

MOON by Simaudio North 791 and 761

by Editor July 2023



Canadian audio electronics expert MOON by Simaudio has revamped its top-end range. The new North Collection by MOON is a six-strong line of electronics. The 791 and 761 tested here are the first two North designs out of the starting gate. They will ship in September. The 125W 641 integrated amplifier and 681 Network Player will follow in October. Finally, the top 891 streaming DAC preamplifier and 300W 861 stereo power amplifier are expected by the end of the year.

Product prices begin at \$/£11,000 for the MOON 641 and \$/£12,000 for the MOON 681. The 791 and 761 previewed here cost \$/£14,000 and \$/£16,000, respectively. Ballpark prices for the 891 and 861 are \$/£25,000 and \$22,000/£23,000 respectively.

MOON North: The Joy of Six!

MOON's North project comes with a lot of product consolidation. North's sextet of products replace many devices in the current MOON line-up. A few specialist products will likely join the line later. These should include a top-end phono stage and a power supply. However, a product like the 791 acts as a line preamplifier, network player, DAC and phono stage in one.



This is not distracting people with a new look while slimming down the product line. North distils what was good from previous designs while adding new technology and industrial design. Although the most visible difference is the move to a colour display screen on the 791, the amps bristle with new tech.

MOON's 891 also benefits from the brand's new MOON Damping Base to reduce vibration. Meanwhile, the whole North range underwent a complete cabinet redesign, with the logo on the top plate acting as a chimney. In the process, this made the whole top of the chassis screwless. The MOON 761 also uses the company's new MOON Distortion Cancelling Amplifier circuit. This is claimed to reduce distortion to 'previously unattainable' levels. A new MOONLink also connects each product, allowing more intelligent control functionality between products.

The bridges connecting MOON products are surprisingly popular and retained here. Different bridges reflect the redesigned layout, meaning you can only stack existing MOON products with MOON North products if you use a rack. However, the North products look good on a shelf with their redesigned feet and more rounded look. The all-black and all-silver variants of MOON products are not carried North; from here on, it's the 'panda' look of silver edges with black centre panels.

It's all about volume

In speaking with MOON's team, it's clear there is some obsession over volume controls. Most engineers consider the volume control a log jam in an amplifier's design. MOON started from scratch, using an optical encoder that sends volume position data to an analogue circuit at the ideal point in the signal path for attenuation. This results in a claimed error of less than 0.1dB between channels and between volume steps. It also lets MOON remote control the volume using the Bluetooth-controlled BRM-1 handset with its OLED screen.





MOON's MiND 2 app helps a lot here, and the North models build on its strengths. Audio enthusiasts like obsessiveness, but these are products for a broader appeal. The MOON North range is simple to use but not dumbed down. The user interface is a vast improvement over the 'Big Red LED' of its predecessors. Installation is painless. Navigation is intuitive and quick. Operation is stable and bug-free. The only strike against the 791 and 761 is trying to move 36kg of power amplifier around without noticeable handles. This is why I am writing this hunched over in a chair, waiting for the painkillers to kick in instead of making a video.

Don't blame the MOON

I've always liked MOON products for their blamelessness. That's not faint praise. Getting out of the way of the music is more complicated than it seems, but MOON does it well. The amps don't exaggerate or underplay their hand. Music sounds good in all the right ways on MOON without accents and highlights. Stereo separation is good. The dynamic range is great. Detail retrieval is excellent. Vocal articulation is first-rate. And everything hangs together well in a musically entertaining manner. And those perceptions seem hopelessly outdated 10 seconds after hearing what MOON North amps can do.

This is a change of gear, a step change in performance. MOON North products still have that honesty and integrity to the sound. They remain blameless. But now they take that performance to the next level. And about 10 seconds into playing the New MOON, you understand the obsession with volume control. From a whisper to a scream, the amplifiers have consistency. This, too, is rare; amps that play loud often 'fall apart' at lower volumes.



Meanwhile, gentle sonic souls often lack the guts to wield a full orchestra playing Mahler or ear-bursting Motorhead. The precision of the MOON North 791/761 combination means you can play late-night jazz at keeping the neighbours' sweet levels. It also means you can send your Apple Watch into noise-warning apoplexy.

We want it all, and we want it now!

Things would be good if the MOON North 791 and 761 were merely last season's models with better volume control. But that's barely the start of things. Everything is improved. Everyone has a sonic trigger, whether soundstage, absence of noise floor, dynamic contrasts, rhythmic precision, or what have you. Unless your sonic motivation is "I'd like it more veiled and distorted", what pushes your buttons is likely dealt with here.

Above all this, however, the MOON North models make music sound like fun. They are incredibly detailed, and precise and patently come from a place of obsession. Yet, they don't sound sterile or overly accurate. Often, I find amplifiers that are extremely precise to be like that guy on a quiz night, the one that knows what brand of shoes Miles Davis wore but is only interested in music for its trivia. Like its predecessors, the MOON 791/761 combo is not for that guy.

