

PrimaLuna EVO 200 Integrated Amplifier Review

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Simaudio's MOON isn't one of those brash, shouty-shouty brands. Instead, perhaps following its home country's renowned politeness, the Canadian hi-fi maker's products have the ability to slip amongst more outwardly flashy equipment and disappear into the background. That is until you bring them into play. At this point, you're reminded that the so-called 'Great White North' is what has given us the likes of Rush, deadmau5, Alanis Morissette, Leonard Cohen, Neil Young – and not just the comparatively safe Celine Dion, Michael Bublé, Justin Bieber and Avril Lavigne.

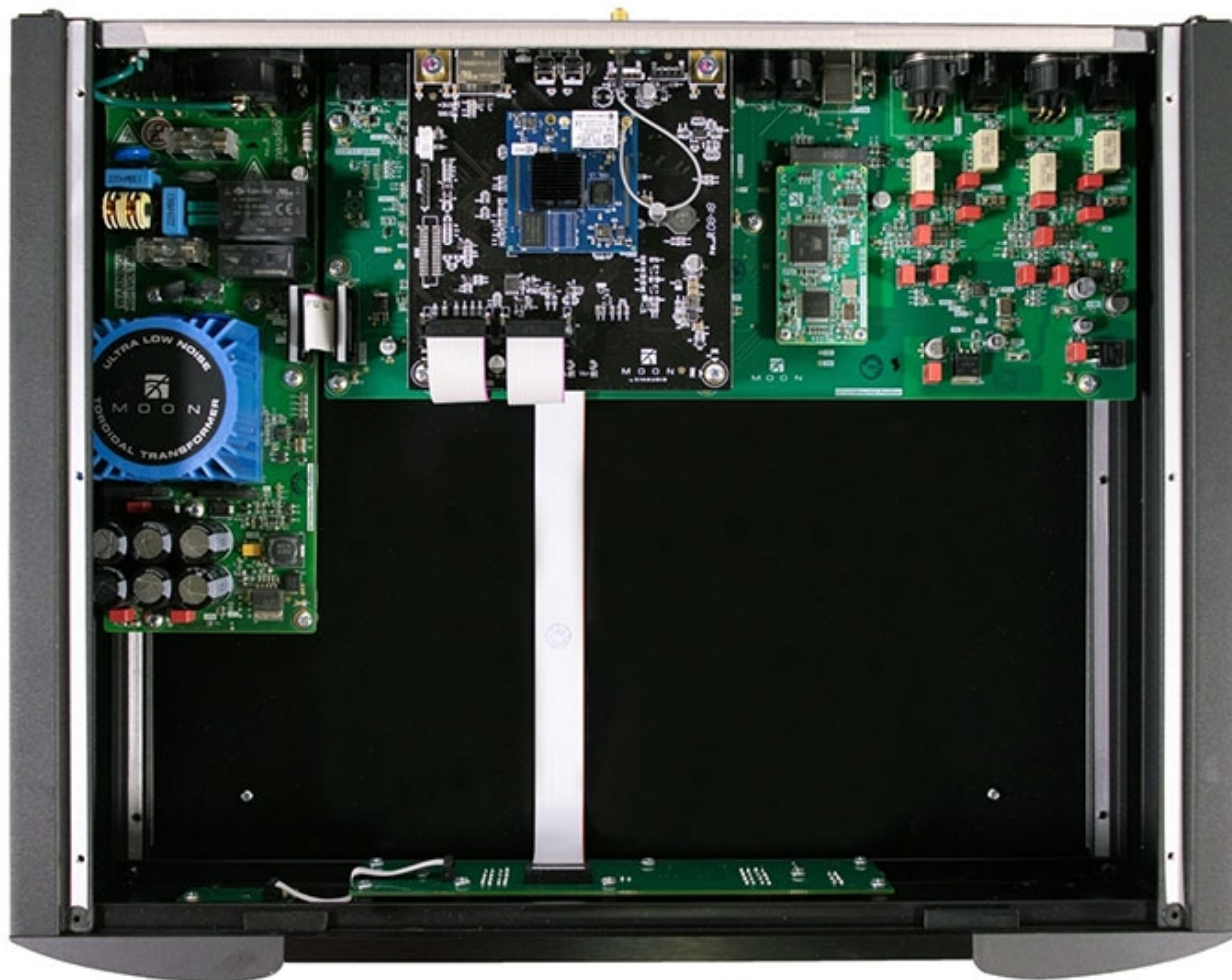
Sitting above the MiND Network Player and 260D CD Transport in the MOON range, this £2,950 streaming DAC looks quietly functional. The first digit in this company's product name indicates its performance level – the higher, the better. But don't discount those lower-numbered articles though. For example, the 110 v2 phono preamplifier is a highly competent component that gives its more expensive rivals a hard time. The object you see here is the new and improved 280D, announced in March this year. It doesn't sport a v2 suffix, possibly due to its updates being mostly software and connectivity-based, rather than hardware.

