

Simaudio Moon Evolution 740P Preamplifier



Simaudio, based in Boucherville, Quebec, Canada, has been in business

more than 30 years, and in that time has produced more amps, preamps, DACs, CD players, and other components than I can remember. In fact, their current lineup alone includes so many models at so many price points

that I can't come close to naming everything in it. But I know well the subject of this review, because I've spent six months with it: the Moon Evolution 740P preamplifier. The next preamp up in the line is their top dog, the Moon Evolution 850P, for \$28,500 USD -- which makes the 740P, at \$9500, seem almost affordable.



More than five years ago, I reviewed the Moon Evolution P-7 preamplifier (\$6900), which the 740P replaces. A little over two years ago I reviewed the entry-level Moon 350P preamp (\$2500 without optional phono stage and DAC). It would be interesting, I thought, to hear how the newer, pricier 740P stacks up.

Description

The 740P's supersturdy, all-metal casework resembles that of other Moon Evolution models. Its dimensions and weight -- 19"W x 4"H x 17"D and 35 pounds -- are the same as those of another Moon Evolution model I've reviewed, the 650D DAC-transport. The 740P's thick front panel is flanked by "cheeks" that make its shape a bit more interesting than a simple flat plate. Screwed into the bottom of the triangular corner posts are conical metal feet, to provide firm footing on a shelf. Alternatively, Simaudio now offers Bridges (like spacers), which replace the feet and permit the secure stacking of multiple Evolution components. The faceplate, cheeks, and posts are made of aluminum and come anodized in black or silver. The 740P's tiered top plate is finished in black; on its topmost portion is a large, silver-anodized plate engraved with the Moon logo.

On the front panel are buttons labeled Standby, Mute, Display, Bal, Input, Setup, and OK. Some of these are duplicated on the supplied, all-metal, FRM-3 remote control. Standby is for day-to-day powering on; Mute cuts the volume instantly; Display affects the brightness of the centrally mounted LED display, which has red characters; Bal is short for Balance; Input is for input selection; Setup allows custom programming via the display (see below); and OK, used with Setup, acts more or less like a computer's Enter key.



On the 740P's backside are three pairs of single-ended and two pairs of balanced inputs, two pairs of RCA single-ended outputs (Var for variable, which the volume control attenuates; and Fix for fixed, which bypasses the volume control), one pair of XLR balanced outputs, an RS232 port for automation, SimLink in and out connectors for communication with other Simaudio products, an IR input for an infrared remote, a 12V trigger input for remote turn-on, a pair of XLR connectors for an external power supply (optional), the main On/Off switch (to be left on most of the time), and an IEC-compatible power-cord inlet.

