



Aces high

The first all-in-one from Simaudio faces some stiff competition, but **Ed Selley** thinks it has what it takes to succeed

It wasn't so long ago that bespoke audio brands made a point of actively shying away from the convenience of all-in-one systems, preferring instead to promote the flexibility and focus of dedicated components for a given role. In recent years, the market for such devices has become significant enough that many companies have decided to come in from the cold and offer one-box systems of their own. The latest to join this group of converts is Simaudio with the NĒo ACE, with the latter part of the monicker standing for 'A Complete Experience'.

This might be a slightly bold claim, but the specification of the NĒo ACE certainly goes some way towards warranting the 'complete' bit – Simaudio has managed to cram pretty much every connection you might reasonably expect onto the back

panel. The NĒo ACE is fitted with the company's MiND streaming module that allows for UPnP streaming of files up to 24-bit/192kHz sampling rates with native Tidal support as well as internet radio functionality. This is backed up by a USB-B port that enables it to handle 32/384kHz PCM and DSD256 files from a suitably equipped source. However you want to access your digital material, this single box has you covered.

Additional connections include a pair of digital coaxial and two optical Toslink inputs alongside aptX-capable Bluetooth. There are three analogue connections; two of which are stereo RCA inputs on the rear and one via a 3.5mm stereo jack that's located on the front panel. This considerable list is topped off by the inclusion of a moving-magnet phono stage and a headphone amplifier, allowing you to collate a fairly biblical selection of

equipment. The only omission of real note is a CD player.

The amplification is a 50W Class AB offering that is derived from the unit fitted to the entry-level Moon stereo amplifier. If you feel that you might be lacking in power, the NĒo ACE is equipped with a pre out that allows for any of the company's power amps to be used with it. Given that Simaudio amplifiers have generally been powerful beyond the bald numbers, it is highly unlikely that you'll be short of power for any remotely sensitive speakers.

Externally, the NĒo ACE is built into the company's NĒo chassis. This is a full-width design and features the trademark curved side cheeks that can be specified in contrasting black on a silver fascia, which looks extremely smart and breaks the lines up nicely. One traditional Simaudio feature that hasn't been included is a red-on-black display. Given the amount of information that it needs to display, the manufacturer has instead chosen to fit it with an all-new blue-on-black OLED screen, which despite having fairly compact text is clear and easy to read.

There's a well thought out selection of front panel controls alongside an IR remote control and the MiND control app. The remote handset is attractive and works well, but has too many identically sized buttons to be

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Simaudio Moon
NĒo ACE

ORIGIN
Canada

TYPE
All-in-one system

WEIGHT
11kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
429 x 89 x 366mm

FEATURES

- Quoted output power: 2x 50W (8ohm)
- Network Audio streaming via wi-fi and Ethernet
- Digital inputs: 2x coaxial; 2x optical; 1x USB; aptX Bluetooth
- Analogue inputs: 2x RCA; MM phono stage

DISTRIBUTOR
Renaissance Audio

TELEPHONE
0131 5553922

WEBSITE
simaudio.com
renaissanceaudio.co.uk



comfortably used without looking at it. The MiND app, meanwhile, is a much more flexible control option, although it is not without a few operational quirks of its own. The volume up and down buttons and the mute control are positioned rather too close together in both the Android and iOS version, and the use of a queue function for playback is an irritant compared with more straightforward systems.

Much like almost everything else that Simaudio makes, though, the Nēo ACE is beautifully constructed with well-weighted controls, non-existent panel gaps and a genuine sense of care and attention lavished

upon the points of interaction. At a whisker under three grand, it is never really going to be considered cheap but it certainly feels worth its asking price. Given the extensive feature set that it offers, it would be considerably more expensive to replicate what it does in standalone Simaudio components so it should be seen as good value in this respect.

Sound quality

Having delivered a tempting overall package, Simaudio seals the deal with an impressive sonic performance. Once you have connected up a pair of speakers – in this case Rega RX1 standmounts (HFC 417) – and performed the simple setup procedure to place it on your network and get it communicating with the MiND app, it puts in a performance that is not simply good judged by the standards of an all-in-one style system, but impressive full stop.

Initially using the Ethernet connection and listening to the hauntingly beautiful 16/44.1 download of *Spaces* by Nils Frahm, the Nēo ACE is able to let this startling piece of music flow effortlessly and completely believably from the speakers. The single most important part of making this album sound right is the reproduction of the piano and it manages to convey the weight and power of the instrument without losing any of the delicacy of higher and more softly struck notes.

If you put something faster on like the 24/96 version of David Bowie's *Blackstar*, the relentless nature of *Girl Loves Me* is something that it is completely at home with. The balance of refinement and aggression that it possesses is demonstrated to perfect effect. There is no sense that detail is being lost or hard edges are being softened and the Simaudio is exceptionally refined. Test this to destruction with a 24/96 download of



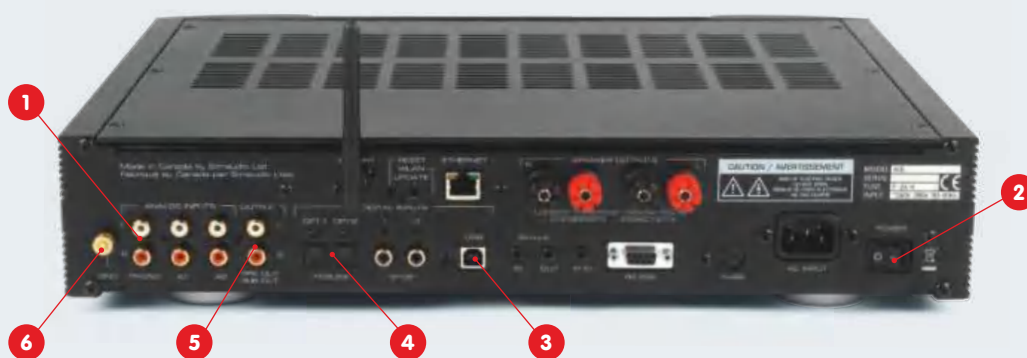
Nirvana's *Nevermind* and the jagged edges of this rough and ready recording make themselves felt, while the musical message remains perfectly intact throughout.

