



Ayre K-1xe and V-1xe

A classic pre/power pairing from Colorado, revised once more. Was Darwin right about evolution?

PRICE: K-1xe: £4,995 (£5,995 inc. phono stage); V-1xe: £6,495 CONTACT: Symmetry, 17 Holywell Hill, St. Albans, Herts AL1 1DT ☎ 01727 865488 www.ayre.com

Charles Hansen started Ayre back in 1993 with the V-3 power amplifier. The heavyweight V-1 power amplifier and K-1 preamp were the next two components Ayre developed, and in the decade or so since there have only been two revisions to these designs. The original V-1 and K-1 remained essentially unchanged until 2002, when the two models received a major refit and became the K-1x and V-1x. Now, the whole Ayre range is being changed once more, in what's called the Evolution upgrade (hence the 'e' in the new 'xe' suffix). Fortunately for current Ayre owners, all the Evolution upgrades are retrofittable.

Both these amps feature fully balanced operation with zero feedback and, even today, are the only Ayre components to incorporate inductor-input power supply filtering, or choke regulation as we call it in the UK. Ayre also pays a lot of attention to mains quality and these third-generation Evolution variants use power line conditioning to help stop radio frequency interference entering the system.

The K-1xe preamplifier is a substantial product with an outboard power supply and a stepped attenuator for volume control. A hefty motor is incorporated specifically for turning this when the remote is used – when it kicks in, the clunk can be heard across the room. This is because there are two attenuators inside the box, one for each channel, both featuring solid silver contacts and driven by an array of belts and tensioners that would make Harley Davidson owners jealous.

This preamp takes the dual-mono discipline to its ultimate conclusion. Everything inside this preamp is mirrored; even the back panel inputs, of which there are three single ended and three balanced, are an inverted reflection of one another. Like all Ayre components its design is fully balanced, with even the single-ended inputs being converted to balanced operation, which is unusual... but not as wild as the fact that the (optional) phono stage only has a balanced XLR connection! This is a state of affairs that's at odds with the majority of tonearm leads on the market, but Ayre's solution is to provide tonearm cables for arms with detachable leads (such as the SME we use as a reference). This cable uses Cardas wiring and costs around £700.

The optional phono stage is both very classy and extremely flexible. You can change both gain and loading by inserting your choice from the various supplied resistors, or just about any small scale resistor, into the screw terminals. This means you can match any cartridge's requirements precisely; it's the only

preamp we've come across that allows you to do this and the price premium it adds to the line version makes this phono stage a bargain.

The K-1xe is a fabulously built preamp with the highest quality internal components. The solid aluminium remote will not change input for you but does offer separate standby switches for preamp and power amp. There's even an 'illuminate' button for the remote itself, so you press the right button during those dark room listening sessions.

The V-1xe, meanwhile, is the heaviest power amp that this reviewer has had the 'pleasure' of evaluating, its 43kg making it a genuine two-man lift. Still, you don't generate 200 watts per channel into eight ohms (that will double power perfectly into a four-ohm load) with analogue amplification any other way. It incorporates five transformers – one split-winding mains unit and two more to form the choke regulation for each channel. These feed 32 output transistors per channel, which operate in Class A for the first 20 or so watts and thus keep the big heatsinks pretty cosy.

SOUND QUALITY

These are extremely fine and entertaining amplifiers with an impressive balance of power and resolve. They do everything well: power, tonal colouring and transparency are all in the top league, and separation of detail is absolutely top flight. These amps will drag more clarity out of your loudspeakers and more detail out of your source components than you thought either were capable of.

“To be frank, I want one and I want it bad. Better start buying lottery tickets, then!”

This is particularly obvious when using a turntable, where the phono stage and arm cable compare more than favourably with outboard stages of some repute. One favourite album, John Fahey's *Let Go*, has always intrigued, because it is not clear whether there are one or two guitars playing on the title track. With the Ayre combination, not only is it abundantly clear that there are indeed two guitars, but that one starts before the other and has a completely different sound. This represents a staggering leap in transparency, which would appear to be down to the quality of high frequencies that both Ayres deliver.

High frequencies are the hardest thing for a transistor amplifier to do well. It's not easy for solid-state amps to reproduce instruments

like bells and cymbals with all their shine and body, but without any extra shimmer. Fortunately, that shimmer often sounds like detail, but when something that doesn't distort high frequencies comes along you hear it straight away. Instruments and voices alike reveal a lot more of their character and it becomes remarkably easy to differentiate between like instruments, even in dense mixes.

The sense of resolve is also enhanced by the quality of microdynamics the amps expose – the small differences in volume between one note and the next. Through the Ayre, this is extremely well preserved right across the band so that everything you play delivers more of its character, more of the tone and intonation of the musicians and their instruments.

This contributes to a strong sense of imaging, both in the solidity of sounds and the scale and perspective brought to the whole orchestra or band. The soundstage varies quite dramatically with recordings, up close and immediate with one album and far and wide with another. Orchestral pieces seem to benefit quite considerably from this, with instruments given enough space to breath in and enough tonal depth to reveal the breadth of their potential. Better still, we finally get to hear the quality of the drum recording on Metallica's eponymous 'black album' – the cavernous sound that is normally submerged in the 'thickener' effect added to the third guitar line on *Sad But True*.

There is plenty of power on tap here, as you would expect. Some records revel in the ability to deliver fulsome yet articulate bass,

but you never get the impression that this is muscularity for its own sake, because the character of the bass is as varied as your speakers will deliver. It's also nimble, which is very gratifying in a big amp; our reference Gamut D200 power amp (also a 200 watter) is nowhere near as fine or rich as the V-1xe, which also has more dynamic kick as well.

We hooked up the K-1xe to ATC's SCM150A active speakers for a session and were astounded by the insight that the preamp brought to the party. Its ability to separate out instruments and to portray their sound is the best we've encountered. To be frank, I want one and I want it bad. Better start buying lottery tickets, then! **HFC**

Jason Kennedy