



Ayre Acoustics KX-5 Twenty & Ayre VX-5 Twenty

In 2013, Charles Hansen's Ayre Acoustics celebrated 20 years of producing some pretty decent high-end audio components. That's quite a feat in an industry dealing with ever-shifting technologies and trends.

But then Ayre is the kind of company that develops its own technologies and sets new trends, rather than following others – and that's as good a formula for longevity as any.

The KX-5 Twenty pre-amplifier and VX-5 Twenty stereo power amp are a good case in point. The Twenty moniker is a direct reference to the two decades Ayre is celebrating, while also distinguishing these versions from the original KX-5 and VX-5.

There's more to the two components than a commemorative designation, though. In fact, the Twenty badge confirms that this duo has benefited from some significant upgrades, directly descended

from Ayre's top-flight R-Series.

So, in addition to some of the accepted Ayre hallmarks, such as a fully balanced, fully complimentary circuit topology, zero feedback, and the pre-amp's Variable Gain Transimpedance (VGT) volume control, these new 5-Series models also benefit from some new developments.

There's the AyreLock power supply, which claims to lock the output voltage of the power regulator, regardless of load fluctuations, while the famous diamond output stage used by Ayre has undergone further development. It's now referred to as a double diamond output stage.

In the original, two pairs of bipolar transistors are connected via their emitters and bases as an alternative to the more common push-pull topology. The so-called double diamond configuration adds a new buffer stage, also employing the diamond circuit principle. This increases

efficiency and reduces heat output.

Importantly, older VX-5 and KX-5 units can be upgraded to the latest spec.

Aesthetically, the revised KX-5 and VX-5 are almost indistinguishable from their predecessors, except for the subtle 'Twenty' logo. The exterior design continues to reflect a pleasing balance between clean design and functionality – typical of the Ayre brand.

The VX-5 Twenty power amp is more compact than you'd expect, but its 24 kg weight serves as proof of physical and sonic substance. The enclosure is substantial and all-metal, with a top plate that's vented to afford cooling.

The stepped faceplate is thicker at the edges, adding a measure of visual finesse. A soft-touch power on/standby button, is located just above a recessed LED that glows green in standby mode, and blue when the amp is operational.



The rear panel is dominated by two sets of Cardas binding posts that are very effective, if somewhat awkward to use, and should ideally be used with spade-terminated speaker wire only – bananas are supported via an adapter.

Both balanced XLR and single-ended RCA inputs are provided, with a centrally located power rocker switch placed above an IEC power socket. The VX-5 runs quite hot when operational, and remains warm in standby mode.

The KX-5 Twenty pre-amp reminds me very much of the Ayre AX-5 integrated amp, although it's a bit slimmer – and lighter. It does employ the same alphanumeric central display, which now looks a little rudimentary compared to the latest OLED displays, but is focussed on functionality. Ayre claims the basic display is used because it creates much less noise than OLED's

The switchgear consists of dual rotary controllers – one for volume, the other for source – and just two buttons: one activates mute, and then standby when pressed longer. The other switches on the record outputs, while a long press accesses the setup menu.

Setup options include input activation and renaming, as well as adjusting the gain offset between inputs or selecting the home theatre bypass option. A factory reset can also be invoked, and the AyreLink system comms ports can be activated.

The rear panel shows a predilection for balanced operation. The KX-5 offers four stereo XLR input sets, together with two variable-level XLRs for connection to a power amp. There's also a fixed output XLR set for recording purposes.

For those who require single-ended RCAs, there are two stereo input sets. Dual, in/out AyreLink RJ45 ports, as well as an IEC power socket with rocker switch complete the rear panel picture.

The review combination arrived brand new, and if Ayre is to be believed, run-in time can be as long as 500 hours. From my experience with the VX-5 and KX-5, I can tell you that they do benefit from extended running in.

This review was completed with about 300 hours of burning in time logged, and the time and effort was well worth it. Plus, I'd expect more, if subtler, gains to be achieved going forward.



Sonically this duo is just marvellous, delivering a smooth, engaging and utterly accessible sound that draws the listener into the music with a gentle insistence and a beguiling honesty and instantly establishing a close rapport.

Music that you thought you knew well sounds fuller, more vibrant, more 'real'. There's a purity of purpose, an emotive accessibility that is all centred around the music, and not at all about the hi-fi.

Listening to the Ayres, you feel far less

VITAL STATS

KX-5 Twenty pre-amplifier

Frequency response	DC – 250 kHz
Signal-to-noise ratio	N/A
Inputs	4x balanced XLR, 2x single-ended RCA
Outputs	2x balances XLR, 1x single-ended RAC 1x XLR record out
Dimensions (WxHxD)	440 x 100 x 340 mm
Weight	10,5 kg

VX-5 Twenty power amplifier

Power output	175 watts continuous (8 ohms) 350 watts continuous (4 ohms)
Frequency response	DC – 250 kHz
Signal-to-noise ratio	N/A
Inputs	1x stereo XLR, 1x stereo RCA
Outputs	2x binding post sets
Dimensions (WxHxD)	440 x 120 x 480 mm
Weight	24 kg

Price

KX-5 Twenty	R169 900
VX-5 Twenty	R169 900

Verdict

A wholesome, intelligently engineered and solidly executed pre/power duo. Meticulous build quality underpinned here by innovation and an easy-flowing, hugely accessible sound.

Supplied by

Fundipoint
031-705-4168

e-Mail

sales@vividaudio.co.za

Website

www.fundipoint.co.za

OUR RATING: 92 / 100





inclined to analyse individual elements of the system's performance, but to embrace the full glory and majesty of the music instead. That's because the music is presented with exceptional presence and a real sense of legitimacy.

