



Simaudio Moon Neo 430HAD

December 01, 2015

Exploring new headphone hifi pathways – Introduction & Part 1.

I'm a big fan of large listening projects to further develop a broad musical taste but also to make sure I keep exploring the limitations and opportunities of my current headphone system. I throw myself into listening to artists complete catalogues, I dive deep into new composers and submerge in anxiety over finding out just WHO is the best Beethoven piano sonata interpreter on the planet?

Over the last weeks I've thought about a new project in which I'm challenging my current system with something completely different. Maybe I'll realize that I'm still happy with what I have, or maybe I decide to go in a new direction with my system. It will not be a project where I explore new domains of music, but rather using the music I know and love to investigate a new Hifi Pathway. Let's start with looking at the facts.

My current headphone system:

Source Desktop: Linn Unidisk 1.1 Dynamik (Universal CD/SACD/DVD-A player)

Source Portable: Chord Hugo

Interconnects: Balanced Black Dragon interconnects from Moon Audio (on loan)

Amp: Sennheiser HDVA600 fully balanced headphone amp

Headphones: Sennheiser HD800, Moon Audio Black Dragon with balanced XLR-4 connector.

Beyerdynamic T5p, Stock cable hardwired

Beyerdynamic PRO DT770, Stock cable hardwired

A short note about my music collection and streaming:

The majority of my music collection (on CD and SACD) consists of jazz and I spend about 70% of my listening time with enjoying jazz from the 50s and 60s. 10% is classical and the remaining 20% is a mix of other genres. This is where I spend most of my listening time. With HD800 and music coming from physical format.

I stream music with Tidal HiFi, although I believe that the interface and search function is still subpar, but the SQ is as good as it gets on streaming services. It's good for researching new music. My physical collection is also stored on a [Synology NAS](#) from which I stream with [jRiver Media Center](#) installed on my PC and controlled by the brilliant iDevice app [JRemote](#). The streaming function is used for portable listening with Chord Hugo around the house. I use the Apple CCK from my iDevices and connect to Hugo via USB. My latest investment was the closed back headphone T5p from Beyerdynamic. I bought it used for a great price and mainly because I wanted a good closed back headphone for when I want to spend an hour or two in complete peace and silence. They isolate pretty good and have a neutral and pleasant sound together with Hugo.

A short note on my portable HiFi Pathway:

The next logic step for me is to go from **iDevice to Macbook Pro -> Toslink -> Hugo**. The main reason is that I believe the optical input on the amazing Hugo is by far the best and in my ears it beats the USB inputs easily. I don't know why, but the optical input has a light and lush touch to its sound compared to the USB which I think is tending to sound a bit harsh from time to time. I think the optical input is such an "upgrade" in sound quality that I'm willing to invest in a Macbook, which has a combined 3.5mm/optical output. To get a DAP like any of the AK's or similar just for the optical output is not an alternative – just because it doesn't make any sense to buy an expensive DAP just to bypass the DAC. The Macbook will provide me with a very nice way to control my collection yet remain reasonable portable. I believe that this is also the only way to bring me closer to my collection when not listening to a physical format. Finally it will also allow me to use [Amarra for Tidal](#) which I have heard so much good about. In terms of DAC / AMP for portable use, I feel that I've reached a level which is quite hard to beat. Hugo is not endgame hifi overall, but for its intended use – it is truly a gem.

Now, let's dig deeper in the rationale behind this project.

My current system does not have any disturbing limitations or major flaws in my opinion. It handles most genres brilliant but especially jazz, blues, classical and vocal acoustic music. It presents the music in a wide and transparent way but with a nice touch of fun. Soundstage is big and so is also the instrument separation both being HD800 trademarks. For the harder side of rock, the system is not fantastic I'll admit that – but well-made albums like Refused's latest album 'Freedom' mastered by the one and only Bernie Grundman has also proved that HD800 can (pun intended) indeed headbang! When comparing the super modern Hugo with the once so high-end Unidisk I'm still amazed by how good this CDP is. So what's the reason behind the project? I seem to be quite pleased with my system...

I've understood that I've reached a turning point where it's time to take big decisions for the years to come. Again I'm not unhappy with my current system, but I can't really take small steps anymore and I don't want to stop. This hobby is for me a lifelong projects. I simply have to keep exploring. Let me explain why by breaking down the steps of my audio chain. I also wish to add that I believe that this is something that is familiar with every owner of the HD800. It's a

wonderful headphone and will scale to the extremes of pure summit-fi if being presented to the right companions, something we'll also learn and see during this project. It feels important to try and see my current system piece by piece, and maybe it's interesting for you to see how I look at my systems pros and cons the way I see them.