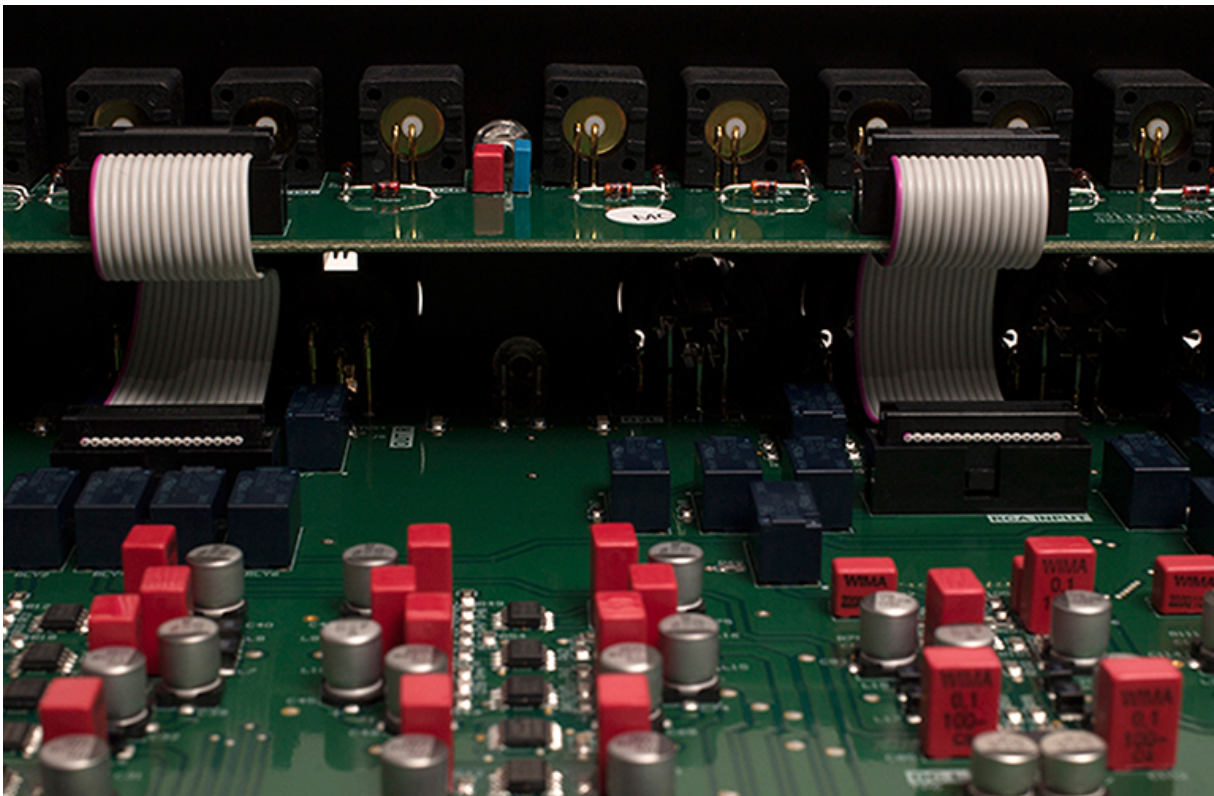


Customizing the 740P using its Setup menus was easy -- it took me all of two minutes to figure out, and I didn't even open the manual -- and the feature set is impressively rich and useful. For example, for the inputs alone, display names can be changed (S1 or B1 to DAC or SACD, for example), trim levels can be adjusted +/-10dB to compensate for differing source output levels, and maximum volume levels can be set, which is incredibly useful if you have kids or careless people around who might crank the volume for the hell of it. In addition, any input can be programmed to bypass the

volume control, which allows for full output for pass-through to a home-theater preamp or receiver. These are the features I mainly used; others are also available.

Most volume controls don't warrant much explanation or praise -- there's usually not much to them - but the 740P's does. It's the best I've used. The front-panel knob is large, sturdy, and spins easily, which I liked. (Note to preamp makers: No matter a model's price, make sure its knob has a quality feel and works well, like this one does, as it's the number-one thing users touch.) From 0 to 30dB, turning the knob at any speed increases the output level in 1dB increments; this increment is retained from 30 to 80dB if the knob is turned quickly, but changes to 0.1dB when the knob is turned slowly. In all, there are 530 positions, allowing for perfect fine-tuning of the output level.

Simaudio has refined its M-eVOL2 volume-control circuitry over many years. There's too much detail to get into it here, but what's probably most important is that the company claims that, regardless of which of those 530 positions you're at, the sound quality remains the same. This is quite unlike conventional volume potentiometers, which have sweet spots of operation for best sound quality.



The 740P is a dual-mono, fully balanced design that provides 9dB of gain, with a maximum output of 6V via its single-ended outputs and 12V via its balanced outs. Its onboard power supply includes two toroidal transformers, and it has a host of other technical features that Simaudio has developed and refined over the years. The result is a circuit design with some impressive specs. Simaudio claims no more than 0.001% total harmonic distortion from 20Hz to 20kHz, "unmeasurable" intermodulation distortion, and a signal/noise ratio of 120dB (20Hz-20kHz).

Two more things are worth mentioning: First, the Moon Evolution 740P worked flawlessly during the time I had it here, which was longer than usual due to a staggeringly large review queue; this bodes well for reliability. Second, the 740P's ten-year warranty is at least twice as long as what most companies offer these days.

Performance

I usually title this section “Sound.” This time I chose “Performance” because it’s more applicable to what I heard -- or, more accurately, what I didn’t hear. Essentially, the 740P had no sound of its own that I could hear -- it sounded startlingly clear and pure, and without a hint of edge or grunge in any part of the audioband at any volume level. The 740P was also dead quiet when no music was playing -- I heard only the faintest ssshhh when I placed an ear right up against the tweeter of either speaker, and that was with all the components in the signal chain turned on. When the music began, the 740P seemed to sonically disappear. If it hadn’t been for its switching capabilities and volume control, which I used often, I wouldn’t have known it was there.

