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Simaudio Moon CD-1 CD Player

by Doug Schneider

According to Partridge's *A Dictionary of Catch Phrases*, the saying "hard act to follow" originated before 1920 and was first used in reference to successful vaudeville acts that would more than likely overshadow ones that followed them. In the world of audio reviewing, you chance that happening when you review a product that can be considered state of the art, or at least close to it, and then right on its heels, you review a product that was never intended to be that good.

With "hard act to follow" in mind, late last year I reviewed the Simaudio Moon Evolution SuperNova CD player (now priced at \$6200 USD) and found it to be the best all-in-one CD player to have been in my system. Then, right after, Simaudio sent me the Moon CD-1, the company's latest CD player, which is priced at just \$1500 and intended to be an entry-level offering. For the CD-1, the SuperNova is a hard act to follow -- hard for any CD player, let alone one priced at about 75% less. But read on. You might be surprised at just how, and why, the CD-1 is able to follow the SuperNova's act so respectably.

Description

There are two things new about the CD-1. First is the appearance. The CD-1 looks like nothing else in Simaudio's product lineup except the new, identically priced companion

Moon i-1 integrated amplifier, which was developed and released at the same time. (I'm currently reviewing the i-1 for our sister site, *GoodSound!*) The i-1 and CD-1 both share the same hefty, all-metal chassis, which measures 17"W x 3"H and 13"D and can be had with either a silver or black 1/4"-thick metal faceplate. Compared to many of the rather flimsy,



Review Summary

Sound "Here was a powerful, forceful sound that showed great midrange presence and superb bass weight, similar to what the SuperNova offers. In fact, the little CD-1 comes across as voluminous and, like the SuperNova, certainly isn't one of those thin, lifeless players that sound cold and sterile and give CD playback a bad name. Rather, the CD-1 had presence and a touch of grandness; it was obvious to me that it and the SuperNova, while not identical, were cut from the same cloth."

Features The CD-1 uses "Burr Brown's PCM1793 24-bit/192kHz DAC with integral digital filter that's rated for a 113dB signal-to-noise ratio (greater than 18-bit resolution)" along with a Simaudio-designed transport mechanism in a "hefty, all-metal chassis." "Simaudio backs that chassis and the electronics inside (except for the transport) with a ten-year warranty (three years on the transport mechanism), which is much longer than most companies back their CD players."

Use "The only things that tripped me up were the track-skip buttons. I couldn't find fast-forward or -reverse, because to get at those features, you use the buttons to skip tracks, but instead of simply pushing them, you hold them down."

Value "It's a CD player that does what it's supposed to do -- get the bits off the disc and don't muck up the sound -- and it does so with pizzazz, all for a grand and a half."

low-priced CD players that people are used to seeing today, the CD-1 will seem sturdy and fairly heavy -- it weighs 14 pounds. It's solid enough that Simaudio backs that chassis and the electronics inside (except for the transport) with a ten-year warranty (three years on the transport mechanism), which is much longer than most companies back their CD players (some commit to five years, but, increasingly, I'm seeing three- and one-year warranties on complete units).

But, compared to those small, flimsy players that are often quite sleek and attractive, the hefty CD-1 is a little industrial-looking, particularly with the black faceplate. On the other hand, this kind of chunky appearance is standard for the audiophile world, with most hardcore audiophiles probably liking the CD-1's rather bulky, squared-off appearance.

The other new thing about the CD-1 is the Simaudio-developed transport mechanism, which, ironically, is getting introduced in this, the company's least-expensive CD player. The more-expensive players use third-party transports. However, I suspect that in the future this might change, because the in-house route seems to be the slant that Simaudio wants to take. I talked to Simaudio's owner, Jean Poulin, at the Munich High End show last spring, and he explained to me the reliability problems companies can run into with third-party transports. Basically, if a company has bought into a certain transport mechanism, designing CD players around it, and it's a dud, that can cause huge headaches when units are out in the field and fail. Therefore, Poulin, who seems to be on a never-ending mission to find ways to make Simaudio's products better and better, decided that the only way he could feel *really* secure about what he's putting in players is to build his own transport.

Now, that doesn't mean that if you visit the Simaudio factory you'll find staff carving out CD trays and fabricating lasers; instead, Simaudio has sourced all the individual parts and designed the transport in-house to make it as reliable as possible by having full control of each part that goes into it. The software to control it was developed in-house too. Therefore, if there's a weak point in the design, the company can isolate it instead of having to look at the entire mechanism as one complete unit.