On the source side, I'm not willing to leave physical format for my desktop system just yet but it's getting closer. CD/SACD is still a very important part of my listening experience. I'm not in a hurry to do the switch, and I need to figure out how to organize the booklets and inlays in a way that I can still have them conveniently close during listening sessions. I understand that I have issues with holding on to the CD-collection the way I do and that I might sound old-fashioned but booklets and inlays are such a big thing for me. It's not about finding a replacing source for the Unidisk – that would be to get the legendary CD12 from Linn. I don't think there's a better transport or disc engine existing today (there, I've said it!) Now I'm pretty sure where to go. When I take the step it will be towards or closer to an endgame DAC and/or streamer like Linns Klimax DSM, maybe something from MSB Technologies (Analog DAC) or the new [Simaudio Moon Evolution 780D](#) that launches in September and of course the new Chord DAVE too, considering how much I like the portable Hugo. A big DAC shootout will come in October, I promise! I'm also very eager to try Simaudios upgraded version of the praised DAC 380D who's now gotten a DSD module thus the new name 380D DSD. It's of course priced a lot lower than the \$15k you have to pay for the 780D, but I've heard so many good things about that DAC, that I have to explore it. That also means that I will have to do a DAC-below-summit-fi comparison too, in order to see what the right next step is for me.

But it's a significant investment in any case and I want to make sure once I take the step, I'm ready to plug and play. It's "just" a matter of finding time for thorough tests and figuring out a solution for booklets and inlays. It also goes hand in hand with the source first theory, or straighter forward: you can't polish a turd. A headphone like Sennheisers HD800 will sound terrible if being paired with the wrong equipment, but being paired with a great DAC and amp, it truly shines. Because of that, I think it's important to do a nice head-to-head DAC evaluation to get a good understanding and opinion about preferred sound signature, functionality and scalability before deciding. It needs to offer a similar signature to the Unidisk, but more refined, more fun and more 'analog'. It needs to be a true game changer in the house, something that really blows me away and that makes me want to upgrade cables, buy lots of music and to take a vacation just to listen to music. I'm not there yet...

On the amp side, I could decide go for a high end tube amp and leave the land of the solid state behind. What would the purpose be? I don't feel that I lack warmth and I'm a little bit afraid to lose soundstage and transparency. The purpose would be to get a livelier and slightly fuller and meatier sound that might suit a wider range of music.

I'm not at all claiming to have an endgame solid state amplifier so it's not unhappiness that drives me to these thoughts. I've connected all kinds of sources to HDVA 600 and it doesn't

give me any unpleasant surprises. HDVA600 will give you what you feed it. It makes things easier. HD800 and HDVA600 works great together and if you like it – put your money on the source that has what you're looking for. But is it end-game? I don't know. The tube-way is totally unexplored and do I want to be someone who never even tried HD800 with a tube amp? Also, as I mentioned, HD800 will scale in a fantastic way even though it's hard to believe with the HDVA 600 being the Germans own creation for balanced action. Now the HDVA600 has a few issues. When being driven fully balanced from a fixed line out like the one from my Unidisk, the volume control gets sensitive so that it's sometime a bit hard to set it perfectly. Also, with low volume there seems to be a slight channel imbalance. I will visit the Sennheiser technical service in a few weeks and have them do some tests, but I'm pretty sure this is not something faulty – it's just the way it is. The sound signature is very Sennheiser – straight forward, no games and sometimes a bit rough around the edges. It does its job the way 'the composer intended' so to say.

So what about just changing the headphone? I can see 3 clear options: Hifiman HE1000, MrSpeakers Ether, Audeze LCD-X or LCD-3F. That would surely bring something very new to my setup and continue on the path of high-end open back headphones but with a different technology. I'm very curious to find out if the HE1000 is the headphone for a true endgame open back setup. But it's like disqualifying the HD800. I love the Sennheisers, even though it needs to be handled with care and paired with good companions. Also I wish to build such a good headphone system that changing the headphone in the future gets more like a plug and play investment. Also, I feel that the headphone race has gotten really up to speed, and I believe that market needs to be stabilized a bit before I change the HD800 – but one can always invest without exchanging.... J

Trying to be objective:

As you can see from the break-down above, it looks like I'm in for some testing in the months to come. On the source-side it seems like I'm slowly maturing into the digital domain for real. On the amp-side I clearly doesn't look at the HDVA600 as end-game and I'm also curious of tubes. And finally regarding the headphones, when reading it out loud to myself I'm pretty happy with HD800...maybe too happy?

The Challenge:

So I've decided to challenge myself with something a bit different. How about going for a top of the line closed back headphone, a true summit-fi solid state amp with an optional DAC and a high-end tube-amp with an unusual design? In addition a simpler buy-in to the desktop DAC-world as a bonus. That'll get me started. Sounds like fun? I'm a bit scared...

I've reached out to Audeze's Swedish distributor Stylus Audio and they've agreed to send me a pair of Audeze LCD-XC as well as the top of the line \$3500 430HAD from Simaudio (\$4300 including a built in DAC). But what about the tube amp? Turns out there's a Swedish headphone amp maker; Röcklinger; that has created a very interesting headphone amp. It's a

pure OTL headphone amplifier; meaning an all tube, output transformer less amplifier but not only that...it's also without output capacitors. Does it get closer to the source than that? I don't think so. And as a bonus, I'll review Simaudio Moon 430's little brother; the 230HAD.

