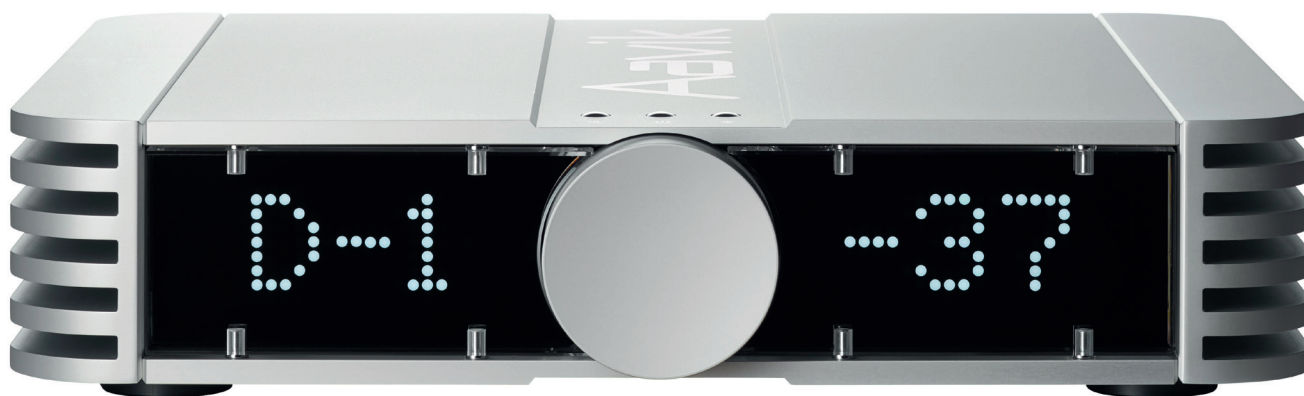


## Aavik U-150 Unity integrated amplifier

by Alan Sircom



**W**hen a company makes a hit of an amplifier in the high-end – even if actual sales are not huge, it's sometimes hard to listen to criticism. Especially when that criticism is muted next to the plaudits.

The Aavik U-300 Unity is one such product. We loved it in issue 139 and loved it enough to give it an award, but if there was a complaint (sky high price aside), it was that the amplifier wasn't too good in display terms. Two little white LEDs, three buttons and a volume control, echoed in the Apple handset supplied. OK, so this degree of minimalism was quite easy to understand, but you still had the occasional 'senior moment' when staring at two white lights trying to work out whether that means 'volume' or 'source'. If I'm being honest, middle-aged eyes don't help here because the legends on the U-300 box were not written for aging eyes.

The U-150 Unity is the response. And it comes with the kind of display you can see from across the room... even if that room is an aircraft hangar. Aavik has gone from having one of the smallest, most minimal displays, to one of the largest in the business. But it's welcomed.

In fact, the basic layout of the Aavik design is more or less unchanged. It still has the three buttons along the top panel that control source selection, turn the amplifier on or off and mute the U-150. And it still has the huge, easy-turn central knob which behaves in a modal manner. It defaults to a volume control, but at the tap of a button turns into a source selector. I'd still like for there to be a way to access some kind of balance control, or maybe even greater set-up modes and display options from the three button, one dial combination, but... baby steps!

Functionally, too, the Aavik U-150 Unity shares much with its bigger brother. The connection count is lowered slightly and the circuit board has been re-laid to fit into the smaller footprint, but the two are more similar than they are unlike. There are three line inputs, and one set of preamp outputs. The DAC supports USB, two BNC-type S/PDIF coaxial connections and two Toslink optical connectors. Above this are the RCA inputs and earth tag for a turntable, and above the vinyl input is an RS232 port and two 12v triggers. The power connector is in the centre of the rear panel and the sides sport those finger-stripping knurled Delrin speaker terminals. ▶

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▶ The big departure from the U-300 is that the digital and moving coil input are now optional extras, configured at purchase. In its standard guise, the U-150 is a very simple three-input integrated amplifier. This poses an interesting philosophical discussion on two sides. First, I'm wondering just how many people will take up the denuded U-150, or go with some or all of the options? I would imagine there will be very few takers for the line-only model, but more for the digital audio version and yet more for the complete system. At that point, it would be interesting to see how many people take this on as a traditional line+phono integrated amplifier without the digital stages. Then, and this one's the more sketchy issue, if the full-thickness U-150 offers a very similar performance to the U-300, will the cheaper model cannibalise sales of the big hitter? Interestingly, here I think the answer is a resounding 'no', even if the products sounded completely identical. There's a different cachet to the none-more-black U-300 that I feel will appeal to audiophiles in a way that the more prosaic looking U-150 may struggle with. Also, and this is a cold indictment on the nature of the modern audiophile, there will be many who choose the U-300 over the U-150 simply because it's more expensive. We in high-end audio sometimes dance around the subject of Veblen goods (expensive things that are valued for their expense), but the notion does exist in high-end audio.

