

recall that the Onkyo's Setup allows selection of filter slopes: (steep) or Slow (gradual). These correspond to the Measuring options of the Ayre CX-layer, and, as I note in the side-fer the sound of the Ayre with ch in the Listening position. e Ayre, however, my prefer- s the opposite: the Slow setting nding to the Ayre's Listening was very laid-back, with some- tter spatial definition, but it too soft-sounding—at least in m, and for my taste. I went d forth several times between settings, using different CDs, rred Sharp every time. All of ments about the sound of the 5 are based on its filter slope t to Sharp.

g to determine the contribu- system's sound of only one of onents is no easy task, and a introducing a new compo- o a familiar system is a good etting a handle on that prod- and, I think it's important o direct comparisons with other ents. In this case, I had two igital sources on hand: the Ayre y new reference for high-end yers (see sidebar); and the c DV8400, a DVD- audio/SACD/CD player that in my home theater for the last s, and which was described by nson, in his "Music in the column of May 2004 (Vol.27 [www.stereophile.com/musicin/504music](http://www.stereophile.com/musicin/504music)), as "a capable er offering balanced sound, d frequency range, and good ge imaging and depth." e noted that it "lacked a little nics."

aking these comparisons, I control potentially confound- bles: I used the same pair of nects for each player or, re comparison involved bal- tputs/inputs, balanced inter- of the same make, model, h. I matched output levels to

ly close to begin with, but the Ayre's balanced output was considerably higher, and the Marantz's single-ended output was quite a bit lower without compensation.

Comparing the single-ended output

instruments and voices within the stage. Music reproduced by the Ayre was more engaging, with a dynamism thrust that made the Onkyo sound slow in comparison (and remember this was *not* with the Onkyo's digit

## AYRE CX-7e CD PLAYER

**F**or the past six years, my digital source has comprised a PS Audio Lambda II CD transport, Perpetual Technologies P-1A and ModWright P-3A digital processors, and a Monolithic Sound P3 power supply. I've been pleased with the performance of this setup, but the four boxes and their attendant power-supply and signal cables made for a lot of clutter, and the P-1A upsampler-interpolator had the annoying quirk of reverting to Bypass mode whenever the power was interrupted. Having the Onkyo DX-7555 for review reminded me of how convenient a one-box CD player can be.

As it turned out, I'd had the DX-7555 for only about a week when my own digital front-end stopped working. Playing a CD produced no sound, and all the P-1A's LEDs lit up, indicating a malfunction. Unplugging and plugging it back in didn't help. Feeding the output of the PSA Lambda II transport directly into the P-3A DAC provided a temporary solution, but in very short order the Lambda II refused to load. The writing was on the wall: I needed to upgrade my digital source.

I considered various alternatives, but the one that kept coming to mind was the Ayre CX-7e. I'd had one of these on loan for a couple of weeks the previous summer, and it had impressed me enough that I seriously considered buying it. In the end, I decided that I couldn't justify the purchase, given that my digital source was really pretty good (even if not *quite* as good as the Ayre). Now the situation was different: I needed a new CD player, and my own experience, and the experience of my *Stereophile* colleagues—at least two of whom said that, for CD playback, they preferred the CX-7e to Ayre's twice-as-expensive universal player, the C-5xe—pointed to the CX-7e as the best choice. I got in touch with Steve Silberman, Ayre's sales manager, and a CX-7e was on its way to me in short order, along with a check in the opposite direction.

Silberman warned me that a CX-7e won't reach its optimum level of performance until it's been played for about 500 hours, but even listening to the player straight out of the box, I knew I'd made the right decision, and later experience merely confirmed it. This is a *great* player that fully deserves the praise that has been heaped on it. There's not much I can say about its sound that I haven't already said in my comparison of it with the Onkyo DX-7555, or that wasn't said by Art Dudley in his review in February 2006 (Vol.29 No.2, [www.stereophile.com/cdplayers/840/index6.html](http://www.stereophile.com/cdplayers/840/index6.html)), but perhaps I can add a photographic analogy.

Canon offers two lines of lenses for their DSLR and SLR cameras: a relatively affordable consumer line, and the more professional-oriented, higher-performing L series. Photographers argue about whether the superior image quality obtainable with L-series lenses is worth the difference in cost, but few would question that that quality actually *is* superior. The Onkyo DX-7555 (\$599) can be thought of as a good consumer-level lens, the Ayre CX-7e (\$2950) as an L-series lens: built to a higher standard and thus capable of higher resolution. Is the five-fold difference in price worth it? Only *you* can answer that question. And please don't ask me if the CX-7e is more like a zoom or a prime lens. —Robert Deutsch