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Published November 1, 2001



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Ayre K-1x Preamp -- Review Follow-Up

I suppose your reaction to the news that there's a "new, improved" version of the Ayre K-1x preamp, which I reviewed in March, is a pretty good litmus test on your reaction to this whole high-end audio thing.

The whole question of upgrades just gives some folks the fantods. "Why didn't they get it right in the first place," they carp. Myself, I view it as a sign of -- I don't know -- authenticity or something. What's more high end than the urge to improve a product at all times? Of course, it can be taken too far. Back in the early '80s, it was said that 50% of all Audio Research products were on dealers' display shelves and the other 50% were on their way back to Minnetonka for a revision.



We boil at different degrees

Ayre's "new" K-1x upgrade isn't all that extreme by upgrade standards. For one thing, it doesn't even have a name. That may be because the x upgrade just isn't that old (and also because, in "Ayre conditioning," that upgrade already manifested the bad pun of a lifetime), but it may also come from designer Charles Hansen's desire to soft-pedal the revision.

It certainly doesn't cost much. For anyone who purchased a K-1x since last April, it doesn't cost a cent. For anyone with an older K-1x, it only costs \$450. And what do you get for the money? "You get the new thinking from Ayre -- all the stuff we learned in an extensive, months-long process of testing and evaluation of, essentially, everything," Hansen said.

"Oh, you mean, what *parts* changed! You get new high-density polymer feet on both the main unit and the power supply. You get a new grounding scheme and new RF filters on the AC incoming line and RF filters on the DC supply line.

"The audio circuit remained the same -- it has a very well-thought-out and well-executed grounding scheme. But when you look at the outboard power supply, a lot of things converge there -- you have the AC safety ground, you have the transformer's shield between the primary and secondary, and you have the audio ground itself -- and there's the chassis. There's no clear-cut way as to how this should all work -- our old way was good, but we went through a period where we questioned everything, and we went through a grueling period of trial and error experimentation in which we tried everything, no matter how stupid, and evaluated the results. And we wound up with this seemingly, no, what is *obviously* a minor variation on our original concept that just happens to make a tremendous amount of difference."

Oh *sure*.

We are all Adam's children but silk makes the difference.

All righty. So we have a \$450 mod to the *power supply*, not even to the active circuitry at all, and what does it change? Simply everything, that's what!

Charlie sent me a new power supply, maintaining that my K-1x was recent enough to have the hard polymer feet, so I've been able to switch the "new improved" PS in and out with the old one. It's not a subtle change at all.

The first thing I noticed was the bass. It's tight and controlled, but it is emphatically deeper and richer. I pulled out a favorite techno/mix album, Fila Brazillia's *Touch of Cloth* [Twentythree 001] and instantly was transported by their lounge/techno/electronica groove, which combines song fragments and conventional mixing with live musical fragments and

chants. *Touch of Cloth* quotes extensively from Zappa's "Chunga's Revenge," but that's not why I like it. I like it for its deep, incredibly full bass, which, through the "new" K-1x and Dynaudio's Temptation loudspeakers, was deeper and fuller than ever.

On the Persuasions' *Might As Well* [Arista 14070], bass singer Jimmy Hayes' masterful lead on "Ship of Fools" proved that the new K-1x was some kind of bass marvel. Hayes' deep, warm, full-bodied take on the song was a *tour de force*, balanced and believable -- that is, if you can credit Hayes' spectacular musicianship in the first place. I've stood next to the guy on stage -- where in the heck does that huge voice come from?

But, after the initial shock wore off, I realized that the new level of bass was not the most surprising aspect of the improvement in the K-1x's sound. On my first few hundred auditions of *Might As Well*, I'd determined that the group gathered fairly tightly together to record the vocals. This makes a certain amount of sense, but the "new" K-1x tells me that it just ain't so.

The new power supply has expanded the soundstage that the preamp throws -- not bloated it or distorted it, simply opened it up. There's an increased sense of space within the soundstage and between the musicians, which remains consistent and credible from recording to recording. On *Might...* the singers aren't all that close together, according to the new K-1x. They can spread their arms out wide without touching, although I *think* Jayotis Washington just might graze Hayes' knuckles. *That's* how precisely mapped out the 'stage is.

There's also an increased sense of air, but that's a different matter entirely. Playing *Might As Well*, the new K-1x simply removed the speakers from the soundstage to an unprecedented degree for a solid-state preamplifier. The sound seemed totally out and into the room -- it seemed to have very little to do with those big boxes sitting in the front of my room.

