



MOON 641

INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER

Integrated amplifiers become increasingly rare as price points rise. That makes sense given that there are invariably compromises involved when packing both a preamplifier and power amplifier with the partnering power supply in the same box.

When spending car money, any idea of compromise should be the last thing on the menu, yet here we have Moon's new 641 integrated amplifier sitting on an equipment rack trying to convince us that it's worth every cent of its \$19,000 price tag.

Moon created quite a stir when it introduced its North Collection of high-end products earlier this year. The name celebrates the company's Canadian heritage and the collection is made up of three tiers of components, with each tier comprising two products.

The starter 600 series consists of a

music streamer (the \$20,000 681) and the 641 integrated amplifier on test here. The top-tier 800 series products come in at approximately double the price and split the signal path differently, by offering a streaming preamp (the \$43,000 891) and dedicated power amplifier (\$38,000 861). The middle-ranking 700 series echoes the 800 series components but at a lower price, with the 761 power amp and 791 streaming preamp priced at \$24,000 and \$27,000 respectively. While Moon has long made high-end products, the introduction of the North Collection is still a bold statement of intent and firmly pushes its focus upmarket.

FEATURES

If you are expecting the full bells and whistles approach from the collection's only integrated amplifier then the 641 is going to disappoint you. This is purely a line-level device with no digital inputs, phono stage or headphone output. Bluetooth? Not on the menu either, which is a bit of a shame considering the way it would open up this amplifier for use across a wider range of sources.

Of course, not everyone will want all of these features and those who want them can always add additional boxes to do those jobs. But a huge part of the appeal of an integrated design is to

have the neatness and convenience of everything in one box, making it ideal for those who want to minimise general clutter and the mess of connecting wires. After all, the moment a manufacturer expects the customer to add extra boxes, that consumer might as well have gone for the more purist separate pre/power approach in the first place.

That said, as far as line-level integrations go, the 641 will slot into most systems without an issue. On the back panel are four single-ended line-level inputs alongside a balanced XLR option. There is also a switchable line-level output that can be used to feed a separate power amplifier for those who feel the 641's healthy 125 watts-per-channel output isn't quite enough, or that delivery can be configured for full line-level operation to feed, say, a recorder of some sort.

BUILD & DESIGN

The Moon's speaker terminals are very nice indeed. There is a single pair per channel and they feel suitably chunky and premium, totally avoiding the more glitzy jewellery-type appearance of many. This is but one example of the seriousness with which Moon has developed the 641's design. Look inside and you will find that the neatly laid-out circuit is arranged in a symmetrical dual mono arrangement

where the left and right channel circuits are split all the way to having their own power supply with a dedicated toroidal transformer. That goes some way to explaining the amplifier's hefty 26kg shipping weight, then!

There are many advantages to a dual mono arrangement, from minimising any unwanted interactions between the components of each channel, improving all aspects of sound quality, to optimising stereo imaging. Such an approach isn't cheap to do, which is why it's only ever seen at more premium prices.

The engineers have had another look at how the volume control works and have come up with a solution that is claimed to improve sound quality and maintain exceptional channel balance regardless of the volume level chosen, something traditional potentiometer-based designs don't do so well.

There's nothing to complain about when it comes to the 641's build and finish, either; it is excellent, just as you'd expect for the money. That classy casework is immensely solid and designed to reduce the amount of external vibration that reaches the sensitive internal circuitry. There's a lovely feel to the large rotary dial on the front, which works as a volume control and a navigational tool in the set-up menus and spins with a lovely smoothness. The large 4.3-inch colour OLED display on the front panel is crisp and clear, too. It remains easy to read from a distance and makes setting up the amplifier a breeze.

You've got to applaud Moon for the lovely BRM-1 remote handset supplied with the relevant North Collection products. While most rival manufacturers take the easy option and buy an off-the-shelf design, this dinky all-metal unit is one that the company has put a lot of work into. It is beautifully styled and a pleasure to use.

The BRM-1 features a small display at the centre of the volume dial that mirrors the volume setting shown on the main display and allows the listener to switch inputs and mute. The very early production unit provided with our review sample had a small glitch where the volume indicator occasionally froze on a number even though the level was changed and the amplifier had responded accordingly. Fortunately, this soon sorted itself out and didn't prove to be a serious annoyance in use.



