



## Simaudio Moon Neo 230HAD – Nordost Heimdall2. Partners in crime? Part 1.

December 21, 2015

As you saw I was blown away by Simaudios 430HAD headphone amp and optional DAC. I really loved it, and I'm determined to have one on my rack in the future. It represents the pinnacle of solid state headphone amps. I will soon publish the next part in my test journey where I've tried a TOTL tube amp to challenge that SS king – but I can already reveal that I didn't end up buying it, despite being offered a very nice trade-in deal by a friendly hifi-dealer. By the way, there's a lot of them, but that's another story.

Anyway, when returning the 430 to the nice guys at [Stylus Audio](#) who's distributing Simaudio in the Nordics they told me that they'd just received the 230HAD. We ended up having a nice conversation and me backing up more boxes in my car than I had in the first place. I was told that the 230HAD had the same DAC as possible to add on to the 430HA, and with a total price of \$1499. Not too much if you consider that this is a complete box ready for prime time. But as we all know, it's all in the implementation. Yes, I was impressed by the DAC integrated in the 430HA, but that says nothing in terms of overall performance. I also got the opportunity to borrow some power cables and a headphone cable kit, all from Nordost Heimdall 2 series. I left the 230HAD running for a couple of days and then set out on a test period over 2 months. But I'm getting ahead of myself. Let's start from the beginning.

What's the value proposition of this product? Well, Simaudio describes the 230HAD as the perfect companion for...most people. A desktop solution for a computer based system, as a stand-alone headphone setup for those with full size systems, or as the center of a second setup. In general I'm not a fan of descriptions filled with the anxiety and the fear of not making friends and therefore offers everything to everybody. There's no system that can do it all.

Headphone hifi is a long struggle of constant trade-offs, we all know that – and we refuse to admit it. We chase after improvements everywhere and a lot of us are never really satisfied. Instead I like products with a value proposition that nobody can misunderstand and that stands out with a strong message, like for Simaudios reference solid state headphone amp: 430HA:

*“The Neo 430HA is the new reference for headphone amplifiers.”*

I just love that! It's bold, straight forward and daring! And it doesn't mention the optional DAC – because first and foremost it's the new reference for headphone amplifiers. Now let's have a look at the tagline for the 230HAD:

*“The Neo 230HAD is a headphone amplifier, a DAC and a line-stage preamplifier all housed in one very stylish package. The possibilities are endless... What else could you possibly ask for ?”*

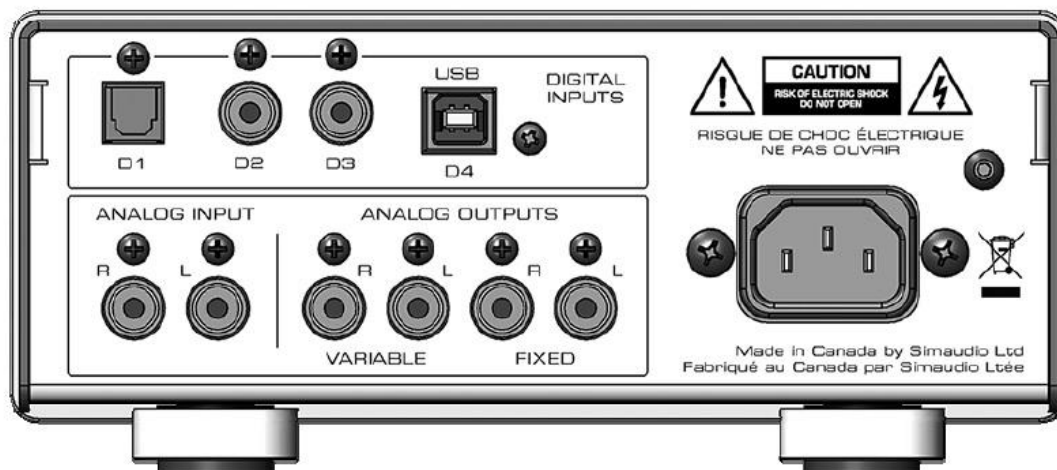
I think it's just describing what we can find out from reading the specs, but it's not really saying what 230HAD really is. Simaudio keeps telling me what it is and what I need and how the marketplace works. It's all in the marketing material [here](#). I'll tell you exactly what the 230HAD is – all for free for Simaudio's marketing department to use. Towards the end of this review.



