

Ayre P-5xe Phono Stage

by Shane Buettner



Not only is Ayre's flagship K-1xe the finest solid-state preamp I've heard, its optional integrated phono stage is astonishingly detailed, neutral and drop-dead quiet. In fact, the K-1xe's integral phono stage impressed me so much that I mentioned to Ayre's president and chief designer Charlie Hansen more than once that I thought an outboard phono stage would be a heck of a good idea.

Well, it wasn't my pestering that finally got Charlie to act but, rather, the fact that it wasn't possible to get a quiet phono stage built into Ayre's K-5 preamp. I'd also guess that the resurgence of vinyl (which sells more units than SACD and DVD-A discs combined) didn't hurt either. Whatever the reasons, Ayre's P-5xe phono stage is here and it's such an extraordinary performer that its (relatively) diminutive price of \$2,350 also dictates extraordinary value.

Intelligent Design

The design is very Ayre. To those of you who have read my reviews of Ayre gear before, I'm going to sound like a broken record (pun fully intended!) describing the design of this phono stage. Charlie Hansen likes discrete, fully balanced circuits with no global feedback

and he hates op-amps because they inherently contain lotsa feedback. The P-5xe is fully discrete, balanced from input to output, and has zero feedback.

Like all Ayre gear the P-5xe is all solid-state, FETs are used for gain, and there are three gain settings: low (44dB), medium (54dB), and high (64dB). If you're using the balanced outputs add 6dB to each setting. The medium setting is the default, but it's very simple to open the top cover and swap the jumpers to change. And the user manual includes a handy-dandy diagram and does an excellent job of describing the procedure.

Loading is adjusted with DIP switches on the back panel and the available factory settings are 100, 1000 and 47k ohms. If those don't work or you just want to experiment, custom resistors at whichever value you choose can be inserted into the unused input on the P-5xe, and again the user manual describes the process with superb clarity.

The P-5xe includes not only a set of balanced outputs, but also a set of balanced inputs to complement a set of single ended ins and outs. RIAA is passive, in a proprietary implementation that improves accuracy by eliminating interactions between the

multiple curves required to meet the standard and lowering the noise floor. Phono stages by their nature employ very high amounts of gain, making noise suppression of paramount importance.

As you can probably guess, the P-5xe isn't a tweaker's phono stage. There are more expensive phono stages on the market that have multiple inputs, more loading and gain settings, and push-button access to those adjustments. Some will even let you make these adjustments on-the-fly by remote control. The Ayre doesn't even have a power switch—if it's plugged in and the blue light on the front panel is illuminated, it's on!

Looking at the P-5xe's functionality as a half-full glass, this is a purist design that unequivocally gets the job done and sounds great doing it. In fact, its ergonomics are second to none on a day-to-day basis since you don't even have to turn the thing on! Also consider that any additional features would increase the cost commensurately.

Evolution

Like Ayre's other components the P-5xe is carrying around an extra "e" these days, which denotes the Evolution series power supply updates. Ayre is

relatively mum on exactly what's involved, but it's said to be a power supply tweak that's been applied to Ayre's line across the board. I've been mightily impressed with the components I've heard both before and after they evolved, including this one, which I did indeed hear before and after.

In all cases I've heard more natural warmth, body and dimension to the music from Ayre's e-series components, and in no case did I hear a decrease in the resolution, extension or focus that makes Ayre's stuff sound great. To put it in today's vernacular, it's all good.

I get a lot of questions from people who already own Ayre gear, wondering if they should send their components into the Ayre factory for the e-upgrades, and my unequivocal answer is yes! The Evolution updates are reasonably priced and offer performance improvements that are undeniable in my experience, with zero drawbacks.

Another note on power supply is that the P-5xe includes Ayre's proprietary "Ayre Conditioner" power line filtering, which is patent-pending and used in some of Ayre's most highly regarded "1" series components.

