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AMPLIFIERS: Beyond the W-5, Simaudio takes its power amplifiers a step further. Copland reinvents an old favorite and makes it better than ever. CEC brings musicality to a more affordable range.

OTHER REVIEWS: The new Veena from Reference 3a, a reincarnation of the Energy Reference Connoisseur, and a hot DAC from Benchmark

PLUS: Paul Bergman on the true nature of hi-fi, and stereo too, the redicoverry of a Bach contemporary, and Vegas 2006



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SIMAUDIO MOON W-8

It seems just yesterday that Simaudio launched what was billed as the ultimate power amplifier, the W-5LE (“limited edition” — there were only 250 built). We reviewed it in *UHF* No. 70, and we were so impressed we bought it, to replace the older W-5 in our Omega system. Albert Simon also got one. And it *was* just yesterday, some 18 months ago. So what is this new amplifier?

To be fair, Simaudio president Jean Poulin had told us at the time that the W-5LE represented the pinnacle of what was possible with the original Renaissance circuit, introduced by founder Victor Sima with the original Celeste amplifiers. That seemed to hint at a totally new circuit topology, perhaps someday. But this soon?

So here’s Simaudio’s new Evolution series, billed as an assault on the state of the art. The series includes a range of products that even include a CD player, all of them decidedly upmarket: weighty in both kilograms and dollars. The W-8 is the first of them available in sufficient quantities to review.

In a photograph the W-8 could be a slightly beefier version of the familiar W-5, albeit without the handles and with the heat sink fins turned the other way. In fact this is a larger amplifier, unable to fit under the equipment stand where our W-5LE lives comfortably. What’s

more, if you try to lift it, it seems to be bolted to the floor. Like earlier models this one comes with screw-in spikes. Small floor protectors are also included, but sliding the amp on them even a little will damage them.

We have longstanding misgivings about large power amplifiers, including the very expensive ones that Simaudio seems to be competing with by launching the W-8. Power is nice, and having too much of it would be like having too much happiness, but high power usually comes at a cost, especially in solid state amplifiers. These big amps, some of them actually apartment-sized, sound veiled at anything below full power (read: nearly all the time), with an opacity that delivers a lot of sound but not much music. There’s a reason for the current fad of expensive amps with tiny power outputs. We have always liked the W-5 amplifiers because they were such an evident exception to the rule.

Still, Simaudio didn’t quite start with a clean sheet of paper, because its engineers learned a lot in the many refinements to the Renaissance circuit. The new “Lynx” topology shares some characteristics with its predecessor. For one thing it is a *differential* circuit, which means it amplifies the difference between the positive and negative parts of the signal. Thus balanced operation, via the XLR inputs, comes naturally,

and not through the addition of an extra amplification stage. The new circuit also operates without an overall feedback loop, which brings part of the output signal back to the input to correct distortion. Only local feedback is used. As in the earlier designs, the output transistors are decoupled from each other.

The build quality of the W-8 is impressive. The sculpted front panel has hardly any straight lines, and the four corner pillars give the structure great strength. That is needed in order to support the hefty power supply, which you can see in the picture on the next page. It contains two large toroidal power transformers, which account for a good part of the weight, and 240,000 μ F of filter capacitors (the blue cylinders). The rear panel is fitted with first-class connectors, including *four* pairs of WBT binding posts, to make biwiring easier. You’ll find the usual 12 volt connections, to let a preamp control the amp for instance, and also an RS232 serial connector. This is a dying feature on personal computers, but it is widely used in complex home installations.

If you use unbalanced cables (as we do, since our Copland preamp is not balanced), you leave in place the jumpers inserted into the XLR jacks, linking pins 1 and 3, shorting out the unneeded negative input. On earlier Moon amplifiers, the shorting was done with a special plug inserted into a second RCA connector. You might prefer to see this done with a switch, but there is probably no way to add a switch without a performance hit.

Though our W-8 had been broken in, it had also undergone an upgrade of its built-in firmware, and we thought it might be best to run some more hours on it. After that, we installed it in our Omega system, alongside our W-5LE, and pulled out some LPs we thought would be particularly revealing.

The first was Wilson Audio’s long-discontinued *Center Stage*, with John Williams’ stirring *Olympic Fanfare* (we had the session only a few days before the Turin Olympics). We like this recording because there is a lot happening at very low frequencies in this wind band recording, and reproducing it properly

requires precision and not merely brute force.

Of course we wanted to see first of all whether the 50 watt power difference would be audible. It *might* be, but something else entirely caught our ears, the sheer *size* of everything. The huge space. And the convincing way the music expands to fill that space.

