

Simaudio Moon 240i Integrated Amplifier-DAC

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In 2007, I reviewed Bryston's B100 SST integrated amplifier. In its base configuration it was simply an integrated amplifier, but it could be outfitted with an onboard digital-to-analog converter and moving-magnet phono stage. At the time, it was easily the best-sounding amplification I'd ever heard, and I admired the fact that with the optional DAC and phono stage it could perform so many functions without the additional cables and space that separates would require. When I finished university and started working, I saved my money, and about a year later purchased a fully equipped B100 SST.

Eleven years later, a quick survey of the audio marketplace reveals the current ubiquity of all-in-one, high-end integrated amplifiers. Even if they don't have a phono stage, many of today's integrations include a built-in DAC as standard equipment rather than as an option. It makes perfect sense. Even audiophiles whose desire to tinker with their systems seems part of their DNA can appreciate the minimalist approach these components offer, provided they deliver high sound quality. Often they do, while costing less and occupying less space than would multiple separate boxes. As with an instant cake mix that requires the addition of only eggs and milk, the appeal of having to add only a pair of speakers and a source component is undeniable.



Where does that leave Simaudio's Moon 240i (\$2100 USD), an integrated amplifier with a built-in phono stage and a DAC that can even handle DSD over USB? Simaudio is now almost 40 years old, yet relatively new to the all-in-one genre -- is it possible for a product-type newcomer to distinguish itself in a component category that seems to be approaching saturation?

Description

When the Moon 240i arrived, what most surprised me about it wasn't its impressive feature set but its price. To anyone remotely familiar with boutique audio, \$2100 is hardly exorbitant for a legitimate high-end product from an established brand. Not only is it built in Canada, it comes with the same warranty -- ten years -- enjoyed by buyers of Simaudio flagship products costing far more. The review sample was solidly constructed, with a nice aluminum case, and the same level of attention to functional detail as seen in Simaudio's most expensive integrated amplifier, the Moon Evolution 700i. Cosmetic concessions have been made to keep costs down, such as the cheeks of plastic (rather than solid metal) on each side of the faceplate, though even here the finish is good -- without passing your fingers over them, you can't tell the cheeks are plastic.

Measuring 16.9"W x 3.5"H x 14.4"D and weighing 20 pounds, the Moon 240i is specified to put out 50Wpc into 8 ohms, or 85Wpc into 4 ohms. Like every other Simaudio amplifier I've reviewed, the Moon 240i is a class-AB design that delivers its first 5W in class-A. It has three line-level inputs, including a pair of single-ended (RCA) inputs on the back and a 1/8" mini jack on the front, the latter ideal for connecting a portable music device. The analog inputs on the rear panel can be configured as a volume bypass, to allow the Moon 240i to drive a pair of speakers while bypassing its volume control in favor of, say, a home-theater processor or other source component with its own volume control. Next to the mini jack is a headphone output. There's also a preamplifier/subwoofer output, should you need only the amplifier section or want to use a subwoofer in the system.



The Moon 240i eschews Simaudio's characteristic large, red alphanumeric display in favor of a white organic light-emitting diode (OLED) screen. Though longtime Simaudio devotees might not appreciate the change, I quickly grew to prefer it. Not only does it look modern, the OLED display also allows more text to be displayed on the screen, permitting more descriptive custom labels to be assigned to the inputs.

