

the ear

HI-FI MUSIC GEAR

Hardware Review

Moon 860A v2

Power Amplifier

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Would it be spoiling the fun if power amplifiers could be limited to say 25kg? As it stands there are rather too many that exceed this figure and have the potential to do serious damage to any unfortunate soul who tries to move them. But it seems that bigger or at least heavier is often better when it comes to generating large amounts of clean power. It would be nice if we didn't need lots of power/or that such a commodity didn't offer sonic benefits but with most loudspeakers having low-ish sensitivities this is sadly not the case. So I have put some wheels on a low platform so that amps like the Moon 860A V2 can be wheeled around, it's a lot cheaper than physiotherapy. But to the power amp in question, for which only a shipping weight of 40kg is given, so it's a bit less than that but still a challenge. The 860A V2 is Moon's penultimate power amplifier although they describe the 888 model that tops the tree as being out of the normal range, so in many respects it is the big one at Simaudio towers. Its specified output of 225 Watts (450W into 4 Ohms) is reassuringly understated considering the mass of the power supply inside its chunky chassis. The bridged output of 750 Watts achieved when it's employed as a monoblock gives a better idea of the current on offer. As does the statement "Output stable into any load impedance", which is not something you see on many feature lists. Essentially it means that the 860A V2 will drive any loudspeaker in any domestic environment to silly levels without having to try too hard.



Connectivity is slightly broader than usual with both RCA and balanced XLR inputs alongside a switch marked AC and DC. This isn't a listening suggestion apparently as the manual states that the DC setting is recommended for "most preamplifiers, including all Moon preamplifiers" while AC is for "many older preamplifiers including many tube preamplifiers". UK distributor John Carrol tells me that "DC is for DC coupled preamplifiers while AC is for those which may have a small amount of DC in the signal as well as variable output sources such as DACs and streamers. We would expect improvement in sound in DC coupled position when used with a MOON pre-amp. Also, for a well designed pre-amp from any other brand. Adding the AC coupling at the input on the power amp (AC position) takes a slight edge of the that sheer relaxation feel that the amp has. It can also reduce bass attack ever so slightly, but at this price we are in the business of looking after 'the ever so slightly'". There are also switches for balanced or singled ended connection and mono or stereo operation plus 12v trigger connections and an RS232 port. The power switch next to the mains inlet turns on enough of the circuitry for the amp to remain warm to the touch at all times, the front panel switch has to be on in order to use it but those keen on polar bears will need access to the back of the box.

The casework is built out of silver and black anodised slabs of machined aluminium, you can have it in all black or even all silver but then it wouldn't look quite so much like a Moon. The chrome feet don't accept spikes thankfully and the weight is mostly at the front where two toroidal transformers stand upright, one for each channel of this dual mono, fully balanced amplifier. At the back you can see blue capacitors through the grille, huge blue capacitors at that.

Sound quality

When I first hooked up the 860A V2 to the Allegri Reference preamp and PMC fact.12 Signature speakers and played on Singapore by Tom Waits I wondered out loud where all the instruments had come from. It is quite uncanny how this Moon produces a revelation in transparency without seeming to add any song and dance of its own. Like its makers this is a very understated amplifier, it simply gets on with doing a remarkable job of presenting so much more of the detail in the music. I noticed in the spec that the first five watts are in Class A, which is probably more power than I was using for most of my listening, and this partly explains why this Moon is so good at rendering tonal character. There are many acoustic instruments on Singapore and it managed to pull out seemingly every nuance in each one which makes for a beguiling musical experience with a decent. I played a whole side of Rain Dogs and

kept finding lovely details that made the recording come to life. The nimble guitar on Clap Hands is superb and the rhythmic subtlety throughout makes it particularly engaging.



