

Moon 390 Network Player Preamplifier

by Rafael Todes



I've come across Moon's output several times in my reviewing career, as a few years ago I was asked to review a Moon phono stage. I enjoyed living with it; it was not only well-constructed, well thought-out, but it had a lovely communicative sound that was striking.

At the Munich show a couple of years ago, I heard the Moon Ace, the all-in-one Swiss Army Knife that Alan reviewed in Issue 138, playing through a pair of bookshelf Martin Logan's, and was staggered that the unit could quietly, without any hint of pretence be producing an arresting sound that was quite out of the price point in which it was born. I bought the unit and have enjoyed it ever since.

This year at Munich, the Simaudio room was using the 390 Network Player Preamplifier, along with the 400M monoblock power amps, driving some B&W802d2 speakers. Again, I was struck by the talent of this combination and by its effortless music making, and on some of the hardest tracks I could throw at it. I listened for a good hour, not really being able to comprehend the how and why of what this combination was doing, so I was naturally thrilled at the prospect of spending more time with this kit.

The 390 Network Player Preamplifier is more than just a Swiss Army knife. In fact to call it thus would be to sell it short. It has been brilliantly thought out. As a preamplifier, it's reasonably comprehensive. It has analogue and balanced inputs and it has a configurable phono stage, suitable for use with moving magnet and moving coil cartridges and with the ability to set capacitance, gain, input impedance and even change the EQ curve from RIAA. It has a built-in DAC with Toslink, SPDIF, AES inputs, and a USB Type B input capable of up to DSD256 and PCM 384kHz.

There are four HDMI inputs for video or SACD, which is a brilliant touch. I have experimented with video receivers, and I am always shocked to see what a hit you take on audio quality over two channel audio. The 390 does not support multichannel audio, however.

Thus the 390 can take HDMI inputs from say a Sky Box, a DVD player, Apple TV etc., and impressively play the audio. Useful, and maybe a game changer for some. The HDMI output is 4K compatible. There is a USB port for connection to a hard disc etc., and a Simlink for a proprietary way of connecting a Moon CD player.

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▶ The volume control operates purely in the analogue domain and avoids some of the sonic compromises associated with a digital control. It uses an optical encoder to create the same ‘feel’ as a digital control. The power supplies benefit from trickle-down technology from the 780D Digital Converter, which also uses the Moon Hybrid Power Supply, where there is essentially a digital switch in the first stage of the supply blocking DC et al., and a linear analogue power supply to feed the unit.

Setting up the 390 is a breeze. There are two antennae which screw into the back of the unit, and you can connect via a network cable, or scan the existing wireless networks. One slight quirk comes when entering the WiFi password, which is a little tricky with a circular knob, the unit predicts the next letter of the password, and you have to take a gamble if the next letter counts or not! That aside, it’s pretty straightforward. There is an IOS app, which is very reliable and does what it says on the tin. I used a combination of the app and Roon, which works well with the Moon, again without any problems. There is a remote control which performs some features and is narrow, shiny, and plastic.

I did many listening tests, with the 400M monoblocks, and also with my VAC Phi 200 power amplifiers, to try and ascertain how the various components within the 390 were contributing overall to the final sound.

I started with the phono input, which was a breeze to configure for my Lyra Etna cartridge. Listening to the marvellously recorded Naim album, Forcione’s Tears of Joy, it became evident that the phono stage in the preamp is not just an afterthought. There is a fast, ‘zappy’ quality here; it’s exciting, dynamic, and thoroughly engaging. The bass is tight, and the wood block is taut; perhaps the decay is not as naturally resonant as my VAC phono preamp, but this is many multiples of the cost of the 390. There is a high-end feel to this; I’ve heard phono stages alone for the same price as the 390 that don’t sound as good.

The area where I suspect this product will be used most is digital. It is interesting to hear the same track played on Tidal, as accessed on the app. There is still the same level of guts and communication, the space is somewhat different, and perhaps the streaming version is a tad less organic, but I’m surprised how similar the two versions sound. I have to navigate between the two inputs using the remote; for some reason the ‘Phono’ input doesn’t come up as an option on the app. A little odd, but one of the only quirks I have found so far!

Onto my terra firma, Simon Rattle and the Berlin Phil playing the eccentric Haydn Sinfonia Concertante, 1st movement. The sound is sweet and totally believable compared with what I’m used to, a dCS Network Bridge plus a Chord DAVE. Rich and full, the bass speed and quality are ▶

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▶ both excellent. The soundstage is well-presented for the price level of the preamplifier, it's not as cavernous and as vast as the VAC/Dave/dCS, but it's impressive. There's something that's inviting about what it's doing. The 390 shows the musicality of the players, the sense of fun, and communication that's going on. It's doing the same thing that I heard from the brand in Munich for the last couple of years.

This file is using MQA, both on the native app and with Roon software. The 390 deals with this integration with consummate ease. I moved on to the Oscar Peterson Trio, specifically to 'We Get Requests' and 'You Look Good to Me', where there seemed to be a problem with the MQA re-release. It sounds fuller and more realistic, but there is quite a lot of wow at the beginning of the track, which isn't there on the earlier CD version. That aside, it's interesting to see what the remastering is doing for the presence of the artists. Either way, that's a bit of a digression, because it has nothing to do with the Moon, except to say it has integrated MQA and Tidal seamlessly into its offering. The double bass is taut, powerful, and the whole track (once we pass the wow-ridden beginning) really rocks.