Anyway, here's the front of the 230HAD. The first thing you might notice is the collection of LED's to the left. We'll come back to those later. The first column indicate what input that is currently active, and the second column the sample rate. In the bottom left corner there's a 3.5mm input for your media players to be connected, then the 6.3mm single ended headphone jack, an input selector button, the stand-by button and finally the volume control. No, it's not the same as with the 430HA. Unfortunately. You won't have the urge to constantly fiddle with this one, and the same remote control is included so you don't have to either. Once you've felt the 430HA volume control, there's no going back.

And here's the back. I borrowed the picture from the 230HAD manual. It makes the overview easier than trying to take a picture of the back. I'm no photographer. Anyway, it's pretty straight forward. Compare the LED's on the first picture with the corresponding inputs below. One toslink optical input, two S/PDIF digital inputs and one USB-B. The USB handles every sample rate up to DSD64, DSD128 and DSD256. For S/PDIF and toslink you have to settle for 24bit/192kHz. There's also a single ended analogue input, which allows the 230HAD to act as a convenient control center; for example I connected my Linn Unidisk 1.1 universal disc player to the 230HAD. Very smart function that I wished more companies included in their products. But I

guess we're a small group of people still playing silver discs of any kind. Next to the analog inputs we see the analog outputs. The variable output is for connection to a power amplifier and the fixed pair is intended for connection to a preamplifier or integrated amplifier. Convenient and elegant in the back.



Simaudio recommends to leave the 230HAD powered on at all times, and I believe they're right. Furthermore this little box needs to settle in for a long time before it'll work in the best way possible. Don't argue with me – just leave it running for a week or 2. Then start listening. Deal? Simaudio states that it will continue to improve over 300 hours. The same remote control (CRM-2) as included with the 430HA is included with the 230HAD and with this, besides the volume, you can control on/off and input. Pretty large volume control for 3 functions... Simaudio could've just built an apple-TV sized remote and that would've been fantastic. With the CRM-2, first you have to press the A/D button to take control over the 230HAD and then you can control volume and input. I assume you won't buy this product for it's remote – but it actually is nice to have one. Maybe a separate remote can be built...?

Speaking of power, I have not been a power cable believer....until now. I'll conclude this during the later parts of my review – but the first part of the test I used the included stock cable. In the second half I used the [Nordost Heimdall2 power cable](#). The results were unexpected. Anyway, before we dive in to the review – here's the specs for the Simaudio 230HAD

<b>Configuration</b>	<b>Single-Ended</b>
<b>Headphone Impedance</b>	<b>20 – 600Ω</b>
<b>Power Supply Transformers</b>	<b>1 x 10VA</b>
<b>Power Supply Capacitance</b>	<b>13,200μF</b>
<b>Type of Amplification</b>	<b>Transconductance</b>