Its optional circuits are not wholly identical to those fitted to the U-300. The phono stage remains a discreet, floating, balanced, ultra-low noise, bipolar input circuit with paralleled transistor pairs. This is a good match to the floating, balanced signal generator that is known as a moving coil phono cartridge. The Aavik U-150 phono stage has a base 60dB gain (which is adjustable to 70dB in 2dB steps), and the cartridge loading is adjustable from 50ohm to 10kOhm. This is slightly more flexible than the original U-300.

The DAC on the other hand shows what a difference a few years make. The original model sported a 24bit, 192kHz DAC, but this new board supports DSD 64 and DSD 128 (albeit downmixed to PCM), improves to 32bit PCM precision, and – at present unconfirmed – brings MQA to the Aavik platform. Whether or not these improvements loop back to newer versions of the U-300 remains unclear.

The core of the U-150, however, is functionally identical to the core of the U-300. It's a 300W Class D design that, like the U-300 before it, doubles its power to 600W into a four ohm load. The arguments about Class D – both positive and negative – have been made time and again. The nay-sayers just see a cheap, cool-running chip amplifier, where the converts see that cheap, cool-running chip amplifier as the starting place to deliver a potentially high-performance sound. It's all about the implementation, which in some cases means ▶

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- ▶ elegant ways to mask Class D operation behind valves or Class A current dumping circuits, and in others means equally elegant ways to extract the best from the chip itself. Aavik chose the latter option.

Back to that ‘volume’ control, which again echoes the U-300 design. Aside from a power-off switch on the rear of the amplifier, the controls are limited to three push buttons on the top plate, and that volume dial. The change here is to the new large LED displays flanking the dial itself. The logic of the trio of buttons has not changed and the button in the middle of the top plate still dims or turns off the display (with such a huge display, this becomes more important). As before, but with added readability, the display on the right denotes which input is in use, the one on the left shows volume in 80 steps from –80dB to 0dB. The left button on the top operates mute, but press and hold this button to choose one of three gain settings for an individual source, using the main control knob. The right hand button typically controls navigation (source selection), but press and hold this button and you go into remote control pairing mode. Aavik recommends the standard slim Apple remote to control the U-150. Press and hold both left and right buttons in a three second ‘power chord’ and the amp switches to set-up mode, adjusting the cartridge loading for the optional phono stage, some display management, and the option for a hard reboot.

Where the U-300 looks like a piece of military hardware in its ‘none-more-black’ livery, the U-150 looks and feels more like a modern piece of audio hardware, with styling reminiscent of AURALiC and BMC Audio designs. This is no bad thing, as too much deviation from the mean in the looks department might spell reduced sales, but the U-300 had an ace or two up its sleeve. For example, with the U-300’s central barrel, the top buttons were clearly defined. Now they sit on a flatter, more uniform plate. The design changes do help to significantly lower the price of the U-150 however; those D’Agostino like ventilation holes in the side panels of the U-300 were very expensive to make, and the horizontal aluminium heatsink slats are a more expedient option.

What’s great here is the changes between U-300 and U-150 are all based around building a more affordable design without sacrificing the basic circuit. Stripping out subsystems that might be unnecessary for all users, and moving from a

more elegant to a more functional and affordable exterior is more than justifiable if the sonics still stand up. And here we get back to the really good stuff.

The amplifier behaves ‘much’ like its bigger brother; if anything, it got to its right operating temperature faster than the U-300 thanks to those horizontal heatsinks. And yes, like its bigger brother, the Aavik runs warm for a Class D design, but not worryingly so. And it also retains that ‘is this thing on?’ noise floor.

That’s the thing about the U-150 Unity from Aavik. It sounds like the U-300. I mean really like the U-300. As in, if you read the review of the U-300, what applies there applies here. The amplifier is quiet, the phono stage excellent, the DAC is lively and entertaining, and the amplifier itself is precise and even-handed. It’s the perfect amplifier to resolve differences in component and cable (not surprising that, given it’s owned by the same people who make Ansuz cables). This poses a problem for a reviewer, in terms of potentially repeating oneself, but at least I find myself agreeing with me.

