

Ayre CX-7 CD player The CX-7e, February 2006

 stereophile.com/content/ayre-cx-7-cd-player-cx-7e-february-2006

5/18/2003

Art Dudley wrote about the Ayre CX-7e in February 2006 (Vol.29 No.2):

Remember all those full-function (line-plus-phono) preamps we used to be able to buy from manufacturers like Audible Illusions, Audio Research, Conrad-Johnson, Convergent Audio Technology, Counterpoint, Dennesen, EAR, Electrocompaniet, Klyne, Mark Levinson, Motif, Naim, New York Audio Labs, Nova, Precision Fidelity, Robertson, Spectral, Theta, and Threshold? Today, most of those companies have stopped making full-function models—that, or vanished from the scene altogether.

But never mind them: Remember all those high-end CD players we used to be able to buy...?

Consumers aren't to be blamed for deciding they don't want a certain something anymore, but whenever that happens, it's not unusual for *some* demand to remain—and for the best or the canniest companies to cement their following and keep what's left of the market to themselves. (I'm thinking Victor Mousetraps Inc. here.) Not only have some of the aforementioned audio-electronics manufacturers survived, but a few have made names for themselves as enduring sources of good full-function preamplifiers—positions from which they're unlikely to be toppled.

I daresay the high-end CD player shakeout is upon us now, and when the leaves have all settled, some variation of the Ayre CX-7 (\$2950) will be among the survivors.

I was more or less indifferent to the CX-7 when it was introduced in late 2002—dizzied, I suppose, by the torrent of players that still seemed to be coming from everydamnwhere back then—but I came to know the Ayre well a little less than a year later. That was when I reviewed the company's [AX-7 integrated amplifier](#), and the folks at Ayre eventually suggested that I try their balanced-output player with their balanced-input amp. I did, and the rest is history—or at least what passes for history in a hobby this small. The CX-7 stood apart from the crowd as a fine all-arounder that got the notes and the beats right and offered the sound that most devotees of high-end audio expect.

In the January 2006 *Stereophile* I described how that AX-7 amp has been refined and rechristened the AX-7e (for *evolution*, no jokes, swear to God); now the CX-7 has come in for the same treatment. And while I don't have a sample of the older version on hand, nor was my time with the earlier sample long enough that I can lay out one of those *comparisons from memory* that we audio writers love to sling, this is a good opportunity to bring you up to date on Ayre Acoustics' bread-and-butter digital source, and to share a few of my responses to a product that I think is a bit more enduring than most.

As with their revived integrated amplifier, Ayre's e-series changes to the CX-7 amount to two areas of power-supply refinement: additional filtering and enhanced current availability on the AC side, and a much more sophisticated—yet enduringly purist—approach to voltage regulation on the DC side.

Yet the CX-7 has evolved in an additional way: Its already sophisticated digital filter, based on multiple Burr-Brown chips, has been replaced with a Xilinx Field Programmable Gate Array, or FPGA. This was, if you'll pardon my use of an expression so liberal it embarrasses even me, an *empowering* move. Using support software supplied by the Xilinx company, Ayre can not only program the FPGA for use as a digital filter, but can further customize it to do virtually anything within a PCM context: upsampling, downsampling, conforming to various different filter algorithms, you name it. In the CX-7e, Ayre used this capability to implement slightly different coefficients than in the earlier CX-7's filter, which they say results in a more open and transparent sound.

Again, I can't give you a hand-on-heart comparison, but I *can* say that my sample of the CX-7e sounded superb—as when I listened to the Lonesome River Band's "Swing That Hammer," from their *Talkin' to Myself* (CD,

Sugar Hill SUG CD 3913). First, here's how that album *usually* sounds: It's obviously a digital recording, probably made on somebody's backwoods hard drive, and it sounds more than a little bit *canned*: kinda flat, kinda plastic, overly compressed, not a lot of drama. What the Ayre CX-7 did was to extract the minimal humanness seemingly left in those pits, and in a way that no other player I've used quite has. During Don Rigsby's nice mandolin solo—especially the second half of it, where he digs into the chords with a forceful syncopated strum—the CX-7e made all the left-hand slurs and right-hand attacks leap out of the mix in a wonderful way. It also revealed guitarist Kenny Smith's G-runs as the explosive and downright manly all-downstroke things that they are (no wimpy down-up-down stuff for Kenny), all while maintaining an excellent sense of timing and momentum.

Compared with other players in more or less the same price category, the Ayre CX-7e distinguished itself as an almost aggressively (in a good way) rhythmic player, yet one with a wide open and transparent view of the sound, with excellent instrumental colors and textures. For its part, the obvious competitor on that field, the [Naim CD5X](#) (\$2950 stock, \$4000 with FlatCap 2X power supply), had an even more relentless way with the string bass on "Swing That Hammer," and just as good a sense of touch in the picking—but it didn't sound as open or as present as the Ayre. In fact, by comparison, the Naim sounded rolled-off on top.

Stretching the comparison in a slightly different direction to accommodate a multiformat player such as the [Linn Unidisk SC](#) (\$4995) also proved interesting: On Mobile Fidelity's excellent hybrid SACD/CD reissue of Béla Fleck's *Drive* (MFSL UDSACD 7003), I still preferred the DSD layer through the Linn over the "Red Book" layer through the Ayre—but barely. The Linn had the better sense of musical flow, but sonically it was also just a bit too smooth compared with the Ayre's more vivid and tactile sound.

On single-layer discs, the Ayre maintained a slight advantage—as on an early European CD issue of Procol Harum's *Live with the Edmonton Symphony Orchestra* (1972, Chrysalis/Eurodisc 252675). In those first Rodrigo-inspired bars that introduce "Conquistador," the Ayre had more color, and more of a sense of digging in, than either of the aforementioned British players. Even before the music began, the CX-7 distinguished itself as having superior detail retrieval and intelligibility (as when singer Gary Brooker tells the orchestra "This is a hot number" just before they start playing), with clearer separation between the electric bass and the string basses, and even better spatial layering, front to back.

All that, and still just \$2950: an impressive value.

The CD Player directory in the 2007 *Stereophile Buyer's Guide* really needs room for an additional spec: Next to the columns for "Maximum Output Level" and "Special Features" should be one that reads "Honestly Now, Do You Really Believe This Product Will Still Be Offered For Sale In Five Years?" For the majority of them, the answer would be a resounding *no*; for this one, I think it would be *yes*. Forgive me for thinking that's at least half the battle.—**Art Dudley**