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Simaudio Moon W-3



Its older brother is one of the best solid state power amplifiers we've ever heard. Is the smaller one as good? Or perhaps even better?

Our long-time readers will know that we've always said that, all else being equal, a small amplifier will sound better than a big one, at least if it stays within its design limits. The result is that, in most amplifier lines, the best amp is neither the biggest nor the most expensive one.

The original founder of *Simaudio*, Victor Sima, was always persuaded we were wrong about that. And his successor, John Poulin, warned us that, our theory notwithstanding, the big W-5 amplifier (185 watts/channel) was unbeatable, even by its smaller W-3 sibling (120

watts/channel). Perhaps, but the W-5 is so good that an amp could be inferior and still score a lot of points.

If you've seen the W-5, you've pretty much seen the W-3 as well. Though it isn't nearly as deep as the bigger amp, it is a twin in every other way. The gorgeous brushed front panel is identical, the rear panel is the same, and the oval chassis is still surrounded by a pair of handles that also support the amplifier on cone-like spikes (and which have dimples on top so another Moon component can be stacked on). The W-3 has true balanced inputs, accessible via XLR

connectors *or* a set of four phono jacks (for unbalanced use, two of the jacks are filled with shorting plugs). The output binding posts are *WBT's*, our favorite. The line fuse is accessible from the outside (as we wish all line fuses were - a blown fuse shouldn't translate into an expensive service call). There is only one design problem: the "reset" button (which you push to turn the amplifier on) is at the rear. But at least the rear panel isn't two blocks back, as it is on a W-5!

When it arrived we were awaiting delivery of the W-5 we had ordered for our Omega system, and so we broke in the W-3 in that system. It sounded very good even out of the box (which was not the case of the W-5, note), and we didn't need to make a comparison to know that this would turn out to be a killer product.

When time came for the formal listening test, we moved the W-3 to our Alpha system, where we put it up against stiff competition: the *YBA One*, a superb solid state amplifier costing well over double the price. The W-5 had shown itself to be in that luxurious league; would its little brother?

We selected a series of LP's for this test, and we opened the hostilities with major gunfire: Alfred Reed's *Allelujah! Laudamus Té from Pomp&Pipes (Reference Recordings RR-58)*. It begins with brass, percussion and organ, and continues with a phalanx of woodwinds. Right off, we noticed a drop in the kettle drum's impact (though Gerard was pleasantly surprised how much was left). The complaints ended there. Except for that bottom-end leanness, the W-3 seemed eager to get down to work, and its workmanship was first rate. The brass textures were rich and varied, with a satisfying "bite" like that of real brass. So good was the clarity that we could focus on any instrument that caught our attention, as we can at a live concert. "This isn't a warm record," said Albert, "but this amplifier makes it seem naturally warm."

An important point: the W-3 is physically larger than our *YBA* (the original model, not the later "high current" version), but the *YBA* is considerably heavier. The weight comes from the power supply, the amplifier's source of "food," and maintaining impact at very low frequency requires a large supply. The W-5, of course, has a much larger power supply than the W-3, and you need only lift it - or try to - to confirm it. We then turned to a recording whose reproduction of depth and space is as good as any we have heard: *Over the Rainbow* from *Jazz at the Pawnshop 2 (Proprius PRLP9544)*. The W-3 was entirely in its element. The opening sequence, with its clatter of chairs, bits of conversation, and the ubiquitous ring of the cash register, was startlingly three-dimensional. From this deep background came the first notes of Arne Domnérus's sensuous and lyrical saxophone, and we glanced at each other. This was going to be extraordinary!

We've talked before about the "transparency" of an amplifier. An audiologist would tell you about the

phenomenon of "masking," the concealment of a soft sound by another louder sound. Masking is a fact of human physiology, but it is not well known that many amplifiers accentuate it. They are *opaque*, which is to say that a loud sound not only masks but totally hides whatever is behind it. A truly transparent amplifier lets the listener hear *behind* the loud sounds. This is important, because with an opaque amplifier, a fundamental note will hide the instrument's softer harmonics, which give the instrument its timbre. And you'll also lose the softer sounds that provide clues to the nature of the space where the recording was made.

