

ITALIAN PASSION FROM ROSSO FIORENTINO

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Moon Neo ACE integrated streaming amplifier

by Alan Sircom. Pictures: Simon Marsh

I'm not even going to resist temptation here. The Moon Neo ACE is audio's Swiss Army Knife – even though it's made in Canada. This all-in-one amplifier-meets-media player is on the very cutting edge of 'now' technology, a product that would have been impossible 10 years ago, and unthinkable 10 years before that. Yet it's a product with legs long enough to think it still a going concern 10 years from now, and that's not easy to suggest in today's fast-moving digital audio world.

The ACE is part of Moon's Neo range, the slimline ones with all black or 'panda' silver-black chassis. The name is an acronym meaning 'A Complete Experience' and that seems like a fair assessment. It's a 50W per channel integrated amplifier with a moving magnet phono stage, a couple of rear-mounted line level RCA inputs and a front mounted stereo mini-jack for DAP, tablet, or smartphone users, and a surprisingly competent headphone stage. There are also eight digital inputs, including aptX Bluetooth, USB, Wi-Fi, and Ethernet, alongside the older Toslink and coaxial digital. There's a neat little OLED screen in the middle of the front panel.

The core to the digital side of things is Moon's own MiND (Moon intelligent Network Device) system, and a MiND module is fitted inside the ACE. All you need to do is hook this to a computer network (wired or wirelessly – it doesn't really matter unless you are attempting to squirt some really high-res files through Wi-Fi, in which case wired is probably your best bet – this is more to do with the robustness of your domestic Wi-Fi infrastructure than any weak links in the ACE), and then run the whole caboodle

from a tablet or smartphone – preferably a tablet – working on the same network. Complexity of installation largely depends on whether you have to enter a network password. Basically, unless you are having this sentence explained to you by your carer, the actions of reading and parsing this page are about as complex as getting the Moon up and running. MiND will locate, support, and play any audio files it finds on that network that aren't protected, and integrates with TIDAL quicker than Taylor Swift finds new boyfriends. Fortunately, if you feel that nagging fear of being overwhelmed by technology, the ACE makes all this simple.

ACE needs to do all this because we are at the tail end of the biggest migration of audio replay since the 1980s. There's a statistic commonly bandied round the music business that suggests most people start collecting music in or around the time they turn teenage, and that crucial period between 13-28 is when we lay down musical roots that resonate through the rest of our lives. And if you are celebrating your 28th birthday this year, you came of age musically in the time of Napster. Chances are, you never needed to start a CD collection, because online services fed that addiction (in fact, paradoxically, a 28 year old music lover is more likely to own a collection of LPs rather than CDs, and their digital music will have always been entirely file-based rather than physical). However, many of us with a few more years on the odometer are likely to have a collection of music on CD, either ripped to a server or still being played through a CD player. So the ACE needs to accommodate listeners who have all their music on polycarbonate (no CD player in the ACE, but it does have digital and analogue connections for players) or even vinyl disc, those who have music stored on home computers and servers, and those who have abandoned local storage for online content delivery. Phew!

Five years hence, one or more of these options might have dried up or all-but dried up. Maybe the need for Toslink will seem vestigial, or perhaps USB will be on the wane. It could be the vinyl bubble finally burst, or even Ethernet in 2021 will seem like using a dial-up modem. Fortunately, this Moon device being the Swiss-Canadian Army Knife, it has a lot of ACEs up its sleeve! It covers all the present bases, so even if it's out of step with the day after tomorrow, it's still got enough firepower in reserve to support new technology with (hopefully) minimal kludge-connections. I'm not a big fan of 'future-proofing' because the technology world moves too fast to guarantee what is relevant today has staying power: perhaps a more useful – if not as elegant – term would be 'fully now compliant'. The more flexibility included on a device at the time of launch, the longer that device remains relevant in the real world. And the ACE is perhaps the most flexible single device currently available in audio. ▶

EQUIPMENT REVIEW / MOON NEO ACE INTEGRATED STREAMING AMPLIFIER



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▶ Moon has a deserved reputation for its products taking extraordinary amounts of time to come on song. They usually sound good out of the box, but it can take weeks or months for the true performance of the device to be realised. The Neo ACE seems to be an exception to the rule. Yes, the ACE gets better over time, but it's more like letting a good bottle of wine breathe for an hour or so than laying it down to age for half a year. However, despite cracking the 'warm up' nut, the ACE retains all the characteristic Moon Neo performance parameters: a deeply unfatiguing yet remarkably satisfying sound, with an extremely large, walk-in-and-make-yourself-comfortable soundstage, excellent precision of dynamic range, image placement, detail, and timing, and that sense of musical 'structure' rising out of a very dark background.

The easiest way of describing the ACE's sound is it's inherently neutral in approach. Nothing is out of place; it doesn't put undue emphasis on one aspect of the performance (either the musical performance being played or aspects of that performance from an audiophile perspective), and a sense of ordered – although not sterile or boring – calm comes across. It can rock out with the best of them, getting into the inner detail of the recording in the process, yet never losing sight of the inherent fun in rock music (my wife, for reasons that seem slightly weird

even to her, suddenly got into 1970s 'driving' rock recently and began playing '(Don't Fear) The Reaper' by Blue Öyster Cult through the ACE... which led to a lot of 'More Cowbell' moments).