Other items pertinent to the CD-1 include Burr Brown's PCM1793 24-bit/192kHz DAC with integral digital filter that's rated for a 113dB signal-to-noise ratio (greater than 18-bit resolution); one pair of single-ended outputs; one S/PDIF RCA digital output (to use the CD-1 as a transport); a rear-mounted main power switch that's intended to be left on all the time to keep the circuitry warmed up (the front Standby switch is used for day-to-day operation); an RS-232 connector for use in a custom-install setup; and a 1/8" mini-jack for remote infrared control.

Then there's the remote control -- a plasticky job that Simaudio calls the CRM. Ironically, I actually like the CRM quite a bit more than the all-aluminum FRM-2 remote control that the company supplies with the upscale Evolution products. The CRM is smaller, lighter and, therefore, easier to handle than the FRM-2, which feels bulky and awkward in comparison.

Obviously, the CRM controls all functions of the CD-1, but it also controls the i-1 as well. The only things that tripped me up were the track-skip buttons. I couldn't find fast-forward or -reverse, because to get at those features, you use the buttons to skip tracks, but instead of simply pushing them, you hold them down. Of course, the owner's manual explains that,

but who reads the manual?

Setup

As I mentioned, the CD-1 followed the Simaudio SuperNova in my system, and this allowed me to do some direct comparisons -- nothing like making that tough act even tougher. At least with vaudeville shows, when the first act is over, it leaves the stage.

Furthermore, because the CD-1 stayed for quite a while in my system, it was used with a lot of equipment: Simaudio Moon Evolution P-7 preamplifier and W-7 power amplifier, Simaudio Moon i-1 integrated amplifier, and my own Blue Circle BC300 preamplifier and BC204 power amplifier. Speakers included the KEF 201/2, PSB Synchrony One, and PSB Synchrony Two B. Interconnects from the CD-1 into either a preamplifier or the i-1 integrated amplifier were always Nirvana S-L. Speaker cables were Nirvana S-L, Nordost Red Dawn or Nordost Valkyrja.

Sound

Given the SuperNova's extraordinary performance, I was ready to be disappointed with CD-1. It's one thing to step up to something like the SuperNova, but quite another to step down, often not only spelling disappointment but catastrophe for the product under review.

From the start, though, the CD-1 didn't disappoint. Much of what I heard from the SuperNova I also heard from the CD-1. In fact, I jumped a little when I first cued up Fiona Apple's 1996 release *Tidal* [Clean Slate/Epic 67429] and "Sleep to Dream" thundered into my room. Here was a powerful, forceful sound that showed great midrange presence and superb bass weight, similar to what the SuperNova offers. In fact, the little CD-1 comes across as voluminous and, like the SuperNova, certainly isn't one of those thin, lifeless players that sound cold and sterile and give CD playback a bad name. Rather, the CD-1 had presence and a touch of grandness; it was obvious to me that it and the SuperNova, while not identical, were cut from the same cloth.

When I played the next track, "Sullen Girl," Apple's piano projected the sort of majesty and weight that I hear from good digital sources but isn't always there, particularly with mass-market DVD players that people use to play their CDs. They might sound OK for their price, even surprisingly good at times, but rarely do they have any weight or real richness that a player like the CD-1 has. Furthermore, the CD-1 proved itself to be quite revealing as well, showing as much detail as any CD player or DAC/transport combo in its price range. In fact, this balancing act of combining just enough richness with ample detail is something I've come to praise about all of Simaudio's latest products, and not only their CD players. Their integrated amps, preamps, and power amps exhibit this quality too. Everything Simaudio makes is solid state, but there's a hint of presence in the sound that reminds me of tubes -- but without any of the downsides.

The CD-1's highs are exceedingly clean, but, frankly, *every* good CD player that's specifically marketed toward audiophiles nowadays should have highs that sparkle like this. Given how advanced CD playback is -- the format was introduced more than 25 years ago -- it's just not acceptable to have those steely, edgy high frequencies that were commonplace in the '80s and '90s, even with some extremely high-priced players. These days, that problem's been fixed, and even sub-\$1000 audiophile players sound very clean. The only ones that don't are those cheap, mass-market DVD players that I mentioned. So, if the player doesn't sound that clean up top, you should toss it away (or, better yet, not buy it to begin with).

I will make an even bigger deal out of the midrange presentation. As with any modern CD player, there's no detachment from neutrality with the CD-1 -- voices and instruments are neither forward nor recessed; everything sounds extremely well balanced -- but what's more important to me is the touch of texture and richness that the CD-1 has that makes the

midband really come alive. Once again, this goes back to what I said about the CD-1 *not* being one of those thin, lifeless players. Rather, it has presence and grandness that help make male and female vocals a pleasure to listen to.

