUDIO

An intriguing blend of old and new, but is that enough?

We've seen quite a few products from Unison over the years and the family likeness is not hard to find. That classic Italian love of medium-dark hardwood, for a start, and the proud way in which the valves stand alone. Like many other Unison Research products, this is a single-ended amplifier, using just one valve for the output stage of each channel.

Most amplifiers, both valve and solid-state, use push-pull pairs of output devices for reasons of efficiency, but single-ended operation has always had its advocates who cite its very simplicity as a major reason why it will (when done well) always sound better than push-pull. There's a lot more to amplifier design than the output configuration, of course. But with its use of a single KT88 in ultralinear configuration, this amp does make a very interesting comparison with the others in the group that use the same valve and the same basic configuration in push-pull.

The downside is output power – the rating being only around 14 watts – but based on years of experience, we've no hesitation in saying that suitably partnered, 14 watts can make for a very satisfying system that will play loud with no special pleading required.

There's an intriguing blend of old and new in this amp, single-ended being the earliest amplifier configuration, while the KT88 is a relatively modern valve and the internal assembly uses a very modern circuit board and integrated circuit regulators for parts of the power supply, plus surface-mounted components in the remote control receiver section. There's even an op-amp in there, though as far as we could see it's simply buffering the subwoofer output signal. Build quality is very good and yes, the wood is solid and luxurious, too.



SOUND QUALITY

If the Ayon is more an amp for lovers of melody than of rhythm, this is in many ways its antithesis. Belying any expectation one might have born of power ratings, physical size or mode of operation, the sound seemed to our listeners to be outstandingly rhythmic and lively, with excellent articulation and a very good sense of being there.

There are limitations, mostly in respect of detail and large-scale dynamics. Rhythm is largely about small-scale dynamics, of course, but over spans of seconds to minutes this amp seems a little less assured and can develop a trace of hardness in loud passages that seems to restrict dynamics a little.

There are some slight deviations from tonal accuracy, most notably a lack of really low bass. Heard in isolation this might indeed pass muster, but in the company of a bunch of its peers, mostly well-endowed in that region, the Preludio comes across as a shade light.

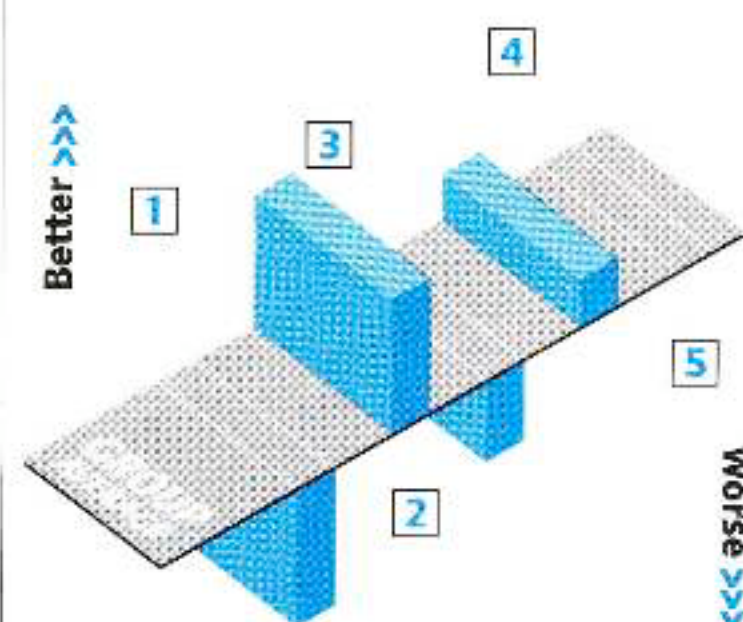
Detail is good, especially in quiet passages of music, while imaging has excellent depth and pretty good lateral extension and definition. Despite some specific deviations from most people's idea of 'valve sound', this amp perhaps comes closest to embodying the valve ideal of musical involvement above all else. If hi-fi specifics mean a lot to you, you may yet do better elsewhere, but this is undoubtedly a very musical amp. **HFC**



LAB REPORT

Single-ended amplifiers are not noted for high output power and the Preludio's 13W is reasonably generous for the breed. It's achieved with less distortion than some of the push-pull models, and Unison Research also deserves congratulations for the amazingly flat frequency response of this amp, not such an easy thing to achieve with this type of circuit. Output power falls off at 20Hz to about 3W: ideally, we'd like to see half-rated power at this frequency, but in most real recordings there's relatively little power below 50 or 60Hz, so it's not a serious drawback. The distortion spectrum is interesting in that it very closely resembles most of the push-pull models' in shape and rate of fall-off as signal level drops, while output impedance is also similar. If there is truly some magic science to single-ended, we can't spot it here!

HOW IT COMPARES



- 1] Dynamic power >> -40%
- 2] Frequency response >> +40%
- 3] Dynamic range >> -20%
- 4] Distortion >> +10%
- 5] Output impedance >> 0%

SPECIFICATIONS

Measurement	Rated	Actual
Power output (8 ohms)	14W	13W
Distortion (1kHz/ 8 ohms)		2%
Frequency response (20Hz-20kHz)		±0.1dB

VERDICT

SOUND

★★★★★

PRACTICALITY

★★★★★

BUILD

★★★★★

VALUE

★★★★★

A rhythmically confident amp, which may lack a little bass and absolute power, but makes up for it in liveliness, control and imaging. Strong on detail, this amp gets close to the valve ideal.