I love the presence this Moon brought out in Waltz for Debby (Bill Evans) on vinyl, the double mono nature of the recording with nothing much in stereo except the audience applause doesn't get in the way of this sounding like you're in the room, at the time and place of the original event. The brushed drums and double bass sound more natural than the slightly clangy piano but it nonetheless produced a hair raisingly palpable experience with this amplifier. It's a pity that it takes over £16k and nearly 40kg to do this but at least it can be done, high price and weight do not necessarily guarantee as much. And real magic has never been easy or cheap, this is the sonic kind, close you're eyes and there's no need to suspend disbelief. At the opposite end of the scale we have the Red Hot Chili Peppers' Give it Away, which used to sound good on some systems but in this company it's pretty horrid. Thin, edgy, heavily compressed and strangely devoid of bass. It made me check out their earlier work including Uplift Mofo Party Plan which does have bass and great kick drum and electric bass sound as a result. Freaky Styley is perhaps the most relaxed of that band's oeuvre, it's positively analogue with a loose, warm sound that makes you want to listen for longer. It's a pity that the RHCP got more successful as the sound of their albums got worse, we might not have pop music with no dynamic range if they hadn't. The point is that this Moon amp let's you hear the true nature of the recording and the music, whatever its character.

This is one of those amplifiers that keeps on opening windows onto well known recordings, the cymbal work on The Man I Love (Joni Mitchell/Herbie Hancock) for instance has never been this real before. Presumably because it's very quiet compared to the voice that's in the spotlight, but it's a key part of the composition so it's nice to be able to appreciate without there being any sense of brightness on the



amp's part. It does pace very nicely too, the Grateful Dead's Cumberland Blues is very easy to get wrong and sounds messy when any part of the system lacks strong coherence but in this amp's hands it can be played at high level without any sense of strain. It images surprisingly well too and this combination makes the live recording that much more real and inspiring. In some respects the Moon/PMC partnership is a little bit too laid back so I tried a more upbeat Vertere power cable on the amp. Their range topping HB model certainly injects some pace, brightening up the leading edges without creating any sense of graininess. The real test was Keith Jarrett's Köln Concert which features a rather thin sounding piano, that aspect was clear but it was pushed into the background by the brilliance of the performance which proved to be a full immersion experience.

I also tried the 860A V2 with Bowers & Wilkins 802 D3 speakers which have a more lively balance than the PMCs and were if anything a better match in terms of tonal balance. The amplifier's calm, effortless character working well with the speaker's warts and all presentation. I loved the scale of soundstage this pairing delivered from an album called the Quiet Temple that I found on Qobuz, there was one particularly brooding track with superb depth of image and dynamic intensity that worked really well and resulted in the album being added to the 'must listen more' playlist. As I enjoyed more familiar material it also became clear that the bass control that this amp delivers is in a different league to more affordable examples of its ilk. It seems to find low and weighty notes in places that other powerful amps fail to deliver, it's not exaggerating the bass but giving it the emphasis that is required, all that power has its uses even at sensible levels.



I got spectacular results with the Moon 860A V2 and can forgive its high mass and high asking price because it does things that more affordable, and liftable, amplifiers cannot even with the wind in the right direction. It may be possible to find a power amp that gets close for less but I suspect that the search will be a long one. A lot of high power amps can do the muscle bit but lack the delicacy and hear through transparency that this Moon offers, and a lot of them completely fall down when it comes to timing. I had to take this out of the system before it was collected for fear of getting too used to it, I am now slowly getting used to a (more) real world amplifier. High end audio, it can be addictive.

Specifications:

- Type: Dual mono stereo power amplifier.
- Analogue inputs: RCA, XLR
- Analogue outputs: binding posts, RCA
- Power output: 225W/8 Ohms, 450W/4 Ohms (750W bridged mono)
- Frequency response: 10Hz – 100kHz (+0/-3dB)
- Sensitivity: 1.2V
- Gain: 31dB
- Distortion: THD 20Hz–20kHz @1W 0.005%
- Signal to Noise Ratio: 110dB (full power)
- Dimensions (HxWxD): 192 x 476 x 445mm
- Shipping weight: 40kg
- Warranty: 10 years