Single-ended inputs (RCA)	1 pair
Mini-jack input	1 (1/8")
Input Impedance	22,000Ω
Output Device Type	Bipolar
Single Ended Headphone Output	1/4" Stereo TRS
Single Ended Preamp Outputs (RCA)	2 pairs (fixed and variable)
Output Power @ 600Ω	100mW
Output Power @ 300Ω	200mW
Output Power @ 50Ω	1W
Audible Frequency Response	20Hz-20kHz ±0.1dB
Full-range Frequency Response	5Hz – 100kHz +0/-3.0dB
Output Impedance	1.25Ω
Signal-to-noise Ratio (20Hz-20kHz)	115dB @ full output
Crosstalk @ 1kHz	80dB
Total Harmonic Distortion (20Hz-20kHz)	0.005%
Intermodulation Distortion	0.005%
Remote Control	Full-Function (CRM-2)
Power Consumption @ idle	10 Watts
AC Power Requirements	120V / 60Hz ou 240V / 50Hz
Shipping Weight	6.2 lb. / 2.8 Kg.
Dimensions (W x H x D, inches / cm.)	7.0 x 3.0 x 11.0 / 17.8 x 7.6 x 28.0
Digital Input Types	S/PDIF (RCA) x 2 USB x 1 Toslink x 1
DSD Data Rates	(2.8224MHz), Double (5.6448MHz) and Quadruple (11.2896) (via USB only)
DSD Sample Rates	DSD64, DSD128 & DSD256 (via USB only)
PCM Bit-depth range	16 – 32 bits (32-bit via USB only)
PCM Sampling Frequency Rates	44.1 – 384kHz (352.8 & 384kHz via USB only)



Sonny Clark

Cool Struttin'

The Horace Silver quintet

The Cape Verdean blues

Tina Brooks

Back to the tracks

Tina Brooks

True Blue

Ok – how does it sound?

## **Simaudio Moon Neo 230HAD – Nordost Heimdall2. Partners in crime? Part 2.**

Right...were where we? Ah that's right – it's in the title; the little brother of the mighty 430HA(D) from Simaudio. The 230HAD. I finished of Part 1 with listing the music I've used for this review. It's got nothing to do with sonic supremacy, it's just music I like and re masters that has gotten as good as it gets. All albums come from Blue Note records. Their recording engineer the legendary Rudy van Gelder was breaking new ground at the time, but lots of his recordings are known for being shrill, bright sounding, treble-intense and sometimes painful to listen to, especially on headphones. I believe I've found the best available digital versions of the albums – and when getting the Audiophile for my Chord Hugo I could finally enjoy these albums in all their glory. That's also why the second part of this review has taken some extra time. So – we will see if they sound good on the small 230HAD...if they do, it's quite the accomplishment.

Installing the driver from Simaudio was easy like 1-2-3 and to configure the playback in Jriver Media Player 21 and ROON was easy. I guess it comes down to experience, but having used JMP for a couple of years it's no longer difficult to setup new devices, optimizing playback and configuring the software to operate to my preference.

ROON is extremely straight forward and I must admit I've bought a years worth of subscription. For now I'll keep both, since Jriver can stream bit perfect over network to my laptop and ROON can't. I'll give both a year and then decide which to keep. The price to pay for metadata with ROON is quite high, and Jriver seems to be experts in charging money for upgrades...

Anyway back to business!

Through the first 5-6 albums my general feeling of the 230HAD was somewhat strange. I scratched my head, and double checked all settings. Yep, everything correct. I tried to change headphones from HD800 to my closed-back Beyerdynamics; the T5p. Easy to drive, easy to please. Nope, not better. I believe this was also during the time where I posted some thoughts on head-fi being somewhat negative. I had a hard time enjoying it. I spoke to the guys at Stylus and explained that this was so far away from the 430HA that it didn't really make any sense to me. After a hiatus of a couple of weeks due to traveling for work we spoke again. We spoke

about the 230HAD again. They told me to try again, to leave it running for a longer time and they also recommended to try upgrading the power cable.

