

MOON by Simaudio Neo 230HAD D/A Headphone Amplifier



I am a lucky person. Who gets to be an artist, an aspiring griot, and a Stereophile reporter? Who gets to stay at home in paint-smearing pajamas, draw pictures of teapots and barn owls . . . and then, on top of everything, gets paid to listen to music made by Henryk Szeryng, Eugene Hütz, and Winston Reedy? C'est moi!

I have groovy friends, too: other eccentric artists, scruffy musicians, recording and mastering engineers, beekeepers, authors and editors, art and junk collectors, tube wizards, turntable savants, DJs, Mensa-type amp designers, bat-shit-crazy poet-philosophers, and unrepentant hoarders.

But none of these extraordinary beings exceeds my old friend David Chesky (of Chesky Records and HDtracks) in natural energy, lovable humility, and flat-out creative force. David is a high-talent pianist who composes classical, jazz, and avant-garde music in abundance. I could go on forever extolling his virtues (loving father, never needs fashion tips, etc.), but most important, David is a master record producer who has taught me a lot about what to listen for in recorded music.

Lately, I've been attending a lot of Chesky recording sessions, and when I'm not sitting behind the binaural microphone head, I'm sitting at a work table on which are a half dozen high-quality headphones, all plugged into the same live microphone feed. I can switch from one headphone brand or model to another and compare them to what I've just heard in the nave of a former church—now the Hirsch Center, in Greenpoint, Brooklyn—where David makes binaural recordings for his label, Chesky Records. Not long afterward, I get to sit at home (in my pajamas) with almost the same half-dozen or so high-quality headphones and listen to the completely uncompressed, high-resolution recording of what I experienced in the Hirsch.

During most of last year, I enjoyed these recordings via the Simaudio Moon Neo 230HAD headphone amp/DAC/line-level preamplifier (\$1499).

The most obvious lesson I learned from all this privileged listening was: Every combination of headphone and headphone amplifier sounds subtly different. Not so much better or worse—or, as you might imagine, more or less accurate—just different.

Between takes

I have also discovered that my summary judgments are frequently incorrect. As soon as I think, from my seat by the dummy head, Ah-ha, this headphone sounds the most accurate, the least colored, the most like what I heard, some lowly headphone I'd previously judged as unexceptional sounds so completely lifelike that it startles me, making me think, for a prolonged moment, Someone from the band is actually standing close to me, speaking directly to me! Startled, I open my eyes and look up, only to realize that—just for that moment—my head had become the dummy head.

This is heart-pounding audio verity.

Those of you who believe that audio gear should be valued according to how faithfully it mimics the sound of live acoustic music will find that, despite the skull-wrapping encumbrance, headphones—even some affordable ones—can sound more like live than box speakers at ten times the price. This effect of uncanny realness, along with the extreme intimacy factor, define a new and fast-mutating audio phenomenon that my friend Steve Guttenberg, aka the Audiophilic on CNET.com, calls "the headspace experience."

Description

The Simgaudio Moon Neo 230HAD is a fusion product—one of today's many cost-effective, space-saving mashups of DACs, line stages, headphone amplifiers, and sometimes even speaker amplifiers. These mashups don't fit the traditional categories of receiver, integrated amplifier, or separates. For example, should we call the 230HAD a headphone amp? Maybe . . . but right now I'm using it as a line-level preamp driving a First Watt J2 (by Nelson Pass) stereo amplifier (review to come) and Zu Audio's floorstanding Soul Supreme speakers. A Parasound Halo JC 3+ phono stage is connected to the 230HAD's analog input. My Integra CD player is connected to the 230HAD's asynchronous DAC—which has four choices of digital inputs: two S/PDIF, one TosLink, one USB. The Simgaudio supports PCM signals of resolutions up to 24-bit/192kHz via all four inputs, and DSD64, DSD128, DSD256, and 32/384 PCM on its USB input. The Neo 230HAD has a fixed output, so it can be used as a standalone DAC. Or if I run a separate DAC through its analog input and its variable output, the 230HAD can be used as a standalone headphone amp. It comes with a plastic remote control, which I used while it was installed in my floorstanding (as opposed to desktop or portable) system.



