

# the ear

HI-FI MUSIC GEAR

hardware review



## Moonriver Model 404

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First of all, a very happy new year to all of you, wherever you are reading this. These are troubled and troubling times for the whole world, so we music lovers are especially lucky that being forced to stay at home is much less of a hardship than it is for many. I have spent the darkest part of our winter listening to a rich array of music, and for the past few weeks the heart of my system has been the Moonriver Audio Model 404 integrated amplifier.

You may not yet have come across this relatively young Swedish brand, which is indeed named after the classic song, but if there is any justice Moonriver Audio is going to carve out a place in many an audiophile's heart. The Moonriver Audio product catalogue consists of just two products, the Model 404 integrated amplifier and a Reference version of the same machine. This review is of the standard model – I hope in due course to bring you my thoughts on the reference model.

The Model 404 is, as you can see from the pictures, a handsome thing in its way, with retro styling but no undue bling. It has been designed and built in Sweden with the express aim of giving the listener a true insight into a recording, with nothing added and nothing taken away. The quoted output of 50 watts per channel may seem modest, but in use the power and dynamics of all the music I have played through it have been exceptional, and there has always been more power available than I need to drive my Harbeth C7ESXD loudspeakers to window rattling levels (when I have had the house to myself). All but the most difficult loudspeaker loads will not find any fault with the Model 404's power output. Backed off to more normal listening levels, the music flows effortlessly and with captivating realism.

However, I am getting ahead of myself here. To continue with the pre-listening inspection, the matte black fascia has four rotary knobs and two metal switches. From left to right there is an input selector dial, which also gives access to the optional MM/MC phono stage at Input1 and an optional USB DAC at Input4. Then comes a switch to dim the already unobtrusive orange indicator lights, a tape loop monitor selector, a balance control, a stereo/mono selector switch and finally, the volume control. The latter is connected to a high-grade Blue ALPS potentiometer. The power button resides below the light dimming switch between the two left hand dials. There is also a receiver window for the supplied remote control – more about that in a moment.

The back panel sports four analogue inputs with a phono grounding point, two pairs of inputs for tape in and tape out (timely, given that both reel-to-reel and even cassette recorders are experiencing a return to some audiophile systems), two pairs of pre-amp out connectors for output to subwoofers or power amplifiers, a left and right speaker connection and a power inlet. The supplied remote control is small and offers volume control, mute, tape monitor on/off, and

four input buttons. The circular dial at the centre offers volume up and down at the top and bottom and switching to the next input via left and right. The diminutive size of the unit makes it all too easy to lose, and I found that its size and my lack of manual dexterity meant that I regularly and inadvertently pressed the wrong button. I also found the volume control, which is all I use the remote for, to be rather imprecise. It may be hard to implement, but an LED on the volume knob would also improve the usability, at least for me it would be helpful to see the setting from across the room.

I connected my Yamaha CD S-3000 which operates as both a DAC (for connecting TV sound via optical) and a player of CDs and SACDs. It is a perfect companion for the Model 404 as it too uses orange indicator lights. From across the room they could be mistaken for siblings.



I also connected my Gold Note PH10 phono stage. My initial cable selections were Tellurium Q for speakers and RCA interconnects, and Shunyata Delta NR for the mains.

### Sound quality

The unit arrived cold from its time in the courier system so having plugged it in and hit the power on button I picked an SACD of the Rolling Stones' *Let It Bleed*, intending to leave the room and do things elsewhere in the house. But it had me at about the third bar of Gimme Shelter and that was the morning gone. Love's epic *Forever Changes* SACD on Mobile Fidelity followed, then *Brothers In Arms* from the same label and finally *LA Woman* Jim Morrison's rousing farewell with the Doors, on Analog Productions' excellent SACD release. My notes contain all the usual superlatives, imaging, PR&T, energy, all got a mention. But I really felt that I was hearing deep into the recordings, with every instrument in its rightful place. The technical specs tell me that the frequency response runs from 10Hz to 50kHz and I believe it. The bass was fast and tuneful while the midrange, which is the Harbeths' real strength, was at least as good as I have heard from them. The top end was clear, with lots of air.

That evening, we were watching a film on Netflix and both us commented on the tremendous amount of micro-detail that we were hearing. Dialogue was crystal clear. Indeed, pairing the Model 404 with a speaker of the Harbeths' capabilities meant that spoken word came across as realistically as I believe to be possible with equipment at this price point.

Switching my listening to vinyl, I compared the built-in phono stage with the output from my Gold Note, using a Goldring 1042 on my Linn LP12/Ittok turntable and arm. Both made a fine job of it, and although the stand alone Gold Note offers a slightly fuller sound, the built-in



one was very listenable and would probably suit all but the most picky user perfectly well. The unit is silent in use – even with my ear to speaker I heard nothing from it when selected. Changing the configuration from MM/high output MC to low input MC can be done by the user, but involves removing the outer cover then exposing two set of dip switches by removing an inner cover on the module. However this only needs to be done for low output moving coil cartridges – the manual says that high output MC designs should be used with the MM setting. I suggest discussing this with your dealer and having them make the settings for you.

Boring you with my playlist isn't terribly useful, but I can say that I have played classical, jazz, blues, rock and pop on vinyl through the Model 404's phono stage, and it has delivered every time. I played *Let It Bleed* on the 50th anniversary pressing and boy did it rock. I had to turn up the volume a bit to match the level I had heard from SACD, but the vinyl had my (happily unwitnessed) air guitar going and my feet tapping as if I had St. Vitus' Dance.

About a week into the review period I received a set of cables from OePhi in Denmark. I replaced all the cabling over the course of the next week., finishing with the mains leads into the Model 404, the Yamaha and the Gold Note. My separate review for those will appear very soon, but what I will say here is that cable choice will make a considerable difference to your results with the Moonriver amplifier. For me, this Scandinavian pairing was a marriage made in heaven, resulting in the most organic, realistic sound I have heard from a music replay system. Everything I played felt like a live performance, and gave me another level of emotional connection to the music.

I would summarise my time with the Moonriver Audio Model 404 as utterly delightful despite the minor irritations with the remote control. I genuinely believe that every other aspect of the design, the component selection and the manufacturing have been executed in an exemplary fashion. The team behind it are not just exceptional engineers but are also very obviously music lovers themselves. I am lucky to have a lot of great hi-fi come and go through my system. Much of it I have admired, much of it I have enjoyed, but most of it is packed up



and returned with gratitude but without regret. I shall be genuinely sorry to see the Model 404 depart. If I was in the market for a new amplifier this would be at the top of my list. I can't wait to get my hands on the Reference model – the mind boggles as to how good that is going to be!

### Specifications

Type: Integrated stereo amplifier

Analogue inputs: 5x RCA

Phono input: optional MM or MM/MC

Digital inputs: optional USB

Analogue outputs: tape out RCA, 2x pre-out RCA

Bluetooth: N/A

Headphone output: N/A

Speaker outputs: 5-way binding posts

Power Output: 50W into 8 ohms

Features: mono mode, balance control, tape monitor

Dimensions (HxWxD): 135 x 430 x 390mm

Weight: 12kg