Any amplifier at this level demands a top-class system to shine, so in come some serious sources for this test — Naim's ND555/555 PS DR music streamer and the Technics SL-1000R/Kiseki Purpleheart record player via a Cyrus Phono Signature/PSX R2 phono stage. An eclectic range of loudspeakers are on hand too, including the ATC SCM50, Wilson Benesch A.C.T. 3Zero and PMC's new Prodigy 5 towers. As far as cables go, suitable premium options from Chord and Vertere Acoustics step in.

LISTENING SESSIONS

Once fully warmed and stable, the 641 turns in a wonderful performance. It has all the smoothness and fluidity associated with Moon products but delivers a level of resolution and insight that puts it at the

leading edge at this level. Massive Attack's 'Heligoland' is a fine showcase for the 641's talents. Listen to *Paradise Circus* and it's clear that the amplifier is resolving a huge amount of detail. All this information is presented in an unforced way and organised into a musically cohesive whole. The way the amplifier's open and insightful midrange delivers vocals is hugely appealing; there is plenty of texture and the 641 communicates any emotion well.

There is plenty of finesse on show, too, and that is coupled with a huge amount of muscle. The 641's power output is rated at 125 watts per channel into 8 ohms, but that's only half the story. That figure doubles as the load impedance halves, which means that there is plenty of grunt on tap to drive any price-compatible speaker to high levels. There were numerous times during listening sessions when we gave up before the amplifier did; its sound was still as composed as you like.

This muscularity can be heard in other ways too, in the grip and authority shown with low bass notes and the 641's general air of confidence. Rhythmically, it's on solid ground, sounding surefooted and enthusiastic when the music demands. Songs underpinned by rhythmic elements, such as *Paradise Circus*, are rendered with their drive and musical momentum intact, meaning the entertainment factor always stays high.

Change things up with an old favourite in the form of 'My Head Is An Animal' by Of Monsters And Men, and the Moon continues to shine. It communicates the album's infectious energy brilliantly, capturing the fun and emotion of the various tracks well. This shift of gear shows the 641's innate transparency and its ability to change character with the music being played.

Tonally, things are even and balanced. While the Moon doesn't sound



THE NORTH SIX

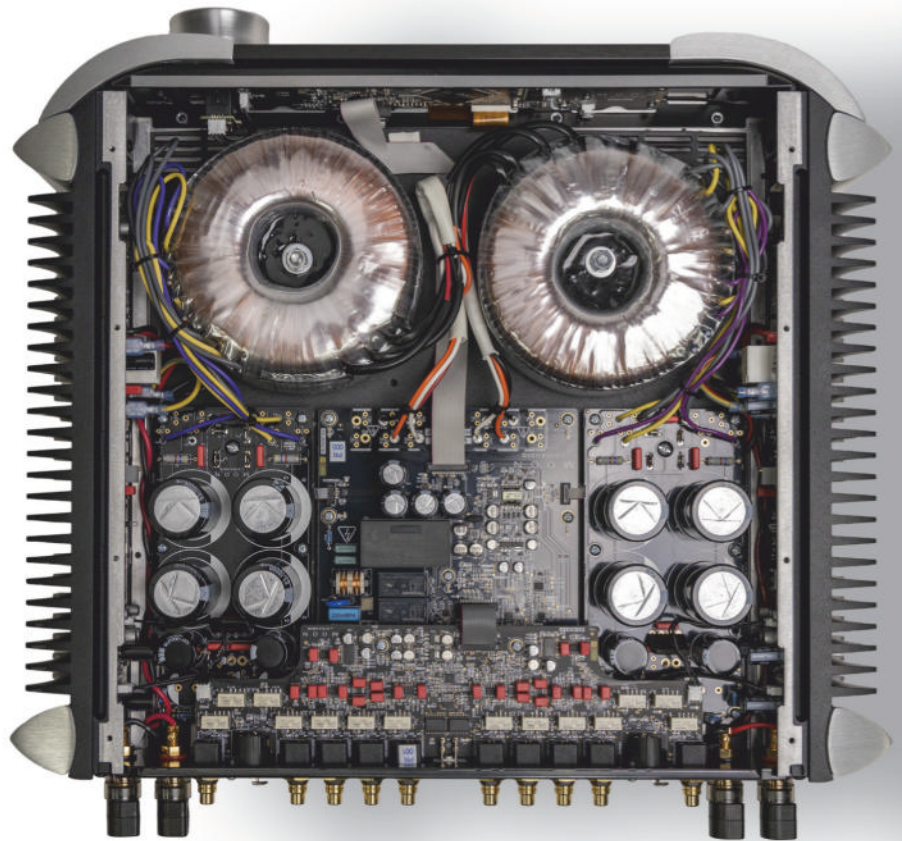
All six of the new North Collection products are designed and manufactured in-house in Moon's home base of Montreal, Canada, just as every other Moon component has been for the last 40 years. Moon intends for this North Collection to both honour its Canadian heritage and act as a guiding star for the brand's intentions going forward in the future of hi-fi.

