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Simaudio Moon 310LP (£1490)



Cruel irony: although easily the most flexible and accommodating of all the units under test, the Simaudio 310LP is the only one that requires you to remove the cover to access the banks of jumpers. I had a long chat with the importer, who provided the official explanation about why the 310LP doesn't provide external access, but I didn't buy it. Removing eight screws every time you want to make an adjustment? Pure sadism, bad planning or both.

Which is a pity, because, like all bar the Pathos and the Clearaudio, the Simaudio lets you adjust gain, capacitance and impedance. But there's more: another set of jumpers offers a choice of two EQ curves, RIAA and IEC. The latter provides a subsonic filter as per the Clearaudio, as noted in the Lab Reports.

You will also need to access the internal settings if you add the optional £1200 320S outboard power supply. Not that you'll need it, for this thing is quiet, and it has serious slam – I can't imagine what's left for a super power supply to add. This was audibly the best-sounding of all the units, though that doesn't negate the value of any of the others – not least the more euphonic and warm-sounding Pathos, nor the super-quick Roksan Reference.

JUMPING MAD... BUT
 But the Simaudio does seem to have it all. There's a silkiness to the sound that favoured the vocals of Sarah Vaughan to a degree that belied this unit's price: I've heard the same material through much dearer phono stages, at greater than double the price of the 310LP, and they could not deliver

RIGHT: Nicely finished, discreet – the Simaudio Moon 310L doesn't shout its presence. It's offered in silver, too

anything 'more'. Equally, it would deal with the vocal textures of each (singing) member of The Band. For soundstage recreation, it's on a par with the Audio Research PH5.

As each of the phono stages demonstrated some specific strength that provided the 'character' of the sound, so, too, did the 310LP have a party trick. And that was top-to-bottom coherence. It's the quality that denotes a thoroughbred, everything from a full-range ESL like the original Quad, to Koetsu moving coils and Stax headphones. The Simaudio has it – remarkable in a phono stage costing under £2000. Way under, in fact.

There's one other important aspect that mustn't be ignored, especially if you accept that not everyone loves moving-coils. Without any doubt, the two MMs sounded of their best through the 310LP – more open, less clinical, free of any brittleness. When it came to the 'Wall of Sound' Crystals recordings, the sense of scale almost matched the portrayal with the Air Tight MC, something not achieved through any of the others, though the Pathos came closest.

There really are no grounds for complaint here, beyond my worrying obsession with the internal adjustments. But I will go so far as to say this, if this preamp had an aperture above the banks of jumpers, I'd be writing a cheque for one right now.

Sound Quality: 88%

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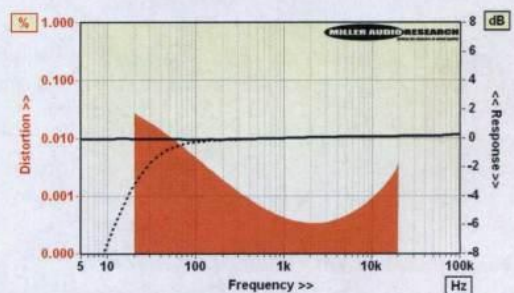
RIGHT: Choice of balanced or single-ended outputs flanking phono inputs, the Sim also sports a socket for the optional 320S power supply



HI-FI NEWS LAB REPORT

Tested without its optional outboard power supply, Simaudio's Moon 310LP still achieves the lowest noise performance in our group test. An A-wtd S/N of 93.5dB in the MM setting is truly superb, the 77-78dB achieved through each of the three MC settings equally impressive. Via its balanced XLR outs, the various gain settings amount to +46.1dB, +60.7dB, +65.8dB and +71.4dB (take 6dB off for the single-ended RCA outputs), the latter perfectly suited for low output MCs with its 270µV sensitivity and 5.1mV input overload margin. The MM setting offers a full 100mV input headroom (+26dB) and is ideally suited to high output pick-ups (5mV re. 5cm/sec).