UP CLOSE

The fascia is identical to the previous iteration and is pretty much a bank of LEDs that indicate which input is in use, along with DSD and PCM sample rate. Otherwise, you get a couple of buttons that let you scroll through the inputs, while another is used to switch on Bluetooth. The final button is for standby. Personally, I would've liked to see the presence of a purple light indicating MQA – instead, you have to rely on the MiND app or Roon to do that bit of verification.



The unit remains equipped with an ES9018K2M DAC chip, which ESS Technology, Inc. lists as one of its reference 32-bit, 8 channel number crunchers. When the 280D was first released, the DAC manufacturer hadn't introduced its PRO line, yet Simaudio stands by its choice, with Product Manager Dominique Poupart reminding me that, "the resulting sound of a DAC is not only attributable to the chip used but the whole digital-to-analogue section including clocking, filtering, analogue output section and power supplies".

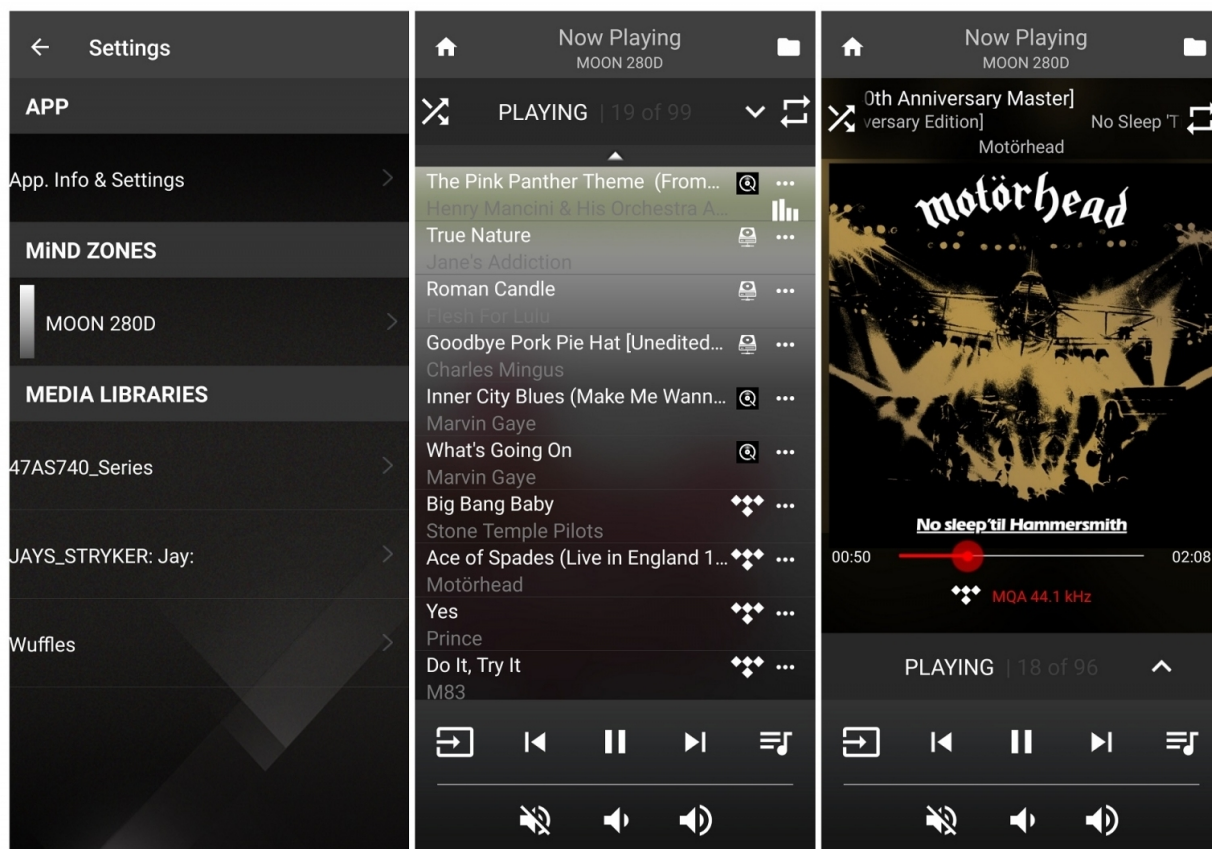


Alongside the RCA and balanced XLR analogue outputs, the 280D offers a USB input (Windows users need to do the expected driver dance), AES/EBU, S/PDIF RCA and a brace of optical ins. The USB and Network inputs support up to DSD256 and 32-bit/384kHz PCM, although the 280D won't play directly from a USB drive. Still, you do get full MQA decoding.

