

# Tripping Through T-Rex With The Ayre AX-7 Integrated Amplifier

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*Ayre AX-7 Integrated Amplifier*

The journey from Castle Rock to Boulder is as nasty a sixty mile drive as one can take within the state of Colorado. After leaving home in the bucolic burg of Castle Rock I climb to the top Surrey Ridge and drop into south Denver and the now famous "T-Rex" parking lot. For those of you not familiar

with T-Rex, it is a 17-mile reconstruction and expansion of I-25, the main north-south freeway. The special problem with this project is that they are working on the entire 17 miles at the same time. So, instead of a single bottleneck to work your way past any given day can have three, four or even five individual traffic stops. We have been told that doing the whole thing at once will cut years off the project, an idea that is horrifying as T-Rex itself will take seven years. I cannot image the alternative. Anyway, it takes about 10 minutes to cover the 10 miles from my house to the bottom of T-Rex. Plan on 45 more to get to the top.

Once you get through the monster and then through the standard downtown congestion, a 15 minute drive, you angle over to Highway 36 and slide past the ever expanding suburbs of Arvada, Westminster, Broomfield, Superior and Louisville only to find that what just 10 years ago was a beautiful 10 mile drive through pasture, fields and rolling hills has been transformed into 9.75 miles of scary Spielberg-esque subdivisions, national restaurant chains, a themed shopping mall and a quarter mile of "greenspace" covering the last hill before you drop into Boulder. Fortunately this section can be driven in 15 minutes or so, even with your eyes closed against the suburban sprawl, leaving a total drive from home to Boulder of about a 90 minutes plus half a pack of Altoids, most of which had been chewed in frustration at the obvious fact that I am the only person left in the state who knows how to drive.

What would cause me take on such a task? In my younger days only a girl would have been worth such an undertaking. Today, an older, wiser, married and less libido-driven man, I have found that a trip to the Ayre Acoustics factory is enough justification for this sort of pain, but only if I can take something home with me. So when Gary Mulder, Marketing Maven at Ayre, called asking if I wanted to let my ears wrap themselves around the new AX-7 integrated amplifier I saddled up the Jeep and drove off through hell and back. For the next 2,500 words or so we'll debate whether the drive was worth it.

### Shiny Metal Box

The \$2,950 AX-7 is the first of several products sharing the same price and based on a near identical

form factor. In the case of the CX-7 CD player, the two products resemble each other to such a degree that without power to their displays, at least at first, you are likely to mistake one for the other.

Finished in white, brushed aluminum, the look is unmistakably Ayre and yet new as well with a softer, more rounded look than their previous products. To the left of the central display is the Ayre logo and to the right are two columns of four control buttons each. The first column selects mute, engages the processor loop, dims the display and powers off the unit while the second chooses from the two balanced inputs and the two single-ended inputs. The central display, at first, looks very much like a CD player, with what appears to be a drawer at the top with an LED display just below. The drawer is actually the volume control laid out as a wide, horizontal toggle. The blue LED display is very legible without becoming too bright. Besides indicating volume in 66 single dB steps the display also has eight small green LEDs that mimic the positioning and indicate the state of the two control columns. A small, slender remote duplicates the power, mute, display dim, source select and volume controls.

Round back the AX-7 uses my personal favorite binding posts, both for sound quality and usability, the single knob Cardas posts. These make switching cables a breeze which is a boon for reviewer-geeks, but more importantly they allow anyone achieve a tight connection and to release that connection without damage to either the speaker wires or the amplifier. Ayre has taken extra care with the binding posts, canting them at an angle to further relieve stress on the loudspeaker cables. The IEC power receptacle is center mounted, while the inputs are laid out from the center outwards with the two processor RCA inputs sitting next to each other, flanked by the first and then the second single-ended input and then the first and second balanced input. While there is a lot of room on the back of the AX-7, I found that the IEC jack, when using large power cords, slightly interfered with the RCA inputs. Under normal usage by normal folk, that is, not by a reviewer, I doubt this would be an issue, but since I tried several cords and interconnects with the AX-7 it came up several times during my audition, hence the mention.