So you can clearly see what I'm doing here. No? Since I'm not mentally ready to move away from physical format yet, I'll just try to get all I can from the Unidisk first. *But Gustav, you can make the Unidisk better with adding a DAC to the game. Yes, yes I know – but doing that means it's already started...soon I'll be streaming everything and forget about my CD's. No! I don't want to!* First, I have to understand what summit-fi amps does to me. Do they get my heart to beat faster? Maybe I want to go closed back? Here we go, there's no turning back now....

Part 1 – Welcome to solid state Everest!

Equipment used:

Linn Unidisk 1.1 Dynamik – Simaudio Moon Neo 430HAD – Sennheiser HD800 – Moon Audio Black Dragon balanced (XLR) interconnects, Moon Audio Black Dragon balanced (XLR) headphone cable.

Music:

1. Art Blakey – A night at Birdland Vol1 & 2. TYCJ-81006 & TYCJ-81049
2. Art Pepper – Meets the rhythm section VDJ-1556
3. Baby Face Willette – Stop and listen BN 65143
4. Hank Mobley – Mobeys Message CPRJ 7061 SA
5. Helene Humes – 'Tain't Nobody's Biz-ness If I Do OJCCD-453-2
6. Jimmy Smith – Midnight Special CBNJ 84078 SA
7. John Coltrane – With the Red Garland Trio CPRJ 7123 SA
8. Miles Davis – Relaxin' with the Miles Davis Quintet CPRJ 7129 SA
9. Stan Getz And Charlie Byrd – Jazz Samba CVRJ 8432 SA
10. Bill Evans Trio – How my heart sings! VICJ-60373
11. Joni Mitchell – Blue. DCC Gold GZS-1132
12. Gerry Rafferty – City to city 5099908726728
13. James Taylor – Gorilla AFZ 151
14. Metallica – Black album 510 022-2
15. Refused – Songs to fan the flames of discontent BHR 1043-2

A brief selection of albums not written about in the review, but still used:

1. Art Pepper + Eleven – Modern jazz classics VDJ-1578
2. Don Friedman Trio – Circle Waltz VIJC-60258
3. John Coltrane – My favorite things ORGM-1080
4. Miles Davis – Kind of blue UDSACD 2085
5. Miles Davis – Milestones UDSACD 2084
6. Ornette Coleman – The shape of jazz to come ORGM-1081
7. Sonny Clark – Cool Struttin' TYCJ-81003

8. Tommy Flanagan Trio – Overseas CPRJ 7134 SA
9. Thelonious Monk & Sonny Rollins UCCO-5275
10. Boz Scaggs – S/T AFZ 168
11. The Doors – Best of The Doors AFZ 206
12. Muddy Waters – Folk singer CAPB 1483 SA
13. Queen – News of the world UICY-40014
14. The Cardigans – Long gone before daylight 067 101-2

It's August 21. I'm all settled in with pen, paper and the phone in flight mode. Yeah, I take my listening seriously. Here we go. I'm thrown back to February 21 1954 and Pee Wee Marquette's voice comes on to introduce the band. Just shy of an hour this first volume is a statement. It's the first time Blue Note Records is doing a live recording. It's magnificent but let's face it; recording quality would improve A LOT over the years. Remember this is 1954! But hey I'm getting ahead of myself here, sorry about that...

Let's start with looking at the piece itself. First of all, it's heavy. The shipping weight is 20lbs or 9kgs. It doesn't give you the impression that this is a headphone amplifier. It's constructed like a full size amp. You're going to need some extra room on your desk, if that's where you intend to have it. But it looks good! It's built like a tank and when I take a few steps back I smile. Solid State Supreme!

The 430HA comes with a remote...that feels like a cheap piece of plastic. This was disappointing. If you build a dedicated headphone amp with a price tag like this one, I would have expected something more, heavier or just nicer remote. You'll hear this in every review. I'll just use my Linn remote instead. Yeah, it works. But then again, and this is important, the physical fat wheel of a volume control is something really special, so you're not going to use the remote much anyway. **Simaudio consider yourselves forgiven.**



Unidisk remote – Simaudio remote

The inputs and outputs of the 430HA leaves nothing to wish for.

On the front there's a 1/8" single ended jack labeled "MP". Here you can connect your media player via a standard 3,5mm jack. The balanced outputs are nicely hidden behind a sliding window on the front. One pair of 3-pin XLR and one 4-pin XLR. There's of course the standard 1/4" TRS jack. All needs covered. And I really like that sliding window that hides the XLR outputs. For those using the single ended output (1/4") it will give the front a clean look.

In the back we find 1 balanced XLR input, 2 single-ended pairs on RCA's (fixed and variable). Since this is the version equipped with DAC (ESS Sabre 9018K2M) it also has digital inputs and outputs (USB, Toslink, S/PDIF x2)



Simaudio Moon Neo 430HAD, Sennheiser HD800 and Moon Audio Black Dragon interconnects. On the front buttons are nicely aligned with 4 to the left and 4 to the right: Standby/Gain/Display/Xfeed — Input/Input/Mute/MP. Finally, the huge volume control that spins easily with the slightest touch. I'm telling you this is one of the greatest features that anyone could have given us headphone listeners. More about that later.