Because of its versatility and perfect size (7" wide by 3" high by 11" deep), I've kept the narrow-faced Neo 230HAD within arm's reach on a shelf in front of me, where it serves as the control center of my desktop system. On its front panel are a single-ended 3.5mm input jack, intended for a portable music player or suchlike, and a ¼" TRS (tip-ring-sleeve) headphone-output jack. To their right is an Input selector button. At left top are two columns of red LEDs telling me which input I've selected and what

sample rate is being serviced. Below the central Moon logo are a Standby button and corresponding indicator LED. A large volume-control knob occupies the right third of the front panel.

Listening to the Moon Neo 230HAD as line stage

I began my listening using the Moon Neo 230HAD as a line stage driven by my reference phono stage, Parasound's Halo JC3+ (\$2999). This setup gave me clear impressions of the 230HAD's basic audio character, which, like those of all other Simaudio Moon products I've auditioned, was mostly Apollonian: fast, clean, and super-articulate. The 230HAD's ostensibly yang line amp mated extremely well with the JC 3+, which is similarly articulate, but a little darker and more yin. But could the 230HAD step out of its orderly audiophile sophistication and twerk a groove? I was hoping so. What I did not yet comprehend about this Moon product was how well it could play songs.

As you may already know, old Jamaican records have a lot of dirt in their grooves—which is exactly why I like them. Best of all, the more resolving my system becomes, the more I can actually feel this dirt, taste it, see how black it is. I'm referring to black Caribbean groove dirt that goes all the way back to West Africa, Asia, and even further, to the Kalina and Arawak peoples. It speaks Patwa and pays allegiance to Queen Elizabeth II. It drinks rum and Red Stripe and dances late into the night. This dirt makes me ever so happy I and I be alive.

Rudie Blues: "Love! What . . . a . . . fee-ling . . . have you ever been in love?" Have you ever heard British reggae artist Winston Reedy sing "What a Feeling" (12" single, Cousins P037)? The Moon Neo 230HAD, with the First Watt J2 and the Zu Soul Supremes, dug all the dirt out of this record's grooves, adding only a spoonful or two of upper-latitude chill to Reedy's romantic Caribbean warmth. Rhythms felt spot on and fully tangible. Snare-drum whacks and reverberant synth decays begged to be savored. Instruments were separated in a natural fashion. Tiny electric-piano flourishes sparkled for my attention. Electric-bass progressions stirred desire in my loins. "This is this the last train going to Mt. Zion . . . you don't need no ticket!" The riddim capabilities of the Simaudio line stage were so true to Reedy's music that I could smell the jerk spice and taste the rum smoothies.

Listening with headphones: Audeze LCD-X

Say the words exquisite violin. Say poetic master. Then say the name Henryk Szeryng as you imagine looking down and noticing that your feet are floating a foot above the floor. That's the kind of artist Szeryng (1918–1988) was, and that's what happens when you hear him play his 1967 recording of J.S. Bach's Violin Sonata 1 in g. I didn't really grasp levitation until I experienced his well-drawn and passionate performances of Bach's Sonatas and Partitas (2 CDs, Mythos MPCD60). This good-sounding Mythos recording is a needle drop with a bit of crackling groove noise at the beginning and end of each movement, which I liked—but more than a few times, it made me get up to raise the tonearm.

The Moon Neo 230HAD, driving the always-lucid Audeze LCD-X headphones (\$1699), tracked the complexity and feeling of Szeryng's playing. It made his tempos into conscious artistic decisions I was keenly aware of. Flourishes at the end of fast-moving passages could be almost explosive! There were fits of Bach fury, human remorse, and divine grace. Contrasts were rendered with a wide spectrum of subtleties. Bass was neither too lean nor too plum. The LCD-Xes' fine detail and excellent tone were framed in an easygoing, musically coherent manner. Listening fatigue was nearly nonexistent.

