

A STUNNING SECOND ACT

MOON by Simaudio's 230HAD
Headphone Amp

By Bailey S. Barnard

The only thing unassuming about the new 230HAD headphone amp/DAC from MOON by Simaudio is its appearance. The little black box isn't much bigger than a hardbound edition of *The Complete Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, but it delivers a potent 1 watt into 50 ohms, which is enough to power all but the most sensitive headphones—and more than enough to extract the deepest nuances from your favorite recordings. I do the majority of my listening for this review through the new and highly capable HiFiMAN HE1000 planar magnetic headphones, which will run you \$3,000.



Whole Lot to Love

On a 24/192 version of Led Zepelin's "Whole Lotta Love," Robert Plant's vocals come through with as much character as I've ever heard, while John Bonham's kick drum is so deep and full that I forget I'm listening to headphones—until the bridge comes in. And then the persistent hi-hat taps ring with an accuracy rarely achieved by reproduced music and the various percussive hits and rattles circle around my head, and then what can only be described as Plant's orgasm sounds begin swirling

across the fully three-dimensional soundstage. The 230HAD achieves greatness.

It does so thanks in part to its forebear, Sim's 430HA headphone amp, which goes for \$3,500 *without* a built-in DAC (which is an extra \$800). For \$1,500 all-in, the smaller 230HAD includes the same DSD256/32-bit, PCM-capable DAC as the larger amp and, again, plenty of power for the majority of headphones. It doesn't deliver the same 8 watts into 50 ohms as the 430HA, nor does it accommodate balanced headphones, but if your

headphones require that much juice, you've likely already spent a few grand on a headphone amp capable of driving a mac truck (or perhaps one with vacuum tubes).

The 230HAD doesn't proclaim to be the end-all solution for every headphone ever made. Except for a small handful of truly esoteric and ghastly expensive headphones (like the \$5,250 Stax SR-009 electrostatic headphones, with their 145,000-ohm impedance), the little Sim amp is all you will ever need. It offers a 22,000-ohm impedance and a published frequency range

from 5 Hz to 100 kHz, with a signal-to-noise ratio of 115 dB. Its DAC is fully asynchronous, with three digital inputs—two single S/PDIF, one TOSLINK, and one USB—plus an analog RCA stereo input. It also offers dual analog RCA stereo outputs (fixed and variable) and two headphone jacks on the front panel—one big and one little. But enough with the specs...

Bring on the Monk

The keys have all the presence and vibrato of a live performance during a 24-bit CD remaster of

Thelonious Monk's Solo Monk. Every note carries beautifully into the next, with each one simultaneously filling its proper space within the three-dimensional soundstage. There are faint but wonderful moments on some of these tracks where you can hear Monk softly moaning with the music—and it takes a truly capable amplifier to expose such details. The 230HAD adds a rarely achieved dynamic to recordings, one that provides a deeper appreciation for music you've heard countless times. *(continued)*

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And of course the ultimate example of this comes when listening to vinyl. On the opening track of Marvin Gaye's *What's Going On*, I'm immediately right in the middle of the party, with the various conversational vocals surrounding me before the music comes in. I can scarcely believe the depth and fullness across the vocal spectrum. The rhythmic finger snaps have more immediate presence than I've ever heard, so much so that the minute differences between each individual snap become audible. Toward the end of the track, as Gaye and the multiple vocal tracks begin bouncing around the soundstage, I have an all-new *ah-ha* moment. Rather than simply reproducing the audio recording, the 230HAD brings the feeling of the music to the forefront.

Curious to test the amp's ability on a lesser set of headphones, I plug in a pair of \$200 Pioneer on-ears and reach for *London Calling* on 180-gram vinyl. Of course, the limitations of these relatively inexpensive headphones are immediately apparent: The soundstage all but collapses, the low frequencies are fairly lackluster, and the highs are tinny. But what remains are the nuances of this detailed recording. Guitar licks tickle the far edges of the stereo image, with the stacked vocal harmonies well separated and distinct. It's actually really surprising how much detail the 230HAD is able to draw through these little headphones, which are perfectly decent, but nowhere near as capable as the big HiFiMAN ear cans.

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The Music Is Calling

Now that I know what I'm missing, I plug the HiFiMANs back in and am met with a multifaceted explosion of sound. When paired with the proper set of headphones, the 230HAD is virtually unstoppable, delivering sound with the full gusto of a reference-level system. It offers enough control to present delicate recordings with all the finesse they require, while providing more than enough power to drive hard-hitting or bass-heavy music with as much energy as a six-figure speaker system.

I've listened to *London Calling* dozens and dozens (if not hundreds) of times and the 230HAD headphone amp with the HiFiMAN headphones reminds me what I adore about the Clash. Though largely considered a punk band, the Clash put so many layers and details into its recordings, which this equipment spotlights as well as anything I've ever heard. It feels like I'm discovering the music all over again. ●

MSRP: \$1,500
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