The preamp's response is also both flat and extended, stretching from to -0.5dB/1Hz (yes, one Hz) to +0.24dB/100kHz. There's also an IEC curve option that rolls away the low bass response to -3.3dB/20Hz and -12dB/5Hz and this is the option to choose if you see your (reflex-loaded) woofers flapping in the wind! Distortion, meanwhile, is highest in the bass (0.003%/20Hz) and lowest through the mid (0.0003%/2kHz). PM



ABOVE: RIAA-corrected response (black) with IEC filter (dashed) and distortion versus frequency (red) from 20Hz-20kHz

Input loading (MM/MC)	47kohm / 47, 100, 470, 1kohm
Input sensitivity (MM/MC re. 0dBV)	4.93mV / 0.93mV, 0.51mV, 0.27mV
Input overload (MM/MC)	100mV / 19mV, 11mV, 5.1mV
Max. output/Imp (re. 1% THD)	19.9V/49ohm (balanced)
A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 5mV/500µV in)	93.5dB / 77.0dB, 77.4dB, 77.9dB
Frequency response (20Hz-20kHz)	-0.05dB (-3.3dB) to +0.13dB
Distortion (20Hz-20kHz, re. 0dBV)	0.027-0.00033%
Power consumption	4W
Dimensions (WHD)	203x83x279mm

GROUP TEST VERDICT

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From least to most expensive, least to most complex and least to most sophisticated, all these units were good enough for any system with a high-quality MC (or MM) cartridge, a top-flight turntable/arm combination and a fastidious owner. None demonstrated any serious foibles (not counting the Simaudio's aggravating internal jumpers) so all deserve serious consideration.

A UNIVERSAL VALUE

Note that with most of the units, as well as my 'control' Audio Research PH5, 100ohm seems to be evolving as a perfectly satisfactory 'universal' loading for all but the 'extreme' MCs, eg, ultra-high or ultra-low output types. This should be taken into consideration when shopping because, if your MC does not demand an outré setting, even the units here with limited MC matching possibilities – the Pathos at 100ohm and the Clearaudio at 510ohm – might work just as well with it.

As there are no poor performers, and as worst-to-best was as close as this year's F1 top six, I'm hard-pressed to create a pecking order. But each does have a personality. Best value is, hands-down, the Avid Pulsus. Most cartridge-flexible? It's easier to say that all are on a par bar the Clearaudio and Pathos, which

lack ultimate fine-tuning capability, the Simaudio having the edge.

Build quality and perceived value go to the Pathos for its sheer elegance and finish, with Bel Canto a close second. The Roksan, by virtue of its size and heft, and the truly Germanic matt-silver Clearaudio, feel the most substantial of the six.

That, however, does not deal with the odious task of choosing winners. There were no clear divisions created by the single-box versus outboard power supply formats, as all sounded fine; and the lack of absolute fine-tuning capability did not hamstring the Clearaudio or the Pathos. Also out on its own is the Roksan: while superb as a standalone device, it begs to be incorporated in an all-Roksan front-end, to exploit fully the architecture devised for that purpose.

HAIR-SHIRT

Avid's Pulsus is the hair-shirt choice for old-school audiophiles who not only reject 'form follows function' but reject form full-stop,

and care only about *performance*. The Pulsus is simply a bargain, if nothing to look at in their cases that resemble Maplin generic hardware.

The Bel Canto sounded great, looked good, but pushed the value element by being the most expensive at a few pounds over the £2000 limit, with the less expensive of two power supply options. Had the

£1699 included the PSU, it would have earned another point or two.

What remains are three that I would easily consider buying: the Clearaudio for its dual personality as a phono stage or preamp and for its impressive build, the Pathos for its valve nature and gorgeous looks and the Simaudio for its top-to-toe, top-flight sound quality – even though I hated those hidden jumpers. ☺

'The Pathos has gorgeous looks and a valve nature'



ABOVE: The Simaudio 310LP delivers excellent sound quality and [clockwise] Clearaudio's impressive Balance+ also serves as a preamplifier, the Pathos ITG MkII – beautiful build and sound



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