After decades of making hi-fi separates with a singular vision and purpose (its analogue-only 250i amplifier only recently added a phono stage, for example), the new range finally takes a step many manufacturers have already taken in combining the DAC, streaming and pre-amplifier stages into one box. The power amps stay separate, though a dedicated MoonLink connectivity feature gives users a level of integration between the products that few other hi-fi brands offer. In this case, the menu on the preamp/streamers lets you control elements of the power amps.

Moon says that while outright audio quality is compromised in such one-box all-in-one designs that can juggle multiple jobs, a traditional separates system is admittedly clunky in operation. MoonLink takes care of that, with the North Collection operating as one unit without compromising audio quality, promises Moon.

Encased in Moon's polished but very familiar-looking two-tone black and silver chassis, the North Collection has new elements such as contoured vertical heatsinks, a vent on top, OLED colour screens on all products bar the power amps, and new volume control technologies.

All six products feature "ground-breaking" technologies developed by Moon after years of research, including the Moon Distortion-Cancelling Amplifier (MDCA), the Moon Damping Base (MDB) and the Moon Digital Engine (MDE). Aside from introducing many acronyms, they work to reduce distortion to "previously unattainable levels" in the power amps (MDCA), offer mechanical isolation to protect against unwanted micro-vibrations (MDB), and improve digital performance with greater accuracy (MDE).



wholly neutral, its presentation a touch smoother and sweeter than ideal, this character makes the amplifier more accommodating of poor recordings or any aggression in the partnering system. This OMAM album has a rough and ready feel to the production that is readily apparent through the Moon, yet the amp never over-emphasises the recording's shortcomings. This unfussy nature counts for a lot considering how much great but poorly recorded music is out there.

Switch to Dvořák's New World Symphony and it becomes clear that the 641 is also capable of rendering a soundstage with huge scale. The benefits of the dual mono circuit shine through the amplifier's impressive stereo imaging, with its excellent depth and width. Instruments are layered convincingly and remain tightly focused, even when the music becomes demanding. There is a combination of stability and control in the presentation that can't help but impress.

This classical piece allows the Moon to stretch its metaphorical legs, showing off its ability to track large-scale dynamic shifts while displaying enough delicacy to render the nuances with skill. It merges finesse and force better than any previously reviewed rivals at this level, and that's no easy task.

CONCLUSION

Over the course of this review, we feed the Moon a wide range of music, from Tracy Chapman's quiet and intimate 'Let It Rain' to 'With Teeth' by Nine Inch Nails, filling the gap with the likes of Etta James and Louis Armstrong, and the amplifier never lets itself down. It is a superb all-rounder with an easygoing character that allows it to slot into a wide range of systems with ease.

The Moon 641's feature count might be sparse, but the combination of excellent build and hugely capable sound quality puts it among the very best at this level. Highly recommended. **£**

SPECIFICATIONS**Moon 641**

Type: Integrated Amplifier

Price: \$19,000

Power: 125 watts per channel

Line-level inputs: Single-ended RCA x 4, balanced XLR x 1

Outputs: Switchable line-level/preamp

Dimensions (HWD): 48 x 10 x 47cm

Weight: 26kg

Distributor: BusiSoft AV