

Review: MOON 280D Streaming DAC

by Simon Wilce



I have been very fortunate to review some wonderful MOON equipment in the last few years. Starting with the all-in-one Neo ACE all the way up to the stunning 780D I have never been aurally let down, even the MOON 110 LP v2 phono pre-amplifier was a winner. This then is a look at the MOON 280D Streaming DAC, understated in the Moon by Simaudio way, it is a high performing functional piece of equipment that sticks to what it does and does not overcomplicate the business of streaming a digital source and converting it to an analogue signal.

Design

The MOON 280D is simply a streaming DAC with a wide variety of digital input sources and two analogue outputs, both XLR and RCA. There is no pre-amplifier in here, so it is a fixed output to your preamplification or integrated solution. Another thing to note is there is no headphone output.



Simaudio confirmed for me the MOON 280D is using the audiophile 2 channel ESS Sabre DAC ES9018K2M. Whilst this is of note Simaudio point out that the 'integration, engineering around the circuits, and optimization makes the greater difference'. On the digital input side, there is the usual array of options, the only thing missing, particularly for me, is a USB A driver so I can plug in my 24-bit collection locally, but I can manage. There is USB B for a windows/MAC connection. Other digital inputs

include 2 S/PDIF RCA style inputs, 2 TosLink optical inputs as well as Qualcomm® aptX™ audio for Bluetooth. Finally, you are plugged into Moon's MiND 2 streaming platform which runs well on Android or iOS. The MOON 280D Streaming DAC is Roon ready and supports Spotify Connect, AirPlay2 as well as Tidal Masters, Deezer Hi-Fi and Qobuz Sublime+ Music Services. Internet radio is also available via Tune-In. The 280D supports MQA decoding and can support multiroom playback. It has native DSD support to 256 (Quad DSD) and PCM to 384kHz via USB (32-bit on USB only). In respect of specifications, there is little more to say other than the THD value at 1kHz seems to be vanishingly small at 0.001% and the full frequency response stretches from 2Hz all the way to 100kHz! The streaming module is accessible through Ethernet or WiFi.



Quality

The MOON 280D has the look you would expect from Moon, not flashy with a plain front and no album art or text type display. The front panel allows you to manually choose inputs and then it reassuringly tells you via LED indicators your bit rate up to 384kHz and your DSD rates up to DSD 256. It would be nice to have an MQA LED but the App is perfectly capable if we're being non-critical. Quality, in my experience, from Simaudio is assured and reassuringly, on inserting the ethernet cable, the 280D updated itself to the latest software release without fuss. I have a remote control which has thus far remained in the box until this point when I realised there was one! The Dimensions (width x height x depth) of the MOON 280D Streaming DAC are 429 x 86 x 333 mm and it weighs in at 7.5kg. The 280D is available in black, silver and their signature two-tone option. The MOON 280D Streaming DAC is retailing at £2,950, it is available in the U.K at Renaissance Audio. The 280D is designed and manufactured in Canada and comes with a 10-year warranty.

Performance

Review Equipment

I have the MOON 280D Streaming DAC on a granite isolation bed with Tellurium Q Ultra Black II XLR cables to a T+A PA 2000 R integrated amplifier. I have the awesome Tellurium Q Ultra Black II speaker cable to the still tremendous Kudos Cardea C10s. I'm supporting the C10s with a REL T/5i using a high level connection. And, I'm getting a great sound, I might add.

Mind2 streaming

The MiND2 App is excellent, I have Qobuz and Tidal available. There is HIRESAUDIO, Spotify and Deezer in the App selection too. HIRESAUDIO is a UK only offering at this time, I gather.



In equal measure, the MOON 280D Streaming DAC is gentle, subtle, dynamic and clean. Take for example the Tord Gustavsen Trio's *The Tunnel* (MQA Studio, 96kHz), a delightful interplay of soft drums, cymbals, piano and bass. The warmth of the bass and the mournful piano interact to offer a mindful moment that the 280D just presents to the listener without fuss. Clean instruments and a well organised mid range combine beautifully in the same way with the remastered *My Love* from Paul McCartney (MQA Studio, 96kHz). Here again, the bass and drums curl together with his vocal for a warm and perfectly organised presentation.

