

Ayre Acoustics CX-7e CD Player and AX-7e Integrated Amplifier

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Although it's been more than three years since I first reviewed the Ayre CX-7, I'll bet a slice of the best cherry pie you've ever tasted that you won't need a side-by-side comparison against the new E Series version to notice—and quite easily—the improvements designer Charles Hansen has wrought with this already fine and affordable CD player. And that goes for the matching Ayre AX-7 integrated amplifier, as well. While RH penned the review of the AX-7 [in Issue X], Ayre did send me a unit to audition along with the CX-7 player. Although it could have used a bit more muscle on the bottom, I recall the AX-7 as being one of the sweetest and most listenable integrated amps I've heard in a very long time [As do I.—RH]. You don't easily forget components like that—at least I don't. I was obviously quite pleased with the opportunity to revisit this fine entry-level pair from Ayre.

In addition to the improved sonics, kudos to Ayre for holding the price on both the CX-7e and AX-7e at \$2950, as well as offering an affordable upgrade path for customers who purchased the original versions. According to Ayre's marketing guru Steve Silberman, the update to the AX-7 will set you back \$250–\$350, while the CX-7 may lighten your wallet a few dollars more but is still quite reasonable at \$300–\$650. Steve explained that the cost depends on the age of the unit—an indication that the newer pieces may already incorporate some of the changes.

The CX-7 upgrade involves a number of modifications for the new E Series, which include fine-tuning of the power supply as well as an all-new Xilinx Field- Programmable Gate Array (FPGA). This device, which replaces several Burr- Brown chips in the original CX-7, is, as its name suggests, an array of gates that can be programmed to perform any task. The designer simply changes the programming to reconfigure the FPGA, and the entire CD player is upgraded. This feature makes the CX-7 more easily upgraded in the future. According to Ayre, it has taken advantage of this enhanced flexibility by employing slightly different coefficients than those used in the old player.



While this all may sound good on paper, the proof is in the plugging (in), as they say. I began my evaluation of the Ayre equipment in the main listening room by first replacing the Meridian 808 with the CX-7e. While the 7e was, quite frankly, not in the same league as the reference Meridian, I was still surprised by how well this sub-\$3000 player performed when paired with components retailing for many times its price. I'd originally planned on moving it to the smaller room where I have a more affordable system set up, but quickly changed my mind. The CX-7e simply looked too comfortable and sounded too good in the big rig.

I'll have to admit, though, I didn't think the old player was too shabby to begin with. I enjoyed the high energy and presence of the original CX-7 quite a bit, my only complaint being that the unit I auditioned three years ago was a little rough around the edges at times. Not only is the upgraded version noticeably more open, airy, and transparent, but those rough edges had been adeptly polished and smoothed—without being overly smoothed.

Rebecca Pidgeon's "Spanish Harlem" [The World's Greatest Audiophile Vocal Recordings, Chesky Records] was gorgeously addictive through the CX-7e. And I do mean gorgeously. I usually roll my eyes when I see "audiophile" recordings. We're a neurotic bunch—myself included—and will glom onto pretty much anything stamped "audiophile," whether it's worthy or not. After listening to The World's Greatest Audiophile Vocal Recordings, I retracted my eye-roll. Audiophile or not, this disc is an absolutely splendid collection of vocal music. And the CX-7e did an absolutely splendid job of helping to reproduce it.

In a comparison with the more expensive Meridian G08 (\$3995), the Ayre player oozed rhythmic intensity and presence, while the G08 was all about sophistication and finesse, without quite the drive or energy of the CX-7e. I also thought the G08 had more depth and breathier vocals. Not that the CX-7e was lacking in these attributes, or the Meridian lacking in drive. It's all relative, I guess. As is most often the case with comparisons, you end up with two worthy contenders and two very different perspectives on the sound.

After first spending a few days with the CX-7e, I was in for another surprise of the most pleasant kind when I introduced the Ayre integrated amplifier to the system. Not that I thought for even a second the AX-7e would disappoint. But as I mentioned earlier, the first unit was a little bass-shy, so I wondered just how well this 60-watter with built-in passive preamp could handle a speaker like the B&W 800D. You'd be surprised, just like I was. I'm not going to tell you the AX-7e will cause rock slides and make the ground open, but this integrated is no

longer a wallflower when it comes to the bottom octaves. Charles Hansen once again worked his magic, doing a bang-up job of tricking out the power supply on this one. (Give Ayre a call for more details on the upgrade.)

I couldn't resist digging out my favorite torture-test recording in the hopes I might finally be able to blow something up. No such luck. Not even a spark or wisp of smoke. On Stanton Moore's *Flyin' the Coop* [Blue Thumb Records], the AX-7e may have strained just a bit at the end when my ears were screaming for mercy, but I wouldn't swear to it. I guess the lesson here is to never underestimate what 60W is capable of, especially with a company like Ayre at the helm. I might also add that the AX-7e does a lot more than just play loud; it also sounds as wonderfully listenable, if not more so, than what I remember. I was enamored with this integrated when I first heard it three years ago and still am.

In addition to the improved bottom end, the AX-7e throws an especially clean—but not sterile or uninvolved—delightfully wide-open, Paul Bunyansized soundstage. Images are stable, with nice separation among instruments, as well. And as with the CX-7 player, pace and presence are again noteworthy.

This may be a strange way to describe its character, but some components seem like strangers (at least sonically) when you put them into your system, while others feel like you've just found a long lost friend. The AX-7e is one of those components that feel like a long lost friend, perhaps because the sound is so comfortably endearing and easy to like. There was a sweetness and musicality that never failed to put a smile on my face and often kept me listening far too long into the night.

(Another item I'd like to revisit briefly is the Myrtle Wood Blocks I mentioned in my original review. I don't think I gave those things enough credit the first time around. Try a handful under your components and cables. You'll be amazed by how effectively they can clean up and smooth out the sound of your gear. I've paid plenty more and gotten far less. The only downside I've discovered so far was when the dog apparently thought they were snacks and snuck a few in my bed one night. While the woodblocks may sound good, they're not particularly comfy to sleep on.)

After thinking about it, the only real complaint I can come up with on the Ayre gear is those dang symbols they use on the front-panel buttons. Who the heck can remember those, especially at my age? Seriously, these are tough components to nitpick, especially for the money. The CX-7e player and AX-7e integrated are both nicely built with a look that I would describe as being simple but elegant.

Many manufacturers claim high-end performance at an affordable price, but few deliver. Not only did Ayre deliver the goods, but it did it with (gasp!) no price increase and (gasp again!) genuinely affordable upgrades. Let's all hope this becomes a new trend. TAS