Inside, the AX-7 is, once again, all Ayre. The circuit board is beautifully laid-out, clean and stocked with high-quality parts. The circuit itself, in accordance with previous Ayre designs, eschews global negative feedback. Also, like previous Ayre designs, circuitry is balanced from input to output. Rated at 60 watts per channel into 8 ohms, the AX-7 doubles output to 120 watts into a 4-ohm load.

Two other circuit features are worth noting. First, the source selector also switches the ground connection so that only one input is connected at any time. And second, the processor switch engages a pass-through "Theatre" mode that cedes volume control to an external processor, allowing the AX-7 to run a standard two-channel system alone and then to power the front two channels in a loud TV (i.e. Home Theatre) setup.

### **Measure By Ear, Judge By Feel**

When I plugged the AX-7 in the system I was immediately and forcefully struck by the extraordinarily clean and detailed sound of the Ayre. More significantly, I was also struck by the fact that the AX-7 achieves this while retaining possession of excellent harmonic balance and a very flat and broadband frequency response, both areas traditionally manipulated to achieve a false sense of detail and cleanliness. Listening to an album like Star Rise (Caroline 2369-2) a remix of tracks from the collaborative works of Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan and Michael Brooks by nine different stars of the Asian Underground, is all about being able to peer deeply into the mix whilst retaining a sense of the real about each layer. Driven by dance rhythms with piles of drums, synths, percussion and effects, this disk with its various sources, remixers and layers is a system tester from the deepest bass to the top of the treble. And it is amazing good music as well.

Through the AX-7 I was able to hear detail that only the most expensive separates had previously unraveled. Take, for example, the clear, beautiful vocal State of Bengal float over the top of a skittering

percussion track on *Shadow*. The original track by Nusrat is languid, clear, rich and relatively natural with the accompanying harmonium particularly well captured. The added mix tracks are dynamic, propulsive, detailed and rich as well, although quite obviously from a different recording. With the AX-7 the harmonium retained its character and presence, even through the electronic maze of sound by State of Bengal and the vocal, while processed, exhibited enticing harmonic detail.

On a more natural recording, like the incredible and excellent sounding Bach *St. Matthews Passion* by Philippe Herreweghe and the Collegium Vocale Gent (Harmonia Mundi 951676.78) the AX-7 allowed the fine filigree of the choir to pass through unimpeded while also placing the soloists squarely in front and with superb power and weight. Instrumentation was placed solidly and high near to perfect. By the way, this set comes highly recommended for the performance but is worth it for the accompanying CD-ROM alone. The ROM includes the entire text of the Mass, an analysis of the music, a discussion of the instruments used, and an MP-3 version of the entire performance. For any student of the work, beginning or advanced, there is much here to appreciate.

On yet to another religious recording, the *Fauré Requiem* by George Guest by the Academy of St Martin-in-the-Fields, the Choir of St. John's College and with Stephen Cleobury on organ. This *Requiem* may have a placid surface but it sure can stress a system. With choir, organ and an orchestra of moderate size, the forces are not Mahlerian, but the frequency spectrum is wide and revealing of any bump or trough. The mood of meditative grief is sustained by rich string and vocal textures that through the AX-7 were well formed and quite evenly played with nary a ripple on the frequency spectrum.