And that's in comparison with an amplifier that understands space, that has it hard-wired into its brain.

Remember what we mentioned about big amps sounding veiled? Well, forget it. This is a very busy wind band recording, and what struck us from the very first was how much we could hear happening in the background even when the foreground was downright crowded. The cymbals, which Reine had found too forward, now sounded normal because we could hear *through* them. "This is quite a trick for a large amplifier," commented Gerard.

We continued with one of our favorite LPs, of William Walton's tone poem *Façade* (Reference Recordings RR-16). This recording can be wonderful or nearly unbearable, depending on the usual factors. Were we right to expect that "wonderful" would be the more appropriate adjective?

Yes indeed. The timbres of the varied solo instruments came through in impeccable form. Though this was generally true, we each noted particular instruments: the bewitching texture of the cello, the supple and ethereal piccolo, the warm bassoon, the realistic and attractive trumpet. As for the snare drum, which announces each change of tableaux, not only was it clean and clear, but it seemed to have added weight, the way a real snare might if it were brought into our listening room.

All of this magic came with no downside. Depth was actually improved, and we could hear *through* a foreground instrument to hear one playing in the background. We had a joyous time.

By now we had noticed that the W-8 has little problem with extreme lows, and we were certain it would easily handle our next selection: *Take the 'A' Train* from



the Ray Brown Trio's *Soular Energy* album. What could possibly go wrong?

Nothing did. From its first couple of notes Ray Brown's thunderous bass picked up the rhythm and never let it go. Certain piano chords, which had sounded unnaturally hard with other amplifiers, now merely revealed the particular nature of the piano. "A piano expert could tell you the make," commented Gerard. Reine was also struck by the difference in the piano. "It's the same pianist, with the same piano and the same sound engineer," she said, "and yet..."

Transparency? The softly brushed snare, almost inaudible behind the bass and the piano, was always very much present. Perhaps it was just that we were noticing more differences, but the amplifier did seem to be getting better from one recording to the next.

At some point, indeed, you start

thinking you've said it all, and you stop taking notes altogether. It was largely that way with *Good Stuff* from the Eric Bibb 45 rpm album of the same title (Opus 3 LP19603).

Gerard noted only that at the very start there was a small background percussion instrument he had never heard before. There's a lot on this recording, and we could finally hear it all.

We had included the Eric Bibb recording because we didn't want to evaluate the W-8 without hearing a human voice. But how would it do with a *female* voice? We pulled out a favorite CD, Margie Gibson's wonderfully emotional *Say It With Music* (Sheffield CD36). We chose a long-time favorite, *I Got Lost in His Arms*.

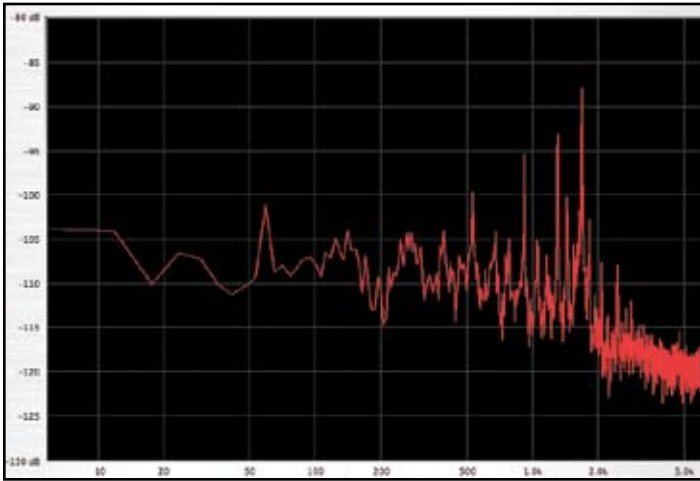
Once again our notes were sparse. "I got lost in the song," said Gerard.

The differences? "She bought a better microphone," suggested Albert, noting that her sometimes difficult "S" sounds were more natural. The trailing syllables of very softly-enunciated words were never less than clear. But there was more here than sound. This song packs an emotional charge, and we could not only hear it but *feel* it.

We were curious as to how the W-8 would measure on our test bench, but how could we measure an amplifier this size? We couldn't check the maximum power output because our large and expensive dummy loads stop 50 watts short of the

SUMMING IT UP...