Yes, this system is lucid and revealing, making the most of the incoming signal, and presenting the information across a generous, expansive soundstage. And yes, it images with a sense of dimensionality so vivid and realistic that it's easy to visualise the physical position of the performers.

But there is a cohesion, a completeness to the music that ensures it never loses its intention or creative thrust. Vitally, the Ayres never clinically dissect the sound, nor re-interpret the music: they simply present a full, rich-hued picture of the actual performance.

The transparency of the pre-amp means it never gets in the way of the music, while the power amp doesn't allow its muscle and pace to rush matters: it uses its considerable reserves and headroom to afford the music free, unencumbered passage without any duress. As I said, in this company, the music sounds just 'real'.

Listening to John Mayer's cover of the JJ Cale classic 'Call Me The Breeze', off *Paradise Valley*, the Ayre pair easily picked

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their way through the densely instrumented arrangement, with the snappy percussion, a deeply resonant bass, a rich Hammond B3 organ, and a pair of virtuoso guitars all vying for attention.

The result was foot-tapping and splendid, with Mayer's sinewy vocals prominent, but always leaving enough room for even the finest details. The wide, deep soundstage

was compelling in its ability to accommodate the fullness of the performance, inviting the listener to simply sit back and enjoy its full impact.

The ability of the Ayres to reflect the intent and thrust of the music is what makes them so engaging, and so beguiling. You never have to work hard to identify and isolate individual elements, because they are all there, and their contribution to the overall performance is equally clear.

One of my favourite blues collaborations brings together evergreen guitar great Eric Clapton and blues giant BB King on *Riding With The King*. 'Marry You' starts out with a fuzzy, almost R&B-style guitar and Clapton's surprisingly articulate vocals, but he's soon joined by the blues-infused riffs and craggy voice of King.

The music becomes a rousing soul anthem laced with funky bass lines and enthusiastic percussion, while the guitars are showcased against a backdrop of fuzz-drenched rhythms. The Ayres accurately portrayed the fairly flat but wide-open staging, and again extracted loads of relevant detail.

Moving on to 'Three O' Clock Blues' off the same set demonstrated the tonal breadth of the Ayre duo: the bass is almost tactile in its intensity, while Clapton and



King duke it out with voice and guitar.

That muscular bass, insistent percussion and a honky-tonk piano are the eloquent witnesses to an intriguing battle. Again you find yourself drawn into the very core and essence of the music, so that it's easy to forget that you're actually listening to hi-fi.

It may be a compilation, but the Rolling Stones' *Grrr!* brings together some the band's best tunes. 'Honky Tonky Woman' is a case in point, and the Ayres accurately, believably portrayed the raw, edgy, visceral intensity of Jagger and Co., laying bare the potency and the swagger of the band to foot-tapping effect.

The mix is brash and stereo-exaggerated, but you still get the sense of a band playing together with a bright, powerful enthusiasm. Their wide-open sound is even more prevalent on 'Sympathy For The Devil': Jagger pouts and struts dead centre, surrounded by a wall of percussion, while the intricate bass passages are more lucid here than I remember.

An almost hollow piano provides a clangy counterpoint, while the backing chorus sounds almost taunting. When the searing lead guitar enters at the song's climax, it does so with a jagged, spiky intensity.

And then there's the spine-tingling



beauty of 'Angie', with its acoustic guitars, melancholy piano and Jagger's adolescent, emotional vocals clinging to sheaves of shimmering strings ...

I hadn't listened to Paul Simon's *Graceland* for years, but I'm glad I did so in the company of the Ayre pre/power. The textures, the voices and the almost eerie ambience of 'Homeless' were so faithfully, so powerfully represented that it had me at the edge of my seat.

The male choir was stirring in its intensity and realism, with such close attention to detail that it was easy to focus on any individual voice. But it was even more rewarding to become immersed in the full presence and momentum of the entire choir.

No wonder Simon's vocals sound almost plaintive and humbled by the sheer power of those voices. The clarity and intensity of the music was compelling.

On 'Diamonds On The Soles Of Her Shoes', the sheer dynamics of the recording were breathtaking – from the intro chorus to the intense percussion, and the filigreed guitars. It took real effort to tear myself away from the music!

I remember the more than a year spent with a pre-Twenty generation Ayre AX-5 integrated with fondness. It displayed many of the same characteristics as the KX-5/VX-5 combination: an ease of flow, a revealing clarity, a tonal breadth and an overriding sense of authenticity.

But these Twenty Series components are a step ahead of the AX-5 in every respect, while losing none of the essence. They simply capture and present more of the music in a way that is magical and utterly addictive. The Ayre KX-5 and VX-5 are fine expressions of the art of hi-fi. But more importantly, they are compelling proof that hi-fi can – and must – be musically authentic, too.

Deon Schoeman

Software

John Mayer – *Paradise Valley* (Sony Music 96/24 FLAC)
 Eric Clapton – *Riding With The King* (Warner CD Rip FLAC 44/16 WAV)
 The Rolling Stones – *Grrr!* (ABKCO Records 88/24 FLAC)
 Paul Simon – *Graceland* (Warner CD)

Associated Equipment

Bryston BDA-3 D/A converter
 Marantz SA-KI Pearl Lite SACD player
 Primare PRE32? MM30 pre-amp
 Parasound Halo A21 power amp
 Vivid Audio B1 Decade loudspeakers
 Synology DS216se NAS
 Olive One network player