So I pulled out some soundstaging classics to see just how much air the new Ayre had. As part of my current hankering for Vaughan Williams, I went to *On Wenlock Edge; 10 Blake Songs; The New Ghost; The Water Mill* [HMV HQS 1236 LP]. What a revelation! The Houseman settings performed by Ian Partridge and the Music Group of London were immediate, intense, and lovingly performed by six musicians so solidly made flesh by my system that I could walk among them. And the Blake songs, whose settings were composed shortly before RVW's death, were so intensely straightforward they gave me chills. This has always been a favorite record -- I especially cherish the two songs where Jennifer Partridge accompanies her brother, the communication between the two seems so finely tuned -- but I'm not sure I'd ever heard the music presented with such liquidity and architectural flow. All finely crafted music is made up of a sweeping structure -- which propels entire movements or the work as a whole -- as well as a series of phrases, which make up the bricks and mortar of the piece. With the new power supply, both the over-reaching structure and the smaller internal building blocks just seemed particularly well aligned. Can I truly claim to have heard this recording, which I have listened to for years, as new? It would seem a stretch, but I was hearing concrete relationships that I'd never really sensed before.

So I pulled out the biggest gun I know, the Mahler *5/Rückert Lieder* set [HMV SLS 785 (2)] with Barbirolli and the New Philharmonia. What tonal colors! What sensitive singing and accompaniment! If this isn't the single finest Mahler record ever made, I don't know what is -- and once more, despite hundreds of listening hours behind me, I was hearing relationships within the music that were new to me -- and, more than ever, I heard the relationships between Mahler's songs and the mighty Fifth. I was hearing deeper into the music and deeper into the performance. How can a power-supply modification make such a difference?

Night makes no difference 'twixt the Priest and Clerk; Joan as my Lady is as good i' th' dark.

I won't pretend to understand it, but I sure heard it -- and I heard it with recording after recording. My admiration for the Ayre K-1x was already extremely high, but I'd now have to call it one of an exceedingly small handful of products that seem capable of going about as far into the realm of musicality as we've ever ventured. The Conrad-Johnson ART was such a product -- and now there's a solid-state preamplifier that evinces that same quality.

Associated Equipment:

Preamplifiers: Ayre K1x -- standard and upgraded, Conrad-Johnson Premier 17LS

CD players/transports: Krell KPS 28c, Sony CDP CX-400

Power amplifiers: Krell FPB 300c, Musical Fidelity Nu-Vista 300

Loudspeakers: Dynaudio Evidence Temptation

Cables: AudioTruth Midnight, DiMarzio M-Path interconnect, AudioQuest Dragon, DiMarzio M-Path, DiMarzio Super M-Path speaker cable, Illuminations Orchid digital cable, Transparent Audio Reference

Accessories: Osar Selway Audio Racks, AudioQuest Big Feet and Little Feet, Vibrapods, Audio Power Industries Power Wedge Ultra 116

Room treatment: ASC Tube Traps, Slim Jims, Bass Traps

If you own an Ayre K-1x, don't hesitate. Call Ayre today and schedule an upgrade. Mow lawns, shovel snow, sell Girl Scout cookies -- heck, I'd even consider *working* for the money -- do whatever you have to do to earn the paltry \$450 it takes to get your preamp upgraded. You won't regret it for an instant.

If you don't already have an Ayre K-1x, you need to be careful. If you gather up your favorite recordings and go to your dealer's to listen to them through the new K-1x, you're probably going to want one -- and that'll cost you anywhere from \$6750-\$8600, depending on how you want it tricked out. And I'd hate to have your purchase on my conscience.

After all, all Charles Hansen and the other Ayre-heads did was change a few components in the power supply. Surely that couldn't have resulted in the bass improvements, increased liquidity, soundstaging excellence, and increased musicality I experienced in the new K-1x. It just wasn't that big a change -- after all, they don't even have a new name for it.

Doesn't matter, really -- no matter what they called it, it's only the difference between nearly great and great. But then, that's all the difference in the world.

...Wes Phillips
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Ayre K-1x Preamp/ifier

Price: \$6750 USD (line stage w/o remote); \$7000 (w/remote); \$8600 (w/remote and phono section)

Price for upgrade: \$450 USD

Warranty: Five years parts and labor

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