The Nēo ACE knows how to have fun too. Push the volume up and ask for a spirited rendition of Radiohead's *Burn The Witch* and the response is genuinely exciting. Thom Yorke's

There is no sense that detail is being lost or hard edges are being softened

vocals soar over a musical performance that has impact and real grit to it while keeping the tone of the supporting strings perfectly intact. The combination of composure and energy is something that underpins almost everything that the Nēo ACE does. If I have to level one criticism at it, at very low volume levels some of the excitement is lost – pleasingly, you don't need to crank it up too much for the energy and vim to return. ▶

CONNECTIONS



- 1 Phono input
- 2 Power switch
- 3 USB input
- 4 Toslink optical digital inputs
- 5 Pre out
- 6 Grounding post

Q&A

John Carroll

UK distributor, Renaissance Audio



ES: What prompted the launch of the ACE?

JC: The discussion for the project that became ACE was started over five years ago. As a close partner I have been involved in this at all stages. The reason for launch now was down to targeting a moment when we could pull together our fully developed MiND streaming, our core amplification and DAC technologies and industry-leading build quality while keeping manufacturing inhouse in Montreal and still offering a 10-year warranty. Many more people are living in busy compact apartments with houses full of objects and the need for compact one-box solutions without sonic compromise is at an all-time high.

Does Simaudio see the ACE being augmented with other Simaudio products, or moved to a second system and replaced by a separate Moon component system?

We see two different directions for the main categories of purchaser. The music fan who loves quality reproduction we hope will enjoy the ACE for at least the period of the warranty giving them a care-free decade of ownership. The audio fan who loves music can enjoy many upgrades in the years to come by cherry picking from the cosmetically matching Nēo product line. Currently they can upgrade with a higher quality phono stage, improve amplification with our stereo power amp, massively increase power with our 400W mono amps or even add CD playback with our highly acclaimed CD transport. The streaming element is a modular card system, with a future upgrade path for new streaming technologies.

Are additional streaming services planned for the MiND platform?

In the last couple of weeks we have added Deezer and Tune-In and are working on additional services. This development will be ongoing and we have a roadmap of releases in place for the next two years already.



Although the text on the OLED display is small, it remains clear and easy to read

The performance differences between the Ethernet and USB connections are very slight, but the latter does add DSD support and it does a good turn with Ragnari's *Fort Of The Hare*, managing to relay the sweetness and warmth of the simple instrumental arrangements. Connected to a Melco N1A (HFC 397), the USB input handles every sampling rate without issue and reconnects reliably. This stability and consistency also applies to the other digital inputs, meaning that even if you have a wide variety of digital sources, the Nēo ACE is going to be perfectly happy with all of them.

It conveys the weight and power of the piano without losing any of the delicacy

Switching to the analogue inputs and connecting a Naim ND5 XS (HFC 352) via RCA interconnects shows the performance to be no less capable. There is the slightest sense listening to the same material as via the MiND app, that the bass response through the Rega speakers is not quite as deep and detailed as it is via the Ethernet connection, although the fundamental balance of refinement and energy is still retained.

The real star of the analogue connections, though, is the phono stage. It is tempting to assume with a specification that's this extensive, its presence is little more than a box-ticking exercise but this is far from the case. Connected to an Avid Ingenium, SME M2-9 and Nagaoka MP150 (HFC 379), the Nēo ACE puts in a fantastic performance. Talk Talk's *The Colour Of Spring* is reproduced with a wonderful sense of delicacy underpinned by the weight and drive

required for *Happiness Is Easy* to sound convincing. The balance of warmth and richness is beautifully judged for the performance to sound inviting without ever coming across as warm or bloomy.

No less impressive is the Bluetooth connectivity. Tested with a Motorola Android phone that is aptX capable and listening to Tidal, the Nēo ACE gets creditably close to the performance it offers with the same Tidal files when used with the same MiND app – with the added benefit of Tidal's own interface being a little slicker in use. Like the phono stage, this is not a mere convenience feature but something that Simaudio has worked hard on to deliver a seriously impressive performance.

Conclusion

It is this attention to detail that marks the Nēo ACE out as an outstanding product. The huge specification means that it comfortably holds its own against the competition (see box out), but the level of performance it delivers across this functionality is a clear indication that Simaudio is determined to deliver a knockout blow in this category. Judged on these results, it has succeeded ●



The closest competitor is Linn's Majik DSM (HFC 356). This is similarly well specified with more power than the Simaudio and a useful set of HDMI inputs for use with video sources, but the lack of wireless connectivity and Bluetooth robs it of some of the convenience of the ACE. Sonically, while the Linn is talented and its optimisation facilities are very clever, the composure and ability that the Simaudio possesses across its multiple inputs means that the Canadian system has the edge in this contest. It will be very interesting to see if the upcoming Naim Uniti systems are able to challenge it.

Hi-FiChoice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



VALUE FOR MONEY



BUILD QUALITY



FEATURES



OVERALL



LIKE: Superb sound across all inputs; great functionality and excellent build

DISLIKE: Clunky app; does its best work at higher volume levels

WE SAY: A seriously accomplished all-in-one that should be on everyone's shortlist