

HANDS-ON REVIEW: MOON BY SIMAUDIO NEO ACE ALL-IN-ONE MUSIC PLAYER

Gordon Brockhouse

Published: 08/25/2016



Look around any consumer audio show, and you'll spot a trend that must keep executives of high-end manufacturers awake at night. It's the audience. Attendees are mostly male, and well on the north side of 40. Many are greying, and not just at the temples. What happens when aging audiophiles like yours truly shuffle off to a seniors' home (or shuffle off this mortal coil)? Or, to put the question in a more positive light, how can manufacturers engage a new generation of listeners, and turn them into customers?

The product under review here is Simaudio Ltd.'s answer to that question. Priced in Canada at \$4,200, the MOON Neo ACE (short for "A Complete Experience") combines an integrated amplifier, high-resolution DAC, phono stage and digital audio streamer in one standard-size chassis. This is a departure for the Boucherville, QC company, whose lineup is heavily skewed toward separates.

The ACE was announced at CES 2016, but its gestation goes back to 2012. "We saw the start of market demand for a simple one-box solution," says Lionel Goodfield, who manages public relations for Simaudio. "Many consumers, especially the younger demographic, want uncomplicated access to music. They aren't interested in multiple components. They have a strong preference for computer audio."

WELL CONNECTED

Nailing down the computer part of the package is why it took four years to bring the ACE to market. The ACE has Ethernet and Wi-Fi connectivity. Inside the ACE is Simaudio's MiND (MOON intelligent Network Device) module. Simaudio also offers the MiND as a standalone component, and as a module inside some of its DACs.

Listeners can use the MiND app, which is available for iOS and Android, to stream music over their home network from a computer or network drive, or from TIDAL. "We wanted the MiND to reach a certain level of functionality before launching the ACE," Goodfield explains, "as it is one of the ACE's centerpiece features."

In addition to network connectivity, the ACE has built-in Bluetooth for one-to-one streaming from mobile devices. There are also two coaxial and two optical digital inputs, a USB input, phono input, two rear-panel line-level inputs, and a front-panel 3.5mm stereo input for connecting a media player. The ACE's phono preamp supports moving-magnet but not moving-coil cartridges.

Except for Bluetooth, all digital inputs support high-res audio. Maximum resolution varies by input, as shown on the chart below. The USB input will accept PCM audio to 384kHz/32 bits, as well as DSD 64, 128 and 256. You can stream high-res audio to 192kHz/32 bits and DSD 64 over a home network using a wired connection. Simaudio advises a wired connection for playing files with sampling rates 88.2kHz and higher over Wi-Fi.

INPUT	OPTICAL 1	SPDIF 1	USB	MiND via Ethernet	MiND via WiFi	BLUETOOTH
SAMPLE RATE	OPTICAL 2	SPDIF 2				
PCM 44.1kHz	●	●	●	●	●	●
PCM 48kHz	●	●	●	●	●	●
PCM 88.2kHz	●	●	●	●	#	
PCM 96kHz	●	●	●	●	#	
PCM 176.4kHz		●	●	●		
PCM 192kHz		●	●	●		
PCM 352.8kHz			●			
PCM 384kHz			●			
DSD64 (2.8224MHz)			●	●		
DSD128 (5.6448MHz)			●			
DSD256 (11.2896)			●			

Note: # 88.2kHz and 96kHz signals might work with MiND via WiFi input, depending on your router, but is NOT recommended as they may suffer from audible drop outs.

Currently, TIDAL is the only streaming service supported by the MiND module and app; but Simaudio says support for other services is coming "very soon." In the meantime, users who want to stream music from services like Spotify can do so via Bluetooth. Pair your device using the Bluetooth option in the ACE's Network menu, then use the service's app on your device to stream music to the ACE.

OUTSIDE AND IN

The ACE is a well-built, attractive component, with styling similar to other models in Simaudio's Neo series. The most visible departure is the OLED screen. Not only is it more modern-looking than the red calculator-style display used on most MOON products, it provides more information. If you're streaming music via the MiND network module, the OLED display will show song and album information. If you're playing digital music through the built-in DAC, it will show format, sampling rate and bit depth.

