

Ayre V-5x

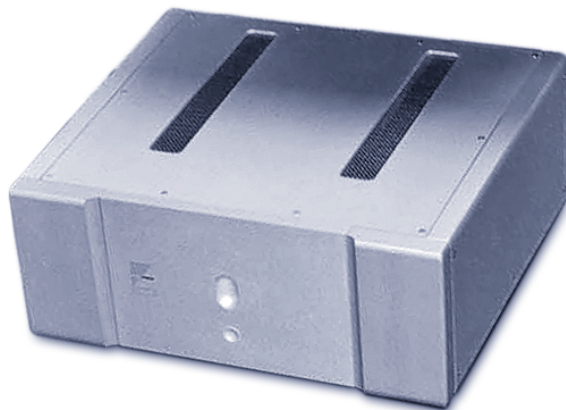
by Shane Buettner

I started chasing Ayre's amplifiers almost three years ago, after I'd heard and bought a Theta Dreadnaught power amplifier. Ayre's president and chief designer Charles Hansen had done the basic circuit design for the Dreadnaught and Ayre was coming out with its own multichannel amplifier and I was interested. The first amp I caught up with was the V-6, which was, like the Dreadnaught, a fully balanced, zero feedback design. I reviewed the original V-6 for The Perfect Vision and found it to excel in most regards, with my chief criticism being its bass performance, which I found too light for a sonically balanced presentation. Ayre improved on the V-6's performance substantially with the V-6x.

The amp we're reviewing here is the V-5x, a stereo amp with the same amplifier modules used in the V-6x, that costs just \$4,500.

Outside Fit & Finish

The V-5x looks familiar. It shares the plain but timelessly handsome look common to virtually all of Ayre's products. The aluminum chassis is available in either silver or black and I'm particularly partial to the latter, which has a deeper, richer look to my eye.



Only a single power button and indicator adorn the front panel and, oddly, when the LED glows green the amp is in standby mode, with blue indicating the unit is powered up. Green doesn't mean "go" here!

Each channel module has its own set of balanced and single-ended inputs and a switch to choose either mode of operation. This amp conforms to the Ayre tradition of staggering the orientation of the speaker terminals—one channel's terminal is toward the bottom of the back panel, the other toward the top, and they're aligned diagonally. This has obvious aesthetic appeal but in practice I'd prefer the more straightforward approach of horizontally oriented speaker terminals at the top of the back panel.

I found myself twisting my speaker cables to get one set going into the top of the terminal and the other in from the bottom and, in both cases, there was additional torque on the cables as they leaned out from the diagonal terminals that I'd prefer not to have. You'll either love the Cardas speaker terminals, as I do, or be driven crazy by them—Dick falls into this camp. A balanced pass-through output is included for each channel also, and two LEDs to indicate blown fuses.

Under the Hood of the V-5x

Each channel of the V-5x is rated at 150 watts into 8 ohms and 300 watts into 4 ohms. Each solid-state module is a fully balanced symmetrical bridge design that employs no loop feedback anywhere (read the Charles Hansen interview in **Journal 10** for more about his design philosophies and his incisive thoughts on feedback).

The input stage employs JFETs, while the driver and

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output stages use bipolars. The output stage of each channel uses sixteen bipolar devices to ensure low output impedance. As with all of Ayre's signature products the V-5x uses discrete circuits entirely, with the paths being as short as possible with only a single pair of Cardas wires connecting the output board to the speaker terminals.

Ayre's proprietary "Ayre Conditioner" operates in parallel with the incoming AC using a non-ferrous filter to absorb RF before the transformers and rectifiers and to convert it to heat. As a parallel device, the Ayre Conditioner doesn't have the dynamic limiting issues often exhibited by typical power line conditioners operating in series with the incoming AC. The Ayre V-5x power supply uses a substantial EI core transformer.

Performance

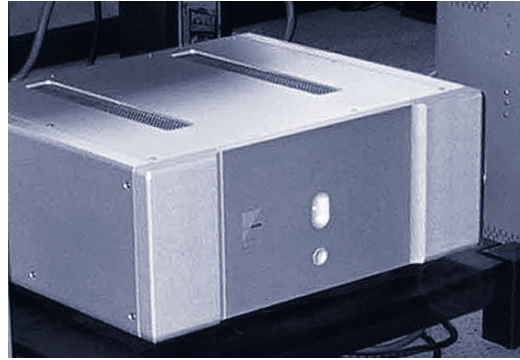
The Ayre V-5x is simply an awesome amplifier, but let me get one detail out of the way first. Like all of the Ayre amps I've heard, it's light in the bass compared to the other amps reviewed here. I've been using powered subwoofers in my system for the last few years so this wasn't an issue for me.

While the zero feedback design probably has a lot to do with this, the Theta amps also use no feedback and they provide a more solid low frequency foundation. Now, let's get to the good stuff.

All sonic attributes of the V-5x are enhanced greatly by what you don't hear with this amp—distortion of any kind or background noise. The V-5x has what I've come to regard as Ayre's house sound: plush, dead quiet background, outstanding image focus and dimensionality, and a highly resolved midrange.

The V-5x is one of the very best amplifiers I've ever heard with regard to focusing musicians in space convincingly. The delineation of spatial cues in the soundstage from front to back, and especially side to side, is as sharply drawn as anything you'll find. The holographic, three-dimensional imaging is outright spooky, with focus ranking way up there with the very best of the best.

My reviews often include a distinction between components that capture the music and those that go beyond allowing the listener to see farther into the recording space. This amp takes you into the recording space and lets you see very deeply into the music. Its low level information was on a par with Theta's Citadel monoblocks. The Ayre isn't quite as refined or powerful



as the big Theta, but the fact that such a comparison can be legitimately made speaks incredibly

well of the V-5x at \$4,500. And the Theta Dreadnaught, excellent as it is, isn't quite as detailed through the midrange or as quiet as the V-5x. The V-5x has resolution to spare.

In addition to all the things the Ayre V-5x does right in hi-fi terms, musical purity is another hallmark of Ayre's sound that's on display here. The Ayre has a pure and liquid sound that's less hi-fi than is typical of solid-state. Strings, in particular, have a naturally detailed and textured sound that's crisp and sharply defined but still organic and musical. Theta's \$16K per pair Citadel monoblocks are the only solid-state amps I've heard that match, and slightly exceed, the V-5x's combination of liquid musicality and resolving power. At its price point the V-5x is a revelation.

Both Theta's Citadel and Dreadnaught outperform the Ayre in top end extension and openness. But I hasten to add that the V-5x seems better in this regard than my memory of the V-6x. The V-5x seems to have a little more sparkle and a little more openness with cymbal splashes and piano decay, for example, than the other Ayre amps I've heard, albeit with a little bit more of a visceral sound than I remember. I wish I'd had the V-6x on hand for a direct comparison. In any case, as well as the Ayre amps I've previously experienced have performed, the V-5x is yet another step up.

Conclusion

The Ayre V-5x is one of the best power amps available at any price. I've never heard anything with more midrange resolution or better image focus. It's quiet and refined, and exceptionally clean, pure and musical. You have to spend a lot more to get slightly better performance. The V-5x is a triumph for Ayre! [APJ](#)

Manufacturer Information

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