As well as streaming via Wi-Fi or Ethernet there is also aptX Bluetooth, but there are no plans to add aptX HD. This is because the MOON 280D is rocking MiND 2 (Moon intelligent Network Device), which gives access to Spotify Connect and Airplay2. It also means that owners should get access to Spotify HiFi, the lossless version of the streaming service. That joins Deezer, TIDAL, HighResAudio.com and Qobuz, as well as access to internet radio and podcasts. The 280D also plays content from UPnP servers and is Roon Ready. Roon is my go-to interface for all my digital listening when at home, fed via a NUC-based fanless self-built Roon Rock core.

MiND CONTROL

MiND 2 is Simaudio's latest bespoke control software. Dominique explained that: "A whole lot of things in the code for MiND 2 are ours or custom made for us. So while some portions of the platform are common, others are exclusive to us." One example of this is the queue system, where you can add a mixture of tracks from Tidal, Qobuz, and local NAS while it plays. MiND 2 identifies the file type in the queue and sets the DAC appropriately on the fly without stumbling over the format change, no matter if it's bouncing between DSD, PCM and MQA. The MOON's MiND Controller app is a completely in-house design.

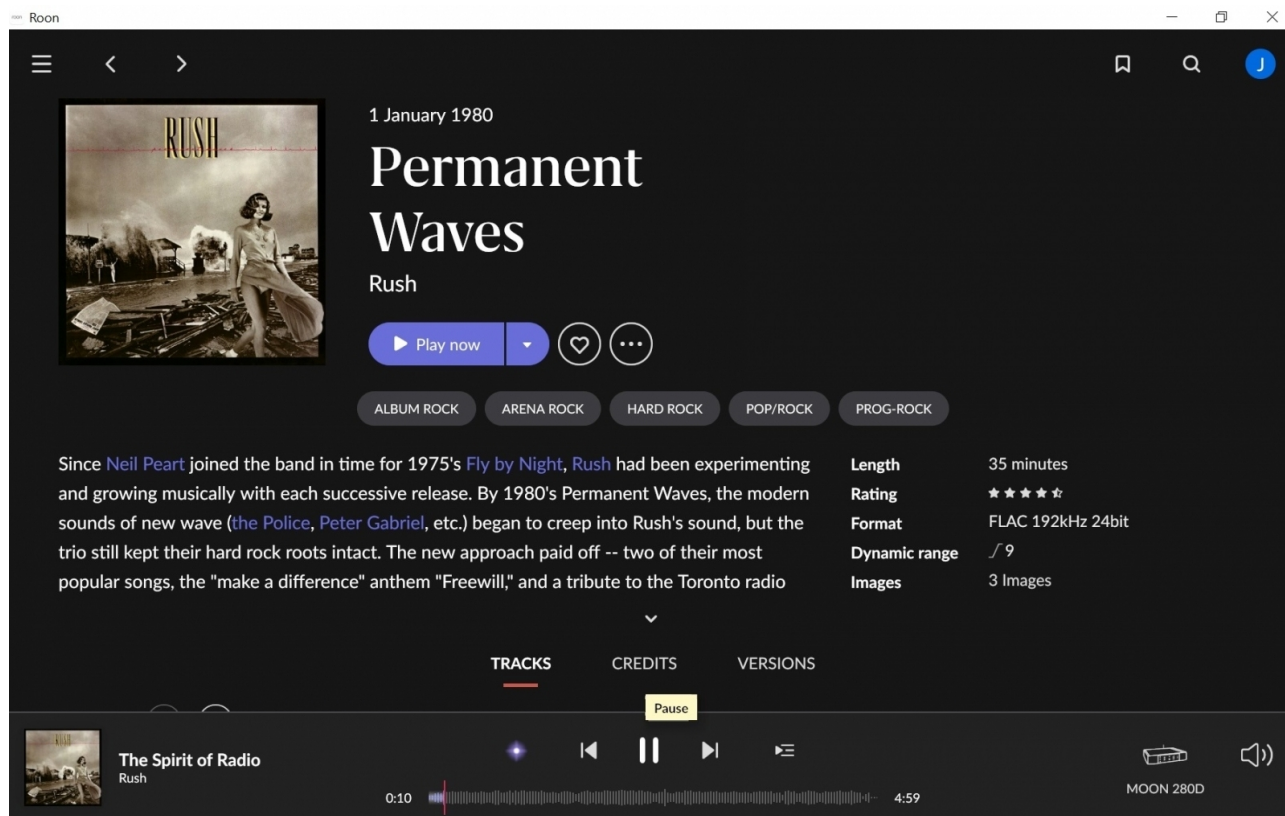


The MiND Controller app is the closest to my beloved Roon that I have come across. I must also add that the link between 280D and my mobile device never once let me down during the review period. Moreover, getting everything connected was as faff-free as things should be these days. If you have other MOON devices, the company's SimLink system enables you to control many with a single remote – power one down, and they all go to sleep together. This is handy as I already have the rather neat 430HA headphone amplifier in my rack, bringing me to another point. The 280D does not have provision for headphones; should you wish to use them, an additional amp is required.

The build quality of the rigid 429x86x333mm (WxHxD) chassis is excellent, with the same attention to detail paid to this as models further up the ladder. It's available in all black as per the review loaner, all silver or the MOON classic two-toned black with silver cheeks.

THE LISTENING

At four years old my much-loved Oppo UDP-205 may have to soon drop its 'cutting edge' boast, as younger components sporting the latest in digital-to-analogue converter technology join the fray. Mola-Mola's Tambaqui was one such reverie and is currently my benchmark in that field. However, this comparatively affordable Canadian streaming DAC did so many things so well, that it belied its ticket price and relatively humble hardware.



stereonet

