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## MOON NEO ACE: A STAR TURN OR A WASTE OF SPACE?

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**Looking for an all-in-one hi-fi unit? Moon asks Paul Rigby to “just add speakers” while reviewing the Neo Ace**

The name, Ace, is actually an acronym, standing for ‘A Complete Experience’. An bold title but it’s nice to see Moon being so ambitious. This all-in-one system looks to provide the user with everything that they might need in a stereo hi-fi system. And it just

about does that by offering an integrated amplifier with a high-resolution DAC and streamer, Bluetooth with aptX support, Wi-Fi, an Ethernet socket, Internet radio via vTuner, TIDAL support and a moving magnet phono stage.

The included class A/B amplifier offers 50W per channel (into 8 Ohms) while the attendant DAC supports files up to 32bit/384kHz and DSD256 files. That includes WAV, FLAC and AIFF tracks. The Neo Ace can also stream songs from your laptop or NAS drive, as long as they're all connected to the same network.



Connections include two pairs of RCA inputs (and one output), two inputs of optical and coaxial and a USB type-B for laptop connection. The front fascia provides a 3.5mm input and a 6.3mm headphone port. I found no issues while operating the numerous interface options whether that includes using the remote or the unit's own from fascia interface.





The Ace's solid, attractively curved, aluminium chassis is strong, straight-forward and unpretentious with just a few buttons to operate plus a rotating volume dial and a clear and easy to use OLED display. Here, you can perform a range of operations such as changing the input, muting the sound, dimming the display and more.



The third interface alternative is the MiND Controller app. MiND or 'Moon Intelligent Network Device' is the the relatively simple control system behind Moon's streaming module. With it, you can select songs from every source. It's fast and efficient.



The basic approach to an all-in-one system from Moon is an interesting one. Compare the Ace with the similarly priced Cyrus Lyric and the Entotem Plato and you trip over contrasting philosophies. To some extent Cyrus and, more so, Entotem have aimed their design and development at a form of lifestyle nirvana. This technology sector promises attendant riches but demands much from anyone wishing to occupy this difficult and

unforgiving sector.

Moon appears to have rejected this tempting option and has set itself firmly in the Hi-Fi realm. For a hi-fi outfit, I applaud this decision.

Why? Because, you either fully embrace the lifestyle ethic and spend millions making the box foolproof in terms of its usability so that even your Granny can't cock it up (i.e.: like a Sky TV box or similar) while spending more millions on marketing and support for those Grannies that have managed to



do just that or you realise that you would be over-reaching to even try. Once you've come to the latter realisation, you save time, money and certain hassle by aiming your box at the hi-fi and audiophile specialists.

The result, for the Ace, is a relatively stripped (and very much more simplified) control fascia compared to the Lyric and Plato, a far more svelte chassis and a lack of expensive hand holding in support terms. For those into their hi-fi, this means that they can get on with listening to music much quicker without having to trawl through a multitude of settings and screens. It also means that the final unit price goes down and you don't have to include extraneous and troublesome features (in an all-in-one system) such as a built-in CD player, which encourages distortive noise.

## SOUND QUALITY

On that basis, because there is no built-in CD player, I did the next best thing and hooked up the Moon to my Leema Elements CD player and listened to the Moon's DAC via the S/PDIF port. Before looking at the Ace as a stand-alone hi-fi component, I wanted to test each part of the box, to see how each performed.

At this stage, I had the Moon hooked up to my reference hi-fi system to isolate the DAC. Playing Bing Crosby's Mandy, which allowed me to hear the iconic baritone vocal fronting a Buddy Cole jazz combo, I was happy to hear a relatively low noise output that was, considering the configuration and the price, neither obtrusive nor distracting. What I did hear was Crosby offering a relaxed (as ever!) and easy going lead vocal. His textured delivery offered plenty of subtle emphasis via an emotive performance that flowed easily. Buddy Cole's piano danced easily under the vocal along with the brushed percussion accompaniment.





One of the sonic highlights was the bass. I'm not inferring that bass dominated this track. On the contrary. What bass did, though, was take the normally shy upright bass and give it a fuller role in the song. The Moon offered a secure and weighty foundation for the lower frequencies. Also, more importantly, bass was particularly focused so that it never got in the way. On a lesser system, bass can be smudged with an irritating bloom that infects the midrange. All of these positive factors added to the sense of a clean sonic output from the Moon.