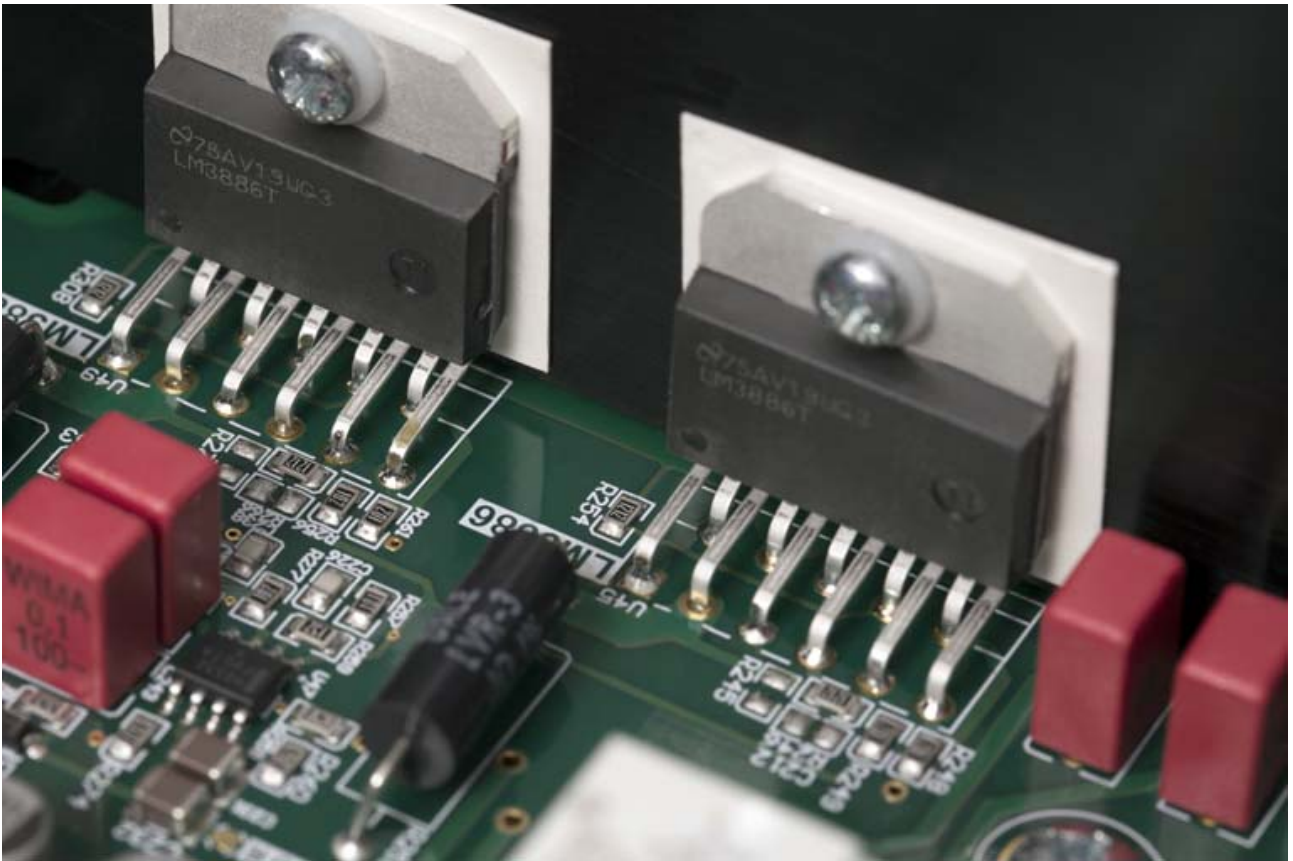
In fact, the ability to customize the product to the user's needs and taste has long distinguished Simaudio's products from those of their competitors. Not only can you label individual inputs as you see fit, you can set offset volumes (± 10 dB) for each input, which is convenient for matching the levels of your source components. Furthermore, each input can be assigned a maximum volume, which may prevent a terror-inducing jolt of sound or damage to your speakers should a toddler -- like the one wandering my house right now --

decide to experiment with that big, curious dial on the front. Unused inputs can be disabled through the setup menu, and the volume bypass control can also be programmed. A screensaver can be activated to prevent burn-in on the display. Energy-conscious users can change the power settings so that the Moon 240i turns itself off when put in Standby, when no music is playing, or after 30 minutes of no user interaction. Even the blue LED above the display can be turned off.



