

Ayre C-5xe U2 Player

By Shane Buettner

I engaged in an extensive and flirtatious courtship with multichannel music, but never really sealed the deal. The best surround mixes use either little hard or no center channel at all, adding only a splash of ambience in the surrounds which adds little to the experience of listening to music that a good stereo doesn't do already. On the hardware side, multichannel is unequivocally a step backward, or at best a heinously expensive step sideways. I've heard the best surround sound processors, and a number of analog multichannel line stages. Sonically none of them withstands comparison to a good, stereo \$3k line stage. Tabulate the price tag for tripling up on top quality stereo line stages, amps and speakers to grab a little ambience and you see me working: stereo rules.

Boulder, CO's Ayre Acoustics has designed and built a reference quality multi-format player for music guys like me- the C-5xe U2 player (\$6k.) Although I'm sure the boys of Boulder are fans of the Irish rockers, U2 here is catchy jargon for "universal stereo." The C-5xe is a music playin' machine that outputs stereo audio only (nope, no video) from CDs, SACDs, and DVD-A/V discs. Hell, the C-5xe is sooo about stereo music that it's practically a turntable for optical discs!

The box is typical Ayre, substantial at 26 lbs. (seemingly half of that in power supply transformers) and simple almost to the point of austerity, but with the added flair of a navigation wheel on the right side of the front panel. Actually, it's two concentric wheels with six basic playback and navigation buttons. Whatever it is, it looks slick and adds some welcome tactile panache.

Speaking of navigation, although eliminating video circuits keeps the audio signal path quieter, it makes DVD-A discs a challenge to navigate. DVD-A discs do a hell of a lot things but one thing they typically *don't* do is just play music when you pop in a disc and hit play. Many DVD-As are loaded with multiple mixes, sample rates and formats and often boot-up to an on-screen menu that must be navigated to select the hi-rez stereo or multichannel mixes. With the C-5xe you obviously want hi-rez stereo, and getting there is a little tricky without the benefit of going on-screen.

Ayre's non-GUI solution to this sticky problem involves using three front panel display LEDs. With a DVD-A disc in the player and the player stopped, the previous and next buttons on the remote or front panel switch "Group" numbers on the disc. When you play a group you determine which has the highest sample rate: the 1x LED lights up for 44k or 48k sample rates; 2x for 88.2 or 96k; or 4x for 176.4 or 192k.

There's one problem with this approach, as Warner's DVD-A of Fleetwood Mac's *Rumours* demonstrated. As with most DVD-A discs I've seen the jacket has no info on which groups of songs have what mixes and sample rates. *Rumours* has 96k stereo and 5.1-channel mixes and both groups light up the C-5xe's "2x" LED when played. One is real stereo and one is a phony downmix from multichannel. Is it a bad mix or a downmix? Only way to tell is to listen. Any wonder why DVD-A has been DOA?

The plus side of Ayre's non-video approach is that it allowed president and chief designer Charlie Hansen to do the audio the Ayre way, which is to the Nth degree. In addition to the overdone power supply, Ayre uses fully-balanced, discrete circuitry exclusively, with no inherently high feedback op-amps. In fact, no feedback at all! Truly balanced circuits require higher parts count, and Ayre doesn't skimp on quality anywhere. While it's typical for manufacturers to use off-the shelf clocks and digital filters, Ayre rolls their own, using proprietary solutions. DSD is converted to analog without being converted to PCM first, and Ayre employs and offers digital filtering

algorithms that favor time domain performance over frequency response. I say offers because the C-5xe has switchable filters (DIP switch on the rear panel) marked “Measure” and “Listen”, with the later offering better time domain fidelity and (to my ears) better sound.

Of course none of that would mean jack if the C-5xe weren't the best multi-format player I've heard. Multi-format players typically fall on their face with at least one format, or make all three formats sound equally mediocre. The Ayre not only doesn't fall down with a single format, it sounds absolutely scintillating with redbook CD, hi-rez PCM and DSD alike to a degree that's unparalleled in my experience with multi-format players (which is considerable).

Another bugaboo with universal players is that too often SACD sounds either so relaxed that it's downright soft (as with the Simaudio Orbiter), or the extra high frequency information is emphasized to the point of sounding hard or brittle (like Esoteric's X-01 and UX-1). The C-5xe is the third bowl of porridge- it's just right. SACDs are clearly more hi-rez, with substantially increased midband resolution and an utterly free and open top end that make CDs sound broken. Tonally and spatially, many SACD players sound like they're in a fog compared to the C-5xe's focused, and remarkably dimensional clarity. But the sound is also balanced enough, with enough ease to remind you why SACD so often draws comparisons to analog.

