

Integrated Amps

Ayre Amps Up

Smarthouse Team - Thursday, 25 January 2007

The Ayre CX-7e CD player is a fantastic piece of work...so is the matching amp just as humble?

Ayre Ax-7e | \$6000 | ★★★★★ | www.advanceaudio.com.au

For: Very nice casework, a great sense of timing and finesse

Against: Not as powerful as some of the competition.

Conclusion: Lacks the balls of less revealing designs; has a degree of refinement.

The AX-7e is an expensive 60-watt integrated amplifier by Australian standards, but it has design features that you won't find in less costly alternatives and that are scarce even in dearer ones. Most significantly, it is totally balanced in operation and has zero feedback. The former is a very effective way of keeping noise out of the signal, while the latter is a tried and tested means of avoiding timing problems, albeit not one that all amp designers agree upon.

Although the nature of the level display and a touch-sensitive bar (instead of a knob) to control volume reveal that this is a microprocessor-driven design, this part of the amplifier switches off when it's not being used, which helps keep the signal clean. To go with the balanced topology is a pair of balanced inputs indicated by left/right symmetrical icons – a star and a planet – whereas the single-ended inputs use asymmetric icons. That aside, there is no easy way of relating your CD player to a specific icon, although you could buy a Moon CD player and plug it into the crescent moon input... but perhaps that's going a bit too far!



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The AX-7e has relatively low power output for a solid-state integrated at this price. This suggests that the money has been spent on quality rather than quantity, something that's born out when you notice that the output doubles when the load drops from eight to four ohms. There may only be 60 watts per channel on offer, but they are obviously being produced by a high-quality power supply.

The 'e' suffix in the amp's name stands for Evolution, which in the AX-7e's case means what Ayre's Charles Hansen calls "a combination of proprietary technologies used on the AC side of the power supply". What this actually consists of is additional filtering to keep out radio frequency interference (RFI) and increased current delivery and filtering for rectifier switching noise. According to Ayre, this is something that remains an issue even when the quietest rectifiers are used.

The voltage gain stage of the power supply also has two stages of regulation that utilize a FET input and a bi-polar output. This reduces output impedance and thus allows the amp greater control over the loudspeaker. It likewise increases input impedance, which allows Ayre to use a high-quality polypropylene voltage reference capacitor. This is said to increase the coherency of the sound.

The AX-7e comes in the same smart casework. In fact, the faceplate looks exactly the same, but where the disc drawer used to be, there's a bar with arrows at either end – this, you may have guessed, is the volume control. In our opinion, you can't beat a good ol' rotary knob for this job, but the touch-sensitive bar does give aesthetic continuity and with most volume adjustments [carried](#) out via the remote, it's no biggie.

The remote is a basic plastic affair (a hewn from solid aluminium version is available at extra cost) with controls for both amp and CD player. It has up and down switches for volume and input above one another, which can mean that the casual user often ends up changing input when they're attempting to increase volume – not ideal, but hardly disastrous.

SOUND QUALITY

Encouraged by the distributor to try some more challenging speakers than one might normally partner with a 60-watt amplifier, we stuck them on the end of our resident B&W 802Ds. This is a high-end speaker that's not a particularly tough load (90dB/W/m sensitivity and an impedance that doesn't drop below 3.5 ohms), but is extremely revealing and requires a firm hand if the bass is to stay sharp. This proved a task that the Ayre was more than happy to deal with, taking the opportunity to show off impressive finesse and a keen sense of timing in the process. It's a combination that makes the most of rhythmically subtle material as well as good-quality source components. It was not difficult, for instance, to differentiate between the Classé CDP-202 disc player, even though both are highly capable designs. In this context, the fine detail of the former ultimately outshone the slightly more etched style of the latter, in part because the Ayre seems to have broadly the same sort of character as the Classé, albeit with a greater emphasis on timing qualities.



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There is a lot to enjoy in the Ayre's sound. It is more relaxed than beefier solid-state amp designs and is able to 'breathe' with the micro-dynamics of the music with ease. It is also appealingly open in its presentation but where it really scores is in the elusive timing department. All manner of music – from Beethoven Sonatas to Gabor Szabo's sitar funk – has an ebb and flow that is right on the money. This comes down to a high level of transparency and doesn't seem to rely on a forward-leaning balance, at least up until it runs out of steam.

The AX-7e is an unusual and entertaining amplifier. It eschews variable input gain and input naming and even the modern enthusiasm for high power, seeking in its place to deliver a well-balanced, revealing and rhythmically tight sound. To give of its best it needs that uncommon thing: a neutral and relatively high-efficiency loudspeaker. This makes us suspect that as long as the speaker's impedance is not too challenging, the Ayre is happy driving some pretty revealing designs.

There are many advantages to the integrated approach, but the fact that the casework is usually the most expensive bit of an amplifier is the greatest. Just one reason why you will have difficulty finding a pre/power combo that delivers the finesse on offer here at anywhere near the price.

KEY FEATURES Size (WxHxD): 43.8x12x35cm
 ► Weight: 12kg ► Inputs: Two single-ended (RCA-phono), two balanced (XLR) ► Rated power: 60 watts per channel (8 ohms)