I've connected the 430HA to my Linn Unidisk 1.1 Dynamik with a set of balanced (XLR) Black Dragons from Moon Audio. These interconnects gives a slightly darker touch to the sound, but in my opinion only so slight. As always when I chose cables it comes down to:

1. Overall sonic preference; are you a detail freak, loves a bit more bass or perhaps silky smoothness?
2. What's the sonic characteristics of your system? For example: with Sennheiser HD800, many owners consider them to have a little bit of a tendency to sound sharp in the upper registry. Connect HD800 to a solid-state amplifier with the stock cable connected, and you might risk to push the envelope on the treble a bit. Then, a darker signature cable; like Moon Audios Black Dragon might be of good use. With another setup, it may be better to look for a cable with a bit more details in it. Trust your ears, they don't lie. If you hear an improvement, go for it. I've quit trying to reason or explain; both with myself and on forums. If it's better, it's better.
3. There's no upper limit and as always I think you should trust your ears, and not the price tag. Make sure you audition cables at home. If that's not possible, well you have to take a chance, but I don't recommend it.

BUT, don't build your system around the cable. Fine-tune your system with proper cables. Drew Baird with Moon Audio is a tremendous source of knowledge and can guide you through the



jungle of cables. Also, since Drew has such a huge knowledge of a wide selection of amps, dacs and headphones he can give you advice that you can trust.

Moon Audio Black Dragon XLR interconnects with those lovely Furutech connectors. Feels like connecting stuff in a space ship. A firm CLICK, and you're ready to go.

Below is the specifications for the amplifier. I've driven mostly the 300Ω HD800's to levels loud enough for anyone, and there was a lot to spare.

Output power per channel @ 600 / 300 / 50Ω: 667mW / 1.33W / 8W

Headphone Impedance: 20 – 600Ω

Frequency Response (audible): 20Hz – 20kHz ±0.1dB

Frequency Response (full range): 5Hz – 100kHz +0/-3dB

THD @ 1kHz, 0dBFS (A-weighted): 0.005%

Intermodulation distortion: 0.005%

Signal-to-noise Ratio: 120dB

Crosstalk: 110dB: Input / Output impedance: 22KΩ / 1.25Ω

Shipping weight: 20 lbs. / 9 Kgs

Dimensions (width x height x depth): 16.9 x 3.5 x 13.8 in. / 42.9 x 8.9 x 35.1 cm

Optional built in fully asynchronous DAC (\$800) adds 4 digital inputs (S/PDIF x2, Toslink x1, USB x1): Supports DSD64, DSD128 and DSD256 (USB input only); Supports PCM up to 24-bit/192kHz (all inputs) and 32-bit/384kHz (USB input only).

Now, back to where I started. The music! How does this setup sound? The HD800 does what it's designed to do: it delivers a transparent and uncolored experience with a wide soundstage and separated and detailed presentation of instruments. Neither underrepresented nor exaggerated. This is reference level galore.

The 430HA is a beast of an amplifier. Balanced through and through. In this setup, the HD800 is allowed to shine! The sonic extensions are extreme. It's like HD800 is being let free from the shackles of bad amplification.

So how does the 430HA sound? It doesn't sound! First, a word of caution: please make sure you let the 430HA run for a couple of days before doing any critical listening. It really needs it. After 100 hours it started changing and after 150 I thought it had settled pretty good.

And here comes exactly what I think about it, in short: It's like the 430HA is coming up on HD800 (in this case) standing alone behind closed stage doors. She opens the doors to the Carnegie Hall stage, smiles and gives HD800 a slight push before saying adieu: go out there,

perform, sing like I know you can, sing like you've never done before! And my oh my how it sings!

See, the Unidisk is interpreting what's on the recording, sends it through its refined analogue outputs and to the amp and further on to my headphones. I want that Unidisk sound to arrive unchanged to my ears. 430HA doesn't touch the sound, but works as servant of good sound. It tells me: 'listen to this, THIS is what's in there – can you hear it?' And I can, oh I can!

I can easily control the 430HA with my Unidisk remote control (since the provided Simaudio remote doesn't really get me going), but I'm constantly reaching for the volume knob on the amp. It's a true work of art. Smooth and silky in its action. 530 steps and channel matching of 0.1dB! It requires quite a few laps of turning to push the sound up. But that's perfect. The level of control over the volume is like nothing I've tried before. Rest of the amp's functions are straight forward: 2 gain steps (LOW, HI) a cross feed function with one step (compared to Chord Hugos 3). I'm not a big fan of crossfeed, even with the hard-panned jazz recordings from the late fifties. Input selector, a mute button and MP to activate the media player input (such as a connected iPod etc). Makes sense to have it separately.

430HA is straight forward in functionality but one thing that sort of bothered me was the delay in action when pushing buttons on the front panel. Sometimes pressing a button didn't generate an action and I had to do it again. Also, when flipping through inputs it needs to be pressed firmly and with a slight hold. Only pressing it quick won't work. This seems to hold true for all buttons on the 430HA. Now I don't go back and forth through inputs, I mean who does that? After a few days it seems like my fingers have learned how to work the buttons.

