

Home Audio Equipment Review



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Ayre Acoustics CX-7e CD Player

by Kirk Midtskog

The Compact Disc has come a long way since its initially unrealized hype of "perfect sound forever" some 24 odd years ago. Yet, some in the audio industry now seriously question the CD's future. The great availability of affordable high-resolution digital players a few years ago made some audiophiles doubt the wisdom of investing serious money in a CD-only player. As it turned out, the high-rez proponents have succeeded in forming an inward-firing ambush, taking SACD and DVD-A down with them in the process of fomenting the format war.

As more and more users download audio files from the Internet and digital music players attached to servers, and DACs begin to play more prominent roles in how music lovers deliver the source to audio systems, I will leave it to others to speculate about the place CD players will have in the marketplace. *I feel perfectly comfortable about investing in a good CD player. I take refuge from my work, chained to a computer as a systems analyst, partly by listening to music. The last thing I want to do right now is tie any part of my music-listening process to another kind of computer. Reviewers' and friends' descriptions of the time involved and the setup difficulties with the server/player*



Review Summary

Sound "The sound of the Ayre CX-7e is lively, open, detailed, and engaging -- not shy or laid-back. Music took on a kind of momentum that drew me in and invited me to listen." "All the CD rigs I have tried had good bass, but the CX-7e was the first one that really lent some appreciable heft and physical weight to things." "On the other hand, the CX-7e may not be for those who favor a more laid-back sound. It asks the listener to keep up with its momentum-generating performance."

Features "The technology behind the 'Evolution' designation was derived primarily from power-supply enhancements, which Ayre calls 'Dynamic Power.' These were gleaned from Ayre's well-regarded C-5xe stereo universal player and consist of proprietary technologies used on the AC side of the power supply, including additional RFI filtering of the AC mains, increased peak current delivery, and filtering of rectifier switching noise." "The CX-7e's transport remains a DVS DVD-ROM drive, and the DAC chips are Burr-Brown PCM1738s. Ayre replaced the CX-7's digital filter with a new Xilinx FPGA."

Use "As for break-in, after 300 hours of use, the CX-7e improved noticeably. Its noise floor dropped, greater corporality and weight kicked

method confirm my impression that it's not for me at this juncture. Call me a Luddite, but adopting the latest technology does not necessarily equate to the best course of action.

in, and the music had more fluidity and coherence." "I could read the display window's large blue characters easily from my listening chair and beyond, a feat not possible with many CD players on the market."

Value "Ayre is onto something with this sub-\$3000 player."

Enter the Ayre Acoustics CX-7e CD player. The "e" stands for "Evolution" and represents an update to the original CX-7 that came on the market in late 2002. The technology behind the "Evolution" designation was derived primarily from power-supply enhancements, which Ayre calls "Dynamic Power." These were gleaned from Ayre's well-regarded C-5xe stereo universal player and consist of proprietary technologies used on the AC side of the power supply, including additional RFI filtering of the AC mains, increased peak current delivery, and filtering of rectifier switching noise.

The CX-7e's transport remains a DVS DVD-ROM drive, and the DAC chips are Burr-Brown PCM1738s. Ayre replaced the CX-7's digital filter with a new Xilinx FPGA. The people at Ayre obviously deemed these changes worth implementing, and they commendably did so without increasing the CX-7's \$2950 USD price. The cost of the Evolution upgrade ranges from \$300 to \$650, depending on the age of the particular unit.

The CX-7e has both balanced and single-ended outputs, with Ayre decidedly favoring the fully balanced approach, which designer Charles Hansen considers one of the core principles of audio-electronic design. The unit's digital output is a balanced AES/EBU type, but Ayre can supply an adapter for coax digital output for those who need it. A switch for activating the digital output is around back and should be turned off for best sound from the analog outputs.



Also around back is the CX-7e's Digital Filter Algorithm switch, which gives the option of flipping between Listen and Measure modes. The manual states that Listen is more accurate in the time domain, while Measure is more accurate in the frequency domain. It mentions that most users will probably like Listen, but Measure will provide better overall sound quality in some situations. I tried in both and greatly preferred Listen. I did all of my serious listening this way.

