



Ayre CX-7 CD Player

Value Check Time

Review by Todd Warnke

A couple of years ago I opened a review of a CD player with concern over the idea of buying an expensive CD player while at the start of a hi-rez format war. Looking back now, the odd thing about this format war is that it is beginning to look a whole lot like the low-rez format



war of several years back, the Mini-Disc/DCC clash that briefly showed up on audiogeek radar as well as in a few niche markets and then quickly went the way of the Quadraphonic clash of the '70s. Sure, the current SACD/DVD-A conflict is being waged on higher bit-rate ground, but like its predecessor it has absolutely failed to capture any significant mindshare with the broad public and so remains an audiogeek and niche issue. While anecdotal evidence is hardly proof, in the last couple of months I've had conversations with half a dozen "normal" music lovers, folks with CD collections over 500 volumes each and not one had heard of SACD while only one had heard of DVD-A. My suspicion from this as well as other, more factual data, is that the high-rez battle will remain a niche issue, at least until the music labels finish hanging themselves over MP-3s and internet audio and then turn to high-bandwidth as a last ditch effort to save their bloated margins (BTW, they will fail in this as well, but, unfortunately, at the continued cost of both the consumer and the artist).

While this concern is largely over software issues, our immediate issue, at least in this review of the Ayre CX-7 CD player is with hardware. However, the battle over software is also fought on the hardware level, and if it were being fought correctly by now we would have seen at least the full second generation of true universal players - but we have not. There are many reasons for this, not least is the cost of licensing all the formats involved. Of course, if the companies involved were sincerely interested in taking their battle to the streets they would offer serious bundled license discounts - for example Sony could eat the SACD license to place the technology in new CD players while the DVD-A consortium could do the same with DVD players - but this has yet to happen to any significant extent.

This has meant that, by default, that most multi-format machines have been optimized around a particular format, or that if it has been a true universal player, it has fallen into one of two categories, the

hyper-expensive statement player such as the dCS gear, or into the realm of the mid-fi Pioneer players. This has left the budget audiophile (as pure a contradiction in terms as network security, country music and compassionate conservative) with few options beyond using separate players. My experience is that given a digital playback budget under \$10,000 you are better off spending on both a CD player and a hi-rez player - or two if you want to hear both SACD and DVD-A at their best. And this, 500 words later, brings us back to the CX-7. (*Editor Steven sez: I count 505 words not including the main title, so I'll simply deduct 5 words from your monthly paycheck and we'll call it "Even Steven" :-)*)

The CX-7

With the CX-7, Ayre has created the perfect counterpart to their \$3,000 integrated amplifier, the AX-7, but their ambition does not stop there. Visually the AX-7 and CX-7 share chassis form-factors, have very similar faceplates and also share the exact same price tag. But where the AX-7 was designed as a pure entry level product, the Ayre CX-7 benefits from trickle-down design expertise from their statement CD/DVD player, the D-1x, and targets anyone and everyone who needs a state-of-the-art CD player but cannot afford the more expensive Ayre player.

Under the hood the CX-7 is pure Ayre. First, this is a zero-feedback design, with neither global nor local feedback. And second, while providing single-ended outputs for "legacy equipment", the CX-7 uses Ayres preferred balanced circuitry.

The DAC in the CX-7, Burr-Brown DF1706, offers two filter slopes, a steep slope that optimizes frequency domain information, and a gentle slope that optimizes the time domain. Ayre allows access to both filters via a rear plate switch labeled "measure" for the steep filter and "listen" for the gentler slope. The rear also holds the output jacks - a pair of balanced and a pair of single-ended - a switch to select output jacks, a balanced digital out jack and an IEC power receptacle.

Up front the CX-7 has a fairly standard display window with 2 stacked control buttons, four per column, to the right of the window. Besides the normal play/pause/forward/etc. controls, Ayre includes a dimmer button that rotates through full display, track number only and off. The supplied remote reprises the same controls except for an open drawer function and adds track and disc repeat.