I followed their advice, left the 230HAD running for another week, equipped it with the Nordost Heimdall2 power cable, and decided to also switch around a bit with headphone cables for my HD800's. Ah! What a revelation. I started with one of my favorite Lee Morgan albums; Tom Cat It's just fantastic. If everything in the headphone system currently used is right, I'll close my eyes, start tapping my feet when the intro track starts with its murmuring piano beat, and Art Blakey's drums just wants you to turn up the volume a little bit more. Once the horns join I brace myself. Ah! (again) Usually I have to turn down a bit, otherwise I'll lose my hearing from the sharp sound signature. But not anymore. Jackie McLean has hurt my ears for the last time. The 230HAD had suddenly gone from neutral BAD to neutral GOOD. I hear clarity but not that sharp treble that is a regular trademark for many of the van Gelder recordings. I hear muffled piano, but not distorted. It's impossible to do something about that piano – it's in most of van Gelder's work. It's like he put a blanket over the piano, put a mike really close and then asked the pianist to just hit it hard... Let's stop there. First not so fun, then more time running, upgraded cables and suddenly more fun.

In music and equipment I don't care much about why, I try to trust my ears. But here's just too much of a perceived improvement for me to let it go. Let's see what Nordost claims to be the secret to their technology with the Norse2 | Heimdall 2 series. Micro Mono-Filament technology & mechanically tuned lengths seems to be the heart and soul of this series. What does that mean? Well the Micro Mono-Filament technology is supposed to dissipate mechanical energy on the electrical AC line which is said to disturb the electronics within the, for this review, DAC. The headphone cable length is mechanically tuned which is reducing internal microphony and high frequency impedance resonance. Ok, so this didn't really teach me much. I can read the words, but I don't understand why. I'll reach out to Nordost to see if I can get better explanations. Until then, I can't explain why – but both these upgrades made a huge difference for me with HD800 and 230HAD, and really changed the review.

So, going back to listening through the list of jazz albums was pretty straight forward. How does the 230HAD sound? It has a somewhat soft and sweet tone, but leaning towards neutral/very neutral, but maybe with a little flare towards the warm side. It pairs surprisingly well with HD800, but maybe lacks a little bit of control. Jazz is all about feeling and I believe the 230HAD manages to preserve and present that feeling all the way through. The bass is accurate without bleeding through, the midrange is towards the softer and warmer side but without becoming too muffled. The treble has a nice extension but maybe lacking a little bit of spark. Don't get me wrong, I don't want it to come across as sharp (think Bob Dylan's harmonica in 'Girl from the North Country') but maybe I'm missing a little bit of intensity here. When reading back, I feel I'm describing it in a good way – sort of middle of the road type sound. I believe it's a good thing. I think it'll work out pretty good with any type of music. Hence, after my long excursion through

jazzland, I went on Tidal and listened through the weekly brew of newly released music from a variety of genres. Just what I thought, it works well with any type of genre.

