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Simaudio MOON 180 MiND Streamer

By Andre Marc

Simaudio has a distinct place in high end audio due to the company's unique industrial designs, proud North American manufacturing base, and innovative products. The recently reviewed Neo 380D DAC has become a part of the TONEAudio team's reference system, and that model is currently being updated to DSD-capable status. Simaudio has also introduced several new products since that review was published, including the Neo 430HA headphone amplifier.

Simaudio especially is on the cutting edge of digital, with their disc players and DAC units impressing sophisticated ears across the world. In for review is the standalone 180 MiND network streamer from the MOON line, which includes phonostages, a DAC, and a power supply. The MiND costs $1300. Note that the Neo 380D DAC as reviewed by TONEAudio comes equipped with an optional MiND module internally, for the same cost.

In case you are wondering, MiND stands for MOON Intelligent Network Device, and its architecture is unique to Simaudio. The company authors its own firmware, and most impressively, its own control app. The unit is designed with a minimalist approach, with the goal of pure audio performance at the top of the list. This means no noisy touch screen or display, or other accoutrements.

The 180 MiND is equipped with an Ethernet jack, wireless receiver, coaxial, TOSLINK, and most importantly, AES/EBU digital outputs. Simaudio feels this is the best quality digital connection.

The MiND is not a DAC; it must be connected to an outboard converter as it is tapped to perform one function as well it can, and that is to stream music files from music library via your network. The MiND supports resolutions up to 24 bits, 192 Khz, and basically all formats including WAV, FLAC, AIFF, ALAC, MP3, etc. There is also a SimLink input and output so that the unit can be integrated with other Simaudio products and controlled via the MiND app.

The 180 MiND is stoutly made, with an attractive logo attached to the front aluminum faceplate and only a blue LED power light to indicate when the unit is on.

All connections on the back panel are well laid out with a WIFi antenna attached, but the preferred method of connecting is wired Ethernet. Connect the 180 MiND to your network with a good quality Ethernet cable, CAT7 in my case, and with just a few additional setup steps, you are ready to start streaming tunes.

The Simaudio control app, available for iOS only, is free to download. You can use the app of your choice – and there are many to pick from – but I found the MiND app to be stable and easy to use with an intuitive graphical interface. *(continued)*

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All that is left is server software running on your networked host computer or Network Attached Storage device, and you are ready to stream music files. Your final step is to connect the MiND to an external DAC. A Bryston BDA-1 and Simaudio's own remarkable Neo 380D is used, via AES/EBU, for the review.

The 4TB music library for the reference system is housed on several hard drives attached to a 2011 Mac Mini running Mavericks, with MinimServer server software. All files are in FLAC format, with resolutions from Redbook CD all the way up to 24 bit, 192 Khz PCM.

Using the MiND app on an iPhone 5 and an iPad Air to navigate the library is a cinch, and with a few taps you can create playlists, play a whole album, shuffle, and repeat. The ability to browse and select files from a vast music collection quickly becomes addicting. It is especially neat that the file type and resolution are displayed right on the app. Our entire library is tagged with metadata, and the MiND app displays artwork and other information to make the dream of easy navigation a reality.

As user-friendly as the navigation process is, what is most important is sound quality. The 180 MiND does not disappoint in this regard. As a matter of fact, the 180 MiND offers pound for pound some of the best digital sound experienced in the reference system.

Music emerges from amazingly dead-quiet backgrounds, and regardless of resolution, well-mastered material has a palpable presence. There is a sense of space to recordings that one generally finds in upper-tier digital.

One of the 180 MiND's greatest strengths is allowing the music to flow gracefully with natural timing. Along with that, instrumental timbres are superbly presented, and acoustic music is especially well rendered. This is exemplified in the way the MiND handles selections from Blue Note's 192 kHz remasters of their classic catalog. Iconic albums by Sonny Rollins, Wayne Shorter, and McCoy Tyner sound wonderful, and you can practically see the tape spinning.

The MiND is no one-trick pony, and it essentially streams all genres of music with equal finesse. Everything from varied recent offerings from the Felice Brothers, Benjamin Booker, Quilt, Jason Mraz, Puss n Boots, Ty Segall, and Chrissie Hynde are loads of fun. That touches on what also makes a component great: its ability to become invisible, literally and figuratively, and just let the party continue. Being able to instantaneously throw together playlists at your whim and have instant access to your music is the definition of fun.

The 180 MiND delivers on the promise of computer audio in spades. And the clincher is that no computer is needed in the listening room. This may be the MiND's secret weapon: total physical isolation from consumer grade computers, hard drives, playback software. Remove noise from your source, and you win a big battle.

The MiND removes general angst from computer audio without the need to worry about computing platform, playback software, O/S updates, or interface. The only maintenance that was done during the review period was a firmware update, which was initiated by the push of a button and took all of ten minutes to complete.

Comparisons to more modest streamers prove definitive. The 180 MiND is superior sonically in just about every department, with more flesh and blood in the presentation, and a total absence of digital hash. This comes back full circle to Simaudio's purist approach, with no display or onboard DAC. The AES/EBU digital output also gives it a leg up, providing superior sound quality. The MiND is very stable, never dropping from my network, and ergonomically it is headache free.

If you are looking for a low-stress, plug-and-play, cost-effective way to stream your music files in virtually any format, the Simaudio MiND fits the bill. *(continued)*

It is an audiophile-grade streamer in every respect, letting you choose the DAC of your choice, so that is not a limiting factor to future system upgrades. Simaudio's own iOS app is brilliant, yet being DLNA/UPnP compliant, those feeling more geeky are certainly free to use the control app of your choice.

Whether you connect via cable or wireless network, the MOON 180 MiND gives you access to your digital music library, freeing you from direct interface with your computer. If budget permits, and you are seeking a one-box solution, the Neo 380D with the optional, onboard MiND module is tough to beat. And at the time of this publication, the Neo 380D will have been updated to be able to decode DSD.

The MOON 180 MiND is an easy recommendation. The 180 MiND will let you spend more time streaming tunes and less time in computer geekville. At $1,300 it offers excellent flexibility, future-proof design, and a small, elegant footprint. That is one neat trick. ●

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