If you're one of the legions who already favor the Audeze LCD-Xes, it's likely you'll appreciate the sparkling balance the Simaudio amp-DAC brings to their sound. I did.

Listening with headphones: AKG K812

For many months, my reference headspace experiences have been provided by the Simaudio Moon Neo 230HAD and AKG's K812 headphones (\$1499). This revealing combo dug deep into recorded music, with nary a hint of bite or edge. The K812s play with a feeling of relaxed openness. They're clean and spacious, but never too dry. The AKG-Simaudio combo always seemed to be revealing big chunks of audio truth, but really, probably all it was showing me was what I imagined the recording should sound like. Nevertheless, with Chesky binaural tracks, the AKG K812s with 230HAD always sounded a lot like what I experienced sitting near the binaural dummy head.

To quote an anonymous Stereophile reader, "I don't know what your definition of accurate is, but I know it when I hear it." That was my exact reaction when I first experienced some hi-rez recordings through the Moon Neo 230HAD. With the high-lonesome sounds of Dave Eggar and the New Appalachians performing the Carter Family's heart-rending classic "Coal Miner's Blues," on From the Mountaintop (24/192 AIFF, Chesky JD375/HDtracks)—"These blues are so blue they are the coal black blues . . ."—the Simaudio 230HAD moved and twisted and played this powerful tune in a fully engaging way. The binaural imaging was maybe a little less "out of my head" than I'd hoped for, but every one of the New Appalachians was positioned exactly as I remember him or her at the Chesky session where I fell in love with the lead singer, Noah Wall. Speaking of "imaging"—as I hinted in my introduction, several times, as I listened to the live feed via headphones, Wall made me think she was talking to me. Every time, my heart pounded.



The Simaudio's only genuine fault—extremely obvious with this music—was that it failed to develop the full range of spatial atmosphere and tonal color that I know is on this recording. In general, the 230HAD sounded kind of dry and a modicum hard; it wasn't as liquescent or as atmospheric as the Schiit Audio Ragnarok (\$1700) or the Linear Tube Audio microZOTL2.0 (\$1100) headphone amplifiers, both of which I've reviewed.

Listening comparisons: Linear Tube Audio microZOTL2.0

Fact: The Simaudio Moon Neo 230HAD and the microZOTL2.0 line-preamp-headphone amps were both conspicuously transparent. By that I mean that they played recordings with pretty much equal (and large) quantities of transparency. However, that simple statement raises an important audiophile question: are all transparencies created equal?

The father of this hi-fi-centric word, J. Gordon Holt, defined transparent as: "1) A quality of sound reproduction that gives the impression of listening through the system to the original sounds, rather than to a pair of loudspeakers. 2) Freedom from veiling, texturing, or any other quality that tends to obscure the signal. A quality of crystalline clarity."

Unfortunately, this definition offers only a summary, and metaphorical, introduction to the complex experience of audio transparency. Why? Because the notion of "listening through the system to the original sounds" is not unequivocal, and can't be measured or even described effectively—and, because any two audio components may deliver radically different qualities of transparency (footnote 2), as did the Simaudio 230HAD and the Linear Tube Audio microZOTL.

The microZOTL's transparency is a humid June-sun clarity that fully exposes recorded ambiances of churches, halls, and rooms. Even close-miked instruments are surrounded by a bit of moist air. The microZOTL's transparency surrounds instrumental tones with a kind of vibrating aura. The image boundary of a cello, guitar, or violin appears to be electrostatically charged in a way that softens its edges and connects the instrument to its environment.



