



Sim Audio Moon 260D Neo and 250i Neo

by Roy Gregory, Oct 13, 2014



Some products arrive with a bang. Suddenly they seem to be everywhere. They are flavour of the month, the new big thing, on the front cover of every magazine, and in the window of every store (real or virtual). Then – more often than not – they disappear almost as quickly, although this time it's not so much of a bang, more of a whimper; brushed aside by the latest new kid on the block. It's a disturbing tendency that's driven in no small part by the audio magazines, always looking for a hot new story. But this rate of change is also increasing, driven by the faster tempo and shorter product lifespans, dictated by computer audio and its association with a bigger, faster-moving global consumer market that dwarfs our little niche industry. The problem is that in many (not all) cases, these high-profile products are, if not best avoided then at least approached with caution. Why? For the simple fact that their ultimate quality, reliability, and longevity remain unproven. Most of us keep our purchases for longer than the shelf-life of an audio magazine, so staying power matters. The products to buy are the ones that don't just deliver, but deliver long-term (not just in a 30 minute demonstration) and go on delivering, year in, year out. Products, in fact, just like Sim Audio's Moon series electronics...

The first generation Moon integrated amp graced the pages of *Hi-Fi+* as long ago as Issue 13 and it was a product that we grew to love and trust. "Grew to" because it took an unconscionable length of time to run-in and reveal its true musical worth as well as its astonishing all-rounder status. It was a lesson well learnt and one that is just as crucial in the case of the latest Moon electronics, dubbed the Neo series. These products might be three generations on from that original integrated amp, but the DNA is strong, the line of descent clear and unbroken. The musical qualities that made the i5 so engaging, entertaining, and satisfying are all present and correct – and then some.



Of course, times have changed since Issue 13 and these days, few companies offer amplification alone. Moving from the slow developmental pace of solid-state amplifier technology to the ever-changing moods of CD replay came as a culture shock to some, a fatal blow to others, but it's a step that Sim Audio took in their stride. What we have here, in the shape of the 260D Neo CD player/DAC and 250i Neo amp are their current take on that original recipe, serious audio for the budget conscious audiophile – not starter level products, but equipment that does everything well enough to present a credible challenge to far more expensive products, a performance hurdle or benchmark those more esoteric offerings will need to clear.

Under the rather elegant skin of the new Neo casework (available in black, silver or parti-coloured combination) the 250i I is still recognisably the same beast that we first reviewed – just updated in terms of connectivity. As well as the now obligatory front-panel 3.5mm stereo jack input (for portable music sources) there is also a pair of Sim Link sockets to connect to other Moon units (excluding Frank Zappa's daughter) for system control. Besides that you get five line inputs, a robust 50 Watt rated output, beefy binding posts for your speakers, a headphone connection that will shame many a dedicated headphone amp, and all the necessary IR and RS232 socketry for system integration purposes. In other words, everything the modern listener wants and nothing that they don't. The 250i's bigger brother adds internal phono and DAC options, a balanced input and twice the power – at a price – but that's not the point of the basic model. This is the chopped down, café-racer – as much performance as Moon can pack in for the price – and doesn't it show?



But before we get to that, let's take a look at the 260D. The market for bare-bones CD players has all but disappeared – at least at this price level – and the 260D reflects that fact. This is best considered as a DAC with an in-built transport, a format first pioneered by Wadia and even more relevant today. The 260D offers two S/PDIF inputs on RCA as well as optical and USB inputs to its 192kHz capable, 32-bit DAC. Obvious attention to detail is demonstrated by the transport, which uses a sophisticated mechanical-isolation mount, shared with the company's (much) more expensive players. It's pervasive influence can be found in the galvanic isolation of the USB input, which protects the sensitive DAC circuitry from the 'dirty' ground of a computer source. You get a choice of balanced or single-ended

outputs (but no internal volume control) while for those who need it, the 260 can also be bought as a transport only, offering the same choice of RCA or XLR digital outputs as the CD player. To further underline their up-to-the-minute credentials, both the 260D and the 250i are also compatible with Moon's MIND multi-room network streaming solution, while in terms of matching, the amp will happily drive a host of partners from the likes of KEF, Focal, or Living Voice, the latter's Avatar IBX offering a particularly successful pairing.

