

Simaudio Moon 110LP

Phono Stage

By Rich Teer



Simaudio is a Canadian high-end audio company that's been around for more than three decades. Their extensive product selection is split between two ranges: the cost-no-object Moon Evolution Series, and the more affordably-priced Moon Series. Between the two ranges there are numerous products, including

DACs, integrated amplifiers, pre- and power amplifiers, and phono stages.

There are three phono stages in Simaudio's current line up. At the top we find the recently-announced Moon 810LP Reference balanced dual-mono phono stage. In the middle is the Moon 310LP (and its optional outboard power

supply, the 320S); we reviewed the 310LP and 320S in issue 5 and were very favourably impressed. Last, but by no means least, is the entry-level Moon 110LP; it is the latter that is the subject of this review.

Technical Details

The Moon 110LP is a diminutive solid state phono stage, and replaces the previous generation's Moon LP3. It has one pair of single-ended inputs and one pair of single-ended outputs. It also features user-selectable gain, input loading resistance, and input loading capacitance. Unlike its bigger brothers, the 110LP offers only RIAA equalisation, but this is not likely to be a serious drawback for the majority of users.

The rear panel contains the gold-plated input and output RCA sockets, a gold-plated earth post, and an input socket for the 18 VDC power. The latter is implemented by a wall-wart power supply. It's no secret that I'm not a fan of wall-warts, but I understand that compromises must be made at this price level, and using a wall-wart is a cost-effective way of keeping potentially noisy mains filtering circuitry away from the sensitive amplification circuits. Talking of power: the 110LP is intended to be powered on semi-

permanently, so there is no mains switch.

The front panel, which is made from a 6 mm thick sheet of machined aluminum, is available with a silver or black anodised finish. It houses the blue power LED.

Inside the aluminum case is a single circuit board. The phono circuitry uses a dual-mono configuration and is implemented with high quality components. The dual-layer PCB features several sets of jumpers for each channel. It is these which are used to select the gain and loading options.

Setup and Listening

My reference cartridges are low output moving coil designs, which pretty much

dictated that I positioned the jumpers for 60 dB of gain, 0 pF of loading capacitance, and 100 Ohms of loading resistance.

Simaudio recommends leaving the 110LP powered on semi-permanently, so, with one or two brief exceptions to facilitate moving gear around, I left it powered up throughout the entire review period (this also helped build up the recommended 300 hours of break-in time). I also played dozens of records through the 110LP as background music before starting my serious listening.

Let the Music Play!

Having been very impressed with its bigger brother last year (the 310LP and 320S combo), I was very much looking

forward to listening to the 110LP. I wasn't disappointed: my first impressions of the 110LP were very positive. It has a very slightly laid back presentation (by which I mean that the soundstage is slightly further back behind the speaker plane than is usual in my system),



with details galore. As an example of the latter, during the finale of part one of Mike Oldfield's *Tubular Bells* [Virgin Records V2001], after the titular bells have finished, I could swear I heard some new subtle details in the left channel (specifically, a female chorus and some piano). Now, I grant that the Lyra Atlas cartridge is no doubt playing a large part in this, but I find this detail retrieval nonetheless impressive!

Talking of *Tubular Bells*, the jingling bells and tinkling piano were very clearly rendered. Unlike some other inexpensive phono stages, the 110LP doesn't limit the high frequencies. I find that a wide, flat, frequency response is really important for getting the sound of such instruments accurate (no doubt, something to do with reproducing the harmonics correctly). It is also important for convincingly reproducing fast transients, whose leading edges can be dulled by gear with a narrower bandwidth.

The 110LP also does a good job reproducing the bass. The bass guitar near the beginning of *Tubular Bells* can become a little bloated and one-note with lesser phono stages, but not the 110LP. Although I found the sound to be a little on the dark side, I didn't find this trait to be overly bothersome or intrusive.