As on other Neo-series amplifiers, the ACE's headphone output is pulled down from the speaker output. Hard-core headphone fans can opt for a dedicated headphone amp; but most listeners will find the ACE's headphone output more than serviceable. Further to the right is the electronic volume control, which is based on the volume control circuitry on Simaudio's premium Evolution-series preamps and integrated amps. Volume level is indicated on the OLED display.



Popping off the ACE's lid reveals a jam-packed chassis. Toward the front is a heatsink that contains the four bipolar transistors used for the output stage. Rated power is 2x50W into 8Ω and 2x75W into 4Ω. Like other MOON amplifiers, the ACE operates in Class A mode to 5W, so there's no crossover distortion at levels where it could be audible.

Accommodating a high-resolution DAC, phono stage and network streamer in addition to all the amplifier circuitry requires a very compact design of all these sections. As Goodfield observes, the shorter signal paths make it easier to avoid the introduction of noise into the ACE's sensitive preamp and DAC sections.

SETUP

Network setup is explained in detail in the ACE's thorough manual. If you're using a wired connection, it's dead-simple: just connect an Ethernet cable between the ACE and your router.

Wireless setup is a little fiddly, but not onerous. You use a combination of the front-panel buttons and volume control to locate your wireless network and enter your security code. It's too bad that Simaudio has not implemented some form of WPS (Wi-Fi Protected Setup) to simplify this process. That said, at some point most users will have connected some other product (a smart TV, a wireless printer) that also takes a hunt-and-peck approach to network configuration. You do it once, and it's done. Once connected, it's a good idea to update the ACE's firmware, which is the last option in the Network menu.

During setup, you can perform other tasks, such as renaming inputs ("Blu-ray" instead of "Optical 1," for example), setting default volume levels, and giving the ACE a descriptive name like "living room" or "den" (the default name appears to be the unit's MAC address). That is how it will show up in the MiND app, which can be used to stream music more than one MiND component.



The next step is to download the free MiND app to your device, which you can do from Apple's App Store and Google Play. The app should find the ACE on your home network. It will also locate NAS drives on your network and let you stream music from them. To stream music from a Windows PC, you'll have to enable DLNA streaming in Windows. The process can be found by a simple Google search.

I'm a Mac guy, so I had to install UPnP server software to make the music on my Mac accessible by the MiND app and module. I used dBpoweramp's *Asset UPnP*. The interface is somewhat utilitarian, and some options are a bit confusing. But overall, this little program did its job just fine. The freeware version does not support DSD, but the paid version (US\$39) does.

STREAMING

On Simaudio's advice, I let the ACE break in by playing music quietly over an entire weekend. I had already connected my KEF LS50 monitors to the ACE's speaker outputs. My Pro-Ject 2Xperience turntable (fitted with an Ortofon Silver MM cartridge) was connected to the ACE's phono input, ready to play LPs; and my Mac Mini to the USB interface, ready to play digital music. And of course, the ACE was on my home network, so I could stream music from the Mac, TIDAL and whatever device I happened to be using for the MiND app.

I ran into a couple of networking hiccups. Once in a while I got a "Connection lost" error message. I'd have to close and restart the app to connect with the ACE. While mildly irritating, this didn't happen frequently. I also got "Connection failed" messages; and restarting the app didn't solve that issue. As it turns out, you can only access the ACE's MiND module through one device at a time. I had the app running on my iPad, so when I launched it on my iPhone, it refused to connect. It would be nice if the app gave more informative error messages so as to reduce trouble-shooting guesswork. More to the point, one-device-at-a-time access is an annoying limitation. Goodfield says Simaudio, which took software development in-house in 2015, plans to fix this in a future update.

But overall, the MiND app is well designed, easy to use, and functionally rich. You can create playlists, search for music across all your networked sources, and use the app to control the ACE itself. It's an impressive piece of work for a company of Simaudio's size.