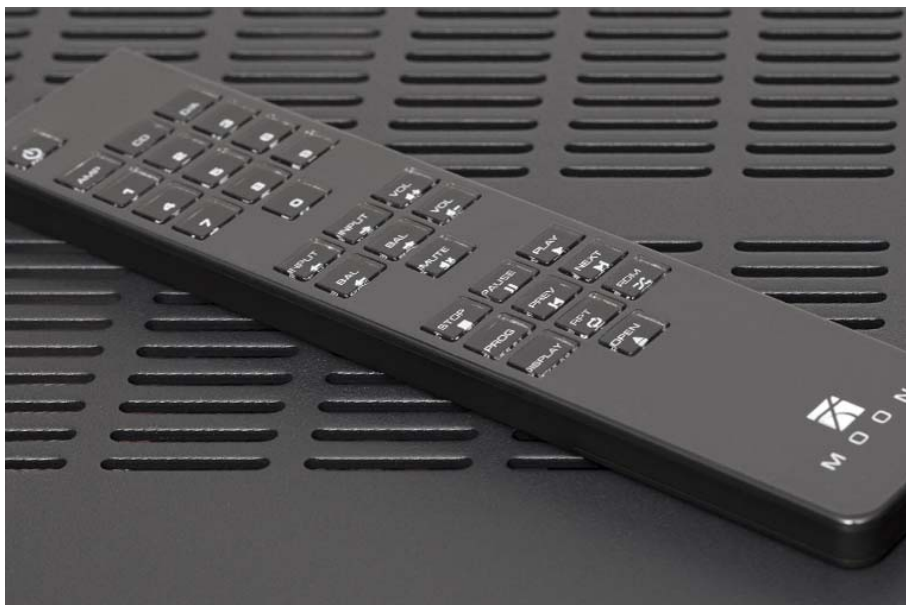
Also like all Simaudio electronics I've reviewed, the Moon 240i includes SimLink, which permits it to communicate with other Simaudio components connected to it via SimLink for more automated operation, such as remote turn-on and input selection. For example, plug a Moon CD player or Moon MiND network player into one of the Moon 240i's two digital coaxial inputs or analog inputs, and you can configure the software so that the Moon 240i automatically switches to them as soon as you press Play on the appropriate remote. This also requires connecting the 12V trigger cable supplied with the unit.

The Moon 240i's built-in phono stage can be used only with moving-magnet cartridges, so if you don't have one (or a high-output moving-coil), you'll need additional gain through another amplification stage. The phono inputs are around back, next to the line-level inputs. The built-in DAC is remarkable in accepting almost any digital signal you send to it. There are a total of five digital inputs: two optical (TosLink), two S/PDIF (coaxial), and one USB. The optical inputs accept PCM data with sampling rates of 44.1 to 96kHz; S/PDIF extends this up to 192kHz, and USB goes all the way up to 384kHz. What sets the USB input apart is its ability to decode DSD64, 128, and 256. If you listen to high-resolution audio, the Moon 240i is ready for it.



In addition to an RS-232 input for home automation, a single pair of speaker outputs rounds out the connections on the rear panel, though I found these disappointing -- they managed only a loose grip on the banana plugs of my AudioQuest Comet speaker cables. But the Comets are stiff -- I was able to bend them so that they exerted enough force to push themselves into the connectors and stay there. However, I changed connections throughout the listening period, and it was easy to knock them out with only minimal contact. If your cables terminate in spades, this won't be a problem.

Previous Simaudio electronics have shipped with their FRM-2 remote, a long, heavy block of metal that felt solid but didn't fit nicely in the hand. The CRM-3 remote that accompanies the Moon 240i is made of plastic, but its lighter weight and shorter length make it far more comfortable to use. It would have been nice had the CRM-3 been backlit, but that feature is rare even in the remotes that accompany far more expensive components.



Sound

I began my listening by playing CDs on my Panasonic DVD player, feeding its digital output through my Bryston BDA-2 DAC, so I could hear the Simaudio Moon 240i in its most basic configuration: via its analog inputs. With Yuri Temirkanov conducting the St. Petersburg Philharmonic Orchestra in Mahler's Symphony No.5 (SACD/CD, Water Lily Acoustics WLA-WS-76 SACD), the Moon 240i created a cohesive stage, the orchestra spread out beyond the left and right outer walls of the speakers and well behind them, to extend past my room's front wall. Though 50Wpc might not seem like much, the Moon 240i had no problem conveying the power and dynamics of the first movement in my midsize listening room. The brass on the right side of the stage sparkled, while the percussion thundered, delivering the vitality of the music in full measure.

The nightingale at the end of The Pines of the Janiculum, from Respighi's The Pines of Rome, in the recording by Eiji Oue and the Minnesota Orchestra (CD, Reference RR-95 CD), underscored the Moon 240i's ability to convey a deep soundstage -- its singing seemed to emerge from behind the front wall. As the nightingale segues into The Pines of the Appian Way, dawn yields to day in a brilliant fanfare portrayed by shining horns and explosive percussion, whose dynamics were well served by the Simaudio.