Anyway, I came out of Birdland all exhausted but very happy. Wow! The 430HA is really something special. I can't wait to move on through my list of albums!

One of my absolute favorite albums is 'Art Pepper meets The Rhythm Section'. It's truly hard-panned stereo with Art blowing the horn far left. Using the Xfeed function puts him closer to the middle, however I think another problem arises. The double-bass suddenly blends in too close to the alto. This is a perfect album to use for hearing how bass and drums can work together to build a foundation and a groove in a song. When they're locked in that right channel, it makes it really easy to hear and enjoy. HD800 is so easy to enjoy like this. There's no sharp edges, only a pitch black background and music. Again, I have to stop and breathe after the last song. 430HA is not easy going, it's demanding. It craves your attention in delivering whatever your source has to offer.

Onwards through 'Stop and listen' with Baby Face Willette. Such an underrated musician he was, often paired with guitarist Grant Green. When he works that organ in the title track I just close my eyes and enjoy. Rudy van Gelders engineering shines through a bit here. This is not the HD800s fault. Van Gelder was good at recording jazz, but in some of the recordings the

cymbals and hi-hat are recorded too close that it almost distorts. The result is sometimes a bit sharp. In combination his way of recording a piano seems to be done with a blanket over it. The better the equipment, the clearer it gets. But there's hope in the horizon! Analogue Productions with Maestro Kevin Gray has 'de-Gelderized' a selection of jazz albums.

One of them is **Mobley's Message with Hank Mobley and friends** (no 4 in the list). Now, it's mono-recording so maybe that's part of it – but I hear this in everything Gray has mastered. There's a natural sweetness to the sound, and especially if he's been collaborating with Steve Hoffman. Your ears relax and you can with ease let the volume go up a bit to get in the middle of the music. Sorry I'm getting ahead of myself here. The 430HA keeps delivering that push-out-on-stage experience I described above. But the best part is actually hearing the HD800 like this. It's like hearing a teenager growing up and finally being able to carry his voice again. It gives HD800 room to move around – for better and for worse of course. We all know that HD800 will completely destroy a bad recording. 430HA doesn't help in that aspect. It will not be forgiving at all. And maybe somewhere here I'm starting to realize what it is that the 430HA does so "good". I say "good" because it means expensive. The 430HA is so honest in amplifying whatever's upstream that it will not only scale HD800 upwards, it will also show you the weakness upstream. In my case it means that my former five figure Unidisk is good but that there is more to gain. The 430HA makes me wonder: how would it sound with a true high-end DAC? What about vocal jazz? One of the best sounding vocal jazz albums I have **ever** heard is number 5 above. **Helen Humes**, another pretty unknown singer, is performing with a quite famous gang in this recording from 1959. How about Benny Carter, Frank Rosolino, Teddy Edwards, Andre Previn, Leroy Vinnegar and finally Shelly Manne / Mel Lewis alternating on drums. When the first song came flowing through the HD800's my jaw dropped. I mean, this is a great sounding album to begin with, but this was just ridiculous. I'm in the middle of the room (mailroom at Contemporary Records by the way) and she's right there! Miss Humes! I'm almost blushing writing about it. When she finishes off with '**When the saints go marching in**' I'm ready to give up – this is just too good. I have to take a break.

Next up is Jimmy Smith. For the first time, it gets a bit ugly. Stanley Turrentine's tenor sax sometimes comes a bit too close in the left channel. I can't crank it up the way I would like to. Or it's just time for a break and let the ears rest.

That's more like it. A bowl of ice-cream and some coffee did the trick. Onwards to 2 mono recordings. **Coltrane with Red Garland trio, and then Miles Davis Quintet!** Cookin' starts with Miles saying to Bob Weinstock (supervising the session); *"I'll play it and tell you what it is later."* Band starts and apparently have no problem following Miles. The job for amp and headphone here is to not get in the way of this dry mono 1958 recording. And they stay away. To hear a session like this in mono is quite pleasant. It gives the recording a live feeling. HD800 knows how to do that and again, 430HA gets out of the way.

Only 2 albums to go before non-jazz-time begins. First up is "**Jazz Samba**" with **Stan Getz and Charlie Byrd** recorded in the 'All souls church' in Washington DC. A true gem! This album is great with any setup and with a \$3500 amp powering HD800 with joy it's just stunning. But

the Unidisk has, despite its age, a magnificent analogue audio output too so I'm not surprised. This is sonic bliss at its very best! Warm, tube-like sound with a wide and sweet soundstage. Last album is the heartbreaking **'How my heart sings!' with Bill Evans Trio.** It's just good. I have a hard time writing about it because I always get lost in the music. It's all good! I continued with another 15 albums, and I don't want to repeat the words above, and I also kept going with a number of classical recordings (Living Stereo SACD's), not mentioned here – reach out on Twitter and I'll give some good recommendations. The time has come to summarize my feelings about this setup.

