

Xavian Unica

stand-mount loudspeakers

Eric van Spelde

Anyone who was into their audio in the 1980s will recall it was the era when the small stand-mount loudspeaker started to be taken seriously as a high-end device. The BBC LS3/5a became seen as something more than a mini-monitor for an outside broadcast control room. Products like the Acoustic Energy AE1 and Sonus faber Minima helped carve a place for the high-performance stand-mount as a viable alternative to the large, wide-baffle loudspeakers that were popular at the time. Although the trend changed once again and slimline floorstanders now dominate the loudspeaker world, there is always room for a classic stand-mount design, especially one as good as the Xavian Unica, with its 1980s price-tag.

Hand-built

The Czech newcomer is a compact two-way stand-mount, built from slabs of 23mm-thick solid oak and roughly rectangular with generously radiused corners all round – the kind of shape that requires hand-building and finishing rather than being stamped out and folded from a sheet of MDF. This is something you might expect from a high-performance stand-mount design, but a solid oak construction in a loudspeaker priced at just €1,000 per pair is the stuff of “how do they do that?” Both drivers are custom-designed for the Unica rather than off-the-shelf. The five-part, second-order crossover uses components from Danish high-end outfit Jantzen, and the logo on the high-frequency unit proudly reads ‘XAVIAN Prague’ like a designer fashion label – with the distinction that, unlike most designer-label clothing, the speaker is actually made there by local craftsmen.

All of this puts the small company under the auspices of Italian-born Roberto Barletta at a competitive advantage before a single note has emanated from the speaker. This, a bijou from a quintessentially European artisan company, built and finished to high-end standards from the finest materials - or the usual mass-produced, ‘designed in UK (or Germany/Denmark), made in China’, rectangular, injection-moulded plastic-baffled, vinyl-wrapped box – well, we all like to own a slice of the good life, don't we?

Word has it that Barletta originally intended this, the entry model in the company's Natura line, to be sold at €1,500, which would still have represented conspicuously good value in today's market. However, at some point he must have thought ‘ah, what the heck’ and dropped a bombshell that will in all probability require him to sell a lot more of them to make it work commercially. Not to give the game away at this point – but indeed, the chances of Xavian doing just that look to be stacked in his favour. Barletta clearly knows his target audience... a by-product of selling direct instead of through agents, distributors and dealers.

The affordable price of admission also means the Unicas will be asked to handle a variety of amplification devices in the real world, and few of them will be big, beefy, and expensive solid-state devices like the €18,000 Accoustic Arts AMP 1 that happened to be here when the speakers arrived. Consequently, Barletta has not tried to squeeze a quart into a pint pot by compromising the ability of his speakers to be driven by rather more prosaic things, including mass-market streaming amps featuring modest Class D outputs, to get deep bass out of them. Xavian specifies the Unica to have a -3dB point at 52Hz, with sensitivity at 87dB/2.83V/1m and a nominal 8Ω load. The recommended amplifier power range is 30-100W per channel.

Also, the Unicas' response is tailored to allow them to be used as true bookshelf speakers, although placing them on 60 to 80cm high stands, at least 30cm from the back wall, with a metre or more of clearance to either side wall is still the preferred option, according to the brief. The excellent manual explains pretty much everything using diagrams and symbols, Ikea-style (it also explains bi-wiring and bi-amping options that aren't available on this particular speaker, which has just a single pair of sturdy, gold-plated screw terminals accepting spades, bananas and bare wire, a feature common to several models). Accordingly, some 65cm high stands were taken out of the basement – which put the high-frequency units about in line with the reviewer's ears in the listening seat (possibly a bit lower) – and the speakers were placed 35cm away from the rear wall with plenty of clearance to either side wall, as per the manual's recommendation. »

EQUIPMENT REVIEW
Xavian Unica



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» No artifices, please

Sliding one of the latest CDs from our gig merchandise stands – *Into Oblivion* by Portuguese darkwave act Necro, who supported NNHMN - into the player, it was immediately obvious that, in line with the stated design goals, this is not the kind of speaker that has been voiced to make a big-speaker impression when placed in free space and given a massive amount of grunt to drive them. In fact, the first thing I did after initial listening was to bring them a couple of inches nearer to the rear wall. This is where they diverge from the classic small speaker path – this is not a speaker that makes you wonder how it makes so much and such deep bass for such a small driver and enclosure.