These amps live up to what MOON wants to do with its North collection; these are products that satisfy the hardened audio enthusiast yet have an effortless ease of use that makes them reach far beyond traditional audio listeners. Finally, the casual and intense listeners have something they can enjoy on their terms and with each other. I think what made these amplifiers particularly attractive is they work well together and make a sound that you couldn't put a price to. They could easily have cost several times more and unless you wanted more power (with the resulting headroom that brings with larger loudspeakers in larger rooms)

the performance was doing all you want from a system. And if you want bigger, then going north on the MOON North catalogue will provide, right up into the thin-air of stratospheric audio.



It's easy to dismiss such products as 'tweeners'; the MOON 791/761 duo is not so affordable it could be purchased on a whim, but nor is it so expensive that you could swap a set for a reasonably nice house. However, another way of looking at the same product is it's in the Goldilocks zone; not compromised in any way, but not so effete and refined that it becomes an amplifier in search of a system. Once again... blameless. And blameless is good.

What blameless means is you can flit from source to source and from track to track with abandon, you can move from silence to a roar back again. You can play music with a paper thin 'everything louder than everything else' dynamic range or play tracks that will threaten the longevity of your loudspeaker cones. And it does it all. The days of sins of omission or commission should be behind us and in the MOON North that is what we finally get.



I realised a fascinating thing when listening to the MOON the first time (just before I received it for review, in a press conference). We had some solo play time and several of us sat round and just played music. Not many were dyed-in-the-wool audiophiles, but just enjoyed music in all sorts of different styles and genres. Their emotional triggers for what yanks their musical chains were all different, and yet all were satisfied. Some wanted a good sense of rhythm for danceable sound. Others... loud, party sound. Some more, soundstaging, dynamic range, vocal articulation, detail, inner detail and small-scale dynamics within a larger soundfield. All wanted an interface that could be quickly and effortlessly navigated with 'a few' beers inside them, and all wanted to play with that fun remote control.

Play time

Normally, at such an event, 'play time' like this is inversely proportional to the actual performance; something that ticks most of the boxes, you get a few minutes. Something that ticks most, you might get half an hour. The PR people had to bribe listeners with more booze and food to prize them away from the MOON amps after a couple of hours of very varied listening. That it ticks all those boxes for all those people, and we all kept coming back for more is a torture test of audio; way more so than me pointing to the same old recordings time and again.

When I got them home, I rolled out those same old recordings and wasn't disappointed at all. It sailed through Joyce DiDonato's perfect pipes singing bel canto opera [Stella Di Napoli, Erato] as it did making a solid, three dimensional soundstage with Anouar Brahim [Blue Maqams, ECM], some earth-moving graunch with Rammstein [Reise, Reise, Universal], speaker-loosening deep bass from Trentemøller [The Last Resort, Poker Flat] or wall-shaking dynamics from Rachmaninov's Symphonic Dances [Zinman, Baltimore SO, Telarc].



But this only gets you half the way there. The joy of the MOON 791 and 761 happens when you begin to hit Tidal or Qobuz hard, and are rewarded at every step. Out came 'Therefore I Am' by Billie Eilish [Happier Than Ever, Darkroom/Interscope] and on out to 'Aurora' by Björk [Vespertine, One Little Independent] and that took me down some dark and weird roads of murder ballads, dance music and eventually 'Coffin Fodder' by extreme metal band Cradle of Filth [Nymphetamine, Road Runner]. Because the MOONs let me. They let nothing get in the way, from a sonic or operational perspective, and the MOON MiND app just gets you to what you want to play, when you want to play it.

The crazy part of all this is this is what we should get from every amplifier, but often there is curation or editorialising taking place somewhere. Maybe an amp isn't quite as dynamic or as detailed as it should be. Unless you view the MOON 791/761 in absolute terms, comparing a £14,000 streaming preamp with an £80,000 dedicated player, or a £16,000 power amp with something extremely beefy and costs as much as a mid-price BMW, it's all you need.

And finally...

There's one last thing. MOON has a reputation for long, slow running-in times. The electronics initially sound good but get much better over the weeks and months. MOON North changes that. While the review samples arrived fully run-in, they settled down fast and sounded good out of the box, and 48 hours later they were about 99% there. There will be an improvement over the first few months of use, but MOON North settles in quicker than its predecessors!

MOON's North launch duo – the 791 and 761 – are impressive, although I have it unshakably in my head that the 761 is the preamp and 791 the power amp. Regardless, they combine flexibility and ease of operation with some clever design aspects (both product and electronics), making a product that redefines the high-end even more than MOON did with the previous range. Unless you like a separate box for each operation and big red LEDs, I can't see why you wouldn't want to head North.