It's good. It's as good as a solid state amp gets. It will show all weaknesses that exist in your system – if there's any, and it will let your system shine, sparkle and fly, and maybe that's what makes it hard for me. I wouldn't be happy buying JUST the 430HA on its own. I would just keep thinking about upgrading the source. So that's where I will start. 430HA is truly transparent but with a dynamic drive and speed that I have never heard before. It outruns the HDVA600 by a big, but not huge margin. They sound similar, it's just that 430HA has more muscle, more speed, more balance and more control. So who is this amp for? For me it's easy: this amp is for those looking for a summit-fi / endgame desktop solid state amp. It's for those that already have their preferred source, or is buying a summit-fi / endgame DAC/Streamer/Transport at the same time or in the near future. Beware – connect this to a source that is not on the same level, and you'll forever think about what your system COULD sound like. But again, if you're happy with your source and you just want to go all in solid state – well, this is it. Final destination MT Solid State. Well done Simaudio!

I know that many wonder how the amp **with** DAC (430HAD) puts up against Chord Hugo, on its own or in combination with 430HA. Fear not, it will come. In part 2 and 3.





Balanced action!

Now I thought that the Unidisk was pretty heavy...think again!

Part 2 – moving on...

Here's the system setup:

Tidal HiFi & PC streaming from NAS over network via jRiver Media Center 20 – Chord Hugo – Simaudio Moon Neo 430HAD – Sennheiser HD800 – Moon Audio Black Dragon balanced (XLR) headphone cable, Nordost Heimdall 2 Analog Interconnect RCA (0.6m)

As many of you could see in part 1 I fell in love with the 430 together with the Unidisk. I couldn't stop listening. The match was made in heaven and I'm back to dreaming about the Linn Sondek CD12. How would that sound? I won't find out, since it seems extremely hard to find one to borrow. But the one thing I take with me from the first part is just that. More questions. But also a valuable lesson. Before upgrading the amp, there's other priorities.

So, time to move on. I unwillingly disconnected the Unidisk and connected Chord Hugo instead (via CCK and USB since Hugo unfortunately doesn't have an Apple Authenticity Chip). I used a borrowed pair of Nordost Heimdall 2 RCA interconnects to feed Hugos sound into the 430HAD. With [TIDAL Hifi](#) & streaming from my digital library via [jRiver Media Player 21](#) I threw myself in to another couple of days of listening. I've always considered to be the Hugo a dish best served on its own and it really has its own sound. Very honest, no chit-chatting – just music. So I was

quite excited to hopefully get that feeling amplified. First of all, for the sake of the review I used the “fixed” level line out on the Hugo. You press and hold the crossfeed button when starting Hugo. It blinks and then locks on to a volume, but it’s not really locked. You can still adjust it. You will see how that it a nice function in part 4 of this review.

So how did it sound? The first thing that struck me was that I didn’t recognize Hugo. It was not the Hugo that I had come to love. 430HAD did its job very well, flexing its muscles and delivering the lightning fast speed and control that I’ve praised it for in the first part of this review. But I missed some of the musicality and analog sweetness that I love with Hugo. I didn’t get an amplified Hugo experience. I was sort of expecting a Hugo TT if you will. There was no doubt about that it sounded very good, but it was not what I was expecting.

Streaming from NAS.

1. [Alain Jean-Marie Trio – Thing’s ain’t what they used to \(24bit/192kHz, wav\) \(song\)](#)
2. [Refused – Freedom \(24bit/44.1kHz, FLAC, HDTracks\) \(album\)](#)
3. [Beethoven, 8th Symphony Op. 93, Paavo Järvi conducts The Deutsche Kammerphilharmonie Bremen](#)

Streaming from Tidal Hifi

1. Daft Punk – Random access memories
2. George Ezra – Wanted on voyage
3. Chris Cornell – Songbook

Alain Jean-Marie Trio does a lovely live performance, and I was hoping to get my feet tappin’ here – but it didn’t happen. It sounded very correct, but not fun. This was disappointing. It was like Hugo threw its full musicality at 430HA and it responded by not doing what I was hoping for. To really blow up the sound and put me in the middle of the room. Very correct, very articulate, but not ‘live’.

Hey, you might not like Refused, and maybe you won’t stand listening to it, but for me it’s a personal thing. I saw Refused in my youth, in small gymnastics hall and clubs. Here in their latest album, the have gotten Bernie Grundman to master. He has done a lovely job. This album will demonstrate if your system is up for the task to keep the music going fast without losing control and without transforming it to a mess instead of a forceful wave. Hugo struggles with this album alone, but it might also be HD800. With Beyerdynamic T5p it does a better job.

Nevertheless, 430HA is absolutely fast enough but again loses out a little bit on musicality. It performs better than Hugo alone on this album though – and I can manage to push the HD800 to loud levels without ending up with too much sharpness. But that’s also in the mastering.

Listen to the drums throughout the album, try to focus on the drums.