The Moon Evolution 740P’s sound was in stark contrast to that of the all-tube JE Audio VL10.1 (\$5000 when I reviewed it). I love the VL10.1’s sound, but it definitely has a sound of its own -- which is what most people who go with tubes actually want. The 740P simply did not. Audiophiles of yesteryear often talked about the proverbial “straight wire with gain” -- the Evolution 740P is that; the VL10.1, not so much. And even though it’s been years since I had the Moon Evolution P-7 in my system, and despite recalling how impressed I was with its neutrality and transparency, I don’t remember being nearly as bowled over by those qualities with the P-7 as I was with the 740P. Which probably means that the 740P is the better preamp.



I was also pleased to hear that the 740P wasn’t dynamically constrained, which is one criticism I had of the one-fourth-the-price Moon 350P. Although the 350P was neutral and fairly transparent in its own right, it sounded slightly compressed and restrained, particularly when the level of the music went from barely above the sound of an ant tiptoeing in slippers on carpet to that of thunder crashing near my head. The 740P stayed clearly out of the way dynamically, whereas most preamps, such as the 350P, are slightly in the way, which tells you that they’re there -- and that they’re standing between you and the music.

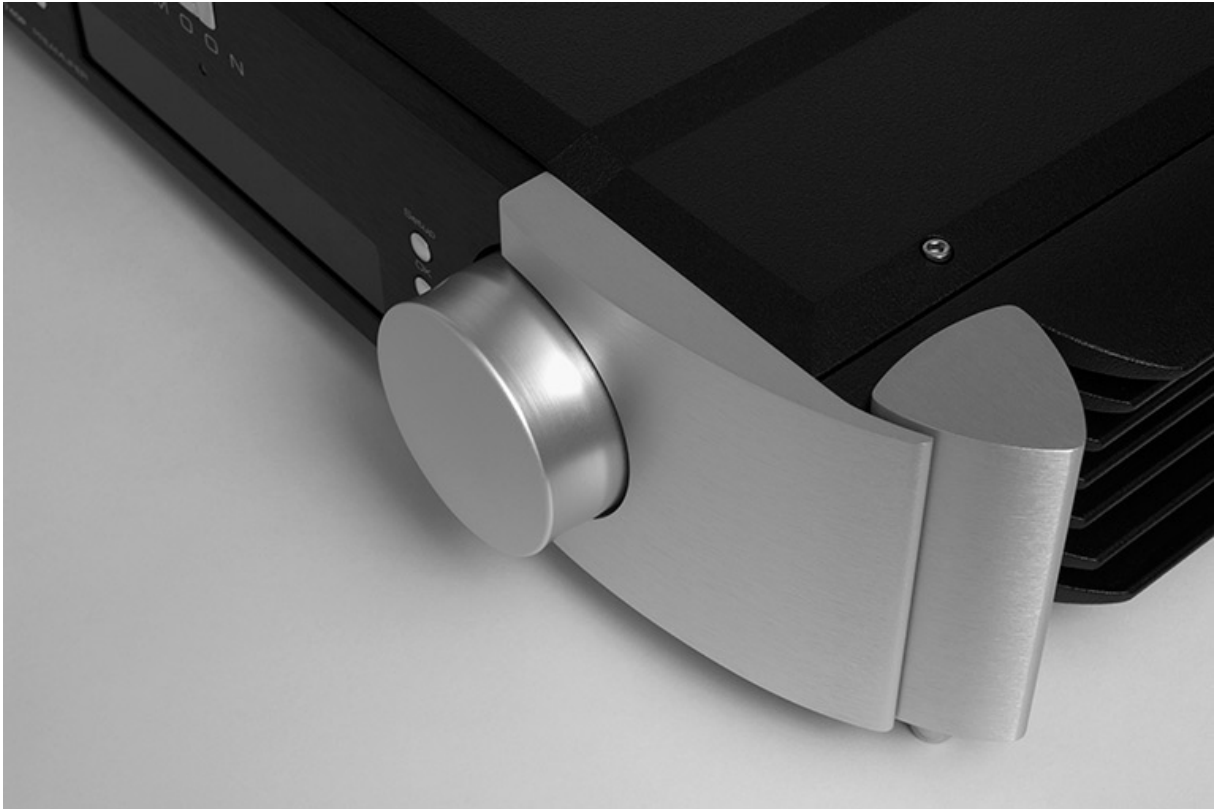
This soundless character of the 740P resulted in music flowing out of the speakers in an unadulterated manner, with precise tonal balance and loads of detail. I was particularly taken aback by the evenhanded reproduction of Bruce Cockburn's *Small Source of Comfort* (16-bit/44.1kHz FLAC, True North). This recording, while clean, detailed, and robust, has flaws. Every one of the positive attributes shone through, but so did the negative ones, and neither was exacerbated in any way. The 740P simply revealed exactly what was there, without embellishing or subtracting.



