



Simaudio Moon Neo 340i X Integrated Amplifier Review



What is the Moon Neo 340i X?

The Simaudio Moon Neo 340i X is an integrated amplifier and the second most affordable of four models from the Canadian company. Moon is an interesting company because they manage to balance being impressively innovative in what they do while maintaining an aura of calm consistency that has seen them become a highly regarded brand in a bewildering variety of countries. Products we've tested like the Neo ACE and 230 HAD have sat very competitively in their respective categories but have brought a little more with them in specification terms at the same time.

The 340i X finds itself in a category that is undergoing a considerable state of flux. At this fairly rarefied price point over the £3,000 mark, amplifiers have not been undergoing as radical a level of function change as has been the case at lower price points but there is still a move for designs to start to absorb the functionality of source equipment – as evidenced by devices like the seriously capable Chord CPM2800MkII. It is perfectly possible to buy a stripped back 'classic' integrated for the same price that you can go and buy something that is within touching distance of an all-in-one in terms of functionality.

Moon has taken a typically distinctive approach to this and offers the Neo 340i X with the option of boards that turn it from a standard line level integrated amp into something rather more sophisticated. The review sample has the complete set fitted so we can see what that does for the performance and whether this is the best means of securing an amplifier that does exactly what you need in 2017.



Specifications

As it sits at its £3,800 asking price, the Moon is a conventional integrated amp but the basics are all there. The amplifier section is a Class A/B design producing 100 watts of power into an 8 ohm load at negligible distortion and this figure doubles into a 4 ohm load – engineering shorthand for ‘very well thought out.’ The power supply arrangements and generally comprehensive componentry that is present in all the relevant areas suggest that beyond the basic numbers, this is an amplifier that should be able to handle most things you throw it.

The preamp section of the Neo 340i X is also conventional in general specification but again, all the little details are there to ensure that it should deliver excellent performance. The volume control is via a conventional pot rather than rotary encoder or resistor ladder but the pot itself has a lovely action and maintains channel stability all the way down to minute volume levels which is has long been a benchmark of quality for such a device.

As standard, the 340i X has four RCA line inputs, an ‘MP3 in’ input on a 3.5mm connection on the front panel and a headphone amp. This might not be the most extensive list of connections you can buy for the money but when you sit back and consider the nature of most two-channel systems, it is sufficient. By way of comparison, my own system, when not augmented by review equipment has two sources and both of those in themselves handle multiple connections meaning that they themselves are input collation devices. I have no need for a vast selection of additional connections on the amp. You also get both a line out and a preout, the latter making a fair degree of sense when the number of power amp options that Moon makes are taken into account.



For many people, this will be quite sufficient but if it isn't, this is where the Neo 340i X gets interesting. If your preferred source equipment has a balanced output, you can specify a balanced input in addition to the line inputs already fitted. This becomes ‘B1’ on the amp's front panel display and operates as a true balanced differential circuit (although there is a degree of ambiguity as to whether the entire amp circuit operates in this fashion). Given that many digital sources at this price point operate to these principles (as indeed do a few phono stages), this is a useful connection to have.

Of course, if you fancy, you can reduce the work that the sources have to do. The next option is a digital board. This is a four input (two coax, one optical, one USB-B) board that is built around an ESS Sabre ESS9018K2M DAC and it grants the Neo 340i X the ability to decode most material up to and including vapourware like 11.2MHz DSD and 32/384kHz PCM. The legacy connections are ‘only’ capable of receiving 24/192kHz but again, for the most part this should be more than enough. These inputs augment the existing analogue ones meaning that the amp jumps to eight inputs (or nine if you've chosen the balanced one already).

The last board option doesn't augment the number of inputs but instead alters one of the RCA connections and turns it into a phono input. And an impressively flexible phono input too. You can choose between

moving magnet and moving coil gain settings and then if going for the latter, you can tweak loading, capacitance and specific gain settings to suit the cartridge you are using. These adjustments are made on the board itself so Simaudio recommends that you let your dealer do the legwork in this instance. Now, for 'enthusiasts' like me, this isn't ideal but the company's product line-up includes external models that are better suited for that particular niche. If you have a cartridge you are happy with, the internal board makes a lot of sense – particularly as based on the performance of the one in the Neo ACE, it is likely to pretty good.

Crucially, these boards aren't either/or. Any 340i X can be equipped with any combination of them depending on your needs and this doesn't have to be done at the time you buy either as retrofitting is entirely possible too. This means that your 340i X could join a conventional system and assume the roles and responsibilities of equipment over time if you needed. Going 'all in' at the start with all the boards raises the price to £4,500 which still compares well with key competition.



Design

Simaudio is like a number of companies at this price point and beyond in that they change their design aesthetic very slowly if at all. Given that there is precious little wrong with it, that's a good thing too. The 340i X uses the company's 'Neo' metalwork with the curved outer sections of the front panel. This adds a shelf presence to the design and breaks up what would otherwise be a fairly conventional box. A very well finished box though, in fact the 340i X is superbly finished and everything about the amp, from the travel on the volume control to the quality and solidity of the connections, suggests that plenty of thought and care has been lavished on this amp.