When reviewing components, I often listen to the War Dance from Respighi's Belkis, Queen of Sheba: Suite, also on this disc. The Moon 240i conveyed all the ferocity and vigor that Respighi clearly intended. With its driving rhythm and wild urgency, War Dance commands one's full attention, and I stopped taking notes to better enjoy the performance through the Simaudio. I own several discs from Reference Recordings -- at home, their sound quality is about as close as my CD collection gets to hearing live music without actually being at the performance. Of course, one needs a good stereo to experience this -- the combination of Moon 240i, Revel speakers, and Bryston DAC absolutely qualified.

Through the Moon 240i, the clarity of Roger Vignoles's piano in a Beethoven song, "An die Hoffnung," made its notes seem to float in space. This provided a nice complement to Stephan Genz's powerful baritone, his shifts in dynamics highly articulate as he breathed life into this collection of Beethoven lieder (CD, Hyperion GAW21055). In "Maigesang," the piano almost seems to dance, its playful rhythm offering the perfect contrast to Genz's singing. The Moon 240i conveyed these songs with unerring precision, perfectly capturing the mood and pace of each.

With "Muhammad My Friend," from Tori Amos's *Boys for Pele* (CD, Eastwest A2 82862), the Moon 240i showcased its excellent transparency. The Moon 240i's retrieval of detail from this track was superb -- I could feel Tori Amos sing this song. The close miking of her voice let me hear her take each breath, then open her mouth to sing and enunciate the words. When Clarence J. Johnson III's soprano saxophone enters, soaring over her voice and Bösendorfer grand piano, it sounded especially clear through the Moon 240i.



Having spent some time listening to the Bryston BDA-2, I wanted to hear the Simaudio's DAC. I connected it via USB to my MacBook and cued up Digable Planets' jazz/hip-hop odyssey *Reachin' (A New Refutation of Time and Space)* (16-bit/44.1kHz AIFF, Pendulum/Elektra). The Moon 240i was a great tool for revealing the layered production of "Rebirth of Slick (Cool Like Dat)." It pulled voices out of the mix while retaining a clear sense of the surrounding space, and the bass had enough weight to provide a funky footing, while the horns in the chorus were more distant, especially compared with the voices. Meanwhile, the reverberation of the sounds of snapped fingers seemed to delineate a broader, deeper soundstage. The Moon 240i's clarity of reproduction made it easy to sort out what was I was hearing.

With the plainchant *Pange Lingua* (anon.), from *The Tallis Scholars Sing Josquin* (16/44.1 AIFF, Gimell), it was as if I were seated in a back pew of Merton College Chapel, Oxford, where it was recorded. As the voices rose to the ceiling, the Moon 240i adeptly portrayed

the vast emptiness of the chapel, giving me a sense of its size. I love the way this track was recorded, with the microphones well away from the singers. The sensation is one of a solemnity that suits this music. One experiences an emotional impact when hearing things like this, and though it's rather intangible, the ability of the Simaudio Moon 240i to trigger them in me was undeniable.

Since the Moon 240i's DAC can process DSD, I played some files I'd downloaded from the Norwegian record label 2L (the files are DSD, but the original recordings were made using PCM). Vivaldi's chamber cantata "Che giova il sospirar," RV679, sung by soprano Tone Wik with Barokkanerne, from the collection Bellezza Crudel (DSD128, 2L 56), turned out to be a great showcase for the Moon 240i's pristine clarity and how well it conveyed music's pace, rhythm, and timing. The violin sounded lucid, the leading edges of its notes carved out with superb precision. The assortment of strings had an airiness that helped give a sense of the space around the musicians.



Listening through the Simaudio to the Enggard Quartet's recording of the Finale -- Presto of Haydn's String Quartet in D, Op.76 No.5 (DSD128, 2L 53), was a lot of fun. Once again, its transparency was on full display -- this recording was an even better vehicle for showing off how capable the Moon 240i was at capturing the infectious energy of this toe-tapping work in this frenzied performance. As with the Vivaldi track, the Moon 240i's squeaky-clean sound did a fine job of making it easy to sort out the four players and revealing the intensity of their attacks.

Curious to hear how the onboard DAC compared with Bryston's BDA-2 (\$2395), I listened to "Society," from Eddie Vedder's soundtrack album for the film Into the Wild (CD, J Records 88697-15944-2). Through the BDA-2, Vedder's voice was exceptionally clear, the vibrato of his baritone amazingly detailed and fully revealing of every nuance of his

singing. The tone of his acoustic guitar was equally lucid, with enough warmth from the woody resonance of its body to sound natural and crisp. “Society” sounded similar through the Simaudio DAC, but lacked the Bryston’s extraordinary clarity. The Moon 240i wasn’t quite able to produce the last degree of detail and organic character in Vedder’s voice, and the lowest notes of his acoustic guitar were a touch weightier through the BDA-2, which made the instrument sound a bit fuller. But keep in mind that while the Bryston is a dedicated digital-to-analog converter -- that’s all it does -- it costs more than the multifunction Simaudio. That the Moon 240i sounded so good in comparison while offering so much more is impressive.