Not that they are 'forward' in the classic budget stand-mount style, with a noticeable upper-bass hump to compensate for a lack of real bass, mind. Moving on to Belgian post-punk stalwarts Whispering Sons and their storming 2018 debut album *Image*, it was confirmed that the Unica is decisively a mini-monitor, and an outstanding one at that. It fully preserves the densely-layered widescreen cinematics as well as the fraught intensity of the songs, while the impact of kick drums in particular was lessened to a degree, compared with the 'big' system occupying the other half of our living space.

At this price level (and quite some way above), the Unicas are exceptional for their blend of tonal saturation and outright resolution. This is another place where the 'how do they do that?' territory of the Unicas lies, and that's before we consider money... Give them a supporting cast of high-end calibre, and they will respond in kind, throwing generously sized soundscapes while displaying a rich palette of tonal colours without obvious colorations - for example, they don't do the slightly euphonic midrange embellishment classic Sonus faber designs were known for.

Instead, they deliver tonal and temporal coherence while achieving excellent clarity, intelligibility, sound staging, and admirable microdynamics. They do everything one expects from very good small studio monitors, but in an organic, unmechanical, non-fatiguing manner that eludes the vast majority of them. The Unicas are no shrinking violets, either; rising to the occasion when asked to handle some of the most bombastic of Rammstein's output.

Questions - but happy ones

After hearing the Unicas, two questions remain, besides the obvious 'how do they do it at this price?' Firstly, what if you combined them with a *really* good subwoofer (which, in all probability, would cost far more than the main speakers if it's



to maximise their potential rather than ultimately introducing a bottleneck)? I reckon, in appropriate surroundings and adequately fed, the end result could really put the frighteners on some vastly more expensive and elaborate set-ups, all while fitting in with real-world domestic environments and aesthetic sensibilities.

The second question concerns the floorstanding Grande Unica, which features the same driver complement plus an extra bass driver in the still-favoured column format, and is quoted at 93dB sensitivity. Could this be more than just a compromise to placate the part of the market that resists the stand-mount speaker? Given the extra investment for a pair of stands and the bandwidth gained by extending the enclosure to the floor without the speakers taking up any more real

estate, it might be. Knowing Barletta, though, I would not bet against that one being equally special.

Apparently, Xavians' shop floor is buzzing at full tilt right now, delivering the Unicas that have already been ordered by the first wave of early adopters. By rights, they should be flying off shelves everywhere in the civilised world for a long time after. As much as I wish every success to Roberto Barletta and his team, can we please keep this our secret? I'd hate to see some big transatlantic conglomerate get the idea of buying the brand lock, stock and barrel, expanding and, in the process, ever so slightly diluting it in the name of short-term profit optimisation. +

Technical specifications

Type: two-way, stand-mount, front ported speaker
Driver Complement: 1x 26mm AudioBarletta soft dome tweeter, 1x 150mm AudioBarletta polypropylene cone woofer
Sensitivity: 87dB
Impedance: 8Ω
Frequency Response: 52Hz – 20kHz (-3 dB)
Crossover Frequency: 2490Hz
Recommended Power: 30– 100W
Dimensions (H x D x W): 32,7 x 20 x 28cm
Weight: 7kg
Price: €1,000 per pair

Manufacturer Xavian Electronics s.r.o., Prague (Czechia)
xavian.cz

UK distributor Official worldwide Xavian e-Shop
xavian.cz