In contrast, the Moon Neo 230HAD's transparency was as fresh and clean as a cloudless November day. The Simaudio's transparency showed me, more precisely than did the ZOTL, where the microphones and performers were placed. Instrumental boundaries were firmly drawn. The 230HAD delivered an informative, no-nonsense transparency that told me more how the recording was made; the microZOTL's transparency tells me more about how the music was played.

Comparisons with the Pass Labs HPA-1

You pay your money, and the more you pay, the bigger the audio shovels you can buy. If you want to dig really deep into your music, you need a giant backhoe like the Pass Labs HPA-1 headphone amp (\$3500), reviewed by John Atkinson in July 2016.

To separate out the sonic characters of the Moon Neo 230HAD's DAC and headphone amp, I connected the Moon's analog outputs to the Pass Labs HPA-1. This, I figured, would show me not only the relative quality of the 230HAD's DAC, but also how its headphone amp compared to a surefire contender for a best-of-the-best in headphone amps.

Don't ask me why, but as soon as I hooked this scheme up I fell into Gogol Bordello dementia. I played their Gypsy Punks: Underdog World Strike (CD, Side One Dummy UPC 603967127126) and Live from Axis Mundi (CD, Side One Dummy UPC 603967140729) all the way through, and it was clear that I had never actually heard about 80% of what is on these recordings. I am a devoted student of Nikolai Gogol (check out his novel Dead Souls) and Béla Bartók, but it is Gogol Bordello's Ukrainian lead Gypsy, Eugene Hätz, who makes me want to dance and slurp Stoli. But don't worry, I stayed on reviewer task and peered deeply into the guitar-and-accordion jigs of Hätz and his mad crew. Then, for the rest of the day, I closed my eyes and listened to record after record: Fela Kuti, John Adams, Judy Henske. The only negatives I noticed were touches of opacity and hardness, plus an occasional fingernail on the high-frequency blackboard. Was it the Pass Labs HPA-1? Definitely not.

I'm certain it was the Simaudio DAC, because when I connected my trusty Halide DAC HD (\$499 when available, no longer in production) to the Moon Neo 230HAD's analog inputs, the entire musical presentation became richer in texture, more relaxed, more colorful, and freer flowing. The scratching-fingernail sounds disappeared completely.

Obviously, the 230HAD played its best as a pure headphone amp. As much as I may like these fusion products at the entry level, I'm not keen on handcuffing any DAC to a world-class headphone amp such as the Simaudio 230HAD appears to be.



The Pass Labs HPA-1 is still new to me, so I'm not yet certain how to characterize my impressions of my comparison of the Simaudio and Pass Labs headphone amps, but I'll try anyway. The DAC-less HPA-1 costs more than twice as much as the 230HAD, but driven by the top-of-the-line Schiit DAC, the Pass was more than twice as musical as the Simaudio, at least three times more open and extended, and had four times the magnifying power. That's all I can say for now.

Just different

At \$1499, the Simaudio Moon Neo 230HAD is in a tough category of price vs sonics and features. Headphone enthusiasts looking to move up from basic headfidelity to more sophisticated amplification have many products to choose from. Jon Iverson spoke well of the Ayre Acoustics Codex DAC-headphone amp (\$1795), designed by digital savant Charles Hansen. Erick Lichte favorably reviewed

the Benchmark DAC2 HGC (\$1995). Then there's the ubiquitous Oppo HA-1 (\$1199), which, in combination with its own built-in DAC, plays with a gentle charm that's easy on the ears—and it loves big orchestras. The Oppo (footnote 3) offers the same feature set as the 230HAD, with one significant extra: all of its analog circuitry is fully balanced. The Schiit Ragnarok integrated amplifier (\$1700) is also fully balanced, has no integral DAC, and, to my taste, delivers more headphone excitement than the Simaudio. Nevertheless . . .

I enjoyed all my hours with the Simaudio 230HAD—mainly because it rocked the rude boys, loved Henryk Szeryng, and taught me well about Chesky's recordings. If your headspace listening is in need of an upgrade, the Simaudio Neo 230HAD is an absolute must-audition.