Beethovens eight symphony is a tour de force. Paavo Järvi does everything right which leave me with just the music. Hugo always shines with Beethoven, if well recorded, and by all means

all classical music. Sometimes Hugo on its own is out of pace with fast classical music, ever so slightly. I mean out of pace like I can hear that it's fighting to put everything together instead of just delivering the flow. It happens very very very rarely – but that's the reason for picking this symphony to see whether it occurs with 430HA. The 430HA delivers a fast and accurate sound that is not warm or euphonic. It does Järvi justice and for the first time I like the combo. If my listening consisted of mainly classical music, I'd be happy like this. It's not because of Hugo – it's because of the 430HA being so accurate, fast and strong. I like it! It extends powerfully through all registers without effort, making the fast strings sing like I've never heard them before. I went back and forth to Hugo alone. Hugo is different, I'd say more musical – but in complicated and fast classical music the amp is not articulate enough compared to the 430HA. Interesting. Now, I don't listen to classical music all the time...too bad, the journey could have ended here. I kept going with Riccardo Chailly's blistering version of Beethoven's 'Eroica', the final movement – and wow! If you're a Hugo owner who mainly listens to classical music: congratulations, go get the 430HA and the game is over. I won't list all the classical music I tried to challenge Hugo/430HA with, but it was a long list and all was good – I should mention that it was all orchestral work. With piano sonatas, trios, quartets – the Hugo is brilliant on its own to my ears.

I spent a few days listening to lots of different music via Tidal Hifi, see a selection above. It got complicated. With 50's and 60's jazz played through Tidal – I preferred to hear the same albums on my Unidisk through 430HA, or via Tidal through Hugo on its own. It's just a matter of personal preference. The 430HA will handle whatever you like, all genres. With rock/pop – same thing.

More details; how does the 430HA perform in comparison to Chord Hugo, and maybe especially how does it perform with the built-in DAC VERSUS Chord Hugo?

I've been getting these questions already. I'm hesitating a bit. As you saw in my summary in Part 1 that I truly believe this is a summit-fi headphone amplifier that will leave no-one disappointed. But to compare it with Hugo? Amp vs amp there's nothing to compare. The 430HA wins easily – as it should. Hugo does not have a bad amp, but you don't buy Chord Hugo because of the amp. You buy it because you want a slim (well sort of) high-quality DAC with built-in headphone amp. That built-in amp is enough to **drive** picky and somewhat hard to drive headphones like Sennheiser HD800 to loud enough levels and with enough control to keep it very musical and tight. Hugo's amp delivers the sound signature that Chord wanted it to deliver when they designed it, in a nice package. It's not an 'unfinished' product in that aspect. 430HA's amp on the other hand is extremely powerful; not meaning LOUD, but powerful as in controlling and strong. It's transparent and revealing. It's superfast I mean lightning fast. Send music to the 430HA and it will take a firm grip and deliver it in a majestic way.

I also do not think that an amplifier should be added to Chord Hugo. I believe its sound signature gets altered in a way that I don't recognize it anymore. Chord Hugo is so honest and correct. It's not polite nor is it arrogant. It like floating truth. I like it like that. I'm not saying, and

this is important, that Hugo sounds bad when amplified externally – but it sounds...different. And I bought it because I loved the way it sounded. On its own. That's the way it'll stay for me. And you might argue that it means 430HA is not transparent if it's changing the sound signature of the Hugo. Fair enough, but I can't say that 430HA is non-transparent. This is tricky, but I truly urge you to trust your ears and evaluate carefully before taking the plunge to combine Hugo with any external amplifier. However....

I'll just say it like it is: if you're not 100% happy with Hugos amplification and you're looking for the best solid state, lightning fast, complete headphone amplifier and you happen to have \$3500 to spend. This is it. Done. But will it still be Hugo? No it will not. It will not be Hugo on steroids. Have a listen first. You might love it, and you might not. Trust your ears, not the price tag. Together they're far better than the build in DAC in the upgraded version of 430HA – 430HAD. But that's not the complete picture. Hang-on for more...

What about the optional built-in DAC in 430HA making it a 430HAD? That's for part 3.

Finally, how did it sound then – if it wasn't Hugo on steroids?

Part 3

PC streaming from NAS over network via jRiver Media Center 20 (ASIO DSD Driver provided by Simaudio) – Simaudio Moon Neo 430HAD – Sennheiser HD800 – Moon Audio Black Dragon balanced (XLR) headphone cable / Nordost Heimdall2 HD800 balanced (XLR) cable

I believe that the biggest improvement is not in the format or in the resolution but in the making of the recording; you can't polish a turd. I don't believe that higher resolution (sampling rates) will result in better albums. Some albums are just not well done at all, and the better your system becomes, the worse it will sound. However, a well-made album in higher resolution than the redbook (CD) standard will often sound absolutely stunning.

