

Ayre Acoustics QX-5 Twenty Digital Hub

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Device Type: Network Player/Digital to Analog Converter/Digital Preamp

Input: 2x AES/EBU, 3x S/PDIF (BNC), 3x Toslink, Streamlength™

asynchronous USB, Ethernet, WiFi

Output: WordClock, unbalanced RCA, balanced XLR, ¼ inch and 3.5 mm headphone jacks, and a pair of 3.5mm balanced headphone outputs

Dimensions: 17.25" W x 13.00" D x 3.75" H

Weight: 16 pounds

Availability: through authorized dealers

Price: \$8,950.00

Website: www.ayre.com



In This Corner...

Weighing in at a fit 16 lbs. with 10 digital inputs and balanced outputs stands

the Roon Ready and firmware upgrade-able Ayre QX-5 Tweeenty! And in this corner, piles of stuff.

The Ayre QX-5 Twenty is Ayre's first foray into networked audio, and they've sourced their network module from South Korea's ConversDigital. Ayre have also decided to make the QX-5 Twenty Roon Ready, which means you can use Roon to control playback. As most reader's know, I use Roon and have Roon Server set up on my sonicTransporter so installing the QX-5 Twenty consisted of taking it out the box (sorry no video), placing it on my rack, connecting an Ethernet cable, a power cable, turning it on, and telling Roon Remote on my iPad to play my music through it. Done. Think less than 4 minutes including a beer break.

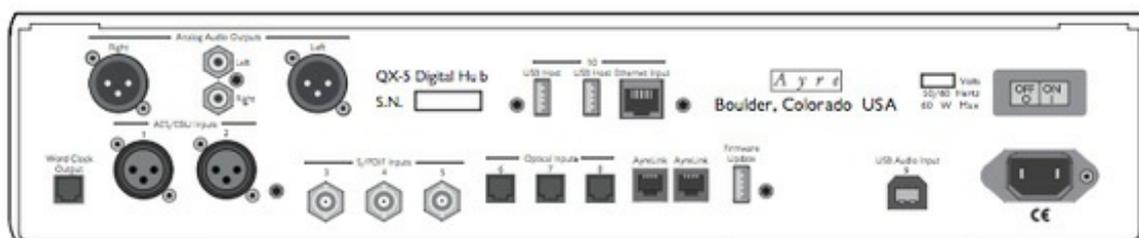


image credit: Ayre Acoustics

Also new in the QX-5 is the ESS ES9038PRO DAC chip which is used for D/A conversion with Ayre's proprietary FPGA-based minimum phase filter taking care of making that process more, um, musical. The company sourced their new "doubly-rotated cut quartz crystal" used in the QX-5's oscillator from St. Petersburg, Russia-based Morion, "designer and manufacturer of quartz frequency control products". The idea here was to produce a high performance clock, "that offers the lowest levels of phase noise in the industry" according to Ayre's press release, without the need for a temperature-controlled environment. You can slave other so-equipped products to the QX-5's WordClock output, making the QX-5 master of system time.

I'd like to give pause so we can reflect on multi-country and multi-company sourcing, something that warms my heart. There, that's better.

There's much more to the QX-5's insides which we'll talk about with Ayre's Principal Development Engineer Ariel Brown, Software Engineer Brendan Boyle, and separately a one-on-one with Founder and Head of Innovation Charley Hansen in our upcoming video. Stay tuned.

In addition to the 10 digital inputs—USB (up to 32/384 and DSD128), Optical/SPDIF/AESEBU (up to 24/192 and DSD64), and Ethernet (up to 32/192 and DSD64)—and the preferred XLR outputs, the QX-5 Twenty can also power your headphones; single-ended ¼ inch, 3.5 mm, and a pair of 3.5mm balanced headphone outputs. The QX-5 can also function as a digital preamplifier as it includes a (defeatable) digital volume control.



The overall fit and finish is superb to my eyes and hands. Beyond basic functionality, you can use the front panel controls to perform a near dizzying array of functions and customization which I will leave to the [Ayre Manual](#) to detail. There's also a hefty but svelte (as compared to the AX-5's remote) remote which I did not make much use of.



I used Roon throughout this review but owners can also use the Mconnect iOS/Android app from ConversDigital. The latter may be a good (free) choice for people looking to just stream Tidal HiFi through the Ayre. If you have a music library, I'd recommend sticking with Roon. I also mainly listened in DAC mode, preferring my AX-5's volume control.