Break-In

My review methodology dictates that components under review undergo a sufficiently long and arduous break-in period. I'm more anal about this than some (if not most), and if you don't believe me ask my wife. Our house is always littered with gear plugged into any and every outlet when not up and running in my system. I typically regard this as understood and don't spend time and words on it in a review except in cases where I feel the component really needs extra time, and if that extra time has a major impact on the component's sonic signature. Never, in my experience, has this been more applicable than in the case of the Ayre P-5xe.

Phono stages are inherently difficult to break-in because you can't simply put an LP on the platter and hit repeat, as you can with optical disc players. Because of this phenomenon the best \$50 I ever spent was on Hagerman Technology's stereo inverse RIAA filter (<http://www.hagtech.com>).

As the name suggests this little PC board takes a standard stereo input and performs inverse RIAA equalization and drops the signal level low enough to allow you to run the output of a CD player directly into a phono stage. Now you can hit "repeat" and continuously break-in a phono stage! While the Hagerman device has more obvious benefits to a reviewer of phono stages, it's cheap enough that anyone who buys a phono stage and doesn't want to wait weeks or months to achieve proper break-in might consider it a good value-add.

Now, even though I ran the Hagerman into the P-5xe for almost two weeks straight, the P-5xe took 2-3 months to come into its own dynamically. I didn't continue to run the Hagerman filter into it beyond that couple of weeks because I was already hearing such excellent sound that I was fooled into thinking it didn't need more. The P-5xe was dead quiet and very extended at both frequency extremes right out of the box, but I kept thinking it was just a bit flat dynamically.

As time went on I was happy but not completely enamored of the P-5xe. I tried the high gain setting to see if I could get some more jump out of it, and tried running the cartridge loading higher than I typically like. The higher gain setting sounded good but a touch strained, and didn't exhibit any real increase in dynamic contrast that I could hear. It was just louder. The higher cartridge loading just made things zippier, and lighter in weight.

So I returned to the medium gain setting and my typical loading preference of 100 ohms and then—bam! One day it was like I had found a DIP switch labeled "slam" and flipped it to the on position! The P-5xe came to life all at once, dramatically. It didn't soften, or get warmer sounding. Tonally it remained just as neutral as it had been, but the jump and snap factor increased by orders of magnitude. Strange but true. I ran this by Hansen and he thought that the thick circuit board he's using might have something to do with the long and then dramatic break-in. If you buy one of these don't email after a week and tell me you're not hearing what I heard—wait a while!

A last note on setup and placement, the Ayre will hum if it's close enough to something with a big transformer in it. In fact,

Ayre's own C-5xe has a big enough transformer that I had to get the P-5xe two shelves down from it to eliminate the hum, even with an all-balanced configuration.

Performance

With the P-5xe in the full swing of its performance envelope I heard even better sound than I'd expected, in spite of the fact that the K-1xe's integrated phono stage prepared me for nothing short of excellence. I heard all of the crystalline clarity and purity of sound I'd heard from the K-1xe phono section, but I also heard better extension at the frequency extremes and more resolution at all points in between. And after the "e" update, I heard more musicality and warmth too.

The P-5xe is not only as scary-quiet as the K-1xe it might be quieter still. In the midrange it has extraordinary resolution of expression and focus, especially with vocals. It's simply as resolved as can be with as much openness and inner detail as I've heard from vinyl playback. And yet it reveals all its transparency in a way that's non-mechanical, very natural and very relaxed. Only a direct comparison to a tube phono stage in a very high-resolution system reveals the Ayre's sound as being solid-state in any way, and even then I consider that an observation and not a criticism.

I've remarked in print before that the hallmarks of the Ayre "house sound" are incredible amounts of focus and resolution, with bass performance that's lacking weight and foundation in the lowest registers. The P-5xe is one of two new(er) products from Ayre that are a significant and welcome departure in this regard (the other is the C-5xe Universal Stereo player).