During the course of the review the CX-7 was used in conjunction with a wide range of gear, including the AX-7 integrated amplifier, a Zanden Model 600 integrated amplifier, Cary and First Sound pre-amplifiers, and power amplifiers from Blue Circle, Cary, Conrad-Johnson, Manley Labs and Sophia Electric. Loudspeakers used were from Silverline Audio and Merlin, while cabling was courtesy of Cardas, Audio Magic, Acoustic Zen, Shunyata Research, and Stereovox.

What It Sounds Like (To These Ears)

The CX-7 was employed as my primary source for about four months, time enough to become thoroughly conversant with its skills, largest of which is its contradictory tendencies toward a studied, self-effacing neutrality knitted to an underlying vibrant character. Think Chow Yun-Fat in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* and his combination of stoic Wuxia master and undeniable but downplayed charisma and you'd be right on.

Taking neutrality first, the CX-7 presents a very broadband, very even frequency response. Starting down low, the bass reach and control of the Ayre player are matched perfectly. Slam was visceral without becoming heavy-handed, while the harmonics of instruments such as acoustic bass, organ and the reverb of concert halls were rich indeed. Highs reached lofty peaks as well, although their ultimate quality was slightly dependent on whether the player was in "listen" or "measure" mode. The latter

presented a slightly more brilliant than real picture of the highs while the latter was softer but richer. My preference was for the "listen" mode.

The midrange was detailed, harmonically full and very precise. This allowed the individual voices in the Estonian Philharmonic Chamber Choir employed on the ECM recording of Arvo Part's *Te Deum* [ECM 1505] to reveal themselves as constituent parts of a larger whole - but without becoming atomized either. This same midrange skill took my favorite jazz with strings album (an admittedly dicey genre, with just a few hits and a whole host of misses), Art Pepper's *Winter Moon* [Galaxy OJC 677-2] to another level. The rich backing orchestra laid a warm and inviting satin sheet for Pepper's lyrical but heartrending moans on romance.

Dynamically the CX-7 was equally fair, offering excellent punch at both the macro and micro levels, while the stage set up by the CX-7 was well defined, if a touch smaller than that rendered by other players in the price category. On the other hand, the tight stage was always well focused, rock steady and immune to volume-induced wanderings. Given a choice between this type of stage and the overblown, exaggerated stage favored by much recent gear, I'll take the Ayre presentation in a heartbeat.

So much for neutrality, what makes the CX-7 special is not that it is the most clinical of players, but that underneath its skin lurks, not an engineer, but an artist, or rather in measure mode the Ayre is indeed an engineer while in listen mode the player transcends mere bits and with great subtlety draws out the inner spark of music. An example. I ran several audiogeek approved recordings though the CX-7 - for the sake of my reputation let's not name them - and in each case I heard more interesting stuff there than I had in the past. While not able to turn a sow's ear into music, the skill of the supporting players shone through even the most boring of audiodreck.

Ok, a better example. According to Ayre the listen mode is time domain optimized, which should result in greater nuance and finer rendering of space and harmonic detail. When listening to classical recordings in the listen mode, recordings such the Herreweghe version of *Bach's St. Matthews Passion* [Harmonia Mundi 951676.78], I heard exactly that. I was enveloped in a more believable acoustic, warmer but no less extended harmonic shadings, and slightly enhanced dynamics. These differences were not overwhelming, indeed, on some recordings they were barely perceptible at all, but on those recordings that were well made to start with, these small changes cumulatively and gently moved the reproduction from a blueprint to a picture. Ultimately, I spent most of my time with the CX-7 in listen mode. Albums such as the early recordings of T-Bone Walker or Charles Brown were little affected by which mode I used, but on recordings made after the late '50s, the difference was usually for the better.

Enter The Cary

Time for the big show down. Last summer I reviewed the \$3,000 Cary CD-303/200 and called it the standard at this price point. So how does the Ayre stack up against it?

To start with, even though they are both very neutral, they are also different where they deviate from the unreachable goal of total neutrality. The Cary is neutral but when it veers away it tends to keep a tight rein on things. If I had a single word to describe it, that word would be authoritative. The Ayre is neutral as well, but when it diverges it opens up and becomes, in a word, engaging. But since the Ayre is also very even handed and never loses control, while the Cary is also quite captivating, the differences cannot be summed up in a word.