That all being said, in very close comparison, there are slight differences in performance. Where the U-300 is ‘lively’, the U-150 can tip over into ‘excitable exuberance’. That’s probably the big difference in sonic terms. It’s also paradoxically at once a little more and a little less warm than the big guy; by this, I mean it can sometimes sound slightly too warm with some recordings, but is overall less warm and rich sounding than the U-300. Otherwise, it’s that same unforced, rhythmic, boppy, detailed sound of the Aavik U-300, but for a lot less money. And, when it comes to these differences, we are seriously gilding the lily, here. For the most part, and for practically everyone, the U-150 is sonically almost identical to the U-300.

This, of course, presumes that the reader will have already read a review of the Aavik U-300, and there is no guarantee of that at all. So what do ‘they’ sound like. In a way, it treads the line between two pre/power amplifier combos also tested in this issue – the D’Agostino Progressions (p24) and the Sugden Sapphires (p43). Forget about the pricing for a moment and just think on the tone. One is sumptuous, the other dynamic. One accents the midrange, the other commands the bottom end. One is all about dynamic energy, the other a sense of flow. The Aavik U-150 sits squarely in the middle! ▶

*“What the Aavik U-150 does so well (as the U-300 does so well) is deliver a consistent and integrated performance.”*

▶ If anything, the Aavik U-150 falls into the inviting sounding presentation, although that makes it sound like its a bad thing. Actually, it just makes music sound like it's the kind of thing you'd want to listen to, rather than analyse. It's dynamic and exciting, accurate, and yet not bland or sparse. It's just a damn good amplifier, and a perfect ambassador for Class D.

What the Aavik U-150 does so well (as the U-300 does so well) is deliver a consistent and integrated performance. Some amplifiers are a great DAC with a mediocre amp attached, or a fine line-stage with an afterthought of a phono section. The Aavik platform is none of those things. It is an exciting performer regardless of whether you are using the line stages, the DAC or the phono. And, also like the U-300, the Aavik platform really ties the music together well. Music flows well with Aavik, and the sound easily moves from theme to theme and from beat to beat.

What was a limitation on the U-300 remains a limitation here too. Only, in the context of an amplifier that costs €10,000 these problems are even less well founded than on an amplifier that costs €25,000. The need for a balance control remains, and the dynamic range of the amplifier is good, but not outstanding. This becomes less of an issue with a €10,000 amp because it's less likely to be partnered with the kind of loudspeakers than highlight such dynamic foreshortening. Toe-to-toe, the dynamic range of the U-150 is probably a little more constrained compared to the U-300. The U-150 doesn't have the same giant killing properties, but possibly it's not meant to have such properties. This will not be used with loudspeakers of such full-range and dynamic performance that they can fell trees at 20 paces. The U-300, on the other hand, might just end up in such a system. It doesn't have any more muscle or definition, but maybe it just can bench-press slightly more pounds when it's needed to.

I return to the big question again. Will the U-150 cannibalise sales of the U-300. The more time I spend with the notion, the more I think it might. Yes, if you are looking at the two from the position of a gazillionaire with a pair of giant loudspeakers, then the U-300 does have a little something extra in tow. But the thing is, I struggle to find that little

## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

**Type:** integrated amplifier

**Inputs:** Three line-level single-ended stereo pair RCA analogue inputs,

**Optional inputs:** stereo pair RCA inputs for phono, two S/PDIF Coaxial digital inputs with RCA connectors. One Toslink S/PDIF connection. USB B.

**Outputs:** Five way loudspeaker terminals, RCA pair

**Digital formats supported:** (USB and S/PDIF RCA) PCM up to 32-bit, 192kHz, , DSD 64, DSD 126, MQA to be confirmed. (S/PDIF Toslink) PCM up to 24-bit, 96kHz

**Power output:** 30W into 8Ω, 600W into 4Ω

**Attenuation:** -80dB to 0dB in 80 steps

**Frequency response:** not specified

**THD+N:** <0.006% (1–100W, 8Ω)

**IMD:** 0.0008%

**Dimensions (WxDxH):** 44 × 37 × 8.8cm

**Price:** €10,000 (basic version)

**Manufactured by:** Aavik Acoustics

**URL:** [www.aavik-acoustics.com](http://www.aavik-acoustics.com)

**Tel:** +45 40 51 14 31

something extra in day-to-day listening. The U-300 remains a great amplifier, but the U-150 is almost the same amplifier for a lot less money. That makes the U-150 an excellent addition to the audiophile roster of great products.

When it comes down to it, the Aavik U-150 stands independent its bigger brother. It reaches a different market and maybe those looking for a €25,000 amp will not even countenance the idea of a €10,000 amp, even if they perform almost identically. But at that €10,000 price point, the world just got a new champion. There can't be many amplifier brands that would do something quite as bold as Aavik has done here! +