LISTENING

As to the sound, the ACE is fast, nimble, articulate and dead-quiet. It creates a wide, deep soundstage with very good specificity. You can see, but not hear the speakers. They seem like sculptures, with the sound coming from the air between and behind them, and sometimes beyond speaker the plane.

The ACE has a wonderful sense of rhythm and drive, engaging you not just emotionally, but bodily as well. It leans into the music, like a soloist anticipating an entry cue. The ACE swings when the music gets rambunctious, and rocks you gently in more subdued moments. "A master of time and space" is how I'd sum it up.

It took me a while to fully appreciate the ACE's virtues. My reference amplifier is Simaudio's Moon Neo 340i, which costs \$1,600 more than the ACE. The 340i has double the output of the ACE (quadruple into 4Ω), and a beefier power supply (400VA toroidal power transformer compared to 250VA; 40,000μF worth of energy storage compared to 20,000). Sonically, the ACE and 340i are cut from the same cloth, but the 340i sounds more muscular. So sometimes I was more aware of what I was missing than what I was hearing.



Played through the ACE, the piano, double bass and drums on the LP version of the Brad Mehldau Trio's new album *Blues and Ballads* (Nonesuch) had a gorgeous tactile quality. Interestingly, the ACE sounded a little nimbler than my 340i, but had less left. Even so, Mehldau's big left-hand chords sounded impressively solid, with no sense of strain whatsoever.

Streamed via Wi-Fi from my Mac Mini to the ACE's MiND module, the late Allen Toussaint's rendition of "St. James Infirmary" from his penultimate album, *The Bright Mississippi* (Nonesuch, ALAC rip from CD), was pure delight. The driving piano and guitar chords, and the big bass drum, made me want to dance around the room. Played with a USB connection using Audirvana Plus 2.5 software, the same track sounded smoother and more refined, while retaining all its swing and energy.

Also played via USB, a DSD download of Patricia Barber's *Café Blue* (Blue Note) showed several of the ACE's virtues. On "Too Rich for my Blood," the ACE's excellent micro dynamics highlighted the beguiling legato style of Barber's pianism, as well as perfect precision of Mark Walker's drumming: not just the timing, but the varying strength of his strokes. And the ACE had enough balls to do justice to the extended drum solo at the end of this track. The torture test was Ivan Fischer's superb reading of Gustav Mahler's *Resurrection Symphony* (Channel Classics, DSD rip from SACD). The Budapest Festival Orchestra was portrayed on a big open soundstage, with lovely transparent strings and great placement of instruments. The tender passages in the opening movement were melting, and the ACE was surprisingly capable in the big moments. Admittedly, the sound got a bit congested and strident when the orchestra and chorus hit triple forte, but all things considered, the ACE's performance was really impressive on this very demanding music.

SECOND OPINION

After completing my evaluation, I passed the ACE onto *WiFi HiFi* Publisher John Thomson. Ten minutes after connecting it, John texted me out of the blue, calling it "a night-and-day improvement" over his old amplifier, a sub-\$1,000 model from a mainstream Japanese brand. "Wow!" John commented, "my KEF [Q10 bookshelf] speakers have never sounded better."



The first music John played through the ACE was the eponymous album by the jazz/house fusion artist St. Germain (Nonesuch/Parlaphone), which he spun on his Pro-Ject RPM Carbon 3 turntable. "It felt more alive, punchier," John says, noting how the ACE unraveled details that had been buried before, like cymbals deep in the background.

One of John's go-to albums is Billie Holiday's *Body and Soul* (Verve Records). Through the ACE, "it just felt perfect," John says. "This is the first time that I've felt like Billie Holiday is right there in the room."

Publishers are naturally predisposed to enthusiasm; so a grain of salt may be in order. But John's over-the-moon reaction strikes me as both genuine and justified. At \$4,200, Simaudio's new all-in-one music centre isn't inexpensive. Sticker shock aside, if John's experience is anything to go by, the ACE will be a revelation to its target audience.