






Something in the Ayre

What is it that makes the sound of Ayre's flagship phono stage so special? Is it the clever use of balanced inputs, the speedy detailed bass, or the richness with which it delivers vocals? David Allcock relishes a bargain

DETAILS

-  Ayre P-5xe phono stage
-  £1695
-  www.symmetry-systems.co.uk
-  01727 865488
-  Sublime bass, luminous highs, rich mids
-  Best used in balanced mode

If there's one thing that makes Ayre's P-5xe m-m/m-c phono stage stand out immediately it's that it sports not only balanced outputs but balanced inputs too. Not only is this unusual, it's also very sensible. After all, a phono cartridge is a naturally balanced source and in a modern audio system has the lowest level of signal, one that is highly susceptible to the unwanted effects of RFI emissions. Treating the negative side as a separate earth is an excellent way to combat these.

This unit is full dual mono internally, with the left and right hand sides sharing only the power supply and PCB substrate. The internals of the P-5xe are clean and simple, with the front of the chassis weighed

down by the toroidal transformer. Directly behind this is a choke with only the rear third of the chassis actually containing the audio circuit. Gain is adjusted by two pairs of DIP switches inside the phono stage that offer 44, 54 or 64dB gain on single-ended outputs, with a 6dB increase on balanced outputs.

BASICS FIRST

However you configure the Ayre, even in its basic single-ended in/out configuration, it's never less than highly enjoyable. The soundstaging is well focused and spacious, extending beyond

the outer edges of either speaker system used for this test, and is populated with realistically scaled images, with only a slight loss of focus and a slight reduction in image solidity being apparent when the single-ended inputs and outputs are used.

Bass is fast, powerful and detailed and comparable with anything I've heard under £2500,

FRONT & REAR PANELS



The front is plain bar a logo and power light. The rear features, from left: balanced output, single-ended output, single-ended input, bal/unbal switch, balanced input, and impedance DIP switches (all mirrored on the opposite side). Gain setting is made internally

while timing is easily a match for my £5500 Klyne PX3.5. As for extension, that scored highly too, and you can feel the weight of a bass on recordings such as the Dave Brubeck Quartet's 'Blue Rondo à la Turk' from *Take Five* [Classic Records CS 8192] without any textural information being obscured.

In the midrange, you are aware of superb levels of transparency and great subtlety, allowing differences in the phrasing and breathing of a performer to be brought to life in the listening room.

It's only in the high frequencies that some shortcomings are in evidence, and then only in reference to the Klyne. For example, while the metallic sheen of cymbals is still portrayed beautifully, a slight hardening of leading edge transients can be heard, which is absent via the Klyne.

BALANCED OUTPUT

Switch to the balanced output and things improve hugely. That hardening of leading edges in the treble is eradicated while the space around instruments gains superior definition. Bass is now more powerful and even more dynamic, being capable of delivering more power to each note resulting in a faster, more precise presentation.

There is a noticeable improvement in midrange transparency too, showing the single-ended output to bring a subtle veil to the presentation.

In the area of overall dynamic portrayal you hear far more

subtlety in the dynamic range, the balanced output revealing nuances in an artist's emphasis and phrasing that are only hinted at using the single-ended output. Soundstaging is also enhanced, with the layering in the depth plane showing greater resolving power while the lateral soundstage is also expanded.

BALANCED INPUT

Moving to the balanced input using an Ayre Signature balanced lead supplied by the UK distributor (£595), running from an SME right-angled 5-pin

'This phono stage delivered one of the finest analogue sounds I have ever heard at home'

mini DIN connector to a pair of XLR connectors, it took less than one bar to realise that even when running balanced input to single-ended output, the improvements with the balanced input are far from subtle. Not only is system noise reduced but the overall performance of the phono stage is now comparable with that obtained from the balanced output, with improvements in soundstage size, focus, dynamic range and tonal shading all apparent. What's more, that leading edge hardness noted when using the single-ended inputs is eradicated once more.

Used in its ultimate configuration of balanced inputs and outputs I was confronted by a simple fact: this phono stage delivered one of the finest

DATA FILE

MAKER'S SPECS

Gain	50, 60, 70dB to balanced outputs 44, 54, 64dB to single-ended outputs
Input impedance	47k ohm, 1000 ohm, 100 ohm
Output impedance ...	110k ohm balanced outputs (55k ohm per phase) 55k ohm unbalanced outputs
Frequency response	RIAA curve accurate to ±0.05 dB
Power consumption.....	10 watt
Dimensions	438 x 350 x 60mm (wdh)
Weight.....	5.5 kg

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

Without question this is a stunning phono stage with exceptional connectivity, excellent build quality and 'fit-and-forget' operation. It operated in my system without a glitch. At its price its performance puts it in the bona fide bargain category, and a less scrupulous engineer and distributor could have priced this at £3000 without question. The Ayre is a truly excellent design and I recommend it very strongly. If you're looking for a phono stage in this price range, you owe it to your music collection to hear this one.

analogue sounds I've ever heard at home. The bass is sublime, the bass guitar on 'Magic Smile' from Rosie Vela's *Zazu* [A&M Records AMA 5016] energizes the air with its low frequencies while the initial transient of plectrum hitting the string, the reverberant energy of the string

on the guitar, plus the rapid decay of each note, is easy and thrilling to hear. The definition really is that exceptional.

Meanwhile, Rosie Vela's sultry vocals are so rich as to be luxurious and enjoy a hear-through transparency that makes all but the finest digital sources sound clouded by comparison. Indeed, there is a liquidity and flow to vocals here, especially female, that is reminiscent of classic valve phono stages – the one found in in the Audio Research SP 11 pre-amplifier comes to mind – but with massively improved definition and speed.

SHIMMERING HIGHS

High frequencies now took on a luminous quality, shimmering with energy and textures without

hardness or undue sibilance, while at the same time boasting exceptional transient speed and definition. The result was that each impact on a cymbal can be heard as an individual event and without smearing.

Meanwhile, the soundstage expanded massively. It now seemed to extend through the walls of my listening room on both sides and some 5m beyond the back wall. What's more, dynamic range was stunning, the Ayre having an ability to switch from the most subtle expression to full power in a heartbeat. At a fiver under £1700, the Ayre is simply outstanding value. ■

REVIEW SYSTEM

Sources: Basis Gold Debut turntable, Graham 2.0 arm, Lyra Argo, Benz Glider L2 low output and MusicMaker III m-m cartridges

Amplifiers: Klyne System 7 PX 3.5 phono stage, Krell KRC-3 pre-amp, Alner Hamblin SP-400 passive, Bryston 3B-SST power amp, Alner Hamblin SA 400

Speakers: Martin Logan SL-3, Hyperion Sound Design HPS-938

Cables: Townshend DCT-300 and Atlas Elektra interconnects, Townshend Isolda DCT bi-wire and Chord Company Signature bi-wire speaker cables