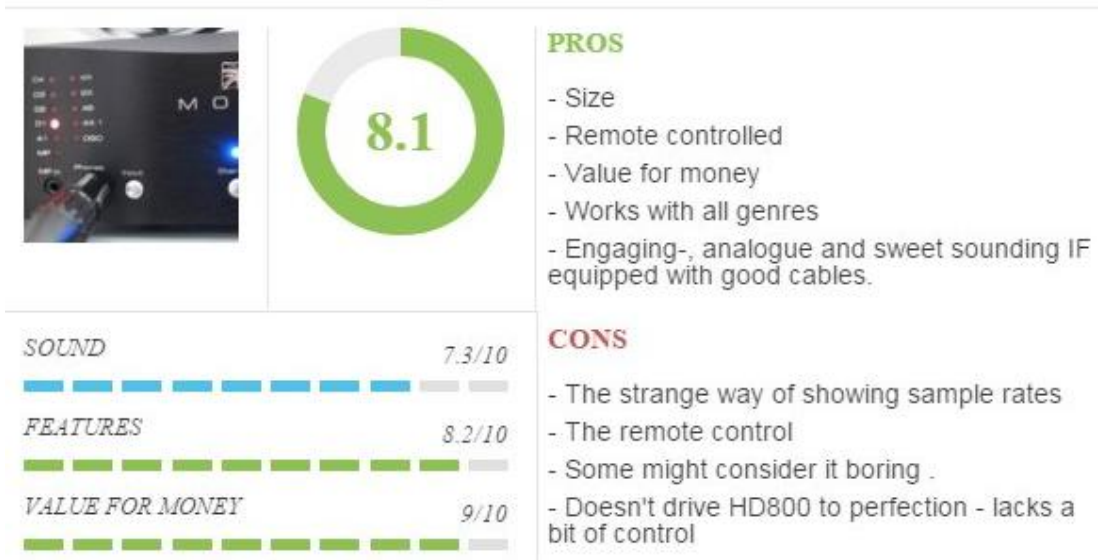
**In summary:**

This is not a cable review. However, the 230HAD will grow immensely with a good powercable from Nordost – and maybe with cables from other manufacturers as well, just use your ears. Combined with the full Nordost line-up for headphone listening this little box impressed with me more than I would have imagined. Without cable upgrades, it was also pretty good, especially after letting it run for some days; but I couldn't really understand it. It was neutral sounding, but lacking a little bit of engagement and passion. It felt a slightly out of breath. With cable upgrades for power and for HD800, even the hard to pair HD800's felt both fast, passionate and accurate. Audiophile Doping. I couldn't hear the similarities with the 430HAD. You do not get a slice of 430HAD in the 230HAD, you get another type of pie. We have now arrived to the end of this review.

I believe my value proposition is better than Simaudios, and better describes who this little box is for. I do see it in multiple settings but it can't do everything, and it will not be endgame for serious headphone audiophiles. But it will take you a long way and it looks very good, and the value for money is really high! If I were to buy it, I'd make sure it had a nice spot on a shelf, desktop or similar, but on it's own. It looks really good on it's own – and it sounds good on its own. Just do it a favor and save up for some nice cables and you're ready for years to come. Leave it on at all times, and give it a good home – be it in the office, or on a shelf close to your lounge chair. Enjoy!

So here goes. **WHAT IS THE 230HAD?** It's an intelligent and sophisticated neutral sounding DAC with a potent built-in headphone amplifier, ready for prime-time impressing colleagues in hip offices, up to date designed to fit the demands of picky audiophiles and as a center of attention for sweet spot listening in your favorite chair at home.

## Simaudio 230HAD





# Simaudio Moon Neo 230HAD – Scene change

It's Friday – or, it was Friday, today is Monday I'm not crazy. I had finally published the late review of the great Simaudio Neo 230HAD. It felt pretty good. I was so happy with the 230HAD and really satisfied with the review. I felt that all my feelings for it was put in to words. I didn't rave and exaggerate, but rather tried to be balanced and fair in my writing. Anyway, I got ready to leave the office but before I did I gave the review a final read... it suddenly felt like some details were missing. Would people get to the end and really read the grades and understand how great this little box is? Had I been too harsh and unfair mentioning my love for the 430HA too much in the review? Had I not brought up price vs performance in a way that people would understand? I ended up reading the review over and over again and couldn't help being a bit disappointed with my own reviewing. I packed the 230HAD and took it home with me...

What happened next was a weekend of intense listening which made me want to add a little bit more – a third part in which the hip 230HAD got to hang out under the stairs in my house....and I'm still listening as I write this, three days later...

When I came home Friday night I went for a long walk and decided that I would include the 230HAD in an intimate Friday night tradition and give it a few more words. I set everything up and started to stream parts of my library which rarely gets listened to. What I mean is that the majority of my collection has been put on my NAS but the problem with that is that they "disappear". When digging through the collection "online", I tend to miss albums. I don't know why. When going through the physical collection it's less likely to happen. Because of that I use Jriver's excellent function 'Smartlists' where you can define inclusion criteria like "last played" and then I put a rule in saying that it can't have been played in the last year. After that I pick 5 albums each Friday. That's my TGIF gift and it keeps me listening to everything in my collection.