The controls are also good. A side effect of there being between four and nine inputs is that there can't easily be direct input selection but the input cycle is logical enough. It also gives Moon a good reason to use one of my favourite design trademarks of the brand. The 340i X has a split display – one side showing the input selection and the other the digital sample rate. This is in a red VFD type display that I think looks fantastic. It is easy to read from a distance, has just the right level of brightness and is a visual recogniser to the company's products. Not everyone who has seen it is such a fan but you can always turn it off. Another option not present on this review sample (but can be seen in the pics on the Neo ACE review) is the option to have a split black/silver finish. This is distinctive and I personally think it looks excellent and would be what

I'd choose if I were going for one. The black as seen here is also a standard finish, whilst all silver is also an option.

Against this, there's very little to be critical of. I'm not the world's biggest fan of the supplied 'CRM-3' remote – the buttons are all a little too similar in low light – and the distance between the RCA inputs of the phono stage and the ground post is quite long for some cables but that's about the sum of it. I'm also not completely sold on the speakers staying active when a headphone jack is inserted until switched off via separate switch – it seems designed to annoy partners who have gone to bed. Otherwise this is a very simple and forgiving device to live with day to day and, in most regards, is no more demanding than a mainstream affordable integrated.



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How was the Neo 340i X tested?

The Neo 340i X turned up as a system of components comprising a VPI Prime turntable and Totem Sky standmounts on their matching stands. These were all connected to one another and an IsoTek Evo 3 Sigmas Mains conditioner. The phono stage arrived pre configured for a Goldring Legacy moving coil phono stage at my request and has been tested connected to the Prime and a Roksan Xerxes 20 Plus. Some additional speaker testing has been undertaken with a pair of Neat Momentum 4i floorstanders and the digital board has been checked against my resident Naim ND5 XS streamer and XP5 XS power supply. Material used has included lossless and high res FLAC and AIFF, Tidal, Spotify and Tidal as well as vinyl.

Sound Quality

The review sample had already accrued a number of hours prior to arriving and it was a simple business to get on with listening straightaway – made simpler by the way that the 340i X goes about making music. One of the most immediately arresting aspects of the performance is that the Moon deploys its considerable power in an impressively subtle way. Make no mistake, this is an amplifier that can take pretty much any speaker at a remotely similar price and have pretty much total control over it but the manner in which this happens is engagingly subtle and refined.



That refinement is underpinned with real authority though. The opening of Underworld's Dirty Epic has a sort of null bass tone that strikes at regular points. Even through the relatively compact Totem Sky, the way that the Neo 340i X delivers this is, well, epic. It is bass that can really only be delivered by a powerful amplifier with plenty of current and the ability to properly control the drivers in question. Everything that you play has this same calm authority and what makes this more notable is that if you play something where gigantic slabs of bass really aren't wanted, there's nary a trace of this latent power to be found.

What you will find instead is a presentation that is pretty much a textbook definition of 'realistic.' The manner in which this comes about is a subtle one but listening to Happiness is Easy by Talk Talk, there is the increasing realisation that everything sounds unforced, natural and believable. In fact these three words crop up time and time again in my listening notes across a variety of material. The Simaudio simply delivers a performance that is perfectly pitched to the requirements of that particular piece of music. It isn't a rock amp or a classical amp – it does in fact make those terms seem pointlessly specific.



Switch to the digital board and very little changes. Compared to the dark but very refined presentation of the Naim, the ESS based board has a fractionally brighter and more forward presentation but this is not to the extent where you are likely to find it becomes an issue. The soundstage becomes a little wider and more expansive but conversely there is a fractional tail off in that phenomenal bass response. It might be fair to say that there are external digital options that can outperform this board – not least from Moon itself – but because you aren't paying for casework and power supplies, it has to be seen as serious value for money as well as extremely convenient. Adding something like an Auralic Aries Mini – which has a USB connection that could talk directly to the Moon's USB and can act as its own server, would see you possessed of a very capable digital section indeed.

These comments apply doubly to the phono stage which is an absolute gem. There is an element of confirmation bias here as using it with a VPI Prime – the only turntable to wear a Reference Status badge – is unlikely to result in poor performance but direct comparisons to my very capable Cyrus Phono Signature suggest that the internal module of the Moon is able to keep it in sight which for something that is substantially cheaper is no mean feat. The single most impressive attribute of the phono section is that it genuinely acts as a gain stage, imparting no discernible character on the wonderful performance of the Neo 340i X. If you like what the Moon does via the RCA inputs, provided that your cartridge in turn doesn't do anything radically different, you'll have a phono input that effortlessly mimics the performance of the amp itself.



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Conclusion

Some products arrive for review and their definable character makes an immediate impression on the character of everything they come into contact with. It's then a matter of establishing whether this character gets in the way of the music itself or at least if it will appeal more to some people than others. This is normal enough – in the absence of an audio equivalent of DCI or Rec.2020, there's no absolute standard by which we judge these things. If such a standard did exist though, it wouldn't be hard to imagine that the Moon Neo 340i X would be seriously close to it. In standard form, this is an outstandingly capable amp that will reflect the behaviour of the equipment you use with it. You then have the choice of extending its capabilities to best suit your needs with a selection of well thought out and – when judged against rivals – very fairly priced upgrade options. This is a seriously clever amplifier that should delight anyone lucky enough to be shopping for such a device at this price point and for this reason, the Moon Neo 340i X comes Highly Recommended.

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SCORE

OUT OF 10

Pros

- Outstandingly accurate and involving sound
- Extremely flexible
- Superbly built

Cons

- Inputs are slightly awkwardly arranged
- Remote is a little congested

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The Rundown

