

# Review MOON North Collection 791/761 Pre/Power Amplifier



Some may be surprised to discover that Simaudio – the company behind the MOON brand – has been around for over forty years. It first appeared as Sima Electronics in 1980, under founder, audio and music engineer Victor Sima. However, were there ever to be a MOON museum, it wouldn't be packed with myriad components displaying new versions launched every year or two. Rather, the Canadian brand has always intended its products to find long-lasting, loving stays with its owners marked in periods of multiple years, not months.

The long period between new products underlines the company's philosophy, so when one actually comes along, it's quite a meaningful moment in the great hi-fi scheme of things. This time round, however, MOON has excelled itself and launched an entire new family of separates – the six-strong North Collection.

## HIT THE NORTH

The North Collection covers 600, 700 and 800 series components and sits atop the Montreal-based company's product family tree. This puts the new MOON 791 streaming DAC preamplifier and 761 200W stereo power amplifier right in the centre of the new range, bookended by the 125W 641 integrated amplifier and 681 network player, and flagship 891 streaming DAC preamplifier and 300W 861 stereo power amplifier.

It has been more than just a case of tweaking a few things on the previous offerings, giving the six units a catchy collective name, and waiting for the money to roll in. Instead, MOON has consolidated its product range, making it less baffling for potential purchasers, as well as adding lashings of new technology and garnishing it with some very tasty industrial design.



My appetite had already been whetted at an exclusive listening session (above) before the system was flown out for the Munich High End Show earlier in the year. The subjects of this review are what MOON considers its 'sweet spot' pairing of the 791 and 761, a streaming preamplifier and stereo power amplifier. However, there is, of course, a noticeably strong family resemblance across the new North Collection...

## NEW MOON ON MONDAY

The two most obvious external differences in the new range are a fresh cabinet design and the introduction of 4.3-inch full-colour graphic displays instead of the red dot matrix-style LEDs. I still have a soft spot for the latter on my 680D as it is so legible, but I understand that the modern world is calling the 791. I am a digital immigrant in a world of digital natives who have been raised on hi-res touchscreens. They're the kind of folk who, should they ever come across a 3.5-inch floppy disk, will automatically assume that someone has cutely 3D-printed a save icon. So this is MOON addressing the next generation of listeners, as well as upgrading the rest of us to a twenty-first century way of doing things!



Thankfully, being able to read the screen from across the room is no longer an issue, as the streaming preamp comes bundled with one of the sexiest remote controls I have ever held – and I own Gryphon products! The Bluetooth-connected, USB-recharged BRM-1 handset sports an OLED screen, relaying important information right to the palm of your hand. To say MOON is fanatical about things is an understatement. The guys and gals in Montreal also like a drink, it seems, as the BRM-1 has a neat trick of being able to channel any spilt liquid safely away from its critical parts – this makes me wonder how many beverage-based accidents happened during the testing phase that warranted this particular aspect of its design?



While speaking with members of the MOON team, it soon became clear that this obsessive interest in volume controlling is more than a passing fancy. Most engineers consider the volume a place where compromises must be made or face the bean-counter's wrath. However, I'm told that the Canadian company 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. I am reliably informed that this approach results in a claimed error of less than 0.1dB between channels and volume steps.



The North range sees a complete cabinet redesign, with the only colour option offered being the two-tone black with silver shoulders – so the all-silver and all-black options are now gone, as are the MOON aluminium bridges for stacking components. The new components have been designed to be sat individually on shelves with the new large logo on the top plate acting as the centre of a cooling vent. This redesign also results in the top of the 791, for instance, being entirely screwless, adding to the overall premium finish of the new series.



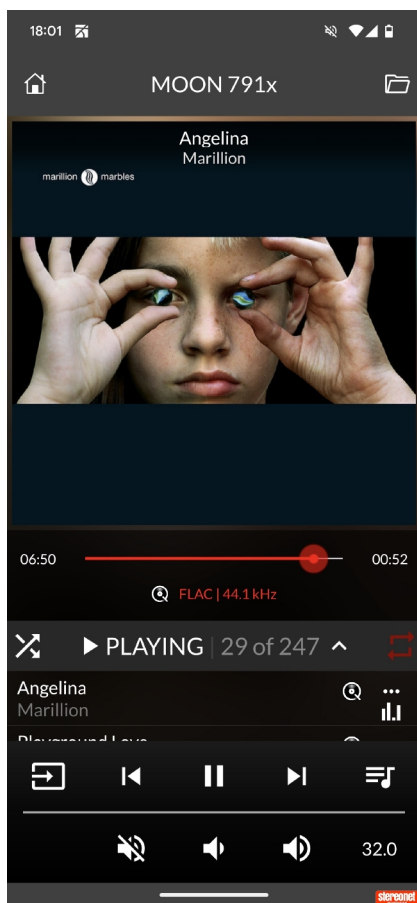
The side cooling fins have also been aesthetically enhanced and gently curve vertically for another premium touch. However, it soon became apparent that, after moving the preamp and partnering power amp from the doorway into my listening area, MOON has yet to enter the field of weight-saving. With the preamp weighing 18kg and the power amp a hernia-taunting 35kg, it's a bit of a struggle to move. Thankfully, though, MOON's nifty packaging helps somewhat in the installation.



In terms of the electronic design, the 791 uses the company's new Moon Distortion Cancelling Amplifier circuit, which is claimed to reduce distortion to 'previously unattainable' levels, no less. Total harmonic distortion and noise is listed as 0.0004%, and intermodulation distortion is said to be 0.0003%. The signal-to-noise ratio on the analogue preamplifier side is put at 120dB. If you pay attention to tech specs, you'll have to agree that this is impressive stuff.



