

# Retro futurism

What happens when cutting-edge digital meets a more traditional type of hi-fi? **Ed Selley** finds out

**W**e live in fast-paced times. There is a 24-hour news cycle to fill and the world revolves around the idea that the 'next big thing' is just around the corner. The audio industry isn't as beholden to this concept as some other parts of the technology sector, but there is still a sense that products have a finite lifespan and will ultimately be replaced by something better sooner or later.

This system does not subscribe to this particular line of reasoning – at least part of it doesn't. On viewing the pictures, your eye will have inevitably been drawn to the hulking form of the Klipsch Cornwall III, a speaker that first went on sale in 1959. Of course, this isn't exactly the same speaker. In the intervening 59 years, it has been revised on three occasions. The basics, though, are the same as

they were back on the day it was originally launched.

The Cornwall (named because it will work either in a corner or against a wall and not because of any particular affinity for the land of pasties or cream teas) is a three-way speaker utilising horn-loaded high frequency and midrange titanium compression drivers partnered with a 380mm bass driver. Mounted in a cabinet that, while a mere 910mm tall is 645mm wide and 395mm deep, the result is a speaker that is incredibly easy to drive – Klipsch claims a single watt of power will give you 102dB of output at 1m into 8ohm.

This means that this hefty box doesn't require a mighty amplifier and allows for some other 'mature' technology to be employed. The Unison Research Simply Italy is a



## COMPONENTS

### ROON NUCLEUS FROM £1,500

The first hardware from Roon; the Nucleus is a dedicated server that uses all-metal casework to ensure it can be run without fans, providing an optimal platform for the exceptionally slick interface.

### PRO-JECT DAC BOX DS2 ULTRA £600

With six inputs, including the all-important DSD-capable USB input, the Pro-Ject is able to handle a swathe of digital sources via its AKM DAC. As an added bonus, wooden side cheeks are available too.

### UNISON RESEARCH SIMPLY ITALY £2,000

Unison's entry-level valve amp is simplicity itself with a pair of EL34 valves running in single ended configuration delivering 12W. The trademark casework complete with wooden front panel is present and correct.

### KLIPSCH CORNWALL III £5,300

Part of Klipsch's Heritage Series, the Cornwall is a three-way floorstander that makes use of the company's trademark horn-loaded titanium drivers supported by a 380mm bass driver in a hefty cabinet.



**BEAUTIFUL SYSTEM**  
PRO-JECT/KLIPSCH/ROON/  
UNISON RESEARCH



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callow youth compared with the Cornwall III, but the circuit design would have been entirely logical back in 1959. A single-ended design built around a pair of EL34 valves with a ECC82 valve in each preamp channel, it is simplicity itself and while 12W of power might not seem too hefty, in the context of a speaker as easy to drive as this, it is more than enough.

### Logical progression

It would have been easy at this point to go full retro and front this duo with a turntable. We could then party like it's 1959 and proclaim at the end that we've made no real progress in 60 years. The reality is, however, that we have made significant progress. There are few things we have looked at recently that embody this more than the Roon Nucleus. Calling Roon 'music management software' is like calling a Porsche 911 a personal transport device – it's technically correct, but rather undersells just how good it is. It combines enough processing power to manage huge libraries with unique search and collation features and effortless Tidal integration. Add to the mix the well-made, bulletproof hardware and your streamed music takes on a

tangibility that it can so often lack. Running into a Pro-Ject DAC Box DS2 – which in turn gives a nod to the retro antecedents of the other units, thanks to its wooden side cheeks but goes on to partner that with everything you'd expect from a modern DAC – the result is a trio of electronics that is compact, attractive and characterful. It also takes up very little room, which might be useful

### None of the technical brilliance gets in the way of you enjoying the music

when you consider the space needed to get the Cornwalls up and running. Taste is ultimately subjective and I am sure that opinions will vary wildly, but I'm going to stick to my guns here and admit that I love the Cornwall's aesthetic pretty much unconditionally. We now live in a world where if you want a truly invisible speaker, you can have one. Conversely, if you decide to go down the path of a 'box loudspeaker' – as this category is now referred to – you might as well have a serious one and make a show of it.

**Above left: Unison combines beauty with musical ability**

**Above: Around for nearly 60 years, the Cornwall is a unique presence**

**Above right: 21st-century tech meets late-fifties thinking with incredible results**

The most important thing about this system, though, is that the way it sounds isn't about making a show. The best way to experience this is to choose an older recording to listen to first. Selecting *This Is Clarence Carter* – his 1968 debut – the experience is so far removed from how this album often sounds as to stop you in your tracks. What can sometimes be a slightly thin and lightweight master has a body and scale that is simply absent with more conventional systems. The performance is so disarming that it can take a while before you glance back at the album cover on the Roon app and ponder how a blind man wearing an orange jumper still manages to look cooler than almost any other human being.

### Spot the difference

The manner in which this system 'fleshes out' recordings is more subtle than the simple application of a large bass driver. Everything gains a sense of scale and space that makes for a wonderfully involving experience. We often talk about systems having a sweet spot where they sound at their best. This system simply turns the back half of any room you can fit the speakers in into a sweet space. The

really clever aspect of this is that the sense of positioning and three dimensionality isn't affected at the same time. There is almost the sense of everything becoming a live recording, turning studio mixes into a genuine interplay of musicians.

### Taste of Italy

Unison Research's Simply Italy valve amplifier plays a prominent role in this process. There are few greater joys than listening to a single-ended amp running into a set of speakers that can hit pretty much any level you fancy without running out of power. In situations like this, the exceptional speed and dynamics that these designs possess is suddenly very much at the forefront of the presentation. Apparatus's *Hold On*, with its complex and structural bass can very easily sound slow and confused, but here it moves with a huge amount of drive and impact. Raz Ohara's vocals are placed effortlessly over the top of this thunderous low end, never consumed by it, but no less importantly, never detached. There is a delicacy to a sensitive driver being powered by a low-powered amp that remains even when you're running it at firmly indelicate levels.



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The joy of connecting these gentle giants and their sweet amplification to a front end as capable as the Nucleus and the DS2 is that you can sit there thinking: "I wonder what that sounds like?" and be able to cue it up and experience it there and then. There is some extremely clever technology available in both parts of this digital front end, but the really impressive aspect of both components

### There's a body and scale that is simply absent with more conventional systems

is that none of the technical brilliance gets in the way of your enjoyment of the music. The DS2 is built around an AKM DAC and there is a sweetness to the way in which it makes music that is wonderfully complimentary to the wider performance of the system.

What ties this all together is the ability to engage and to make you keep listening and exploring your music and indeed anything from the furthest flung reaches of Tidal. It takes very little time to 'dial in' to the way that this system makes music and

once you do so, it's rather harder to go back to a world of little drivers being brutalised into trying to do the same things that the Cornwalls do without breaking sweat. The absolute bass extension that they produce is good, but no more than many similarly priced designs. It is the swell of energy in the lower midrange that is truly wonderful. The string section in Daft Punk's *Adagio For TRON* is a palpable and believable thing that you feel as much as hear. It's possible to discern individual instruments and get a real sense of their relationship to the rest of the orchestra.

### Size matters

This, then, is undoubtedly old-school thinking. It is also a reminder that many aspects of older hi-fi design have fallen by the wayside not because what we now do is decisively better, but because we need things to be rather more compact. When you mix this older method of doing things with the sheer ability and flexibility of modern digital, you end up with something that is an utterly enthralling demonstration of the benefits of both. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm off to work out how to secure a very large listening room ●