Brand/model: Simaudio Moon W-8
Price: C\$12,500/US\$10,500
Size (WDH): 47.5 x 41 x 18.5 cm
Claimed power: 250 watts/channel
Most liked: Power and transparency
Least liked: Hot'n'heavy
Verdict: The outside says Hummer, the sound says Porsche



rated power (we had never needed more than that before). Besides, our ears had told us what we wanted to know. Instead we had a look at its behavior at very low levels, just a few thousandths of a watt above silence. Impeccable...how could it be otherwise?

Hum is 111 dB down, and even the worst noise peak (whose nature is uncertain) is -98 dB. Above 5 kHz, where our graph ends, the noise actually dips *lower*.

Now came an important discussion.

The day before this review, we had been discussing the possibility of

Even measuring residual noise was a challenge, since we couldn't actually use 250 watts as a reference level. Instead we made the measurements 10 dB below the 200 watt full power level. The resulting curve is shown on this page. The *real* noise curve is 10 dB better than shown.

upgrading the Alpha system by finally changing its power amplifier. We had talked about different possibilities, including possibly a tube amplifier. Heat would be a problem, but perhaps that could be manageable.

But by the end of this session the solution was clear. We would move our W-5LE to the Alpha system, where it would make a major splash. The W-8 would replace it in the Omega system.

The number of readers who will follow our example will be necessarily small. The difference in price between the W-8 and the still superb W-5 (the Limited Edition or the plain vanilla) is not to be tossed off lightly. Besides, few systems are good enough to reveal the differences.

However, if your system *and* your budget can handle this amplifier, be sure you lend it an ear.



CROSSTALK

I have to admit I came to this session prepared to dislike this amplifier. True, Simaudio had scored a long list of winners, but all of them were based on the original Renaissance design. When it did wander elsewhere, as it did with the Moon Rock, for instance, it lost me. A bigger, more powerful, much more expensive amplifier? Simaudio was obviously going after You Know Who. Bummer!

Well, no, I was wrong. It is clear that the people at Simaudio have learned an important lesson from the evolution of products such as the W-5: how to listen. When Simaudio's Costa Koulisakis told me about how they did the voicing of the W-8, I understood. They put in all the tech tricks they had learned, and then they listened and listened again.

The triumph that the W-8 represents should not be underestimated. I have always thought that the W-5, in its many incarnations, was about as good as a large solid state amp could possibly get. To hear it bested so convincingly is sobering. And it is exhilarating.

The W-8 does loud stuff well, but then you expect that from an amplifier it takes two people to lift. Listen to the way it does *soft* stuff.

—Gerard Rejskind

A certain weariness envelops me. It's

been a long day, and it would normally be quitting time. Supper is waiting. How am I going to do justice to this amplifier, the final product in this long test series?

Let me reassure you, because I came out of the session rested and of good cheer. What a terrific time! Here let me sum it up in upper case and bold letters: **PERFECTION!**

Not that we weren't happy with our W-5LE, but the W-8 goes even further, multiplying the qualities that were already present in our own amplifier. *Were?* Did I just put that in the past tense? Or was I expressing a hope?

Let me go into particulars.

The space seems to expand generously in all directions, the spectral balance is perfect, the clarity is incomparable, the sound is exquisite, details arrive in quantity, counterpoints are so clear you can walk into the music and follow each melody. What can I say about those warm and natural timbres? About smooth woodwinds, about scintillating brass that is never strident, about a plucked bass that exhibits even the most ethereal of inflections, about moving human voices, about percussion that alternates between subtle and energetic, about bass drums that are overwhelming and snares that are snazzy? There's liveliness, energy and good humor, and you become a part of the music.

I'm stunned by this perfection, and it

leads me to the conclusion that there are designers and manufacturers who are not prepared to sit on their laurels. So much the better for us.

This Moon is a titan!

—Reine Lessard

How do you transform a listening experience when you thought you had it just right? How can the space open up between and around the speakers, letting musicians and vocalists step through it — giving the word "transparent" its true meaning?

You're going to have to ask the folks at Simaudio. Or better still, why don't you pretend all I said is just an exaggerated reaction to a new, heftier model and go experience it for yourself? Just check it out. Locate a friendly and passionate dealer, and bring along a couple of CDs, one featuring a soft, intimate recording and the other a powerful performance.

If at all possible, haul in your own power amp to use as your reference and have a first listen (I can just see friendly and passionate dealers hurling old UHF copies at me.)

Then, let them replace it with the W-8 and go over your CD selections again. Say nothing, just listen. And here is the final test: see if you can pry yourself from your listening seat, in full view, while the performers are there, watching you.

—Albert Simon