

Ayre Acoustics K-5x Pre-amplifier and V-5x power amplifier

by Jason Kennedy

If audio components had star signs would you have to get one that was sympathetic with your own? I've heard of more far fetched reasons for selecting components, but I've not come across an amplifier which uses planetary symbols to identify its inputs. The Ayre K-5x is a new pre-amplifier from an electronics company which features stars and planets where one would expect to find legends like CD, tuner and the partner baffling classic, aux. The five symbols on the front of the K-5x are even less useful to those unfamiliar with the system's set up but at least they are attractive and a whole lot more memorable than the numbers adopted in some quarters. Little badges featuring matching star, planet and shooting stars to stick on the front of your record player, CD player and tuner might help though.

Ayre is a ten year old company run by Charles Hansen in Boulder, Colorado - a place where luxurious aluminium casework is the norm or so it would seem if you look at the Ayre components and then think of the brand named after the city - there must be a great metalworker there. Prior to founding Ayre, Hansen designed loudspeakers for Avalon Acoustics such as the original Eclipse, but he's moved on since then and his goal with this company is to make high-end electronics that don't have silly price tags. Hence the brand's range topping K-1x pre-amp comes in at just over \$7,000, which while hardly bargain basement stuff is not excessive for what sounds like a pretty stunning product,

with a glorious phono stage and carved from solid style build.

The new K-5x/V-5x pre/power amplifier combo weighs in at just under £7,000 the pair, and shares some of the most luxurious casework I've seen in a good while. You could argue that if Hansen had really wanted to make affordable high-end he could have gone for less extravagant casework, but I suspect that in many parts of the world if a component doesn't look high-end it won't be considered that way, however



good it sounds.

It's a tribute to products like the Groove phono stage that it has made its mark so well despite a rather self-effacing appearance. With the Ayres you get beautifully machined insets for switches, lights and knobs and a machined plate for every surface. It's the sort of finish that makes even Chord products look almost ordinary.

Inside the K-5x pre-amp you will find fully balanced, zero feedback circuitry, both being key features of Ayre's design philosophy. Ayre's first power amp the V-3 also featured choke input filtering and measured much as you would expect to find with a tube amp. The balanced aspect runs so deep that single-ended inputs are restricted to a grand total of two plus a tape output. XLR balanced

inputs add a further two to the roster to give you a rather limiting four inputs. Unless you have at least one balanced output equipped source component this makes the K-5x rather difficult to incorporate into most systems. One way round this is to convert the balanced inputs with XLR to phono adapters which Ayre, among others, can supply.

This obsession with balanced interconnection has yet to take hold in the UK but on the North American high-end scene I get the impression that you'd be laughed out of the club if you tried to sell a single-ended only component. The advantages of

the approach are not always obvious though. I'll grant that the plugs and sockets are far superior and don't make nasty noises through the system when you pull them out, but unless you have yards of interconnect there don't seem to be any sonic benefits. In fact it would seem that the opposite is the case. RCA phono plugs actually seem to sound better when connecting single ended components. Balanced connection does of course have its advantages when it comes to fully complementary components, especially if they're separated by more than a few metres where the noise abating aspect of the topology comes in handy.

The distributor also lent me the Ayre CX-7 CD player. As you may have read in the last issue the CX-7 is an excellent CD player and it's not hard to see why I was encouraged to use it.

Getting back to the K-5x pre-amp, despite a dearth of SE inputs it does have both SE and balanced outputs ►

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► for the power amp and a "Theater" mode for use with surround sound processors, which is basically a fixed level in/output which effectively bypasses the pre-amp and allows the power amp to drive two of the channels in a 5.1 system. If you want to combine stereo and



multichannel systems this is one of the best approaches available. Volume is adjusted by a proprietary balanced control with FET switches and metal film resistors, output level is displayed on a big blue LED display and a compact remote is supplied to adjust level, change input, extinguish the display and mute as required. The microprocessor which handles all these features is shut down at all times except when responding to your whims, so it effectively 'sleeps' in order to minimise signal contamination.

Only the selected input is grounded so unselected inputs are effectively disconnected when not in use, which will nullify any potential cross-talk.

The V-5x power amplifier is a substantial 25kg block with some of the most unusual speaker terminals I've come across. Basically they are a means of holding both positive and negative terminals of the cable with one clamp, a system that's designed expressly for the spade lugs preferred in the US. I had to use adapters in order

to terminate my 4mm banana plug equipped Townshend DCT cables. (These are the same posts used on the Avalon Ascendants and will accept 4mm plugs at right angles. Ed.) Inputs are switchable between phono and XLR and there are also balanced outputs for use in bi- and tri-amplified systems or with sub-woofers. Power

output is specified at 150 watts a side at eight ohms, with a doubling into four ohms. Which is not a claim that many amp makers are prepared to make.