The light, handy plastic remote has the usual CD buttons, including numbered ones for direct track access and a few extra buttons that control Ayre's AX-7e integrated amp and K-5xe preamp. I actually prefer well-made plastic remotes over most of the heavy metal jobs that many audio folk seem to think indicate quality and class. The heavier metal remotes can scar other gear if you accidentally drop them, and the cold metal can feel uncomfortable in your hand. The player's transport feature-set does not include track programmability.

The CX-7e's clean, uncomplicated look and feel suggest "competent, well-engineered, no nonsense performance," rather than, "stunning, elegant, industrial art." The sound and motion of the drawer won't wow you with mechanical precision, but you still get the feeling that your hard-earned money is going into sonic results instead of component jewelry. I could read the display window's large blue characters easily from my listening chair and beyond, a feat not possible with many CD players on the market.

The CX-7e is attractive, but it's not visually commanding, measuring 17 1/4"W x 12 3/8"D

x 4 3/4"H and weighing 25 pounds. It saves "commanding" for its sound.

Setting up

While the CX-7e exhibits its underlying sonic virtues nude, as it were, its focus improves and noise floor drops considerably -- as does all gear in my experience -- with a good power cord and some appropriate vibration control. Therefore, I listened to the CX-7e with Aurios MIB 1.2 bearings beneath it and a Silent Source Signature power cord connected around back. I also placed a small bag of loose lead shot on the top case over the transport mechanism. It is probably safe to assume that almost all users of audio devices at this level use aftermarket power cords, and the Silent Source Signature worked very nicely with the CX-7e. The other players I used for comparison also had the same setup benefits.

Even though Ayre promotes balanced operation across all of its products, my First Sound preamp has only single-ended connections, so I listened exclusively that way. My fairly small 12' 6" x 17' room necessitates that I use extensive acoustic absorption panels at the first-reflection points, behind my listening position, and a few at the speaker end of the quasi-LEDE (live end behind speakers, dead end behind listener) arrangement.

As for break-in, after 300 hours of use, the CX-7e improved noticeably. Its noise floor dropped, greater corporality and weight kicked in, and the music had more fluidity and coherence.

Sound

The sound of the Ayre CX-7e is lively, open, detailed, and engaging -- not shy or laid-back. Music took on a kind of momentum that drew me in and invited me to listen. If I wanted to sit back and follow the tune or engage my analytical powers to pick out the interactions of the various orchestra sections, the CX-7e took me there. As I marveled at "So Pretty," one of Leonard Bernstein's odd and beautiful art songs from *Bernstein* [Reference Recordings RR-87CD], I could also clearly hear soloist Beth Clayton just left of center and in front. The cello section, complete with a sense of it being made up of individual players, filled the space to the right front, rather than being placed to the left middle as it is often used in European orchestras. On the rock side of things, the sheer forward thrust of "Reflection" from Tool's *Lateralus* [EMI Virgin Music 61422-31160-2] was obvious as it built an insistent, progressive propulsiveness and pretty much launched shortly after the 9:00 mark. I also admired Danny Carey's intricate, mind-bogglingly complex drumming with a good amount of dynamic shading, impact, and balance between drum-head and -body sound.

Associated Equipment

Loudspeakers – Coincident Speaker Technology Super Eclipse III.

Power amplifier – Gamut M200 monoblocks.

Preamplifier - First Sound P.D. 4.0 with Paramount Plus upgrade

All the CD rigs I have tried had good bass, but the CX-7e was the first one that really lent some appreciable heft and physical weight to things. Big material, like "Sennets and Tuckets" from the *Bernstein* CD, had additional impact, with explosive wallops and thundering crashes. Even on less-than-"wall of sound" or bass-laden passages, such as those from "The Last Time I saw Richard"

Paramount Plus upgrade.

Analog - VPI TNT 3.5 turntable, SME V tonearm, Benz-Micro LP cartridge, Lukaszek PP-1 phono stage (with modified power supply).

Digital sources – Ayre Acoustics CX-7 CD player, Electrocompaniet EMC1-UP CD player, Opera Audio Consonance Reference 2.0 CD/SACD player.

Interconnects – Shunyata Research Altair and Audience Au24.

Speaker cables – Shunyata Research Andromeda.

Power cords – Silent Source Audio Signature.