With such a neutral and transparent sound, it wasn't surprising that the soundstages re-created by the 740P were as wide and deep as the recordings would allow, or that the imaging was very precise. My age-old test disc for these qualities, the soundtrack to the movie *The Mission* (16/44.1 FLAC, Virgin), was reproduced with as much width and depth as I've ever heard in my room. Ani DiFranco's voice in "Everest," from her *Up Up Up Up Up Up* (16/44.1 FLAC, Righteous Babe) -- another recording I always listen to when reviewing -- was positioned exactly where it should be, surrounded by plenty of air and detail. The 740P did subtly fall short in this area in absolute terms: Images within the stage lacked a smidgen of three-dimensionality and interstage separation (my terms for instrument-to-instrument and instrument-to-air delineation), compared to, say, the EMM Labs PRE2 preamplifier, which retails for \$15,000 (i.e., more than 50% more than the 740P) and can portray a stage with uncanny dimensionality, separation, and realism. The differences weren't huge, but they were certainly there when I listened closely enough.

The Moon Evolution 740P's ability to get completely out of the way of the music not only allowed me to enjoy my recordings, it also made it an ideal reviewer's tool. During the course of this review, I used the 740P with three different power amps: Simaudio's own Moon Evolution 870A and Ayre Acoustics' VX-5 stereo models, and Anthem Statement's M1 monoblocks. I'd like to tell you what the 740P sounded like with each of these, but it didn't sound like anything at all -- it simply let the character of each amp shine through. I also used it to assess three very-high-resolution speakers in for review: the Magico S5, Polymer Audio Research MKS, and Aurelia XO Ceric. Finally, I used the 740P to help discern the differences between the Meitner MA-1 and EMM Labs DAC2X DACs. These

differences turned out to be subtle but extremely meaningful in audiophile terms, and, in the end, quite easy to figure out -- not only because of the Evolution 740P's exceptional transparency, neutrality, and resolution, but also because of its instantaneous switching, which allowed me to rapidly flip back and forth between these two outstanding sources.



Despite all the good things I've said about it, the Moon Evolution 740P may not be the ideal preamplifier for every listener precisely because of what it does best: sound like nothing at all. Some listeners won't want their preamps to pass on music in the most untainted way, but instead will want it to add some sort of coloration as a way of tuning their system's sound. Tube designs, for example, can impart some midrange fullness, bass bloom, high-frequency taming, or other coloration, which, to some, may sound more pleasing than the straight facts about what's actually there. The 740P wasn't like that -- its sound was as uncolored to my ears as air is to the eyes. How much you might like it will depend on how faithful to the source you want your sound to be.

Conclusions

Simaudio's asking price of \$9500 for the Moon Evolution 740P is substantial but not unjustified. The 740P is a well-built preamplifier that's rich in features and easy to use -- it performs all switching flawlessly, and handles volume control better than any other I've used. And it has a ten-year warranty. But to the audiophile, what's most impressive about it is that it doesn't obscure, mask, or alter the music signal in any way. If the triple-the-price Moon Evolution 850P can better the 740P in terms of self-noise, detail, and transparency, I'll be flabbergasted -- the 740P itself does such an incredibly good job of getting out of the music's way. The Moon Evolution 740P is a benchmark for preamplifier performance for under ten grand -- not for what it sounds like, but because it sounds like nothing at all.

... Doug Schneider