

Both Sides of the Moon

The Simaudio MOON 300D DAC and MOON 750D DAC/Transport

By Jeff Dorgay



S imaudio has recently released a pair of outstanding DAC's at opposite ends of the price scale. Their 300D entry-level model is reasonably priced (\$1,595) while the 750D costs considerably more (\$11,995) and includes a CD transport as part of the deal. I've been living with both of these DAC's for some time now and have been equally impressed.

Let's Start Small

The 300D is available in black or silver and comes packaged in a case not much bigger than Simaudio's LP5.3 phono stage, or about half the width of a standard component. A nice touch if you are going to place it on a rack with a LP5.3 or perhaps a turntable power supply. It takes a somewhat unconventional approach, using the BurrBrown PCM1793 DAC chips, featuring 24bit/192kHz resolution, yet internally upsamples everything to 24 bit/352.8 kHz processing. A row of LED's on the left front panel indicate the sampling rate of the incoming signal.

Though the current trend has been more towards USB DAC's, a USB input is included on the 300D's rear panel, however it is only for convenience. The Simaudio engineers do not feel that USB offers the best solution for high-quality digital playback, concentrating instead on investing the quality in the S/PDIF (RCA) inputs. An optical input is also included to make this a very versatile DAC. There is a pair of RCA and XLR outputs to accommodate either type of system.

Setup

To give the 300D a thorough test drive, I used a variety of 16/44 and 24/96 source material, primarily from my Sooloos music server, as well as pairing the DAC with a few older disc players. For the audiophile on a budget, the Pioneer 563 and Denon 3910 can both be purchased used for less than \$250. With a suitable digital cable, either of these can mate with the 300D to provide a high-quality digital front end while offering the added flexibility of multiple digital inputs.

For comparison purposes, the digital output of the MOON 750D was used just to find the limitations of the budget transports.

The 300D was used via XLR and RCA outputs to my reference Burmester 011 preamplifier, and I preferred the sound of the XLR outputs here, using identical AudioQuest Colorado interconnects. Staff writer Mark Marcantonio, who now uses the 300D as his reference, also had the same experience with the 300D mated to his Simaudio i-7 integrated amplifier, finding the balanced outputs offering up slightly more ease and smoothness.

Mighty Mite

In the midst of this review, we had the opportunity to do a bit of "group listening" where I had a few staff members over for a day of music while comparing a wide range of DAC's from about \$1,000 all the way up to the \$55,000 dCS Paganini stack with upsampler and word clock. While we don't do formal product shootouts in the magazine, it is always worthwhile to compare gear that's in for review to other similar-priced offerings to see how they shake out in terms of ultimate value.

With four other DAC's ranging from similar to almost double the price of the 300D, I kept switching between one DAC and another while the staff members listened, not knowing what they were listening to. The vote was unanimous on "DAC C" having the most open and least "digital" sound. A couple of the staff writers were disappointed that they consistently picked the MOON 300D over their own DAC's, but that's how the chips fell. *(continued)*

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Just as there are multiple paths to great analog sound, the same applies to digital. Most companies defend their position as “the best” when in reality, there is always more than one way to skin a cat. In the case of Simaudio’s up-sampling approach, it works well.

If I had to describe the 300D in one word, it would be “natural.” This was very evident when listening to solo vocal tracks, small ensembles of acoustic instruments and especially violins; the 300D consistently turned in an excellent performance. Keeping in line with the Canadian vibe, listening to “Love Won’t Find Us Here” from Mae Moore’s *Dragonfly* CD showed off Moore’s breathy vocals, giving the presentation a big, open sound. Moving on to the XRCD of Dave Grusin’s *Discovered Again*, the sound of the triangle in the opening of “Sun Song” was smooth with a natural decay.

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This is a small but subtle test that many lower-priced DAC’s can’t handle.

While the 300D had great dynamic range and solid, decisive bass performance, what really sets this one apart from its peers in its price range is that level of delicacy that usually does not exist *at all* here. No, it’s not a giant killer and you won’t mistake it for Simaudio’s top player, but it gives a very solid performance that is as non-digital as I’ve yet heard here. To try and put it in better perspective, if you only have a modest analog setup, I’m guessing you’ll either be shopping for a better turntable or more time listening to digital, especially if you have any kind of collection of high-resolution digital music files. Call me crazy, but I’d rather have great digital than mediocre analog, and at this level, the 300D delivers the goods. *(continued)*





Going to the Head of the Class – The 750D

Removing the 750D from the box, this player feels substantial at 35 pounds. Like all of Simaudio's Moon Evolution series, the aluminum chassis is built in-house on their own five-axis milling machine, and the result is a player that looks like a piece of sculpture with performance to match. The 750D includes a front loading CD (only) transport as part of the bargain, and even though many audiophiles are strictly playing music from their hard drives, there are still quite a few who do not want to embrace the computer as a means for playback. With the 750D, you can have the best of both worlds. And should you decide at a later date to include a music server, you're prepared.

The rest of the visual scheme is in keeping with Simaudio's top line Evolution series of electronics, with an all-silver front panel or the black-and-silver front panel. I've always been a fan of Simaudio's industrial design; the layout is intuitive and incredibly easy to read, and like the other Simaudio products, it has a large, LED readout that those of us who are older than 30 can read easily.