Bass dynamics are impressive: the thunderous whacks of the bass drum and gong in *The Great Gate of*

Kiev from Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition* on *The Power of the Orchestra* [Analogue Productions/RCA Victor AAPC 2659-45] is a particularly good illustration of the 110LP's abilities in this area. Another good track for this sort of thing is Wagner's *Ride of the Valkyries* from the direct-to-disc [Sheffield Lab 7]. The brass has just the right amount of bite, and the triangle in the finale comes through nicely.

Imaging

Two imaging-related observations are in my *Tubular Bells* listening notes. The first is that the stage width isn't quite as wide as it is with some other, admittedly more costly, phono stages (for example, the Allnic H-1200). The second observation is the spatial delineation of the Nasal Choir was good, but not excellent.

Wanting to hear more of what the 110LP could do, I turned to another of my trusty test pieces: Prokofiev's *Lieutenant Kije* [Classic Records/RCA Victor LSC-2150]. The acoustic ambience of the recording venue is very apparent. Take, for example, the snare drum near the beginning of the piece. You can hear the initial sound coming from towards the rear left of the stage, followed very quickly by a duplicate of that sound being echoed from the rear wall, just right of centre.

Talking of *Lieutenant Kije*, the second movement, *Romance*, features a celeste. I like to use this track to see,

err, hear how a piece of equipment handles the upper frequencies. While it sounded fine using the 110LP, I did notice that I couldn't hear the air around the instrument as I can with more pricey phono stages.

Seeking a change from purely instrumental and classical music, I listened to *Wuthering Heights* from Kate Bush's debut album, *The Kick Inside* [EMI EMC 3223]. I can't believe how talented the young—she was only 19 when she recorded and released this album, and some of the songs on it were written when she was just 13—Bush was (and still is). On the right gear *Wuthering Heights* sends a shiver down my spine, but using the 110LP it wasn't to be. Don't get me wrong, the 110LP is very capable in the "hi-fi" sense, but in this instance the emotion just wasn't convincing. In the context of a \$600 phono stage, I don't consider this to be a major shortfall, and I'm not aware of any other similarly priced phono stage that does convey emotions convincingly.

Verdict

The Simaudio Moon 110LP phono stage is a great sounding, moderately priced phono stage. With adjustable input capacitance and resistance, ample gain for all but the lowest output MC cartridges, and good build quality in a choice of two finishes, it's impossible for me not to recommend a personal audition of this phono stage. One or two minor caveats aside, the

Moon 110LP is a phono stage that will please all but the most demanding vinyl lover: highly recommended!

Specifications

Description Solid state phono stage.

Frequency response 20 to 20,000 Hz \pm 0.5 db.

Crosstalk -97 dB (@ 1 kHz).

Gain 60 dB (MC), 40 dB (MM).

Distortion < 0.001% THD (20 to 20,000 Hz).

Input impedance 100 and 47k Ω .

Input capacitance 0 and 100 pF.

Phono equalisation RIAA.

Maximum input voltage 4.5 mV RMS @ 1 kHz (MC), 45 mV RMS (MM).

Signal to noise ratio 87 dB (MC), 104 dB (MM).

Dimensions (whd) 127 mm x 74 mm x 165 mm.

Weight 1.1 kg.

Finishes Silver and black anodised aluminum.

Serial number of unit reviewed M5814536.

Price CAD \$600.

Warranty One year non-transferable (ten years with registration).

Manufacturer

Simaudio

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Associated Equipment

Analogue source Forsell Air Reference Mk 2 turntable and arm.

Phono cartridge Lyra Atlas.

Phono stage Allnic Audio Labs H-1200.

Preamp Audio Research SP-9 Mk 2.

Power amplifiers PrimaLuna ProLogue Sevens.

Speakers MartinLogan Spires.

Cables Phono: Nordost Frey. Interconnects: Nordost Frey. Speaker: Nordost Frey. AC: stock.

Accessories Target and SolidSteel equipment stands; Mission Isoplat; Furman Elite 15-PFi power conditioner; Audio Physic cartridge demagnetiser; Acoustech carbon fibre brush; Last record and stylus cleaning products; Audio Additives digital stylus force gauge; Spin Clean Record Washer Mk II.