The Ayre QX-5 Twenty was connected to my Ayre AX-5 Twenty, which drove the DeVore Fidelity gibbon X speakers. Tellurium Q Black cables were used throughout. The QX-5 Twenty proved to be fairly nonplussed in terms of how and with what it was connected to my network: The difference between a straight run of Ethernet and media-converter, opto-isolated Ethernet, didn't matter much, if any.



A Worthy Contender?

As I mentioned, I was playing music through the QX-5 Twenty within minutes of its arrival. But, Ayre's Alex Brinkman stressed that I run it in for some serious time before passing final judgment. I forget whether it was a hundred hours or if Alex reminded me a hundred times, but I played through the Ayre for weeks before giving it my full, undivided attention. Owners have reinforced the need for a healthy break-in period.

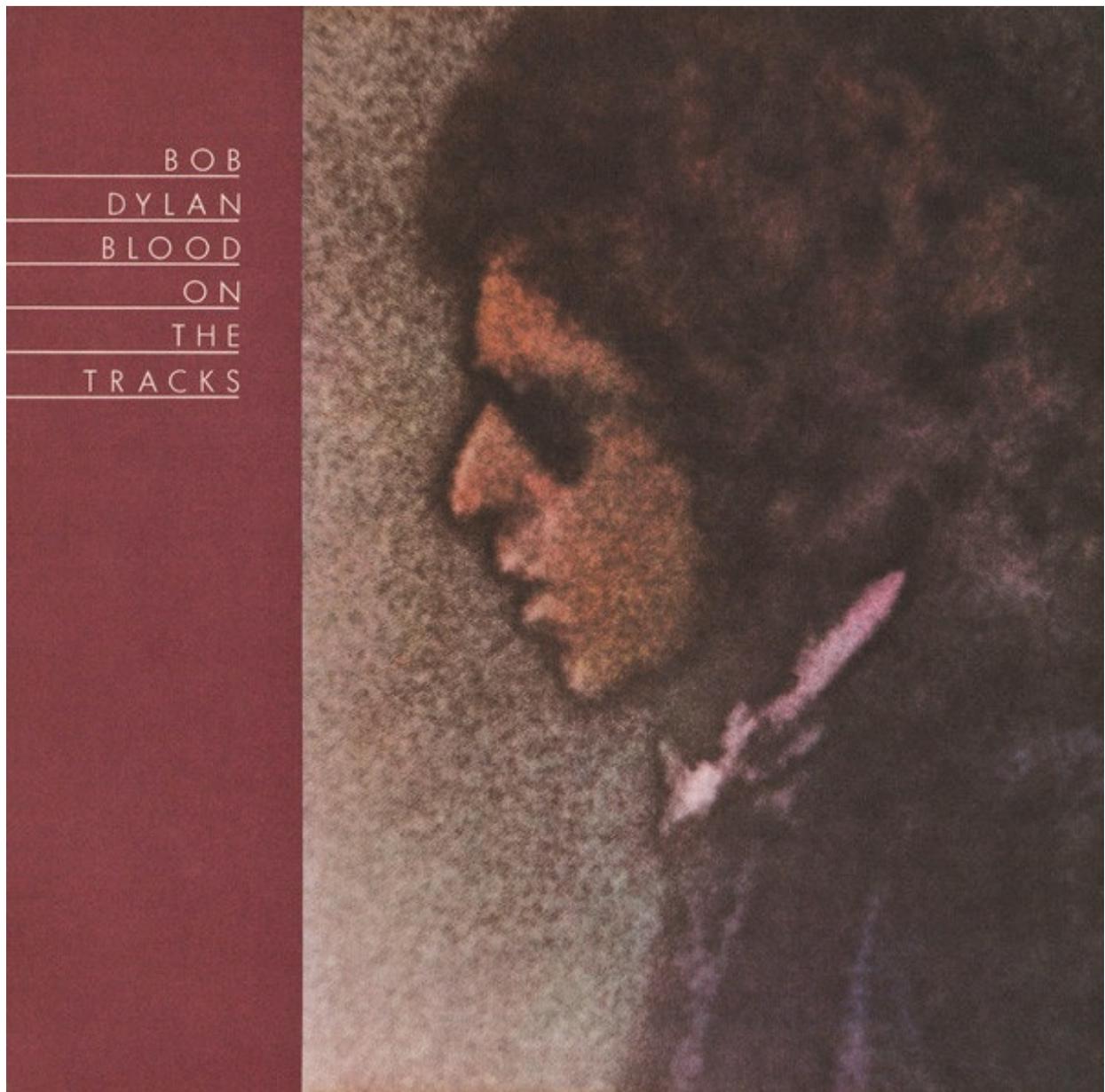
XLR input 1: totaldac d1-six. XLR input 3: Ayre QX-5 Twenty. Using Roon Remote, I could switch between the Ayre and d1-six in seconds so this was my comparison process which we'll get to soon. Note that I use the same cable, Tellurium Q Black XLR to connect each device to the Ayre integrated to remove that variable from the equation.