Around the rear panel, the 750D features four digital inputs; Toslink, USB, AES/EBU and an RCA S/PDIF input should handle whatever source you require. Personally, this is my only complaint with the 750D. At this price point, I would love to see a second RCA input for the fanatics in the crowd who have more than one source requiring it, even if it was at the expense of the Toslink input. It would have been nice to connect my Wadia 170i and my Sooloos to the 750D. When you've got a DAC this good, you want to use *all* of your sources with it.

As with the 300D, the USB input is not considered the high-performance option on this DAC and is limited to 16/48 capability. It's worth mentioning here that even though Simaudio does not offer 24/96 USB capability on the 750D, I was more than impressed while streaming 16/44 lossless files from my MacBook Pro and never felt like I was missing out on anything.

The 750D has a pricetag to match its level of quality; MSRP is \$11,995. However, considering you get a world-class DAC and transport, you'll agree that this one is quite the bargain after all. *(continued)*



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Top Technology

Even though the CD is slowly falling from favor (as is all physical media) as a means for distributing music, I’m guessing that if you are going to spend 12 large on a redbook player, you probably have a substantial collection of CD’s that you’re not planning on getting rid of anytime soon. In 2010, it’s the late 80’s all over again, and just like everyone was getting rid of their LP’s for peanuts, the used CD market has never been better. So it’s exciting to know that Simaudio has made a commitment to their customers by designing and building their own transport, thus assuring you that this player will be serviceable in the future. Simaudio’s Lionel Goodfield told me at this year’s CES show, “We felt we had to build our own transport after getting burned by a major supplier a decade ago. This way, we *knew* we would always have transports for our own decks. And we feel our transport sounds better, too.”

Thanks to the ESS Technology Sabre32 Reference ES9018S DAC/Digital Filter working in Hyperstream™ – which uses a total of 16 DACs (8 per/channel in a differential configuration), the 750D operates in 32-bit asynchronous mode and combined with their M-AJiC32 jitter reduction circuitry, reduces jitter to below 1 picosecond. *(continued)*

Fortunately, it has the low-level resolution and ultra-low-level noise floor that will add a new dimension to recordings you've heard many times.

Always a common audiophile argument regarding the superiority of a hard drive versus CD for tip-top performance, I still maintain that at least with the hardware at my disposal (MacBook Pro, Wadia 170i, Sooloos and Naim music servers), standard 16/44 discs still sound more natural when playing through the transport. It's close, but when listening to the best discs in my collection, the transport still had the edge in smoothness and low-level detail. Acoustic instruments had more body and texture, and again, the uppermost register had a lack of harshness that I didn't hear until I switched back to hard-drive playback.

Upping the ante to high-resolution files changed the game. Playing a combination of downloaded files from HDTracks.com and the Naim Music Store established how much more interesting digital is in high resolution. Comparing some of my favorite analog tracks captured in 24/96 with my Nagra LB from records became stunningly close to the originals through the 750D and certainly good enough that I found myself listening less often to vinyl. Especially with those Blue Note 45's, and that's as good as it gets for digital.

Against the Odds

Again, the unlikely comparison test occurred, as I just happened to have a handful of great CD players here in the studio, including my Naim CD555, the Wadia 781SE and my new reference, the four-box Paganini stack from dCS.

From an informal comparison, I'd put the 750D squarely in the middle of the "big bucks" category. While it did not have quite the level of refinement in the upper registers as my \$32,000 Naim player (and we are really splitting hairs here on a six-figure reference system), it did have a little more weight and control in the lower registers, very impressive for a \$12k player.

Switching to system two, consisting of the daRTzeel CTH-8550 integrated and my Harbeth Monitor 40.1 speakers, the difference between players evaporated, so for 99 percent of the market, the 750D will be the top of the mountain and you'll be happy living there.

But that's not the whole story, in 2011 when Simaudio releases the *outboard power supply* for the 750D, I anticipate that it will increase the performance substantially, just as any of my favorite Naim components have when making a similar upgrade, so don't count the 750D out of the very top of the playing field just yet. We are anxiously awaiting this upgrade and will report as soon as it is available. For now, the Simaudio 750D is a fantastic digital player that is as obsolete proof as today's technology will allow. This is a fantastic player in every way and it is certainly a bargain in the "cost no object" CD player category.

I am very happy to award the Simaudio 750D DAC/Transport one of our Exceptional Value Awards for 2010, and we have purchased the review sample for our reference fleet of components. ●

Staff members Marc Marcantonio and Ken Mercereau both contributed to this review.

The Simaudio Moon

300D DAC

MSRP: \$1,595

750D DAC/Transport

MSRP: \$11,995

MANUFACTURER

www.simaudio.com

PERIPHERALS

Analog Source Spiral Groove SG-2 w/Triplanar arm and Grado Statement 1 cartridge

Digital Sources Naim HDX music server, Sooloos music server, Squeezebox Touch music server

Preamplifier Burmester 011

Power Amplifier Burmester 911 mk. 3, Simaudio i-7 (integrated), daRTzeel CTH-8550 (integrated)

Speakers GamuT S-9, Harbeth Monitor 40.1, B&W 805D

Interconnects Shunyata Aurora, Cardas Clear

Speaker Cable Shunyata Stratos SP, Cardas Clear

Power Conditioning Running Springs Dmitri and Maxim

Power Cords Running Springs HZ and Mongoose, Shunyata Python CX

Accessories SRA "Ohio Class" isoBase amplifier platforms, Shunyata Dark Field Cable Elevators