Accessories - Two 20-amp dedicated AC lines with FIM outlets, QS&D equipment rack, Tender Feet cones, Aurios MIB 1.2 and 1.0 bearings.

from Joni Mitchell's *Travelogue* [Nonesuch 79817-2], I noticed how much the congas, with their resonant "bonkiness," played a role in bringing a swaying quality to the song. I had heard the congas in the mix before, but they became more physically present with the CX-7e. The kind of information that this physicality added to the music was greater than the odd elements standing out more than expected; rather, it contributed to a better understanding of the music at a fundamental level.

The CX-7e created a large, deep, open soundstage. I don't tend to go overboard with soundstaging minutiae, but the size and airiness of the CX-7e's presentation could be considered a definite strong point. Because my listening room is somewhat small, I listen between seven and eight feet away from the speakers. As a result of the relatively close triangulation of my listening position and the

speakers, the soundfields of many recordings extend out to the front corners and create a 3-D, terrarium-like stage behind the speakers. "War Dance" from *Respighi* [Reference Recordings RR-95CD] filled this imaginary stage with a stable, coherent soundscape, complete with hall-sound wall reflections as the percussion and brass sections blasted away. Individual images had a surprisingly abundant amount of body -- a Red Book CD *bête noire* at the CX-7e's price level until relatively recently. The rendering of space around individual musicians together with this corporeality on "Agnus Dei" from *Requiem, Five Anthems* [Reference Recordings RR-57CD] helped create an emotional immediacy to the male and female choruses as they sang their plaintive cries.

Ayre has achieved a rare combination of musical appeal and technical competence with the CX-7e. Rather than hyping certain aspects of the sound that are presumed to indicate detail in a typical hi-fi sense, the CX-7e allowed musical information to unfold and remain integrated into a reasonably convincing listening experience. Some pieces of audio gear have a discernable underlying haze above which the music must ride and be deciphered. The CX-7e cleared much of this up so that notes started a bit sooner and decayed a bit longer, and a closer relationship with the music was created.

I don't think Ayre has artificially sweetened or added to the CX-7e's sound to get such an engaging presentation, however. At first I suspected that the bass and midbass may have been warmed up because the extension and heft in the entire region had a commanding, satisfying quality that I haven't come across in \$3000 digital before. But I listened more and attended a few orchestral concerts in three different halls, and I have to conclude that the CX-7e approximated live music's overall balance quite well. Live music has substantially more heft and spaciousness than my system can muster, but the CX-7e's overall qualities of speed and heft didn't come across as artificial gimmicks.

On the other hand, the CX-7e may not be for those who favor a more laid-back sound. It asks the listener to keep up with its momentum-generating performance. I find this quality engaging, but I can understand if others find the CX-7e's take on music a bit too forthright. It is not forward in the sense of having a close-up perspective -- it's actually midhall or so. Even though it provides quite a detailed picture on the recording, its soundstage usually began near the back of my speakers and extended farther back from there. (My speakers' front baffles are about five and half feet from the wall behind them, so this kind of perspective is not unusual.) If there were brass blats, cymbal crashes or forcefully projecting vocalists sending notes out into the hall, the sound would shoot out into the room, much the way it does at live concerts.

This may come across as too interactive for some listeners. The CX-7e will not gloss over the exaggerated prominence that Alanis Morissette's voice has on "That Particular Time" from *Under Rug Swept* [Maverick 9 47988-2]. This presentation won't necessarily irritate, but the CX-7e will let you know about recording's quirks and flaws. To me, the CX-7e gets the basic mood and flavor of live music pretty much correct. Could it have a lower noise floor, more dynamic shading, and still greater air and detail? Of course, but I imagine it would cost a good deal more money to get such improvements.

Comparisons

Because we all have to make system decisions based on relative performance to other gear, I compared the CX-7e to its predecessor, the CX-7 (\$2950 when still available), as well as digital players higher and lower in price: an Electrocompaniet EMC1-UP CD player (\$5500) and an Opera Audio Consonance Reference 2.0 CD/SACD player (\$2500).

Compared to the original CX-7, the newer Evolution version sounds more organized, focused, coherent, detailed, weighty and dynamic. The soundstage is larger -- deeper especially -- and tonal color is more true to that of live music. Subtle details and the airiness around the musicians are allowed to come through in greater measure. Nothing in the Evolution upgrade represents a compromise over the original version -- the epitome of the proverbial "all gain and no pain."