I also spent some time listening to the Simaudio’s phono stage. With “Out on the Weekend,” from Neil Young’s Harvest (LP, Reprise 517937-1), the Moon 240i generously conveyed the lush warmth of vinyl. The drums sounded especially full-bodied, with a solid sense of heft, while Young’s harmonica floated front and center on the stage. I also found the noise floor to be commendably low at this price point for the reproduction of an all-analog recording from 1971. Image specificity was quite good; the music wasn’t carved out with pinpoint precision, but it filled the front of my room with a palpable sense of space on the stage, and clear outlines of the performers.

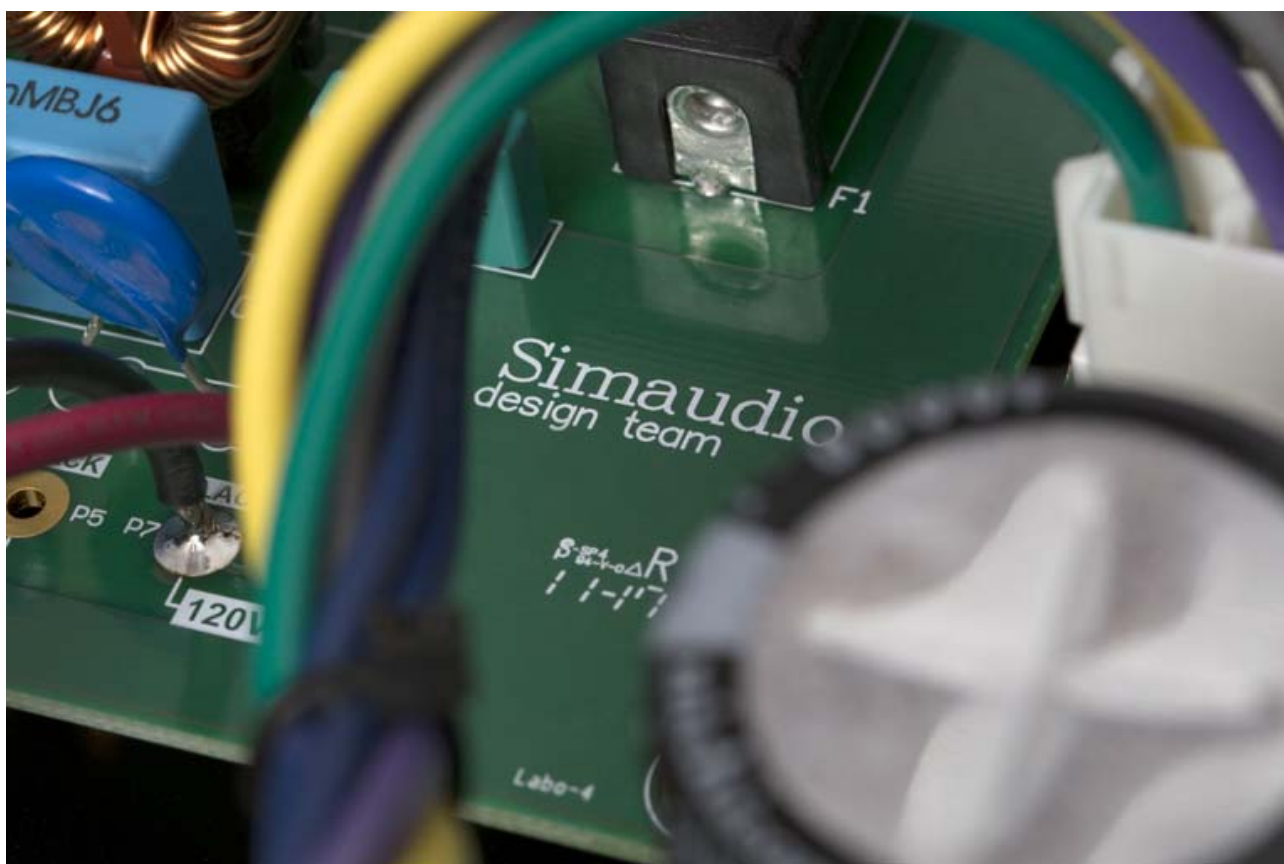
Listening to “Speed Trials,” from Elliott Smith’s Either/Or (LP, Kill Rock Stars KRS 269), I was again impressed with the Simaudio’s soundstaging: fairly wide, but even more notable for its depth. Smith’s voice was more forward, the drums positioned well behind him and the plane described by the speakers’ baffles. The sound lacked the clarity of a dedicated high-end phono stage, but such devices can easily cost as much as the Moon 240i, so this wasn’t a surprise. Overall, Simaudio has outfitted the Moon 240i with a good-quality phono stage that will do a great job of allowing the listener to revel in the virtues of vinyl, with the