Although the similarly-priced Linn Majik DSM 4 (2020) has a slightly more extended top end, the 280D delivers detail aplenty with musicians placed in a clearly identifiable soundstage. Moreover, it does this without coming across as over-analytical. In fact, in an attempt to avoid the word 'relaxed', my only alternative was 'analogue'.

The 280D has a warm and well-organised midband, which is not to say that it presents a sepia-toned acoustic. Indeed, Duran Duran's Come Undone was delivered with all the track's processed angles intact. I found that vocals, especially female artists, came through with a luxuriant, more refined sense than Leema's Stream IV, which sits in a similar price bracket, for instance. Lost Cause from Billie Eilish's latest release is a track full of expression. Her now-signature closely mic'd vocal technique captures every breath and inflexion, and the MOON DAC delivered the goods in an atmospherically accurate way right into my listening space.

Changing the programme to more up-tempo choices, and the 280D kicked off its comfy slippers and was ready to start ordering body shots while signalling to the DJ to turn it up, such is the sense of fun and dynamism this streaming DAC can produce with the right material.



The bass being delivered to the Audiovector R 3 Arreté loudspeakers via the capable Gryphon Essence pre and stereo power amplifiers hit my pleasure receptors in the best possible way. With Goldie's early nineties drum'n'bass classic Terminator, bass was full and extended, yet taut, controlled and detailed. This was echoed when I turned to a more traditional band format, and heard Radiohead's Jigsaw Falling Into Place. This MOON DAC has a talent for painting a believable picture which – although more romanticised than that produced by the Tambaqui – was no less enjoyable for it. It was also great at imparting dynamic shifts with impressive timing and tangible musicality. This was the case whether I was listening to Billy Cobham getting groovy with Some Skunk Funk or The Hut on Fowl's Legs (Baba-Yaga) from Mussorgsky's Pictures at an Exhibition as performed by Jean Guillou.



THE VERDICT

From its very opening gambit, the MOON 280D states its raison d'être with no fuss or fanfare. This Canadian streaming DAC has a job to do, and it does it very well. It might be low on fripperies such as headphone stages, preamps and fancy displays but, once you have it in your system, you can hear that every cent has been spent on quality. If the MOON 280D isn't quite at the end of your budget, and a headphone output is a deal-breaker, perhaps check out the AURALiC Altair G2.1. Need more of an all-in-one solution in terms of connectivity and function? Then the Linn Majik DSM 4 or Lumin T2 could be for you. However, if you want your budget to be spent on eking out as much as possible from your digital music library, the MOON 280D will not disappoint.