I've also had the opportunity to listen to two of the most exotic and highly regarded CD/SACD “separates” in my own system- the \$19k Verdi/Delius transport/DAC combo from dCS and EMM Labs' DAC-6 which costs \$10k without the transport needed to drive it. With SACDs the C-5xe isn't as sweet and musical as the EMM DAC-6, and perhaps not quite as insanely “see through” transparent front to back as the dCS stack but it's right in there and it doesn't have the slightly analytical side the dCS showed occasionally. The C-5xe is superior on CD to the DAC-6 by orders of magnitude, and is so close to the dCS' performance that I'd have to hear them head to head to ferret out a winner. Consider the prices and that neither the EMM Labs or dCS play DVD-A discs and you see why I'm high on this Ayre player.

The C-5xe also took hi-rez PCM to the next level. Classic Records' Mike Hobson is the only guy who gets it, and makes DVD-A discs for people who are into music. Pop one of Classics new 24/192 HDADs into the C-5xe and hit play and voila! No video menus to muddle through, and yet the gorgeous, silky, extended hi-rez PCM ours right out into the room. I pulled out a golden moldy in the HDAD of *Casino Royale* soundtrack and cued up Dusty Springfield's Look of Love against Classic's own 200 gram, 45rpm single of the same cut on an SME 20/2 turntable with a Lyra Titan cartridge. Switching between the two in real time, I could hear some additional textures of vocal expression and a slightly more natural cushion of air around the instruments and vocals from the vinyl, but the HDAD on the Ayre was exceptionally open and airy on top with tons of transparency in the middle and layers of front to back depth. I'm generally an SACD guy, but hi-rez PCM on this player floored me. The C-5xe joins the \$11k Linn UniDisk 1.1 at the pinnacle of DVD-A performance, and may have been more spatially accomplished in soundstage focus.

Having spent months living with Ayre's D-1x CD player, the C-5xe's CD playback took me aback some at first. Where the D-1x is smooth and refined, letting you come to the music, the C-5xe is far more insistent and even rambunctious. It *commands* your attention with a lively, more visceral sound that says “hey, you and me buddy. We're going to party with some music and we're doing it right now!” It's not forward

sounding by any stretch, but the midrange is crisp and highly resolved with excellent resolution of low level details in the recording space (if just a hair less than the great D-1x), outstanding dynamic contrast and better bass impact and articulation than any Ayre player I've heard to date. Not only is the lowest foundation rock solid (the *very* bottom that anchors and solidifies a piano), bass speed makes drums sound concussive but tightly drawn and rhythmically alive.

And yet what really separates the C-5xe, and the other Ayre gear I've heard and lauded in these pages, is that it sounds more like something has been taken out of the system, rather than added to it (if that makes any sense at all.). There's a purity in the C-5xe's presentation that's beyond transparency, and even more than the dissolution of another layer between the music and the listener. Digital disc playback is less mechanical sounding with the C-5xe; the space occupied by the musicians sounds less like hi-fi parlor tricks and more like the real thing. There's less sound of equipment, and more of raw artistic expression jumping out of the music.

Ayre has clearly established a high water mark for multi-format players with the C-5xe. It's not only consistent across all formats, it *excels* across all (stereo!) formats performing at or very near the current state-of-the-art. I think the hi-rez formats would be doing much better with audiophiles had a player of this quality come along earlier. But hey, it's here now and hi-rez digital needs a shot in the arm like the C-5xe badly. And serving music lovers by eschewing video playback and multichannel audio allowed Ayre to deliver reference quality sound at a price that, while not cheap at \$6k, isn't as lofty as the C-5xe's performance would lead your ears to believe. Rarified Ayre indeed!

Associated Equipment

Vandersteen Model 5A loudspeakers, VTL TL7.5 preamplifier, Aesthetix Rhea and Ayre P-5xe phono stages, Theta Citadel power amplifiers, SME 20/2 turntable, SME IV.Vi tonearm, Lyra Titan cartridge, Ayre D-1x CD/DVD player, Audioquest Skyy and Cheetah interconnects, Audioquest Kilimanjaro speaker cables, power delivery by Richard Gray's Power Company 400S devices, AudioQuest NRG-5 and RGPC High Tension Wire AC power cords, with room treatment by Acoustic Room Systems

Specifications

Outputs: One each, balanced on XLR, single-ended on RCAs, digital audio on AES/EBU

Dimensions: 17 1/4" x 13" x 4 3/4"

Weight: 26 lbs.

Manufacturer Information

Ayre Acoustics. Inc.

2300-B Central Ave.

Boulder, CO 80301

303 442 7300

www.ayre.com

Price: \$6k