The 791 offers six digital inputs, including AES-EBU, S/PDIF, optical and USB Audio, an HDMI ARC port, and one set of the two RCA pairs goes to an MM/MC phono stage alongside a balanced XLR set. There are also RCA and XLR outputs. Although the 791 network player and preamp combines plenty in its lovely single casement, there's no provision for headphones, so my 430HAD can rest easy for now. The latest MOONLink is onboard and allows more intelligent control between MOON products.



User-friendliness has further been boosted thanks to the company's MiND app. Although the 791 is Roon Ready, using MiND 2 for streaming playback and its partnering mobile app proved seamless and bug-free across various streaming services and my NAS digital library.



## THE LISTENING

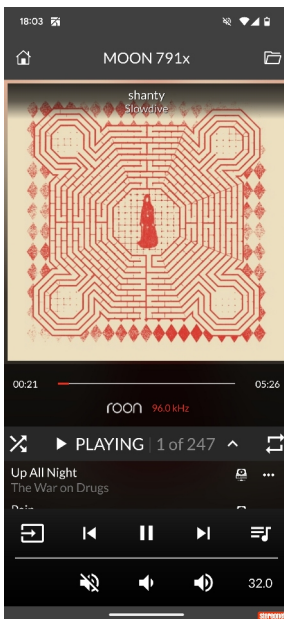
The 791 and 761 pre/power amplifiers both go about their jobs entirely without fanfare. There is no jumping up and down, basking in the limelight, and no showy attempt to grandstand when making music. Instead, you get an extremely high-resolution sound that's all about what's on the original recording rather than what the replay equipment is or isn't doing. What's so impressive about the 791 and 761 pairings is the evenhandedness, almost nonchalance, of this high-end two-box streaming system.

It is instantly evident what MOON engineers were aiming at when listening to Noordpool Orchestra's take on Weird Fishes as part of its Radiohead, A Jazz Symphony album. The 42-piece jazz big band with additional strings and woodwind gives this typically melancholic and introspective piece an almost lounge vibe. Still, there is no mistaking that the MOON combo is working its magic, as heaps of detail are handed to the listener despite the laid-back nature of the music being played. Similarly, you notice the incredibly low noise floor and outstanding spatial separation between the instruments in the well-ordered soundstaging. These are all aspects that have been improved over the 680D, and to my ears, it even betters the likes of Linn's Selekt DSM Edition Hub. However, the MOON doesn't have the option of a DSP surround upgrade for Dolby Digital TrueHD and DTS-HD Master Audio like the Linn has if that is a deal-breaker.



Comparison between MOON 791 (top) and MOON 680D (bottom) rear panels

The MOON pairing really has a knack with vocals, too. The articulate delivery of *The World Is Looking For You* by Aldous Harding is brittle but in all the right delicately spine-tingling ways. Streaming the track via Qobuz, the 791 imparted the soul-baring intimacy of the singer and acoustic guitar. Furthermore, none of this was lost during a late-night listening session with the volume turned down – something that not all amplifiers are happy with, especially ones that love to rock.



Speaking of which, using an Aidas Malachite Silver moving coil cartridge at the business end of a VPI Prime turntable to investigate the grooves of TOOL's *Fear Inoculum* album, there is no shortage of power from the 761 whilst playing *Pneuma* at levels that my mum still thinks is part of a phase I am going through.



There's a lovely smoothness to the power being delivered to my Audiovector R 6 Arreté loudspeakers, still with impressive punch and transient response. However, with the 791 plugged into my Gryphon Essence power amp, I feel there is more grip and urgency from the same track if you are prepared to wait for the Class A Gryphon to warm up a while. The 761, whilst still getting warm, doesn't seem to reach the room-roasting temperatures of the Gryphon. The MOON does have some clever tech onboard, which enables it to run as efficiently as possible while still giving you outstanding performance.



Playing vinyl through the 791 and out through the Essence demonstrated just how transparent this preamplifier is, which also gives some rationale as to why MOON has included a streaming DAC and phono stage into this fully-featured preamp. This is because if anything in your source chain isn't up to scratch, then this pre/power combination will tell you all about it – in its politely self-effacing Canadian way, of course.

stereonet



stereonet  
INTERNATIONAL

Band On The Run by Wings in hi-res shows how the MOON amplification can pick its way through various musical styles and shine a light on them equally. It's very deft in the dynamics department, going from quiet to loud and back again at the drop of a hat. The quiet sections draw the listener in, while the more raucous parts are relayed joyfully. Yet this is done with consummate smoothness and effortlessness, with seemingly endless amounts of power available on tap. What's not to love?



stereonet  
INTERNATIONAL

It's a formidable pairing, then. Yet, for all its accuracy and forensic detail retrieval, this combo never loses sight of what it's really here to do – which is to make music magic. It can unpick the most gossamer threads of a musical work and let the listener marvel at the production, but as Irving Mills once so wisely wrote, it doesn't mean a thing if it ain't got that swing. The MOON combination never forgets this.

## THE VERDICT

MOON's new 791 is truly a North star, and is more than ably backed up by its 761 stablemate. The latter delivers punch and power whilst maintaining composure and control thanks to clever tech. However, for me, the network streaming preamplifier shines as the best at its price point and then some. When companies bundle a phono stage and a streamer into a preamp, you sometimes get the feeling that compromises have been made for commercial expedience. Not so here, however.

The MOON pairing offers a seminal combination of performance, functionality, build and finish. So much so that, to my mind, it's a bargain even at its elevated price. Try finding three separate boxes that match the quality and capability of this system at or near the price. It may be expensive, but you're buying yourself years of musical enjoyment – and hi-fi that won't become obsolete for a very long time.