First out was **Abbey Lincoln** with the album **Abbey is blue**. I love Abbey Lincoln. She's not Billie, not Ella and certainly not Sarah. She's just...different. Abbey is blue was recorded for the Riverside label in 1959. The setup of musicians is just massively impressive. Kenny Dorham, Stanley Turrentine, Wynton Kelly, Philly Joe Jones...to mention a few. It's very well recorded and fits the HD800 perfect! I mixed myself a dry (extremley dry) martini, sat down in my inherited lounge chair, put my feet up on the footstool....pressed play and turned up the volume...yes yes, WITH the remote and closed my eyes.... I was teleported to 1959 and thrown in to the studio. The presence sent a shiver down my spine. I opened my eyes 39 minutes and 17 seconds later. There's actually nothing missing. I can't think of anything that I would like to hear differently. That sweet midrange is to die for! Vocal jazz with Simaudio Neo 230HAD, check!

Second album.... **Danzig – S/T**. Hell yeah! This is a good one, and indeed a long time since I heard it. Brings me back to my teenage. I remember screaming; “*..and if you want to find hell with me...*” in ‘Mother’ and feeling like a real rock star. That was long before the jazz collection started, I can tell you that. Quality of sound should be measured by level or air drums being played throughout this album. In ‘She rides’ that seducing intro over 60 seconds makes me turn up the volume and I can swear it’s Jim Morrison and not Glenn Danzig singing that first line. Scary, but so good. I can still follow the drums throughout the song and the 230HAD makes it a pleasure. No sharp edges, only a steady beat. Rock n’ Roll with Simaudio Neo 230HAD, check! Third album. **Queen – Works** Wow! Another journey back in time. I was never a real Queen-fan, but for me ‘Works’ is such a great album. One of the things I do when nobody’s watching is a live performance (living room) of ‘Hammerfall’. It’s not something you’d want to see, but I feel exactly like Freddie Mercury... Geez, did I just reveal that. Well done Simaudio!

Fourth album. **Billy Joel – Songs in the attic**. Ah! My favorite album to play in the car. I wonder if the universe is trying to tell me something about career choices. “Miami 2017” is another one of my “live performance” songs. This is not a live album per se – it’s a collection of live performances from the the summer tour of 1980. It’s a great album nevertheless and the 230HAD doesn’t disappoint. For live albums I want to hear the full distance of music reaching over the audience. It’s hard to explain, but for this album I want to be put above and slightly behind Billy. Like I’m floating above and just behind the drummer, watching over the stage and the audience. Closing my eyes I can see the band members and I can clearly see the ladies from the front row as Billy sings ‘She’s got a way’. The 230HAD offers a wide sound stage and imaging that allows me to check all the boxes above. Nice!

Last album from the Friday night session....**Bill Evans Trio – Waltz For Debby**. I rarely listen to just Waltz for Debby, which is basically just one of the performances from Village Vanguard. I often listen to ‘[The complete Village Vanguard Recordings](#)’ instead, and that might explain the reason for this one ending up as not played for more than a year. Well, this particular version is the Analogue Production gold cd from the nineties, with Doug Sax as the mastering engineer. It’s very well done, and the 230HAD does exactly what it’s supposed to do. It gets out of the way and let that analogue tape shine. There’s an analogue feeling in this recording, and the 230HAD gives me not only a live feeling, but an extension into the atmosphere of the trio. I listen to the collaboration between LaFaro and Motian in the left channel. That can keep me busy for hours. Sometimes I just move that right cup away from the ear a bit, just to hear bass and drums working the rhythm. It’s beautiful to hear Motian give LaFaro a little bit of foundation and then just lets him move around all he wants. I’m standing just in front of him, and the 230HAD leaves me alone to enjoy.