For example, the Cowboy Junkies recently released *Trinity Revisited* [Cooking Vinyl 434], a CD/DVD combo set that captures the band remaking their album *The Trinity Session* some 20 years later -- in the same location (Church of the Holy Trinity in Toronto, Canada) with some additional musicians kicked into the mix. Overall, it's quite a good release, but, despite advancements in recording techniques and what I can only guess was a budget many times larger this time around, the new release doesn't actually *sound* better than the earlier recording made in the mid-'80s on a shoestring budget. Still, this CD sounds reasonably good -- better than many mainstream releases -- and I particularly like the way Natalie Merchant sounds singing alongside Margo Timmins on "Misguided Angel."

With the CD-1, the two voices are a snap to pick out in the mix, and there's complete cleanliness from the lows to the highs -- it's all squeaky clean -- but there's still that touch of richness to the CD-1's sound. The highs, as I said, are superbly extended, and the sense of space the CD-1 re-creates indicates good retrieval of detail.

Overall, the sound of the CD-1 is pretty hard to fault, which is what I'd expect from a good-quality CD player in the \$1500 price range. What's most important, though, is that while there's nothing to complain about, there are some things to praise. For me, the CD-1 stands out with good across-the-board sound that's capped off by a hint of richness and weight that helps make the player sound larger and grander than its modest asking price would indicate. It's a CD player that does what it's supposed to do -- get the bits off the disc and don't muck up the sound -- and it does so with pizzazz, all for a grand and a half.

The hard act to...

But that's not to say the CD-1's sound has such pizzazz that it pushes the four-times-the-price SuperNova to the side. The family resemblance is certainly there, and perhaps on a low-resolution system that masks detail the differences wouldn't seem too vast, but with the equipment I use here, the SuperNova still stays a clear step ahead, not just bettering the CD-1 but every other all-in-one CD player I've heard.

Where the SuperNova absolutely kills most players on the market is its ability to unravel the smallest details of the recording, which, in turn, allows you to hear *more* -- more presence, more dimensionality, and more re-created space. It's startling really, and when I first played the Cowboy Junkies' original *The Trinity Session* [RCA 8568-2-R] through the SuperNova, I was shocked to hear so much more detail from the recording than I had experienced before. The SuperNova seems to retrieve *everything*.

The CD-1, on the other hand, gets most of the way there, but not all of it. The result is the same general sound, but without quite the same level of detail that I can hear from the SuperNova. As a result, on *Trinity* the CD-1 creates a soundstage that hovers around the left and right speakers and then extends all the way to my front wall (which is pretty far, because speakers in my room are generally pulled about eight or ten feet from that wall). To most, that would be impressive enough, because it's a better sense of space and depth than many CD players can re-create. But when I put the same recording on the SuperNova, the walls of my room disappeared with a soundscape that had *no* defined boundaries. What the CD-1 does is impressive for its price; what the SuperNova does is impressive at any price.

Finally, although the CD-1 sounds clean to the point that it would be impossible for me to fault if I didn't have the SuperNova on hand, the fact is that I *do* have the SuperNova here, so I know that the CD-1 can't match it in this department either. Again, no surprise, given the vast difference in price. The SuperNova isn't just clean, but crystalline. There's a beguiling purity that I've never heard from any other CD player and that, again, puts it a cut above most of what's available. On the other hand, the CD-1 is clean-sounding but doesn't

take that extra step forward. As a result, the CD-1 simply stays in line with what you'd expect from CD playback.

Conclusion

The Simaudio SuperNova is certainly a hard act to follow, and I suspect that many CD players, regardless of price, stand a very good chance of being disappointing in comparison. Simaudio really hit the ball out of that park with the SuperNova, but, admittedly, at a high enough price that even people like me, who review audio equipment for a living, have to pass it by. (Incidentally, Simaudio also offers the two-piece Andromeda at about double the SuperNova's price. *Gasp!*)

On the other hand, the CD-1 holds its own against that tough act by getting far closer to the SuperNova's sound than the massive price difference indicates. It's a fundamentally clean-sounding CD player that provides a similarly rich and bold presentation along with exceptional detail retrieval and refinement that will no doubt please those audiophiles who want to get as much as possible from their CDs, but who don't want to have to forgo a second car or a vacation to get there. Furthermore, the CD-1 is built well and is backed by a generous warranty, something that will help make it a long-term purchase rather than being the kind of product that gets flipped on the used market in a few months' time.

Therefore, although the CD-1 doesn't reach as high as the SuperNova, it certainly deserves the same kind of praise for offering a lot of that player's performance at about a quarter of the price -- not something to underestimate or neglect, whether you're reviewing, buying, or just shopping around to see what's available. I can't afford a SuperNova, but I *can* afford the CD-1, so it's good to know it's out there.

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Simaudio Moon CD-1 CD Player

Price: \$1500 USD.

Warranty: Ten years on electronics; three years on transport.

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