A brief survey of the headphone output is no surprise. It's no slouch, punchy, clean, and highly capable. Listening to the ball scene from the *Symphonie Fantastique*, Ticcianti and the SCO on Linn, a beautifully recorded 192kHz affair, there is a pleasing combination of clarity and grunt, but also warmth and humanity. The soundstage is spacious, and it exceeds

the capabilities of my old Graham Slee headphone amplifier in sheer presence and communication, a unit which represented excellent value-for-money at over £600.

Substituting the VAC power amps for the Moon 400M's, and going back to the vinyl, Forcione shows some impressive results. The power amps add muscle, precision, and even more tautness. The resulting sound is exciting, engaging and gives some of the percussion instruments more of a spotlight. This was a surprising case of synergy, the components singing together. Of course, a good transistor power amp can leave a good valve amp standing in the bass department, but these two together and a good vinyl set up has really cracked the timing of the track.

It is worth noting that the 400M's are no spring chickens; they have been around for at least the last seven years, they don't seem to have been picked up by reviewers anywhere – they appear to occupy space below the radar. At £7,200 they are something of a bargain, and they seem to have a special affinity with the B&W802d2s. They have the power to grip the bass performance of the speakers and to drive them with aplomb. My turntable is an Inspire Monarch, with an SME V, and I've not heard such impressive bass performance as this on my system. Continuing with the vinyl odyssey, this time the Amadeus Quartet with Cecil Aronowitz playing Mozart's early and utterly charming Bb Quintet op 174 on DG, the combination really captures the vitality of this world-class ensemble. The sound is packed with detail, lovely tonal ▶

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► nuance, and the colours of the players’ Strads (not all of them) finessed effortlessly. This is the opposite of many of the digital amps I’ve heard recently. The greyness and lack of tonal nuance kill them for me. None of that here! All this from the phono stage that comes from a preamp costing £4,750.

The 400M’s have fully balanced differential circuitry, matched Moon bipolar transistors, an over-sized power supply using a custom-designed toroidal transformer, and a healthy 400 Watts at 8 Ohms. The monoblocks are also Class A for the first 10 Watts, which goes some way to explaining the sweetness I’m hearing.

So onto some opera, *Macbeth* conducted by Sinopoli on Philips Digital Classics. Using the 390 and 400M’s – a truly stellar (or should I say lunar combination), once again shows the synergy of the three products. They capture the drama of this extraordinary work. The fearsome orchestral crescendi... 0-60mph in 6 seconds! There are choral moments, which can scream on lesser systems, but here have a beguiling line to them. When the music turns comic, the tightness and grip these units have on the music is the perfect conduit for the wit of the score. When Mara Zampieri as Lady Macbeth gets going with her pyrotechnics, there is no hint of harshness and such control! The full personality of her voice is laid bare.

Finally, I tried Leif Ove Andsnes playing Chopin Ballades and Nocturnes on Sony, as heard through Qobuz, a 96k/24 bit recording. The piano is a funny one for me. It’s tough to capture a keyboard well so that it sounds like a single instrument and not a series of drive units- so it’s more a speaker thing, but the amp and DAC also play a starring role in the success of good pianistic reproduction.

Chord’s DAVE is the master of the piano, but somehow what I’m hearing on this hi-res Qobuz recording makes me want to listen further and further. It’s a beautiful sound with no harsh edges, and the incredible subtlety of Andsnes’ phrasing spins the musical line in an arresting way. Not only is the timbre of the piano just right, but the micro-phrasing that you hear when you stand next to a great musical artist is all there. It is so often lost.

I’ve been hugely impressed with the Moon 390 Network Player Preamplifier; It’s well-engineered, and highly intelligently

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

390 Network Player Preamplifier

Analog Inputs: Phono Input: MM and MC, RCA Inputs, Balanced Input

Analog Outputs: XLR balanced, fixed and variable output (RCA)

Digital Inputs: Toslink and coaxial S/PDIF, AES/EBU, 4xHDMI, USB Type B, RJ45

Finish: all black, all silver, black with silver cheeks

Dimensions (WxHxD): 43 × 9 × 33.2cm

Shipping weight: 10 kg

Price: £4,750

400M Monoblocks

Output Power at 8Ω: 400W

Output Power at 4Ω: 650W

Finish: all black, all silver, black with silver cheeks

Dimensions (WxHxD): 42.9 × 8.9 × 35.6cm

Shipping weight: 15 Kg each

Price: £7,200 per pair

Manufactured by: Simaudio

URL: simaudio.com

UK distributor: Renaissance (Scotland) Ltd

Tel: +44(0)131 555 3922

URL: renaissanceaudio.co.uk

thought out. It combines a well-facilitated phono stage made without obvious compromise with a top-class streamer which works without faff or fiddle. The headphone amp section is also a serious contender, as is the DAC. Together with the well-kept secret 400M mono power amplifiers, the whole package creates an award-winning partnership that offer outstanding value for money. Anyone looking for a serious high-end system should give this the most careful consideration. To ignore this would be lunacy! +