But despite the sheer range of features and facilities loaded into these products (a modern necessity), in many ways the secret of the Moon unit's lasting appeal lies in their dedication to getting the fundamentals right. You can see it in the heavily engineered power supplies, the use of proprietary output devices, and the careful attention to noise performance. But it's most visible of all in the shape of that new casework. Not just a pretty face, the multi-part Neo casework offers superior self-damping and mechanical performance to the previous, more prosaic metalwork. It doesn't just look better, but sounds better, too – considerably better should you bother to do the comparison. Of course, there are other changes too, so it's not a straight like for like shoot out, but the Neos do sound markedly superior to their predecessors across the board – and in some cases that can only be down to the casework. One change that's not so great is the result of green directives from the EU. Leave the CD player on for 20 minutes and it will automatically switch into standby mode. Now, given that these products take forever to run in and also warm up, that's not ideal – at least not if you care about sound quality. If you've spent this much on your system, do yourself a favour, leave both units permanently powered and find a different, better way to save the planet. Fortunately, you can do that by disabling the auto standby feature (press the Program button on the CD for two seconds) and I'd suggest you do so as soon as it's installed. Bizarrely the amp doesn't suffer from the same affliction, but then nobody ever said that EU legislation had to make sense. Last piece of the jigsaw is the simple, handheld system remote. It ain't pretty but it does work and for something with so many buttons on it, it's surprisingly intuitive. Again, it's more evidence that the designer has spent the money where it matters: namely on long-term rather than on first impressions. When people choose audio equipment, they start by looking at it, then touching it, and finally they might give it a listen – which helps explain all those ridiculously ostentatious remote controls. The Moon Neos are all about performance. They are intended for owners who actually listen rather than just look and perhaps the clearest indication of that is that simple

Mind you, on first switch-on you might not want to listen. From new the Neos will sound bland, flat, grey, and gutless – but give them time. As they run in and warm up they gain presence and purpose shape, and colour, a sinuous sense of rhythmic flow, and an easy, unforced sense of musical structure. Even when warm it's possible to mistake their lack of edge or glare for warmth and rounding, but that would be a mistake. These Moon units might have their faults, but a lack of leading edge precision, pace, and dynamic resolution are not among them. What's missing is the exaggeration and clipped notes, the artificial sense of speed and zip that typify so much of the opposition, a sound that's designed to impress short-term and in comparison to the completion in a quick AB demonstration. Instead, the unforced presentation of the Moons sounds almost relaxed or laidback – right up to the point where you get serious dynamic demands and then things happen with a body, presence, and suddenness that will take you by surprise. Actually listen and you'll realise that there's no shortage of detail; it's just that the CD player and amp aren't firing it at you like a manic Gatling gunner on speed. Instead, they're giving the music time and space to happen on its own terms, set its own pace, and establish its natural dynamic envelope. If the first test of musical honesty is putting the music ahead of sound, it's a test the Neos pass with flying colours.



Of course, rhythm and structure are the foundation stones on which any decent, musically communicative system rests. But the Moon Neos go way beyond the basics. The Ruth Moody album *These Wilder Things* (True North TND577) offers up the perfect example, the rapid attack and complex, shifting patterns of its blue-grass tinged arrangements, fragile vocals and banjo presenting exactly the sort of audio obstacle course that finds lesser systems (as well as some far more ambitious ones) tripping over their own feet. On the Moons the tracks sail by unobstructed, uncongested, unimpeded. The system has enough confidence in its sense of pace and place, is responsive enough and agile enough to allow the music its own space – and its head. The constantly shifting tempo of the opening track is a case in point; the speed and attack of the banjo is never blunted, while the sudden flurries of backing notes drive the accelerations and power the song's sense of emphasis and purpose – as well as heightening the contrasts with the halts and hesitations. The performance is so sure-footed you can almost see the steps. The fabulously sparse cover of 'Dancing In the Dark' takes things a whole stage further, the almost metronomic rhythm anchoring the flexibility, phrasing and dynamic shifts in the vocal, the hi-fi equivalent of simultaneously rubbing your stomach with one hand and patting your head with the other.