I put a lot of music through its paces on the ACE, and the Moon product never once disappointed. The MiND app is easy to navigate and integrates well with local and online streamed music, so it is effectively open to all the music you will probably ever need. This, combined with the ACE's even-handedness, makes for some very interesting musical ping-pong through the evening. Jazz turns to blues turns to classical, then back to jazz again, before diving into opera, turning left through world music, then to rock through Scandinavian death metal, and so on. Any audio product that lets you jump from Horowitz playing Scriabin's etudes [Sony Classical] to 'Swansong for a Raven' by Cradle of Filth [*Nymphetimine*, Roadrunner] in two moves is doing something very right indeed. Why? Because it has the subtlety and grace to cope with the structurally dense piano work of Horowitz playing the ultimate late Romantic works, and the balls-out energy to cope with the extreme metal onslaught, without overplaying one or understating the other. Unless you have a very catholic set of tastes, it's often hard to hear this, because one will seem 'boring', the other a 'cacophony'.

The joy of the ACE is that it gets out of your musical way better than many of its rivals. You really can play anything through it and it doesn't colour the sound or undermine one musical style or another too much in the process. As described above, it has a Moon-esque 'shape' to the sound, but as that shape is inherently one that doesn't add to or subtract from the performance and simply lets the music out to play, it's that precise and ultimately listenable.

There's something that jumps out with the ACE. It's a true one-stop-shop for audio enthusiasts, effectively becoming a 'just add speakers' approach to audio. If you have a turntable, it has an excellent MM phono stage. If you use headphones, the built in amp drives all bar the really gnarly ones well. If you have a CD player or tuner, the line stages are excellent, the DAC is outstanding, the streamer is easy and flexible, and the app is intuitive and works seamlessly. In short, all the things you need from your audio electronics ▶

EQUIPMENT REVIEW

“The ACE’s unfussy ability to work diplomatically and sympathetically with other devices takes some of the pressure off the buyer.”

▶ today are in the ACE, and the sound it makes is inherently neutral, meaning it just lets your loudspeakers be themselves. The ACE takes a lot of the system matching problems out of the equation as a result, and much of that task revolves around matching the right speakers to the room, knowing that the ACE is flexible enough to be accommodating. Yes, there will always be some synergy issues where some matches are better or worse, but in the main, the ACE’s unfussy ability to work diplomatically and sympathetically with other devices takes some of the pressure off the buyer.

While we don’t do comparison reviews in *Hi-Fi+*, there are two noticeable rivals to the ACE that cannot be ignored here. The first is the Hegel H160, which we know well. The Hegel is more powerful, but is essentially an amp with a DAC. Both have their ‘house’ sounds – the Moon more ‘effortless’ in approach, the Hegel more ‘authoritative’ – but the two are very similar in outlook, and unless you were using a difficult load or playing in a very large room, I’d go with the greater flexibility of ACE. A possibly more narrow comparison is between the ACE and one of the most popular integrated system amps in the UK for the last few years, the Naim SuperUniti. Again, I know that product’s performance, too. The mix of features is tighter here, although the ACE still has the upper-hand in terms of phono stage and range of digital options. And I have to say that here, the Moon ACE is the better all-rounder sonically, too. The Naim SuperUniti is a fun, exciting, and powerful-sounding amplifier, very much like the classic Nait line from the brand, but the ACE is a more balanced performer overall. In comparison, the Naim’s ‘excitement’ factor is like adding grain to a digital photograph to make it look like film, where the ACE just is more like the unsullied original. And the ACE is a whole grand cheaper! I still have time for all three, but nevertheless the ACE edges its rivals out.

The limiting factor to the ACE is fairly obvious. Strip away all the features and it’s a 50W amplifier. It’s a really good 50W amplifier, capable of punching above its weight, and hangs on to its sonic character for a lot longer than most 50W integrated amplifiers, but that still imposes certain limits on what speakers you can use with the ACE. I don’t suppose anyone in their right mind would use the ACE with a punishing £100,000 behemoth loudspeaker with the impedance load of a small asteroid, but this highlights the ACE’s performance in positive terms. You wouldn’t partner these two because of the price differential, but in performance terms, the ACE is a more tempting proposition, thanks to its outstanding sound quality. If you are going for some really high-grade loudspeakers, it might be best looking at a separates approach – very possibly from the same brand.

I think the ACE is something of a game-changer for audio, and Moon itself. It’s a complete solution in a box at a price where it sees off challenges from separates pre/powers, rival standalone solutions, and pick ‘n’ mix

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Integrated amplifier with streaming DAC
Power output: 50 Watts per channel (8 ohms)
Input Sensitivity: 370mV
Input Impedance: 22.1kohms
Gain: 37dB
S/N ratio: 100dB full power
Frequency response: 10Hz-80kHz +0/-3dB
Crosstalk: -100dB
THD (1w/50w): 0.02%/0.02%
Intermod: 0.005%
PCM Bit-depth/sample rate: 16-32bits/44.1-384kHz
DSD sample rates: DSD64, DSD128, DSD256
Finishes: all black, black and silver
Dimensions (WxDxH): 42.9x8.9x36.6cm
Weight: 11kgs
Price: £2,800

Manufactured by: Moon by Simaudio:
URL: www.simaudio.com

Distributed by: Renaissance Audio
URL: www.renaissanceaudio.co.uk
Tel: +44(0)131 555 3922

streamer/DAC/amp systems. Its intrinsic performance is neutral enough to represent a complete ‘just add speakers’ approach to high-end audio, at a price that many high-end audiophiles might spend on a power cord. The Moon Neo ACE gets our highest recommendation. +