So I was happy to find that review amp that I was sent from the nice guys at Stylus (Swedish distributor for Simaudio) was equipped with a DAC as well. This is an optional upgrade to the 430HA that will not only add a D to the title making it a 430HAD, but also a pretty nice DAC for almost nothing (\$800). Of course I couldn't resist to run a bunch of songs and albums through the DAC to my HD800's. The driver installation was straight forward, and after configuring my streaming software jRiver Media Player 20 to send the files straight to the USB without touching the file (!) everything worked flawlessly. A quick input change to D4 (meaning the USB input) and voila' – music! The display of 430HAD shows the sampling rate to prove that we have arrived to the land of high resolution. I threw all sorts of files at the 430HAD without a hiccup. Again, I believe that the DAC became much better over time, and the music selection mentioned below was the list that I used for critical listening after I felt that the DAC had settled a bit. I still think it needs 150 hours to

arrive to a point where it performs at its best. But how does it sound? I'm going to go as far as saying that you can't get a better standalone DAC for \$800 and you're saving yourself the money for interconnects as well. This piece just grows on you. I believe it's a lovely match between DAC and amp. Please see a selection of songs with comments below:

Music:

1. [Art Lande – Smoke gets in your eyes \(DSD 2.8Mhz DFF\) \(song\)](#)

Wow. This is such a beautiful song. I don't know if it's the DSD, the DAC or the amp but this is piano music directly connected to your brain. Other than the piano, it's pitch black and dead quiet. There's NOTHING there.

2. [Alain Jean-Marie Trio – Thing's ain't what they used to \(24bit/192kHz, wav\) \(song\)](#)

Live recording from Birdland in Neuburg, Germany. If you're new to jazz and want to audition a DAC, this is perfect. Easy going piano trio. Recording quality is stunning. It feels like sitting in the middle of the room. The extension and soundstage is wonderful.

3. [Refused – Freedom \(24bit/44.1kHz, FLAC, HDTracks\) \(album\)](#)

A tough and hard album, but mastered by the great [Bernie Grundman](#). This proves that even hardcore can sound great on the HD800's. How does one describe this albumsonically? Well, I would like you to listen to the drums. Just focus on the drums for a few minutes, and you'll understand how well made it is – despite its intensity. Compared to, let's say, Metallicas black album where the drums are so far ahead in the mix that it's hard to enjoy loud, at least on a headphone like HD800.

4. [Various Artists – Jazz at the Pawnshop \(DXD 352.8kHz\)](#)

This album has been called the greatest jazz album of the century. That's a bold statement and I'm not going to comment on that. But it's an absolutely fantastic album that will give you a direct injection of what happened during 2 nights in December 1976. In a former pawnshop, later transformed into a hip jazzclub called 'Stampen' in Stockholm. The club phone rings in the background, people are enjoying good drinks and good music. The recording engineer Gert Palmcrantz got the brilliant idea to put a mic under Lars Erstrands vibraphone. You're just there. In the audience. How does the 430HAD perform? Well how would I know, I was mesmerized by the great music. It just swings. Every song is being delivered in an analog way – but analog on steroids. I absolutely loved it!

5. [Beethoven, 8th Symphony Op. 93, Paavo Järvi conducts The Deutsche Kammerphilharmonie Bremen](#)
This hybrid SACD is of great value, I'm listening to the redbook version from my NAS. I urge you to read about this symphony the way Paavo Järvi, the conductor in this recording, describes it in '[Gramophone magazine](#)'. Then listen. It's lovely to evaluate any audio equipment when you have the story behind why it sounds the way it does. The 430HAD does a great job in presenting this classical masterpiece. It's electric from the first note to the last. The soundstage is a little bit congested and I'm not used to hear HD800 like this. The bass extension is very nice without being boomy. Strings are tight and I believe this is how they wanted to record it. Have the soundstage come together creating a more intimate feeling, like the orchestra is really in alignment with the conductor (who would think anything else, but I'm speaking from an audio equipment point of view). I do believe that the built in DAC is somewhat lacking a little bit in depth and speed here, but it's hard to know whose fault it is, and remember what's in the description of the symphony following the link above:

“This is a wonderful little gem, but you do encounter in it technical and musical challenges. It's not a piece that works unless everyone is convinced about the common interpretation. The direction must be agreed. You need an orchestra that possesses extreme virtuosity, which is also convinced about a shared approach and interpretation. Otherwise the piece will appear clumsy, out of breath, endlessly speedy – or just messy. It's a great challenge and, in my relationship with this symphony, I feel my journey is never complete.”

// Paavo Järvi

You see what I mean? His journey is never complete. Is that why I sometimes thinks that I can't put myself in the audience when listening, but more watching it from above. I don't know, it's a minor thing but interesting to think about.

Now, is the built-in DAC better compared to Hugo feeding it? In one aspect it is not. With classical music, I felt Hugo came alive more than with any other genre feeding the 430HA. But. Comparing it like this I believe the 430HAD offers a tremendously good value and the sound quality is amazing – and better than with Hugo connected as an external DAC overall. But weigh in how Hugo sounds on its own, portability, versatility, musicality and honesty – no it's not better. I think Hugo on its own sound better than 430HAD but I think 430HAD sound better than Hugo feeding 430HA. Imagine how 430HA would sound when being fed with a DAC that is a better match for 430HA. I believe that's when we're getting closer to the end-game and true summit-fi.



Well hello there DSD.

I don't know how to give you any other summary than what I have repeated throughout the review. I'll be comparing it with an OTL tube amp without output capacitors, a unique product on its own. Then I'll make up my mind – but it's going to be really tough to ship back this amp to its owner....



Chord Hugo hanging out with the Simaudio Beast!



SACD Stereo from the Unidisk, b1 (meaning balanced) input to the 430HAD and finally balanced XLR-4 to Sennheisers HD800... game over?