The bass of the P-5xe is remarkable not only for its weight and authority, but for its extraordinary articulation and resolution of low level details. Great acoustic bass work has a wealth of small nuances of expression—microchanges in the intensity of the string plucks, the hand sliding up and down the neck and strings, the other hand slapping the cavernous body of the instrument, and the resonance of the big body of the instrument, all at the same time. The Ayre allows all of this expression during a performance to be revealed without ever getting too fat and quenching the little details,



or getting too fast and lean and robbing the instrument of its massive body.

At the other end of the bass spectrum is something like Epic's AC/DC box set on 180G remastered vinyl, which has electric bass and kick drums that are EQ'd to be big, beefy and sock-in-the-gut powerful like a concert in a 20,000-seat arena. This kind of big, loud bass is short on nuance, but huge on balls and the Ayre can do that with the proper impact but no overhang or bloat—just the requisite amount of raw, punishing power.

Other Ayre hallmark sonic attributes include resolution and otherworldly image focus front to back, and particularly side to side on the soundstage. Laterally, the P-5xe focuses instruments and vocalists in a line, right across the stage in a tighter fashion than anything I've heard. On Johnny Cash's American Recordings IV: The Man Comes Around—a record I've listened to 100s of times—I heard better separation between the dueling guitars and a particularly addictive amount of midrange detail on guitars. The strings and the bodies of the guitars were integrated and full, but also detailed, airy and very present. It's not easy to pull something off that record that I haven't heard before but the Ayre did just that.

While the Ayre's lateral focus is beyond reproach—the best I've heard—it does compress things a hair from front to back in comparison to Aesthetix' Rhea, a remarkably full-featured tube phono stage that sells for \$4K. The Aesthetix has the full, rounded and dense three-dimensional image that places musicians and vocalists front-to-back in layers on the stage to a startling degree. A prime example is "The Nearness of You" on Norah Jones' Come Away with Me LP by Classic Records. Jones' vocal hovers in a more coherent and yet more distinct spatial plane, and there's a deep front to back dimension between the piano and the voice that's extremely distinct on the Rhea and a hair less so on either the Ayre P-5xe or ARC's PH5. Is this real? Is it something on the record or a hi-fi parlor trick—a pleasing coloration? I dunno. I'm not sure which is "right," but I confess I do like this aspect of the Rhea's presentation.

On the Ayre's plus side, its background is quieter and has a little more resolution

through the midrange and better top-end extension too. Cymbal splashes and piano decay light up the stage, but maintain striking coherence. When cymbals are brushed, for example, you can practically count the strands.

The Rhea's single minor fault, in my opinion, is that it can be just a touch on the dark side. As seriously small a touch as it is, the Ayre's midrange and treble are fully resolved and take the lid off the music just enough to make it apparent.

Conclusion

A reference product is as extended at the frequency extremes and as resolved as it can be without being over-emphasized, pushed or tucked anywhere. A reference component establishes the sensation that what comes out of it resembles so closely the source material that went in that you've no doubt that it's all there, warts and all, without embellishment. It's something you can put in your system knowing that when you audition other components any colorations you hear must be coming out of those components, not your reference.

This Ayre P-5xe phono stage is that kind of benchmark. Its sound is defined by what's on the LPs played through it, not by any interpretation of its own imposed on the music. And yet in spite of that neutrality and precision, it in no way sounds analytical, cold or too revealing. The sound it defines is the sound of the system and components getting out of the way and allowing us to hear more deeply into the LPs than before—and believe me there's plenty of music there without the phono stage adding its own color. You can buy more expensive phono stages with more functionality and features, and perhaps even more of some parts of the frequency spectrum. But I'm not sure you can buy a phono stage that's more truthful. The P-5xe is a highly recommended, reference quality component in every way that I could live with and listen to day in and day out. In fact, I've been doing just that for several months now.

Product Information

Ayre P-5xe Phono Stage

Inputs: One each balanced (XLR) and single-ended

Outputs: One each balanced and single-ended

Dimensions (WHD): 17.25" x 2.38" x 13.75"

Weight: 12 lbs.

Manufacturer Information

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