When reviewing, I like to spend a lot of time just listening and ideally enjoying. That last bit, enjoyment, would seem to be a given but it's not. When doing nothing but listening to music on the hi-fi, the quality of that experience is an essential aspect of enjoyment and some components make my brow furrow which is a joy-killer if ever there was one. The QX-5 Twenty made me smile.



Josephine Foster, *Little Life*

It made me smile for weeks and many hours of listening, sometimes into the wee hours just for the fun of it. The Ayre is among the smoothest and most natural-sounding digital devices I've heard. There is also a lovely sense of low-level resolution, what I'd attribute to a low noise floor, that gives one the ability to listen *in* without any sense of obstruction. With some digital, especially noisier digital, you can get the sense of *too much resolution*, like putting on too much cologne to mask the fact that you haven't taken a shower in far too long. The Ayre is fresh and clean (apologies).



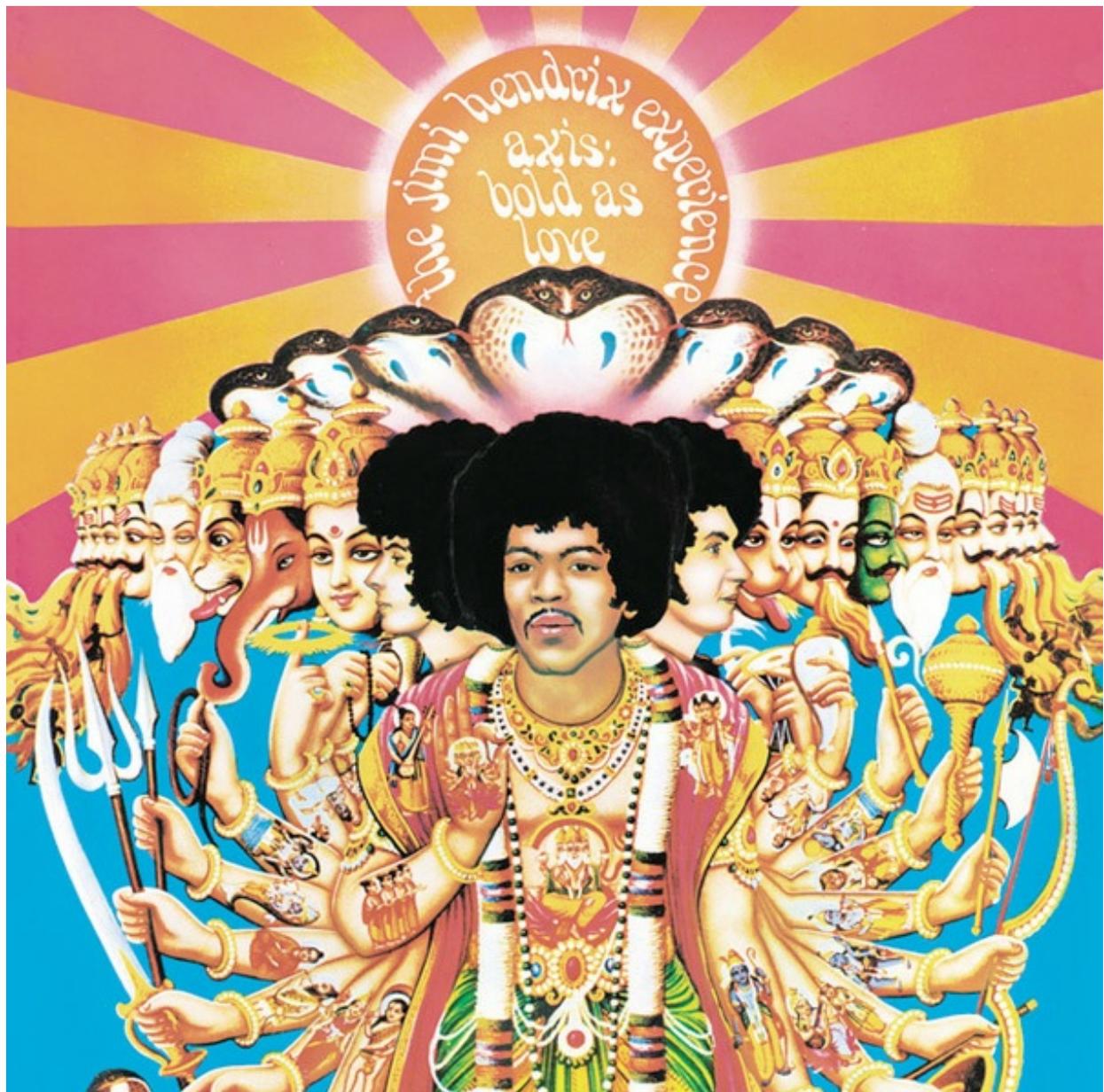
Favorite, well-worn, songs including Nick Cave's "Love Letter", Tom Waits "I'm Still Here", Duke Ellington's "Autumn Leaves" (yea, I listen to it in the autumn while watching the leaves fall through the barn's windows), PJ Harvey, Antonio Soler performed by Marie-Luis Hinricks, Bach's St. Mathew's Passion, The Lounge Lizards, Nobel Prize Winning Dylan, Jimi, and on and on and on were there for the taking in. The QX-5 also passed the "I want to hear something new (even new/old)" test with flying colors; streaming from Tidal HiFi sounded simply lovely.