Lest you think all is *pious* 'round the Warnke Music and Snowshoe Lodge let me tell you how the AX-7 sounded playing back some Muddy Waters. For some reason my 15-month-old son, Miles, loves to dance to the blues... and most especially Muddy. So *The Chess Box* (MCA CHD-80002) has been in heavy rotation of late. I got to tell you, it's a heartwarming experience to come home and have your son grab you by the hand, drag you to the stereo and plop himself on the floor and point to the record shelf. Anyway, the second disk of the aforementioned Muddy set seems to be Miles' favorite and with the AX-7 powering the system it is easy to see why. This disk, which covers 1954 to 1959, when Waters finished honing his blend of the Delta and the urban and the music is spare as a skeleton, driven like a locomotive and is as direct and brilliant as a lightening bolt at midnight. Simply, Muddy rocks with ferocity that no one has ever matched. Or for that matter, ever will. The bass control by the AX-7 lays down the foundation perfectly, while the treble extension allows cymbals and harmonica to cut like a butcher knife. Yes, you can say that the AX-7 has drive, timing and coherence as well. And Miles loves it.

To this point the AX-7 sounds very much like typical Ayre, and in most ways it is. Detailed, clear, dynamic and flat. One way, however, that the AX-7 differs from earlier Ayre efforts, at least in my experience, is that at low current levels this Ayre retains all its skills and is very involving. When I had the big Ayre amplifier in for review several years back I found that it took a good twist on the volume knob to get things started. Once they did get going, at about 85dB or so, the result was the best sounding solid-state amp I had heard. The AX-7 does not seem to need that push to get started. This means that the AX-7 powered an awful lot of late night listening and work sessions to quite enjoyable, not to mention distracting ends.

Still, all is not perfect with the AX-7 as the Ayre folks would be, I am sure, the first to point out. To begin with, while I had to really push the AX-7 to get it to sound winded with certain loudspeakers and at near lawsuit SPL levels the AX-7 did begin to puff. Sure, not everyone needs to examine the top of the Rat Shack SPL meter, nor are all speakers power supply testers. My experience with the AX-7 is that faced with either one of these issues it has the pop to deal, but if you plan on giving it the double whammy a test drive is certainly in order.

Next, and I am sure this reflects equal parts personal bias and objective reality; I would prefer a touch

more liquidity and presence than offered by the Ayre. In all likelihood the AX-7 is being almost unfailing accurate to the dry and slightly digital sound of most recent recordings, but there are times I would prefer a bit of sugar with my tea while the AX-7 takes it straight. The gap between the integrated and myself is small enough to be bridged with the right ancillary equipment, so please place this comment within that perspective.

Finally, while detailed and clear the AX-7 misses the very last bits of resolution. This is really only noticeable when faced with an unfair comparison, such as when shooting the AX-7 out against my reference First Sound Presence Reference pre-amplifier and Manley Neo-Classic 300B amplifiers. Now before you go and point out the obvious, that comparing \$2,950 worth of gear to equipment over five times that amount is unfair, I too am aware of that, but the AX-7 is really quite an excellent performer and attracts the unfair comparison on its own. And, ultimately, it is a complement to the AX-7 that it needs to be measured by such elite company.

## Looking Around

Starting about six or seven years ago the integrated amplifier market began a rebirth, which was and still is an entirely good thing. Separates, while allowing for step-by-step upgrades and allowing a designer to focus on a single part of the equipment chain, cost. Multiple power supplies, multiple cases and multiple controls. Not to mention a quality interconnect and, especially in the current market, the not insignificant cost of an extra power cord. Thus, with the integrated amplifier a savvy designer can put out a product that sounds much better than price alone would indicate. Over the last five years or so we have seen several companies to just that. The Connie J CAV-50, Bryston B-60 along with several of the newer Creek and Arcam models have become virtual instant classics (but then again, Creek and Arcam along with a whole host of Brit-Fi companies have been doing this for a *long* time). While I do not have access to all those models, my past listening experiences with those pieces as well as others have established a baseline against which the AX-7 can be judged.

For example, compared to the Bryston B-60, the Ayre integrated is at least as clean sounding, but with a slightly richer and truer harmonic envelope. Both have superb timing but, to these ears, the Ayre seems a touch more coherent than the Bryston. Lastly, I find the Ayre to have a surer musical sense, a better sense of real musicians making music in real spaces, than what the B-60 generates. In all this makes the AX-7, to my ears, a much better purchase.