HIFI CHOICE OVERALL SCORE
★★★★★

CONCLUSIONS

Our valve amps have it all; good looks, absolute power and high performance levels

As the temperature in our listening room cools back to normal after the climatic assault of all those valves, what conclusions can we draw? First and foremost, given the competition, valves are clearly a viable and valid amplifying technology. It's even more significant that all our 'blind' listeners were regulars and the notes they left behind were not remarkably different in tone and content from those left after a morning auditioning transistor models. In other words, if sound is your only criterion, then the simple presence or absence

of valves may in the end be something of a red herring.

There is such a thing as a valve sound stereotype, though, and if we heard it from any of these amps it was the Melody that provided it. Big and strong on generalities, it's a bit thin on real insight, rhythmic precision and involvement. It has its place certainly, but didn't really press our buttons. For us, the Ayon seemed more successful, giving a good measure of itself, but maintaining rather more of the detail and attack within the music. Both models look a million dollars, especially with the Melody's valve

cage removed, and will give you audiophile cred in spades!

If it's sheer class you're looking for, then it's probably no accident that the two Italian jobs win the day (both also sound very appealing in their different ways). The Pathos seems to be a marriage of both convenience and real affection between valves and transistors. With solid-state control and valve euphony (to the extent these vast generalisations are valid), it boasts a useful power output that makes choosing speakers a little easier than some other lower-powered all-valve

models demand. If power really isn't an issue, the Unison Research Preludio is very much an all-rounder with a very appealing presentation and grasp of contrasted musical styles.

Which leaves Icon and Copland, both also very capable. The Copland is great for people who aren't valve aficionados as such, while the Icon is (almost) the ultimate tweaker's amplifier – four subtly different sounds in one chassis. We enjoyed this group a lot. When all's said and done, there is something peculiarly appealing about valves... **HFC**

TRY THEM WITH THESE

CD PLAYERS

REGA SATURN £1,298

One of the best integrated sounds from a sensibly priced player.

TOWNSHEND TA565 £3,000

A player that's well equipped to make the most of CD and high-res discs.

LOUDSPEAKERS

LIVING VOICE AUDITORIUM £1,700

This floor-stander has a nicely open balance and very good musical insight.

QUAD ESL 2805 £4,500

The ESL was designed to partner a 15-watt valve amp and still sounds lovely.

HINTS AND TIPS

>> Valve amps run hot and need lots of space around and especially above them. A little added floor clearance does no harm either.

>> Never mind saving electricity, switching off when not in use for an hour or more will prolong valve life.

>> Most valve amps have outputs for four and eight ohm speakers. The only way to find which is best in practice is trial and error.

>> If some way of checking and adjusting bias is provided, do it roughly monthly for best sound and longevity.

VALVE AMPS AT A GLANCE

MAKE	Ayon Spirit	Copland CTA405	Icon Stereo 60 Mk2	Melody Astro Black 50	Pathos Classic One Mk3	Unison Research Preludio
PRICE	£1,745	£2,498	£1,499	£1,845	£1,535	£1,825
SOUND	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
FEATURES	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
BUILD	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
VALUE	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
OVERALL	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
CONCLUSION	The antithesis of solid-state muscle amps: sound is super-smooth, but actually detail is decent and tonality good	A musical and involving amplifier which also has considerable insight and is user-friendly by valve amp standards	The ability to 'tune to taste' merely adds to what is already an attractively melodic and well-balanced sound	Rhythm is not a strength, but integration between instruments is excellent and sound generally stress-free	An attractive amplifier offering beautifully musical presentation with good tonality and detail, plus looks to die for	A rhythmically confident amp, it lacks absolute power, but makes up for it in liveliness, control and imaging
KEY FEATURES						
LINE INPUTS	4	5	4	5	5	5
TAPE OUTPUTS	0	1	1	0	1	1
PHONO INPUT	No	Yes	No	No	No	No
SIZE (WXHXD)	46x25x35cm	43x19x40cm	42x20.5x35cm	43x22x34cm	23x15x47cm	38x18x33cm
WEIGHT	28kg	21kg	28kg	26kg	9kg	18kg
REMOTE CONTROL	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
BALANCED INPUT	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	No
LAB CONCLUSIONS E = EXCELLENT • G = GOOD • A = AVERAGE • P = POOR						
CLIP POINT	14V ^A	20V ^G	15.5V ^A	19V ^G	23.5V ^G	10V ^P
FREQUENCY RESPONSE	±0.5dB ^G	±0.2dB ^E	±2.0dB ^A	±0.2dB ^E	±0.5dB ^G	±0.1dB ^E
DYNAMIC RANGE	108dB ^E	109dB ^E	102dB ^G	105dB ^E	99dB ^G	101dB ^G
OUTPUT IMPEDANCE	5 ohm ^P	0.9 ohm ^A	1.5 ohm ^A	14 ohm ^P	0.05 ohm ^G	1.5 ohm ^A
POWER CONSUMPTION	165W/-	180W/1.5W	160W/62W	160W/-	37W/-	135W/-