But the real key to the Moon's performance lies not in the definition and placement of leading edges, as important as that is. Combine that easy, unforced sense of musical position with a corresponding sense of length (or sustain) and now you're talking. It's why Ruth Moody's banjo can dovetail so effortlessly and effectively with the fiddle backing. But, factor in the solid sense of body and presence that the Neos invest in the music and you arrive at the jewel in their crown: their remarkable ability to track not just dynamic range but density too. When backing instruments arrive, they're not just another sound in the stage, they're a physical presence, a broadening in the scale and power of the performance. Extrapolate that up to orchestral dynamics and now you're really cooking, with a really satisfying impression of many musicians but one big, complex instrument. This stability and effortless ability to respond to the scale of the performance – small and fragile or big and bombastic – is what makes the Moons so special, so engaging, so musically convincing and, in my experience, unique at their price.



If you want to pick holes in their performance you can point to a lack of spatial separation and absolute intimacy, a warm but subtly collapsed tonal palette, and a lack of physical volume to individual images. But to hear (or rather, notice) that you'll need to be comparing them directly to some pretty hefty kit. Yes, if you substitute the excellent Border Patrol P21, 300B push-pull integrated for the 250i then you'll gain in all areas – at the expense of having just one input and a considerably lighter wallet! In short, you can do better than the Moons, but any worthwhile upgrade is going to cost – a lot! Interestingly, if I were swapping out either unit, I'd go for the amp. The 260D is a quiet, unassuming, yet brilliant overachiever, one digital front-end that punches well above its weight. Clearly, Sim Audio have plenty of (well-placed) faith in their CD player/DAC as it is the sole disc spinner for the entire Neo range, right up to the 350P/400M pre/power combination

Ultimately, the reason for the 260D/250i's success is the oldest song in the book: doing the basics right and then adding some well-balanced superstructure. Bizarrely, in a world where balance (in every sense of the word) is everything, it seems to be the rarest of attributes. Where different is so often equated with better, engineering a single, standout ability into a product, lifting its performance in a single area seems to be the de facto strategy – partly because it is easily achieved. Improvements across the board are a far more difficult goal, yet that's exactly what Moon have always been about – which is why I started this review by mentioning the original i5 amplifier. Over the years the products have changed in appearance, as much to make them more affordable (the 600i and 700i are the aesthetic as well as spiritual descendants of that earlier integrated amp) but the essential philosophy has remained firmly in place with a clear evolutionary path, linking each subsequent iteration. New ranges from Moon are hardly an annual event, reflecting the care and consideration that goes into (as well as the difficulty of) that process. But the results are well worth waiting for. The Neo series takes up exactly where the previous models left off, instils the same sense of mechanical solidity and musical trust, and delivers the same engaging and satisfying performance. These Neos look better and sound better than their predecessors. They're more versatile and easier to use. Sim Audio have rubbed out one benchmark and replaced it with another.

The 260D might be the pick of this pairing, but you can't listen to a CD player without an amp and the the real beauty of these products is that their combined musical performance is significantly greater than the sum of the parts. Just add speakers and enjoy...



Technical Specifications 260D Neo

Type: CD Player/DAC

Digital Inputs: 2x S/PDIF (RCA); 1x TosLink Optical; 1x USB

Digital Outputs: 1x AES/EBU (XLR); 1x S/PDIF (RCA)

Analogue Outputs: 1pr balanced (XLR); 1pr single-ended (RCA)

Digital Conversion: 32bit (delivers 24bit/192kHz resolution on all inputs)

Dimensions (WxHxD): 429 x 86 x 333mm

Weight: 7.5kg

Technical Specifications 250i Neo

Type: Integrated amp

Inputs: 5x line-level (RCA); 1x line-level (front panel 3.5mm jack)

Outputs: 1x pre-out

Rated Output: 50 Watts/Ch (8 Ohms); 100 Watts/Ch (4 Ohms)

Dimensions (WxHxD): 429 x 86 x 366mm

Weight: 10.0kg