The W-3, then, is a beautifully transparent amplifier. Indeed, Gerard complained that, during the opening sequence, he could, for the first time, hear the fact that some of the patrons at the Stampen pub hadn't thought good to interrupt their conversations. "I felt like telling them to shut the hell up," he said.

Of course, we lost track of them (or else their neighbors shushed them) when the piano came in. The musicians had a palpable "there" quality. They came out of the speakers and into our room, though without ever giving us the feeling that they were *too* close. The percussion was superb, with excellent detail and terrific rhythm. The applause at the end was natural, and so clear we could have counted the customers. Delightful!

One of the amplifier's quirks did emerge, however. Because it sounds so dynamic and willing to work, we were running relatively high levels (though no higher than with our reference amp), high enough to get close to the amplifier's power limits. It doesn't overload the way other amplifiers do, by getting progressively more fuzzy (as tube amps in particular do), or by sudden clipping of the signal (as most solid state amplifiers do). For one thing, overload takes place first in the higher frequencies, not in the power-hungry lows. For another, it takes the form not of catastrophic distortion, but of a change in character. On two occasions, the higher notes of the sax got loud enough that the amplifier suddenly sounded honky. Turning down the level made the phenomenon vanish. It's a little disconcerting when it happens, but we agreed it was preferable to a fuse or a transistor blowing, say. And we've seen that too.

We then moved to another version of *Over the Rainbow*, followed by *Dorothy*, both songs from Amanda McBroom's *West of Oz* LP (*Sheffield LAB-15*). From the first notes we knew the W-3 was going to do better than even our reference. The harmony of the backup singers made sense for the first time (Reine was enchanted by them, though she had called the sequence ugly earlier). McBroom's voice was also smoother and more natural, of course, with the text of the song (which suggests that Dorothy made a disastrous life choice at the end of the movie) gloriously illuminated. The string bass was satisfyingly full, with little of the leanness we had noticed

in the opening recording. The percussion accompaniment was exceptionally detailed, and indeed it turned out to be more complex than we had originally supposed. The performance was flawless.

We had noticed that the W-3 is good at both rhythm and lyricism, and both talents served it well in our next recording: *Ain't No Fool* from Jerry Ricks' wonderful *Empty Bottle Blues* LP (Hungaroton RPL016). From the first notes of the guitar, we knew it was going to work better than we had perhaps ever heard it. It was easier to follow the tune (with its intentionally dissonant "blue" notes) and the words of this politically incorrect song. The dynamics brought the music to life, and we realized we needed less mental effort to imagine Ricks in the room with us. "For the first time I feel as though he's singing to me," said Reine, "and when a guitar sounds like that one does, I get goosebumps."

The W-3 also did well by the spaciousness of the recording. Though the microphones were quite close to the artist, he was also amplified in the hall, and the loudspeakers provide an audible echo. So sharp was the soundfield that we could make out the location of the speakers. That is musically extraneous, of course, but it added to the feeling of being there.

We ended the session with a rock recording of exceptional power, *Amuseum*, from *John Newton Howard and Friends* (Sheffield LAB-23). The W-3's now familiar characteristics got the best from the music. All of the instruments - percussion, synthesizers plus a delicious "bass guitar" which was also a synth - were as clear as could be, and at times sparks flew. "This is like fireworks," said Albert approvingly, "and it's not just noise, you can hear *everything*." Gerard thought the musicians seemed unusually close. "But this isn't what you get with those really forward amplifiers," he added. "This is the opposite - the musicians don't move toward you, they draw you in toward *them*."

We should add, however, that we did occasionally get close to the amplifier's power limits, and it let us know by doing its now familiar change of character. Once again it was the higher-pitched instruments (the synths mainly) that gave it a difficult time, and never the kick drum.

