



Make your home theater and whole-house integration dreams a reality with CEDIA's Electronic Lifestyles® Finder Service!



Ayre's C-5xe "U2" universal player

It is, amazingly enough, the first of its kind, deserving its own designation. Thus, Ayre Acoustics refers to the C-5xe as a "U2" player. Like other universal players, the C-5xe plays Super Audio CDs and DVD-Audio discs, but the U2 moniker refers to a universal stereo player; its raison d'être is extracting the best sound from digital discs. Yes, that mission is supposed to be covered by the previous generations of "universal" SACD/DVD-A players, but their audio performance inevitably plays second fiddle to video and surround-sound features—effectively putting the kibosh on the players' appeal for aurally fixated audiophiles.

Ayre's C-5xe is unique in that it plays practically every 5-inch optical disc format ever created—including DVD, DVD-Audio, SACD, and CD—but it has no video capabilities and does not include surround-sound decoding.

Ayre's U2 concept is exactly what I have been waiting for in a disc player. The company's founder and chief designer, Charles Hansen, took an audiocentric approach to U2. He banished the player's video and surround-sound circuitry, and focused his considerable talents on the ultimate goal of producing a great-sounding player. The C-5xe's fluency accommodates nearly every extant 5-inch optical disc: CD, Super Audio CD, DVD-Audio, the audio portion of DVD-Videos, and MP3 CDs. Hansen claims that if he were to build a multichannel, video-capable player to the same standards as the C-5xe, it would retail for something approaching 2.5 times the C-5xe's price. I have a hunch Hansen will tackle a surround-sound processor long before he builds a home theater universal player, but I could be wrong.



The C-5xe's sleek stainless steel and aluminum plate chassis exudes high-end cache. The deeply sculpted control ring on the front panel does away with the standard control buttons like "play" and "stop," and it makes perfect ergonomic sense. The player is mostly crafted in Ayre's Boulder, Colo., factory, though the metalwork comes from California. Lift the 26-pound machine out of its shipping box and you will get a sense of its rock-solid construction quality. The presentation is first-class all the way, and even the smallish, machined-metal remote mirrors the player's look and feel.

Poking around C-5xe's insides, I see more proof that this is no ordinary player. Each of the two massive power transformers hunkered down on the left side of the chassis looks bigger than the ones I see in most 100-watt-per-channel audio/video receivers, much less DVD players. One transformer supplies power to the laser/transport mechanism, the display, and some of the digital circuitry. The second one handles the remaining digital bits and all of the analog circuitry. Despite their state-of-the-art sheen, most mainstream universal players are saddled with off-the-rack electronics based on integrated circuits. Hansen instead builds his amplifying circuits the time-tested way: with individual resistors, capacitors, and transistors. Sure, it costs a lot more to do it Hansen's labor-intensive way, but he is adamant about it. "There's no excuse to use off-the-shelf chips in a high-end design," he says. "It's an outrage! It's like saying a



The
 center
 of your
 digital
 universe.

French patissier can't make a better cake than Betty Crocker." Hansen's "recipe" for C-5xe's sound is uniquely his own.

Connectivity is straightforward as can be: The C-5xe offers just one set of stereo RCA-type analog outputs; a set of professional balanced XLR analog outputs; an AES/EBU digital output; and an Ayre control port for use with Crestron or AMX touchscreen system controllers.

Most folks are perfectly content with the sound of CDs, and many are satisfied with MP3 files, but I am not one of them. Case in point: Led Zeppelin's How The West Was Won concert sounds fine on CD, but the DVD-Audio two-disc set rocks a lot harder. The band's energy seems higher, the sound is bigger and closer to the real thing. Switching from the DVD-A back to the CD version saps some of the raw power coursing through "Heartbreaker" and "Dancing Days." Similar reveries pour out of Creedence Clearwater Revival's In Concert SACD. So you see, the super discs' higher-fi dividends are not limited to pristine audiophile productions. The C-5xe is the master of space and time; the disc's spacious soundscapes sometimes extend back, behind my Dynaudio Special Twenty-Five speakers.

Play a stripped-down, unplugged recording, like any of the early 1960s Bob Dylan SACDs, and the C-5xe will deliver the sweetest, most natural sounds you have ever heard from a digital player. SACDs from the Telarc label, especially its remarkable symphonic recordings, sound magnificent. On the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra's recent recording of Stravinsky's The Firebird Suite, I can hear the orchestra and the concert hall's acoustics materialize between my speakers. With stereo this good, 5.1-channel audio seems superfluous.

In addition to my collection of about 125 SACDs and DVD-As, I own at least 2,000 CDs, so the Ayre's CD sound is important to me. Once again the C-5xe does not disappoint—although the CD sound does not match what I hear with DVD-A and SACD, the C-5xe dredges up newfound details from my most familiar CDs. Even lackluster recordings, like my ancient Booker T. & The MGs' discs, sound worlds better with the C-5xe than I ever thought possible.

I feel a little naughty playing DVD concert videos over my two-channel stereo system, but oh boy, it is a treat to hear the White Stripes' latest masterstroke, the Under Blackpool Lights DVD, sounding this good. I love the band's studio recordings, but the White Stripes are even better live. Thanks to the C-5xe's digital prowess, I can now play the DVD over my stereo rig. The one snag to the U2 is ergonomic: Navigating the menus of some DVD-Vs without a TV can be a little tricky, but I always get there eventually.

Beyond the U2, Ayre offers a wide range of components. What follows are just some of the highlights: the V-1x and V-5x stereo amplifiers; the V-6xe multichannel amplifier; the K-1x and K-5x stereo preamplifiers; the CX-7 CD player; and the D-1x and DX-7 DVD players. They are remarkable in their own ways, but I have a hunch the C-5xe will turn out to be the landmark design of the group. From my vantage point, it looks like just the first of a new breed of U2 players for music lovers who will not settle for less than the best. I almost always return the products I review, but not this time.

PRICE: silver \$5,950, black \$6,200
CONTACT: 303.442.7300, www.ayre.com