The Electrocompaniet EMC1-UP sounded more laid-back than the CX-7e, but, ironically, its soundstage began a bit closer to the listening position than the CX-7e's. The EMC1-UP's presentation was

Ayre vs. Ayre

My role in evaluating the Ayre CX-7e was twofold: talk about any differences between its single-ended and balanced performance, and compare it to Ayre's C-5xe universal stereo player, which I purchased after my March 2006 review. The CX-7e's sound is light and lithe, highly focused and articulate, all of these things aided by its intrinsic quietness. It has topflight retrieval of low-level detail, and the soundstage it casts is extremely wide -- it often puts images beyond the speakers' positions. The CX-7e is honest above all else -- to a fault for some listeners, I am sure, who may find its sound a tad lean and dry, especially compared to some of the tube-based CD players on the market.

The C-5xe (\$5950) is a different matter altogether, offering a fuller and weightier presentation with greater heft and power in the bass. These differences could actually lead to the CX-7e sounding better with certain recordings -- well-done ones with over-ripe bass, like some from Telarc -- but the C-5xe is superior overall and still a reference point among universal players.

less dynamically forceful, and subtle details as well as small dynamic and tonal shadings sounded a tad obscure when compared directly to the Ayre CX-7e's presentation. The EMC1-UP sounded just enough less open to leave me with an impression of a slightly smaller overall soundstage. While I can understand someone happily choosing the EMC1-UP for its suave, sophisticated sound, I also believe that most well-meaning audio-obsessed types would concede that the CX-7e achieves a higher level of performance in terms of micro- and macrodynamics, a lower noise floor, greater retrieval of inner detail, better imaging, and truer tone and timbre.

The Opera Audio Consonance

Reference 2.0 uses a 6H30 tube in its output section for the single-ended outputs and no tube with the balanced outputs. Because of my system configuration, my testing was done through the tubed output. The Reference 2.0 was a good performer all around, especially given its reasonable price. In direct comparison to the CX-7e, it had a rich, ripe midrange texture, but not quite the same attractive clarity and extension at both extremes -- especially in the treble. Some listeners may prefer the Reference 2.0's additional warming resonance in the midrange and upper bass. I heard this as lending a thickness or slight smearing. It's not an unappealing quality *per se*, but I am not sure that it allows the player to give a realistic representation of live music. The Reference 2.0 also sounded slightly veiled and closed-in overall, something that I posit comes from a higher noise floor than that of the clear, quick, and commanding CX-7e.

To be fair, I highlight all of these differences just to bring the contrasts among all of these players into greater relief. Each is accomplished in its own way, but there was no doubt which one I thought sounded best -- the CX-7e.

Conclusion

The Ayre CX-7e proved itself to be a fine performer. Its satisfying weight, transparency, and verve serve all kinds of music equally well -- from solo works to crushing rock, from pop to orchestral music. At no time could I find fault with its operation or sound at a fundamental level. Keep in mind that I listened entirely through its single-ended outputs; the CX-7e will theoretically sound even better balanced. The improvements wrought by the Evolution power supply and new digital filtering represent a substantial leap forward in performance compared to that of the CX-7, an already solid performer.

Through its balanced outputs, the CX-7e sounds a little more enriched and round -- a bit like the C-5xe, in fact -- but not quite as overtly detailed, though all of the musical bits'n'bobs are there. I'm talking about a hair-width's difference here; it's obvious that Ayre has paid attention to the single-ended performance of the CX-7e, though if I owned it I would definitely use it balanced.

One of the best times I had with the CX-7e was while listening to Gillian Welch's *Revival* [WEA 5046668742]. "Paper Wings" is a cut I've used as demo material at shows, and its delicacy was well served by the CX-7e's state-of-the-art portrayal of width and overall airiness. I played the same cut on the C-5xe, and the upright bass was more meaty and prominent. Welch's vocal was also a touch more three-dimensional and physical.

While such minutiae is for the audio obsessives among us, comparing the CX-7e and C-5xe underscored just how good both players are. For some listeners, a CX-7e and \$3000 in the bank will be an appealing proposition.

...Marc Mickelson

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Ayre is onto something with this sub-\$3000 player, and based on my time with it, I am even more curious to hear what the company has done with the C-5xe stereo universal player. In the here and now, though, the Ayre CX-7e is more than worthy of your consideration -- it deserves to be on your very short list.

...*Kirk Midtskog*

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Ayre Acoustics CX-7e CD Player

Price: \$2950 USD.

Warranty: Five years parts and labor.

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