



September 2009

## **Doug Schroeder immersed in digital the Austrian way via the \$5,500 Ayon Audio CD-2 CD player**

### **Doug Schroeder**

#### Specifications:

Conversion rate: 192kHz / 24 bit

Tube complement: 4 x 6H30 EH

Dynamic range: > 110dB

Output level @1 kHz / 0,775V -0dB: 0 – 4.8 V rms variable

Output level @1 kHz / 0,775V -0dB: 10 V / peak

Output impedance Single-Ended-RCA: 300 Ohms

Output impedance Balanced-XLR: 300 Ohms

Digital output: 75 Ohm S/PDIF (RCA), 110 Ohm AES / EBU (XLR)

Digital input: 75 Ohm S/PDIF (RCA)

S/N ratio: > 105 dB

Frequency response: 20Hz - 20kHz +/- 0.3dB

Total harmonic distortion @ 1kHz: < 0.001%

Remote control: Yes

Output complement: RCA & XLR

Dimension (WxDxH) cm: 48x33x12 cm

Weight: 13 kg

**MSRP:** \$5,500

#### **U.S. / Canada / Mexico Distributor:**

Ayon Audio USA

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I walked into the local Best Buy the other day and spied an alternative future, a display of Micro-SD Chips preloaded with music. The things were so small that if you were to drop one while standing on a lawn you might not find it! I shuddered as I considered what such technology, along with dynamically compressed recordings and mid-fi electronics will portend for the industry. I thought to myself that it will take another generation of geniuses to extract from that format anything approaching the quality of the upsampled CD. But by then, in order to keep pace with innovation, another concept will be spawned which will keep convenience alive and audiophile sound at bay.

I have not yet experienced any portable, drive- or streaming audio-based music source to rival the quality of a high profile player; I currently use [Sonos](#)' coaxial output to an outboard DAC to handle streaming audio and files of my collection on a NAS. There is no doubt that one can obtain pleasing results through these other venues, but the silver disc is still king in my listening room. One of the reasons why is a machine called the Ayon CD-2, a top-loading, tubed, upsampling redbook player. It is the third effort of Gerhard Hirt, an Austrian designer who continues to hone his craft. I have had the privilege of reviewing all but one of his players and have seen consistent improvement in them. The CD-2 is an outstanding mix of artistry, technological innovation and lush music reproduction.

When introducing the [CD-3](#), which preceded the model under review, I noted "I have not found another player which has bettered the CD-3 in terms of putting me in a state of *rapture* when listening." I have now found that player - it's called the Ayon CD-2. A raft of improvements, from the stunning new lid with integrated clamp to the beefier chassis, has resulted in another

step forward for the Ayon team. I keep my eyes open regarding public perception of designers whose products I review, and I am seeing increasing positive perception of the Ayon gear. In my experience this is warranted, as not only the players but also the [Spirit](#) integrated amp I wrote about are exceptional products.

The CD-2 is the replacement for the two-chassis CD-3: think CD-3 with 15% additional advancement. This is no small feat, as the CD-3 was a fine source for my [\\$100K Super-review rig](#). Take nearly any parameter of the CD-3 and consider the CD-2 to have bested it by no less than 15% perceptually. I heard the two together in my room for an extended period, and both my heart and ears gravitated toward the CD-2. I consider it refined, rich, sweet and potent, a combination beguiling to me.

The original CD-1 is being retired to make way for the already released CD-1s. The CD-3 will be phased out later this year or in 2010. There are no plans to revive the twin chassis design. Rather, when the reference quality CD-5 (You can be sure I'll be setting my sights on that one!) is released it too will have a single chassis, so that will be the look of Ayon for the foreseeable future. I do like its looks, as the black anodized aluminum casing is now a tad wider, thicker and taller. It not only appears more substantial, but also aids in repressing operational vibrations. Other than the redesigned lid, the player looks like a cousin to the transport of the CD-3.

Numerous design changes include:

Bur Brown 1704 D/A converter

Upsampling process

Dual R-core Transformers

New CD-drive controller board

New Display and Remote control

Gold PCBs

New 6H30 analogue output stage L/R separated

Integral Lid/Clamp system

Elimination of repetitive commands to read disc



In other words, this is a whole new machine, one that is more pleasurable to use than the CD-3. It is a complete reworking, not a “re-warming”. You may have seen plenty of look-alikes in similarly rounded cases, Ayon is not particularly impressed by the clone-ish players which have followed on the heels of their work. So, they’re making it much more difficult through these advancements for others to copy them. Gerhard points out the CD-2 *“is a completely new design and has no relation with the previous CD player designs.”* Ayon products are *brainiac’ed* and assembled in Austria, the buyer is getting a calibrated musical piece, not a piece of musical equipment lacking calibration. There is a critical difference.