We were curious to discover what technical tests would reveal. Low-level performance (this is where we go looking for trouble) was exemplary, at least on the right channel. The left channel had a buzz of unknown origin, which had seemed like a minor problem but in fact turned out to be a serious symptom. When we took that channel to full power on the test bench, there was a puff of smoke and then silence! When we did the same thing to the right channel (the one that was working fine), an overload was met by a tripped relay, as it should be. This would, of course, have been a warranty repair.

Is this the best solid state amplifier available? No it's not, if only because *Simaudio* has finally succeeded in what it had long tried for: making its biggest amplifier (the W-5, revisited on the next page) sound better than its smaller amplifiers. However, if its power (and its price!) are right for you and your system, you pretty well have to place it on your list of amplifiers to listen to.

But warning's fair: it may spoil you for some of the other amplifiers you may have on that list. As Amanda McBroom rightly says, there ain't no way to stand Kansas when you've been to Oz.

Model: *Simaudio* Moon W-3

Price: C\$3200

Dimensions (cm): 48,5 x 36,5 x 16,5

Warranty: 5 years, transferable

Most liked: Lively, rich, transparent sound at a more than reasonable cost

Least liked: A change of character at loud levels

Verdict: An honors graduate from finishing school

CROSSTALK

There was something about the musical textures that struck me from the very first piece we listened to. There was something rich and warm about them, something natural and just right.

I did notice that it lacked the sheer impact and bass depth of the reference, but I hardly paid attention to the difference as the music unfolded under new light. There was transparency in being able to discern all layers of sound on stage, and performers acquired a remarkable presence.

This amplifier is lightning-fast, and it energized every piece it handled with its tremendous sense of rhythm.

Voices were naturally warm and softly expressive; lyrics reached me flawlessly. Timbres were uncannily accurate, and subtle details I didn't expect were revealed on some recordings.

It was a rare and happy moment.

- *Albert Simon*

I remember the days when *Sima* (as the company was then known) was making amplifiers only a roadie could love. It moved to low-end audiophile integrated amps, and then to its first mid-level separates. And now it has come down to this: the little company that could is no longer so little, and it makes not-so-little amplifiers that definitely can.

The big story is of course the W-5, but the W-3 is a wonder in its own right. It was with a feeling of awe that I heard it take on our much more expensive reference amplifier, and sometimes win. How many amplifiers have done that? Hardly any.

My one reservation is what happens when it overloads. It doesn't just get harsh, it changes character in a way that is not really seamless. Recently I spent a couple of days with the Moon i-5 integrated amplifier, which did exactly the same thing.

But that's a problem only if you run the amplifier too close to its limits. If you do, it's a sign that you should have bought a W-5 instead. If you don't, you'll enjoy one of the sweetest amplifiers money can buy.

- *Gerard Rejskind*

This little brother, as we might call it, to the Moon W-5 behaved impeccably against our reference amplifier. Indeed, in at least two recordings I would declare it the winner! It projects a stunning image, with a remarkable sense of space. It has a highly lyrical sense, and indeed it lends a sensuous tone to saxophones, guitars and voices.

Why beat about the bush when the conclusion is so simple? The W-3 is exceptional. What I heard from beginning to end was clarity and impeccable separation of instruments of different timbres. How do these people do it, surpassing themselves with every new product? This time they've done it, actually making our superb reference seem just a little less superb on some recordings. And that's tough to do!

- *Reine Lessard*

Moon W-5 vs W-3

Simaudio's top amp has gone through some refinements since it was first launched. How much better is it?

No picture of the W-5 is necessary. Not only can you see it on the cover of *UHF* No. 49, but it looks exactly like a W-3 ... except that it's 16 cm deeper - nearly half again as much. And it weighs ... oh, maybe a ton more. The price, C\$4800, is no heavier than before, however.