Dynamically, I would give the Cary the overall edge although the bass is a mixed bag with the Cary extending a touch deeper than the Ayre and with a touch more slam while the Ayre had better pitch

control and delivers better harmonic information. Mid and upper frequency dynamics are similar, with the Cary having a bit more impact and the Ayre more finesse.

Staging plays out along similar lines with the Cary offering a larger stage with larger players while the Ayre has a very respectable stage but one populated by slightly denser, slightly more organic sounding musicians. Inner detail and ultimate resolution offer the same contrasts with the Cary presenting a smidgeon more detail but the Ayre offering up finely fleshed out images that feel livelier if less ultra-focused.

Bottom line, both these players are superb and very versatile, offering many similar skills but with distinct differences. My tastes and preferences would allow use of either player in a multitude of systems, but if forced to choose I think the strengths of the Cary allow it to partner better in tube setups and the Ayre in solid-state systems. I suppose this makes some degree of sense, as Cary is a traditional tube company just as Ayre is a solid-state firm. But I ask that you not take this too far as I found great joy with the both players in both types of systems. With digital sources this good an audition is mandatory. Mandatory as well is giving thanks that you have such excellent choices at this price point.

Value

Back at the top I meandered on about format wars and concluded that two or three different players may be the way to go, at least for now. One major reason I have come to that conclusion is the skill of the Ayre CX-7. No multi-format player I've heard, even at twice the price, makes Redbook CD sound this wonderful. If I had a budget of five or even ten thousand dollars for a digital front-end my choice would be to spend three thousand of it right here and put the rest toward hi-rez. The SACD/DVD-A battle is not going to resolve tomorrow, nor is either format about to breakthrough or establishes a dominant market position. CD lives on, and will live on for many years to come as the primary method of music delivery. To hear all that music at its best you need a CD player this good. The CX-7 is most highly recommended, especially if you have a solid-state system - and most especially if you absolutely love music.

Tonality	95
Sub-bass (10 Hz - 60 Hz)	91
Mid-bass (80 Hz - 200 Hz)	95
Midrange (200 Hz - 3,000 Hz)	95
High-frequencies (3,000 Hz on up)	94
Attack	94
Decay	95
Inner Resolution	96
Soundscape width front	92
Soundscape width rear	92
Soundscape depth behind loudspeakers	90
Soundscape extension into the room	50
Imaging	92
Fit and Finish	100
Self Noise	100

Features

Multi-Stage Digital Filter: Sophisticated multi-stage digital filter system. First filter "upsamples" to 176.4kHz at 24 bits. Second filter "oversamples" to 1.4112MHz at 24 bits.

Dual Selectable Digital Filter Algorithms: User selectable choice of time-optimized or frequency-optimized filter algorithms.

Segmented Architecture DAC: Upper 6 bits are converted with a PCM architecture. Lower 18 bits are converted with a 5-level Sigma-Delta architecture operating at 11.2896MHz.

Differential Current-Output DAC: Sophisticated DAC allows use of dedicated differential zero-feedback current-to-voltage converters.

Zero-Feedback Analog Circuitry: Hallmark of Ayre designs said to ensure correct time-domain performance.

DC-Coupled Analog Circuitry: DC-coupled analog circuitry with no servos ensures perfect group-delay response at the lowest audio frequencies.

Balanced Audio Outputs: True differential balanced circuitry maximizes sonic performance. Single-ended outputs also included for legacy equipment.

Digital Audio Output: AES/EBU balanced digital output features transformer coupling for total ground isolation.

Specifications

Frequency Response: DC - 20 kHz, +/- 0.25 dB

Signal/Noise: 110 dB (unweighted)

Full Output: 4.5 Volts balanced, 2.25 Volts unbalanced

Dimensions: 17-1/4" W x 13-3/4" D x 4-3/4" H (44cm x 35cm x 12cm)

Weight : 25 pounds (11.5 kg)

Price: \$2,950

Company Information

Ayre Acoustics
2300-B Central Avenue
Boulder, CO 80301

Voice: (303) 442-7300

Fax: (303) 442-7301

Website: www.ayre.com