For the purpose of attempting to keep wheat and chaff in neat little piles I didn't just put both amps in place of my normal Bryston BP25/Gamut D200 combo but took things one at a time, substituting the preamplifier first. Once I had established that the source Eikos CD player was plugged into the crescent moon rather than Saturn input things got rather entertaining. Bobby Hughes' scando-latino vibes expanded in scale and took on a life and



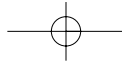
energy that made the Bryston's approach seem positively repressive. It should of course be remembered that the venerable Bryston costs half as much as this silver beauty and thus some improvement was expected. But the scale and presence delivered exceeded expectations and

negated any chance of the Bryston getting in on the act until the Ayres had left the building.

The K-5x has a full bodied sound that revels in tonal colour, shape and texture, very valve like in fact with the same tendency to increase scale. The scale seems entirely natural, it's a bit like you are hearing the harmonics in all their glory as opposed to the merely the fundamentals. It's not as though the picture has been expanded but more like there's greater resolution of spatially related information. The hubble-bubble toking intro to the Peace Orchestra's magnificent *Domination* sounds as if it were recorded in an aircraft hangar with this pre-amp. It always reveals reverb but the scale here seems to be in another league. It made me wonder whether combining Ayre electronics with the Totem Forest speakers reviewed last month would be too much. They are also unusually transparent to reverb, unfortunately they were no longer around otherwise it would have been interesting to see if I could have broken into the fifth dimension with the right Hawkwind track!

Adding the V-5x power amp in place of the Gamut D200 (Mk3) added more space again to the proceedings, the soundstage expanding in width by a substantial margin and certainly increasing both up and back, though not to the same extent. Low-level resolution seemed to improve once the two units were paired up and

dynamics certainly didn't suffer. There was a slight reduction in bass grunt, the Gamut's extra 50 watts and slightly tighter approach delivering greater impact, but it was not a difficult transition as both power amps are clearly excellent but have strengths in slightly different areas. Timing for instance is very good with the Ayres, the groove picking up in a subtle ►



▶ but distinct fashion when something suitably rhythmic came along. The sound is also unusually natural for a transistor pairing with instruments rendered with convincing tonal colour and body.

The brand new nature of this pairing meant that it was not fully run in and I suspect will not get to that point till way after the deadline.



As a result the sound I got with my Living Voice Avatar OBX-Rs was slightly forward of neutral and didn't encourage high level listening, more's the pity. It lent them a lively, even loud, balance that I'm told calms with time - two or three hundred hours of use are required before they are fully on song.

Further listening revealed a quite uncanny ability to spread sound either side of the speakers, this effect is almost like the Q-Sound phase manipulation used on some albums (Madonna's *Greatest Hits* being the only one that comes to mind!). It's as if you're getting surround sound from two speakers, yet if there's a strong central image that remains where it should be and doesn't seem stretched. The soundscape is very much a great 2.0 home cinema system.

Moving on to the voice of youth, or Eminem as he's better known, this was slightly more aggressive than usual but full of detail and energy, a presentation made all the more persuasive by the

distinctly quiet background. It seems a little odd that the noise floor on such a disc should be notable but this is no two bit recording and responds well to increases in dynamic and signal to noise range.

Just to test the tubeworthiness of the K-5x preamp I put it up against my Border Patrol prototype, a comparison which made the transistorised unit sound marginally less transparent, fuller and a shade less natural. But it was surprisingly close for something so sophisticated.

I also brought in a pair of B&W CDM9 NTs to give the power amp something slightly less easy to wrestle with. This brought about a greater sense of control and precision to the proceedings and clearly didn't give the V-5x any cause for concern. The pairing delivering greater bass depth albeit less engaging music.

The arrival of the Ayre CD player improved matters rhythmic rather nicely and proved



itself to be extremely effective at delivering the musical message.

I haven't been able to immerse myself in Radiohead's latest offering (*Hail to the Thief*) largely because it has failed to inspire with previous equipment, but the Ayre partnership made a remarkable job of revealing what the band were trying to do. The superb low level resolve bringing out all the subtle strands and building them up into a gripping musical experience with

nearly as much power as the band's opus *OK Computer*.

This is clearly a first class pair of amplifiers: build quality is exemplary and better than most achieve even at twice this price. But more importantly the scale and presence that it reveals is transporting. This combined with a sweet sense of timing makes for a very compelling experience and one which I'll have trouble forgetting - and that's not the sort of trouble I often suffer with!



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Ayre K-5x	
Type:	Remote operated pre-amplifier
Inputs:	2 balanced, 2 single ended
Input impedance:	20 kOhm (per phase)
Maximum Input Level:	4V - unbalanced inputs, 8V - balanced inputs
Frequency Response:	DC - 200 kHz
Maximum Gain:	4dB - unbalanced outputs, 10dB - balanced outputs
Dimensions (HxWxD):	44 x 12 x 35cm
Weight:	11.5 kg
Price:	£2950

Ayre V-5x	
Type:	Stereo power amplifier
Power Output:	150 watts per channel/ 8 ohms, 300 watts per channel/4 ohms
Gain:	26 dB
Input Impedance:	100 kOhm (per phase)
Frequency Response:	DC - 200 kHz
Dimensions (HxWxD):	18 x 46 x 41cm
Weight:	25 kg
Price:	£4495

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