We liked the original W-5, and we encourage you to read the original review. How *much* did we like it? Well, one of us (Albert) bought one after a half hour demo in his system, and we have since picked one up for our Omega system. But John Poulin and his team have been busy bees. Since Albert got his amp, a number of improvements have been made. John promised us a surprise. So Albert brought in his W-5 and put it up against ours.

Visually they're identical, except for a name change. The "Celeste" name is being gradually phased out (it doesn't play well in all languages, it seems), and the newer amplifiers have oval gold badges bearing the *Simaudio* name instead.

We compared the two W-5's in our Omega system, using selections from three vinyl albums: the *Dorothy* and *Amuseum* pieces used in our W-3 test, plus Arthur Wills' dramatic tone poem *The Vikings* from the *Pomp&Pipes!* LP (*Reference Recordings* RR-58). We poured on the horsepower, feeling confident that the two big amplifiers were up to the task.

There's no mistaking the sound of the W-5 over the W-3. This is a muscle amp, and the sheer dynamic headroom is impressive. No small amp can match it, not even the W-3. As we shall see, it has other virtues.

We began with *Amuseum*, whose powerful percussion was well served by both amplifiers, as well as our *Reference 3a* Suprema speakers. In both cases we liked the freely-available power, but we also liked the finesse and the transparency. Did the two amplifiers sound different? Initially we couldn't agree.

Albert wasn't certain that the difference, if indeed it existed, was significant. Nor was Reine, though she thought the older amp threw a little more of a spotlight on certain details, notably the separation of different instruments. Gerard noted a flaw: a cymbal that fell apart on the older amplifier, but was reproduced plausibly on the new one. Still, on this difficult recording we found ourselves attracted more to the considerable similarities

than to the differences. We would return to that disc later, after a few more back-and-forth shifts and considerable discussion.

The differences were more evident with *Dorothy*. The older W-5 had a brighter top end, or at least a little more upper midrange. Although that sort of tonal balance can underline detail (by making certain clues louder), in this case it made Amanda McBroom's voice rather thicker and less expressive. "With the newer amp I want to sing with her," said Gerard, "but with the old one I'm a passive listener." Both Gerard and Reine found the choral backup annoying with the older amp.

Since we were running the two amplifiers nearly wide open, we decided to give them a real workout. *The Vikings* is the most dramatic of the show-off pieces on *Pomp&Pipes!*, with simultaneous bursts of brass, organ pedals, cymbals, tympany, and more. During one short burst, indeed, we heard the Suprema's subwoofer overload ... and that's not easy to do!

Both amplifiers coped well with the challenge, but the newer amplifier's superiority was evident. The older amplifier was brighter, but ultimately not quite as clear. The cymbal was a single burst of sound, whereas with the new amplifier we could distinguish the sound of the drumstick hitting the cymbal, and *then* the cymbal's shimmer. The organ was also clearer.

We went back and forth several times, because we didn't want to make an affirmation that wouldn't stand up in another comparison. The more we listened, the more the differences became evident. With the first recording we had tried, *Amuseum*, we could now hear how well both amplifiers coped with most of the percussion, but not with the cymbal, which turned into white noise with the older amplifier. Prolonged listening allowed us to learn where the differences lay, and to focus on them.

We ended the session with *Dorothy*, and this time we knew exactly what to listen for. The new amplifier reproduced McBroom's voice in a more natural fashion. Not only was it sonically more satisfying, but it paid off in musical satisfaction too.

Of course, we knew we would get asked how the smaller W-3 compared to the W-5. We installed it and listened briefly to *Dorothy*. No comparison! Excellent though the W-3 is, it simply can't operate at such high levels. We smiled, and agreed to go no further with this unfair competition.

We should put this comparison into perspective, less owners of older W-5 amplifiers misunderstand. The original W-5 was *and is* one of the best solid state amplifiers you can buy regardless of price. But "best" doesn't mean "perfect," and every amplifier test we have run has helped confirm that perfection is not yet in sight. The people at *Simaudio* have evidently done some critical listening, and they have found ways to make a superb product even better.