



Moon Neo 230HAD – Review

By Simon Wilce

Published on 11 May 2016. 2

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This is a review of the the very desirable Moon Neo 230HAD headphone amplifier by Simaudio, the Canadian audio hifi manufacturer of 35 years standing. The Moon Neo 230HAD is in fact a headphone amplifier, a DAC and a line stage preamplifier that offers versatility and quality from the desktop, to the lounge (as a headphone upgrade) to your full system set-up. Indeed this is the problem I have had for the last few days. Initially I opened my new box, carted the Neo 230HAD upstairs and immediately rigged up my laptop, downloaded the DSD driver, and let rip. Then I thought to myself, at this price (£1000+) it belongs as the digital stage of the main HiFi system, and having taken delivery of the Rega Elicit R last week it is a fine companion. Now it is on my desktop again, playing Tidal into my preferred open backed headphones. All rounders do tend to have limitations, but here I'm still looking for one to be honest.

Moon Neo 230HAD Design

The Neo 230 HAD is well served with many inputs, though there are none balanced. For this you are looking to invest in the Neo 430HAD from which many of the components are taken for the Moon Neo 230HAD. There is no display panel to speak of, save for two columns of LEDs indicating the input source and the other showing the PCM or DSD sample rate. So a 192kHz source illuminates the '48kHz' and the '4X' LEDs which is uniquely thrilling. Having seen the different light shows with other headphone amplifiers or the full on display on the lovely Oppo HA-1 this is a unique solution and one I appreciate (in a slightly sad way).

Inputs



There is a 1/8" standard music player input jack at the front for the iPod generation. On the rear panel there is an Optical (TosLink) input, two S/PDIF coax inputs and a USB Type B. All of these inputs support PCM into 24 bit/192kHz. DSD (64,128,256) is only available with USB B as is PCM at rates of 32 bits/352.8 & 384kHz. A driver download is needed for DSD support which is pretty easy to set-up. There is also an analogue RCA input at the back which may be useful.

Outputs

Happily for me there is a proper 1/4" headphone jack at the front of the 230 which therefore promotes higher end headphones of impedance upto 600 Ohms. There is a fixed and variable RCA analogue output at the back, so I have had the Moon Neo 230HAD as a DAC on fixed output to an integrated amplifier. If you're after a balanced output for your headphones, at this price level consider the excellent Oppo HA-1, otherwise the Neo 430HAD maybe your destination.

Other facts include the huge frequency response range being claimed at 5Hz – 100kHz (Audible is 20-20kHz).

The box is what I would describe as 'half size' (7 x 3 x 11 inches), so it fits neatly on my desktop. It weighs 2.8kgs, which seems to be mainly the toroidal transformer and various DC stage reductions. Interestingly I am unable to find which DAC chip is being used in this application. Many brands make a point of promoting the Sabre DAC, etc.

Quality



This is a beautifully presented and made box of tricks that I would really want to have in my 'box' collection. I have the sleek black finish which may actually be the only one available. The quality is as you would expect at this price, there is nothing hanging off, the volume knob is smooth and comfortable.

Performance

Generally, I have found the sound from Moon so far to be rather special. Since I have broadly been attracted to Naim, like a moth to the bright green light, I have to say this is a very nice presentation. I have found the sound-stage to be warmer and deeper and wider than that I have experienced so far. The detail is very very good and I have had very little fatigue when listening to this DAC at length, which can often be a Naim criticism.

MP In

I had a bit of a play with the input at the front from my smartphone (Nexus 5) using the PowerAmp App. This is no reason to spend over a thousand pounds on a piece of kit but playing U2's Silver and Gold was fantastic, compared to using my usual headphones. Of course the

headphones I used (Oppo PM-2) cost a heck of a lot more but the width and unheard detail in the sound was noticeable.

USB B

Using the USB B input is where this box really sings. I am using J River software on a laptop (I have given up on Foobar) and when you choose the correct playback options the best sources with the highest bit rates sound beautiful. I'm finding that the Moon sound is very warm and rhythmically softer than I am used to and this really does promote longer listening times.

Concentrating on listening to various tonal differences the lower frequency is definitely softer in my view, 'Regulate' by Warren G, and Massive Attack's 'Unfinished Symphony' being the references here. I personally think the overall sound is quite uncluttered and the mid ranges have a very natural sound.

I have not found any problems with heat output on my desktop, despite the emphasis on the 'high power' control in the instructions.

Coax and comparable DACs

I decided to rig the Moon Neo 230HAD up to my test stereo rig and I thought I would play around with the K3 DAC I still have, the Arcam irDAC II and my own Musical Fidelity M1 DAC (four years old now and slightly out of touch). Strictly speaking they are not financially comparable, however it was worth a couple of hours of mucking around with CDs and just listening to great music. I guess that really we should consider the Naim DAC V-1, (£1,350) the Oppo HA-1 (1,200) and the Chord Hugo (£1,400) in the same breath as the Moon, however I have yet to hear the Hugo.

I rigged up my ageing Yamaha CD player as a transport to the different DACs using an Atlas Mavros Coax cable the into the Rega Elicit R integrated amplifier.

I felt the Moon Neo 230HAD when used as an out and out DAC in the above configuration was the softest and my most favourable sound. With the K3 DAC still being an exceptional performer (still love mucking around with the K Link) and the Arcam irDAC II being the best pound for pound DAC in the building, the Moon at this price would probably be my preferred choice. I hope the naturalness of the sound from the Moon is coming through in this review. If I had the money, I'd buy one for sure.

Remote Control

There is a remote control with this Neo 230HAD but I have barely used it since on a desktop it is not needed, volume control is on the large knob at the front. When used as a DAC you are not really flicking between inputs and volume control is elsewhere.

Overall

I have really enjoyed the very natural, yet detailed sound from this wonderful box, the sound is softer than I am used to and this promotes longer listening, for sure. I'm hoping to take a review of the newly launched Moon Neo ACE soon and now I am really worried I'm going to go all gooey and start trading in my Naim boxes for this Canadian audio leader.

Love

The exceptionally natural sound

Build Quality

Like

the 1/4" jack

understated front panel

Wish

I owned one...