The weekend kept going with more albums I hadn’t heard in a long time, and the 230HAD kept it delivering uncompromising joy. I feel I don’t want to send it back anymore. I want it to stay under the stairs in my house, where my lounge chair is, on a small side table. I want to put my feet up on the footstool, look up music that I haven’t heard in a long time and just enjoy. Sometimes you need a change in scenery. This is not new from a review perspective, but

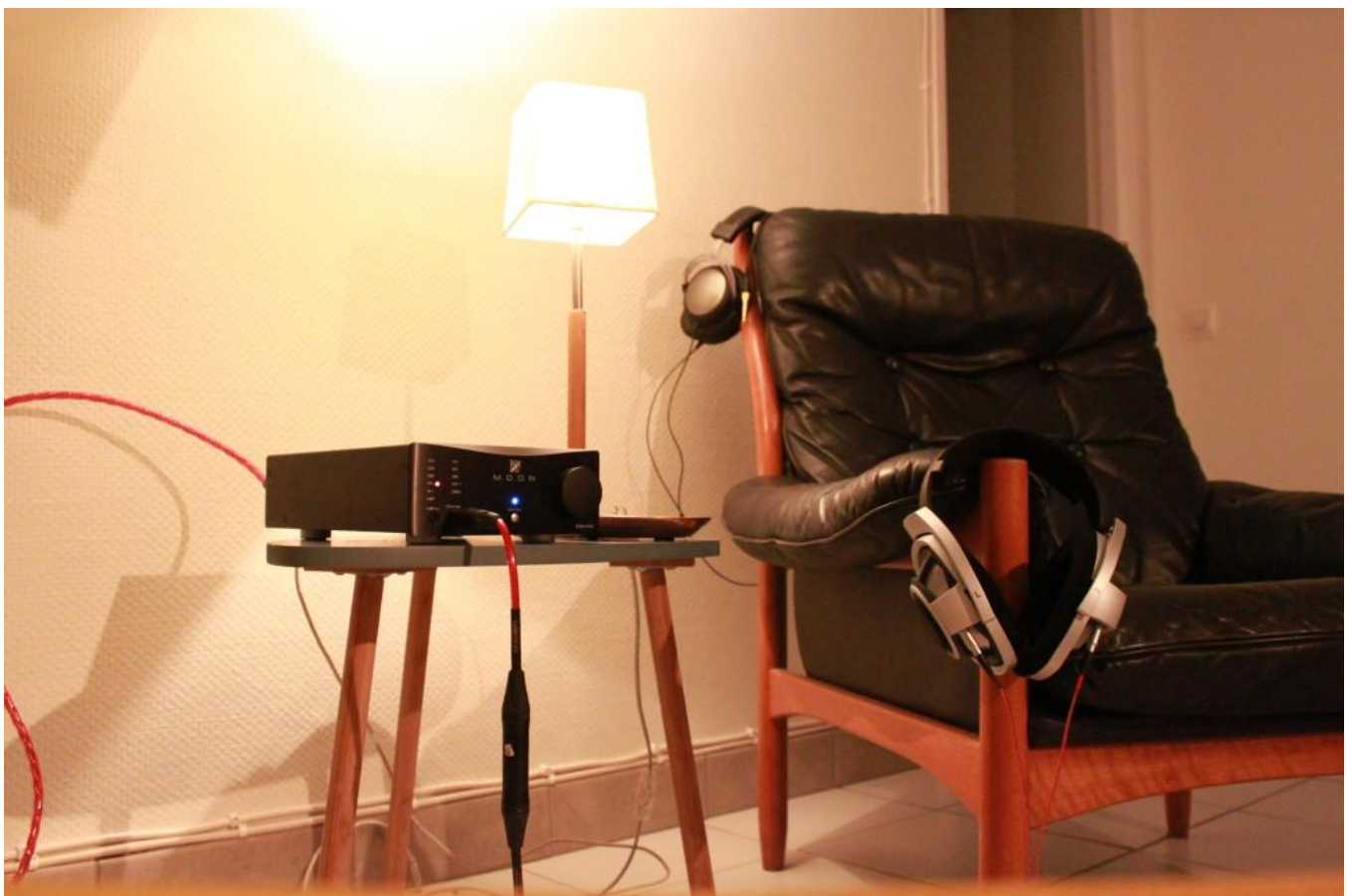
maybe I didn't describe it in a way that the message came through clear enough. In the safe setting of my home where I actually doesn't do much listening compared to the office, the 230HAD made it easier for me to describe it.