BLACKOUTS



HISTORY IN REVERSE

Truth be told, some reviews are easier to write than others. This was a very easy one because I found myself just listening for pleasure for as long as time allowed. I even pushed that time-limit on a bunch of occasions being led to that wonderful timeless place that is complete musical enjoyment, being led from one song to the next, from one album to the next, by mood and music.



This level of *quality of experience* is not something I encounter on a regular basis. I certainly get there with my totaldac whenever I listen through it. The news on this comparative front is these two devices do not sound exactly the same. The totaldac digs in deeper and pulls out more "wow" from every recording. It also happens to be nearly twice the Ayre's price and it does not have an Ethernet input so you need to take care of that piece separately. How wide is the gulf between the Ayre and d1-six? Is it \$8000+ wide? Only you can answer that question. I will offer that while these two fine-sounding music makers do not sound exactly the same, I very seriously doubt that anyone who spends real time with the Ayre will feel *regret*.



The Ayre's headphone out drove the AudioQuest Nighthawk's to musical highs (I tend to equate headphone listening to my hazy youth). For those whose curiosity gets the better of common sense, I did not prefer running the Ayre with the microRendu via USB sonically or practically. If you're wondering if the Ayre does this or that sonic detail, you know...bass, silky, lush, mid-range, etc, the answer is, if you're anything like me, you won't ask those questions once you listen because to my ears, the Ayre is convincingly musical: Space, time, tone, texture, color, delicacy, physicality.

BRIAN ENO DISCREET MUSIC



Roon Radio picks up playing your music after your selection has finished. I've grown to love Roon Radio as it reintroduces me to my music, some of which I hadn't thought about for months or years or longer. The thing about Roon Radio is it doesn't care about the quality of the recording, it cares about the relevance of the music.

With some digital gear, there can be a temptation, sometimes uncontrollable, to move past Roon's current selection because it sounds, well, bad. I know some feel that bad recordings should sound bad but I say, to a point. To my mind and my experience, better digital does not make a bad recording sound unlistenable. It makes it listenable because it doesn't unnaturally over-emphasize anything. This naturalness is the case with a rare breed of digital in my experience and the Ayre QX-5 Twenty joins that list with ease. Of course, it does fine with fine-sounding recordings, too.



A Knockout

How to sum up? If you are on the lookout for a one-box solution for all of your digital needs and don't want to think about anything other than music, I'd recommend placing the Ayre QX-5 Twenty on your must-hear list.
