

how to spend it

Simaudio Moon Neo 230HAD

A magnificent desk
amplifier and converter for
high-end sound



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What I find fascinating about audio is the infinite variables. Subtleties in the original recording quality, medium (digital, vinyl, CD, etc), amplification, speakers, headphones, software, even your own ears and taste, mean that the search for perfect sound reproduction never ends. There's always scope for improvement. I was particularly struck by this while trying out the Moon Neo 230HAD, a magnificent, if sizeable (28cm x 18cm x 8cm), new desktop headphone pre-amplifier, amplifier and digital-to-analogue converter from Simaudio, of Boucherville, Québec.

The Neo is designed to enhance the sound output of a computer-based audio system (probably one on your desk), and the effect is startling. Even quality music files get an extra boost of clarity, vividness, warmth and spatial reality by being spun around £1,150 worth of top-notch Canadian electronics – capable of handling recordings from virtually any digital source at up to 32-bit standard, thus making it effectively future-proof. You can't even buy 32-bit recordings yet. Don't be concerned that the final power amplifiers are rated at just one watt – that's enough to blow your ears and your mind.

What I enjoyed most about the Neo, however, was experimentation – listening to a dozen different interpretations of one track by swapping around headphones and audio software, or abandoning the Neo and just plugging headphones directly into my computer. It's fair to say that a regular MP3 or basic iTunes download will probably sound better using your computer's built-in amplifier and simple headphones – a device as refined as this will just show up a poor recording's inadequacies.

I accept this is getting awfully close to hobbyism, but I took a track I've been using as a bellwether lately, Coldplay's Adventure of a Lifetime (after years of averagely recorded material, the band seem to have got into quality audio), and found myself spending hours trying different combinations. Listening to a 24-bit recording downloaded to my computer from HDTracks.co.uk with the Neo and good headphones, I felt I was close to the limits of current technology and to the reality of how the studio engineers wanted the track to sound.

A dream machine like this is all about creating the best of the best, and that does bring us well into the realm of diminishing returns. (I even used a £230 18in cable someone sent me ages ago to connect the Neo to my laptop, but I wouldn't recommend anyone do that; it's just not necessary.) With some tracks and some headphones, you will think, "Actually, I've heard that sound better." That's the fun and intrigue of it, though. The Neo brings supremely high-end audio, frustrations and all, to your desk. What's not to love about that?