Still isolating the Ace, I switched to an Astell & Kern AK120 DAP and played Dire Straits' Money for Nothing through the optical port, playing at 24bit/88.2kHz. This is a bright master so I was interested to see how the hardware tackled this troublesome presentation.

Three things impressed me about the Moon, at this point. Firstly, the track still exhibited the excessive peak limiting so the harsh master was visible but the Moon was able to hold all of the nasty frequencies in the palm of its hand and keep control of each, preventing any nasties forcing the ear to wince.

Secondly, the bass was not only powerful and solid but I was impressed by the tonal character of each part of the drum kit that only added to the rich nature of the lower frequencies.

Finally, the soundstage was so wide, I needed a taxi to get from the left to the right speaker. The expansive nature of the synth runs created an 'epic' presentation from this clean and focused track.



I then plugged my Apple MacBook, featuring a SSD drive, into the USB port and played Tchaikovsky's Souvenir de Florence op.70: 1. Allegro con sprito at 24bit/192kHz via Audirvana. I personally don't recommend this direct approach. If you can, play your

music through your laptop via a dedicated, small *external* hard disk and place that unit on an isolation pod of some sort. The computer might be playing your music but it's also busy being a computer and, hence, creates noise in the process. Nevertheless, playing music direct from a laptop is a common (often unavoidable due to mobility issues) occurrence so I pursued the test from this 'crippled' configuration.

As such, I was impressed with the dynamic reach of the string section which soared and then kept on going during crescendos and moments of high excitement. I was also impressed with the instrumental separation between the violins and cellos. The lower frequencies, via the cellos, were tight, offered an almost portentous power but, again, they were isolated and kept themselves to themselves, allowing the soundstage to sound rich, complex and layered.

I then paired my iPhone 6S with the Moon. Doing this took a few seconds of menu manipulation on the Ace but the actions were few and the pairing painless. I played Kylie Minogue's *All the Lovers* from her *Abbey Road Sessions* via an MP3. Normally, when you stream MP3 files, the sonic results are dire. Not here, though. In fact, the results were a pleasant surprise. Yes, the basic issues of the limited and limiting technology remained but, having said that, the Moon's penchant of inserting air into the soundstage gave Minogue an uncharacteristically spacious presentation while I could even make out a strumming guitar low in the mix where, on lower costs systems, such a noise was basically morphed into the digital sludge.



Finally, I tested the Moon as it really should be tested, as a standalone unit. The main reason, of course, why you would buy the thing in the first place. So I reattached my Astell & Kern AK120 and played Bob Marley's *I Shot The Sheriff* at 24bit/96kHz through the reference speakers and let her rip.

The result was nothing short of beautiful. That percussion. So crisp. Superb precision without being bright with a bass guitar that bounced around the soundstage like a low frequency ping pong ball. Such was the character and vigorous nature of the instrument. The organ was whole musical and the guitars informative with plenty of string textures. As for the vocal? Both the Marley and backing harmonies stood apart, in their own space, which allowed them to enjoy micro-reverb effects of their own, adding a sense of clarity to their performance.

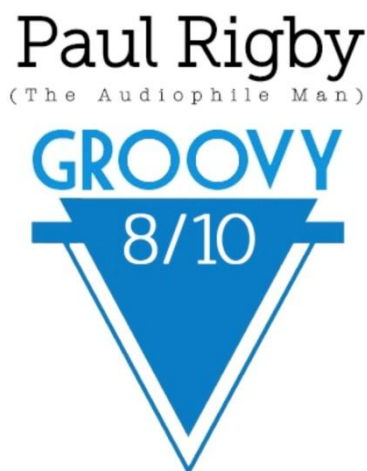
## CONCLUSION

What can I say? It worked and worked well. The Ace offers a gamut of facilities that will cover just about every hi-fi task from analogue to digital while handling a broad array of external sources. The fact that it's also a stand-alone unit with a built-in amplifier and speaker connections means that it will be ideal for those who are short of space. Easy to use, packed with features, sounds great...what more do you need?

**GOOD: midrange precision, instrumental separation, bass focus, feature count**

**BAD: nothing at the price**

**RATING: 8**



## REFERENCE

Cyrus Lyric

Aesthetix Calypso pre-amp

Icon Audio MB 845 Mk.II monoblocks

Quad ESL-57 speakers with One Thing mods

Spendor S3/5R speakers

Vertex AQ & Tellurium Q cabling