The 280D can deliver the dynamic performance needed with ease. For example, my current favourite foot-tapper by Miles Kane, *Don't Forget Who You Are* (MQA Studio 44.1kHz) is sparkling and vibrant with the C10s with the result you end up playing the same track over and over just to make sure the first time wasn't a fluke. Sure enough, a run-through of *I Bet You Look Good on the Dancefloor* (Tidal FLAC 44.1kHz) confirms the sure footed bounce from the 280D.

I wanted to check out the low end delivery from the 280D with my REL installed. Newton Faulkner's cover of *Teardrops* (MQA Studio) is my current dive into the lower octaves with a REL connected. The track takes off at 1'38" and it could not come across better. Ariana Grande's *God is Woman* offers the same low frequency delivery from the 280D, the modern bass line, even at more acceptable volumes, resonates the chest and sets the mind wandering.

We should remind ourselves this MOON 280D Streaming DAC is the source with the T+A and Kudos speakers doing the work, but they would be unable to perform without the cleanest delivery from the 280D through the Tellurium Q XLR cables.

The subtleness and presence of this streaming DAC are offered in tracks like Coldplay's Trouble (MQA Studio, 192kHz) or Ben Howard's Small Things (MQA Studio, 192kHz). Aside from the sound performance in the MiND 2 the internet radio works seamlessly and I've found all of my usual stations (Groove Salad and Naim Radio are very easy to find). The Bluetooth connection is fine, pairing was a simple task using the BT button on the front of the unit with my Pixel 4 smartphone. The range and connectivity seem to be fine.



Optical Input

I have hooked up an old Bluesound Node v1 with optical to the TosLink in the MOON 280 D and it has been given a new lease of life with the more contemporary DAC performance. The latest release this week of Marvin Gaye's 1971 classic Mercy Mercy Me (Qobuz, 24 bit, 192kHz) comes through the optical input at 96kHz but sounds fresh and soulful through the 280D. Obviously, using a six-year-old streaming DAC is an odd thing to do but I was keen to hear the optical input working.

Coaxial Input

Similarly, with an old Yamaha CD player I hooked up the coaxial output to the 280D and again the performance upgrade for a twenty-year-old CD player was refreshing and certainly makes me realise I do not need a new CD player.

USB B Input

The 280D is uncluttered and the space offered in the soundstage by this source is notable

I had a play with my Dell XPS laptop with the 280D and the performance is as good as it can be, I have an Atlas Mavros USB cable with the GRUN grounding system. Somehow, I did not need a driver with my Dell XPS, maybe because I've used other MOON DACs (780D, 390, 230HAD) with it.

Using Qobuz desktop, Miles Davis' wonderful track So What (24 bit, 96kHz) sounded crisp and easily more contemporary than the 72 years since its recording. Listening to Loyle Carner's bass line in Ottelenghi (16 bit, 4.1kHz) I can hear the bass drum in a new light, the 280D is uncluttered and the space offered in the soundstage by this source is notable.

Comparisons

You must have a listen first and this must be on your shortlist, without question

I would suggest if you were after a plain vanilla high end streaming DAC, and you already have headphone options or an amp the 280D will cover off your digital solutions quite nicely. As with these things in the premium market, if this is near your budget, you must have a listen first and this must be on your shortlist, without question. Alternatives that I can think of include the Naim ND5 XS2 that I reviewed a few years ago, this too is a vanilla streaming DAC coming in at £2,299. The ND5 similarly needs preamplification and has no screen, like the 280D, it is functional and good. Also prominent in this streaming DAC sector are Auralic, though their products, like the Auralic Vega G2.1, often have the twin headphone output and preamplifier capability, so it is not quite comparable.

Overall

...the MOON 280D offers all round digital perfection

If you have the system to capitalise on the capabilities of this streaming DAC, the Moon 280D offers all round digital perfection. The MOON 280D Streaming DAC offers nothing more than a high performing, functional, quality output, what else do you need?



Love

- XLR output
- Understated functional performance
- Low end delivery

Like

- App control
- LED indicators

Wish

- USB A input option
- MQA LED on the fascia?