option of upgrading later. That said, I suspect that the Moon 240i will still do justice to turntables costing from \$500 to \$1000.

Comparison

I pitted the Simaudio Moon 240i against the Bryston B135 SST2 integrated amplifier I've owned for several years. The B135's base price is \$4695, with options for a DAC (\$1395), a phono stage (\$600), and a remote control (\$375) -- total price \$7065, or well more than three times the price of the Moon 240i. The B135's fully dual-mono design is undoubtedly costlier to build, and comes backed by Bryston's 20-year warranty (compared with Simaudio's ten years), but it has none of the Simaudio's extensive software programmability.

However, the Bryston's considerably higher price was reflected in its sound. It didn't beat out the Simaudio by a lot, but in some areas I preferred it. I used Bryston's BDA-2 DAC through both integrateds' analog inputs -- the Moon 240i sounded commendably transparent, but the B135 SST2 was quieter still, music seeming to emerge from even "blacker" backgrounds. Through the Bryston, the banjo that begins "Your Rocky Spine," from Great Lake Swimmers' Ongiara (CD, Nettwerk 30691 2), sounded a bit more upfront, with a greater sense of the space around it. The music jumped out more -- as opposed to the Simaudio, which sounded a bit reticent by comparison. Both expressed the warmth of the double bass, but the Bryston did so while delivering a little more of the instrument's weight. Though I preferred the overall character of the B135, I could live quite happily with the Moon 240i, which did nothing wrong -- it merely presented a slightly more distant perspective on the music.



With “m.A.A.d. city,” from Kendrick Lamar’s good kid, m.A.A.d. city (16/44.1 AIFF, Aftermath/Interscope), the Moon 240i acquitted itself nicely in comparison to the more powerful B135. Specified to output 135Wpc into 8 ohms, the Bryston could ultimately play a few dB higher than the Simaudio’s 50Wpc into 8 ohms, but for me the difference was moot -- both integrateds had no trouble playing this track more loudly than I could tolerate, and I never felt I was pushing either to anywhere near its limits. Both Canadian amplifiers sounded muscular and clean, the most noticeable difference being that the Bryston reproduced with more authority the fat bass underpinning this track. Compared with the Moon 240i, the Bryston’s bass was more firm -- not a bad thing when listening to hip-hop. However, I could never describe the Simaudio as bass-deficient -- this was the sort of difference I notice only in direct comparisons.

Although I ultimately prefer the Bryston to the Simaudio, the gap between them in sound quality wasn’t as wide as you’d expect from the difference in price. At less than one-third the price of a fully equipped B135 SST2, the Moon 240i provides most of what the Bryston offers, but leaves you with a lot more money to spend on speakers. If you don’t need the extra power because your room isn’t big and/or your speakers are fairly easy to drive, the argument for spending more on the Bryston becomes harder to make.

Conclusion

I began this review by asking how an integrated amplifier with a built-in digital-to-analog converter and phono stage can distinguish itself among the growing crop of companies offering similar products. Simaudio’s Moon 240i is set apart by the high level of quality you get for its low price of \$2100. That’s not a small sum of money, but it’s also not outrageous for anyone who cares deeply about sound quality and can afford to spend that much on an integrated amplifier-DAC.



That the Moon 240i sounds great is only part of its appeal. Its full, ten-year warranty is rare even among some far more expensive competition. Add to that the fact that it will accept almost any source and nearly any type of digital music file, and I wonder how Simaudio could cram so much into the Moon 240i for just a little over \$2K. This is the easiest recommendation I’ve made in a long while.