Finally, I want to shed a little bit of light on a few details in part 1 and 2 that I, with a bit of perspective, can see that some might find confusing. Hope that this makes it a bit more clear.

1. The 230HAD is **\$1499**. Yes, **\$1499**. I'm not sure you read the grades I gave it towards the end of part 2 – but I dare you to find a better DAC/AMP combo for \$1499. I believe there isn't such a product on the market. I'm not going to speak about specs, I mean who cares about DSD anyway? This is how I see it, with regards to what products I already own. My Chord Hugo was \$2195. Chord Hugo is not at all \$700 better and has a much weaker amp and a crappy USB input (yes you heard me – it's sharp and cold to my ears no matter what USB cable I've tried) I have the Hugo and like it a lot, because of it's versatility but it has caused me some headache until I bought the Audiophileo to finally be able to use S/PDIF instead of the USB input. I'd say with the Audiophileo the Hugo has become really good – but with a **much** higher total price, without remote and still with an amplifier that I still find lacking a bit of control.
2. The 430HAD is \$4300! There's no comparing between the two and look at it this way; what you pay the premium for with the 430HA is the amp + preamp + functionality + no-compromise. The optional DAC is \$800. With the 430HA you pay for a \$3500 amp and an optional \$800 DAC. Maybe you can't count like that but if you do – consider that I wrote in part 2 that you're **NOT** getting a slice of the 430HA with the 230HAD. That was supposed to be a good, no a **great** thing. You're **NOT** paying \$3500 for the amp, you're paying \$699 for the amp (if the math can be done like that...but hey, it's my review I can do math any way I want...) Tell me about a \$699 amp that can do what the 230HAD does? Didn't think so. Set a side portability, pay \$700 for a nice power cable and you have a setup that is at least on par with Hugo. I will use the Christmas break to see whether it's more than that.... (yaiks!)
3. The 230HAD has a remote. You can basically only use it for volume but it has a remote! I don't want to reach for a volume control on a box, unless it's fitted onto a Simaudio Neo 430HA! Sitting at home with eyes closed, I just want to control volume and that's it. I listen to albums from beginning to end – no pause, no skip, no fast-forwarding. I control that with my remote app on my iPhone anyway.
4. No – the 230HAD doesn't have balanced inputs and outputs. I've found that with my Linnenberg VIVACE, the balanced inputs and outputs makes a difference – but overall I think that it's all in the implementation. Sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't. With the 430HA the balanced outputs was magnificent. With the 230HAD I didn't miss is at all. I can't think of a better DAC/AMP combo at this quite attractive price range.

5. I will buy the 430HA and a TOTL DAC as my end game setup. Period. It's not because the 230HAD is not good enough – it's because the 430HA is the best SS headphone amplifier on the market in my opinion. And that's where I'm going. Is that amp \$3500 better than the 230HAD's amp? Irrelevant to me, but probably it's not. But you're paying for a fully balanced, no compromise preamp/amp with every function anyone could ask for. The majority of headphone listeners will not go down that path. And if that's the case...well give the 230HAD a good listen before buying anything else.
6. I tried the 230HAD with Sennheisers open back HD800 and with Beyer Dynamic T5p closed backs. Both sounded terrific – but they're good at different things, so it's not really fair to compare. They both match very nicely with the 230HAD.  
There you have it. Maybe it's a more colorful of describing it. I'm sorry if it didn't come across in part 1 and 2. Look at the grades in the end of part 2....then go buy a 230HAD.

Good evening!



Under the stairs...



Audiophile doping times two



Getting late Friday night...



Nordost Heimdall2 – Sennheiser HD800. It's just magnificent sounding. And nice to look at too!