The C-J sits on the other side of the AX-7, at least in terms of skill sets. It has a slighter better harmonic view, one that matches better with my perception of music, although the Ayre is cleaner and more detailed. The Ayre also has better frequency extension and is flatter across that range. In short, the C-J is an excellent, clean sounding but nonetheless tube-based amplifier. That means you get the wonderful presence of tubes along with a full and rich harmonic palette, but give up a touch at the frequency extremes, a bit of punch and have to deal with a bit of noise. For me the call between these two is much harder than between the AX-7 and the B-60, as the comparison almost borders on apples and oranges. If you need to see music from the perspective of harmonics than the AX-7 will do an excellent job while also delivering bass, control and detail, but the C-J will give you a bit more "there" but with a cost in detail and extension. If you want to hear deeply into a recording and enjoy a flat, unbiased frequency response, the C-J does an admirable job of that for a tube amplifier, especially considering its cost, but the Ayre is much better at this, albeit with a touch less presence. Either way, in my estimation, you would be purchasing a classic component.

## Exit Notes

If I have learned anything over the past seven years of reviewing audio gear it is these two things, first, price has a correlation to sound quality, but only a modest one. And second, a skilled, patient, and

careful designer can always overcome price constraints. Take, for example, the Vandersteen 2 line of loudspeakers or the Cardas Cross and Neutral Reference wire or a Rega turntable. Each offers sound quality far beyond their price, creating near category killer value. And, certainly, each is far more than the sum of their parts. Having spent a modest amount of time with Charlie Hansen of Ayre I can attest to the care and patience he spends on design, and while his products have traditionally aimed at a higher price point than the above listed products... just like Roy Gandy, George Cardas and Richard Vandersteen, he attempts to extract maximum value from each component used in a product.

With the AX-7 and its companion, the CX-7 CD player, Hansen has turned his focus on the upper range of entry-level gear or at the entry level point of mainstream high-end gear, and done so with the ear of a perfectionist. The result is sound quality that pushes the expectation envelope as much as anything by Vandersteen, Cardas or Rega. More to the point, the AX-7 offers sound quality that should clear out a lot of the competition in this price category. Wonderfully detailed and as clear as an October rocky mountain morning, the AX-7 is also extended, evenhanded, and dynamic. For my tastes I would prefer a touch more presence than offered by the Ayre, but this is probably a personal issue and not the fault of the AX-7.

In the final analysis I see the AX-7 as an integrated amplifier for someone who wants to purchase a serious component, one that will sit in their main system for a great many years and through many other component upgrades, as this is one \$3,000 piece of gear that would be quite at home driving any thing from a \$6,000 to a \$20,000 system. Let me put it this way, listening to the AX-7 was most certainly worth the trip through T-Rex, so much so that the folks at Ayre may need to make the drive down to Castle Rock, because it is going to be hard to part with this little beauty.

Tonality	90
Sub-bass (10 Hz - 60 Hz)	90
Mid-bass (80 Hz - 200 Hz)	95
Midrange (200 Hz - 3,000 Hz)	90
High-frequencies (3,000 Hz on up)	90
Attack	90
Decay	85
Inner Resolution	90
Soundscape width front	90
Soundscape width rear	90



Soundscape depth behind speakers 90

Soundscape extension into the room 85

Imaging 90

Fit and Finish 100

Self Noise 100

Value for the Money 100

### Specifications

Power Output: 60 watts per channel at 8 ohms

120 watts into 4 ohms

Input Impedance: 20Kohm (per phase)

Frequency Response: 2Hz to 200kHz

Power Consumption: 20 watts in standby mode

70 watts in operating mode

Dimensions 17.25 x 13.75 x 4.75 (WxDxH in inches)

Weight: 25 pounds

Price: \$2,950

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