The unit retains the red backlit logo and top mounted controls of previous designs. New are the approximately 1.5” x 3” Chrome grills at the left and right rear of the cover over the tubes to allow them to dissipate what little heat they generate. According to Ayon the unit needs only about 4” (10cm) clearance underneath a shelf, however in principle I would recommend much more clearance.

At the back there is a red light which illuminates when the unit is plugged in. It reads, “Phase”. I scratched my head, “Phase!” I wondered how the unit was determining the proper phase, and just how I was supposed to invert the plug when the prongs are sized to only enter oriented *one way* without the travesty of using a cheater plug! I couldn’t foresee having to return the unit to have its phase reversed. Upon inquiry, it turns out that the North American model’s purpose for the red light is to indicate “On”, not phase. European plugs look similar on both poles, so that one might have the plug inserted such that the player is out of phase. The “Phase” light indicates proper connection of the European player for best performance.

The flimsy ball and chuck disc retention system of the previous model is history, in favor of the integral weighted magnetic clamp. I sing the praises of Ayon for making this move, as it makes the player more user-friendly. Now, rather than juggle player parts, then punch multiple buttons to get a song going, all one need do is pick up the integrated lid, place the disc and put the lid on top. The alignment of the internal magnets of the lid and base grasp the disc tightly for playback. I found that approximately once every 20 times when a disc was inserted the magnets were not aligned and did not “grab” each other’s magnetic field to lock. It sounded as a clattering, as though a critical part was loose. In reality, nothing is hurt and a quick lift of the lid to reset the disc fixes it. After a while I wanted to believe that I had developed superior disc clamp placement skills, but I know better. Just when I think I’ve got it down perfectly, I get a “rattler”.

Another quibble is the occasional skittering of a slightly warped disc. It does not take much

warping for a disc to skitter its edges rapidly while spinning in the CD-2, as the gap between the seated disc and transport disc's "floor" is very small. It only happened with two or three discs of several dozens played, and I never found the sound to be loud enough to disrupt my music. Only with very exceptionally quiet passages of music would it be discernible (Remember, I have a custom listening room with about an 8dB drop in ambient noise; In a normal living environment this might not be heard at all). I rate this about a 1 on a scale of 1 to 10 as a concern.

Initialization is swift and smooth, the player is raring to go before you can get back to your seat. The Ayon is equipped with the Stream Unlimited – Vienna transport made by the Austrian company Stream Unlimited, which is also the transport of choice for the Ayon CDP CD07 and CD-1S. A spinoff of Phillips, Stream Unlimited's engineers includes some who were designers of the original CD format-standard. Stream Unlimited also collaborated on the CD-drive servo board. Also adding to the upgrades, the top plate of the chassis was thickened to add extra stability to the lid/CD holder mechanism.



## *The Sound of CD-2*

There is not a world of difference between the CD-2 and the CD-3 when it comes to the performance. Charlie Harrison of Ayon Audio USA, the U.S. distributor for Ayon, indicated that they would be similar, and he was right. The CD-3 seemed to my ears a bit more mellow and indistinct. The CD-2 has been tuned to be a touch tighter and has superior detail resolution, but not by much. Considering that the two-chassis CD-3 was the top of the line previously, it's a marvelous accomplishment for Ayon to be able to reduce the price by approximately \$2,000 and still come up with performance advancement.

As I indicated in my previously published [Audio Blast](#), the CD-2 in the tradition of Ayon players, is not an attempt to extract every last bit of warm, root beer-ish (sweet, dark and goes down smooth) flavor of tube performance from a player. I would liken the experience of the CD-2 more to Mountain Dew, as a sweet, highly charged, vibrant brew. You can get your buzz of detail to your limit with the player, or you can pair it with mellow electronics to tone it down.

Two amps which I used extensively with the Ayon each had their own personality akin to the aforementioned beverages. The [Cambridge Audio Azur 840W](#) amp is like a shot of liquid adrenaline, a highly charged affair with copious power and scintillating clarity. Conversely, the Moscode 402Au, by comparison, is a root beer float. The Moscode lays the tube vibe all over the music, suppressing a bit of detail to add bloom to the music. When paired with the Ayon, each shone in its own way.

One of the best aspects of the CD-2 is that it does not flood the musical experience with tube warmth. One can bring whatever warmth they wish to the system in the amp and speakers. The Ayon players all exhibit a lovely expansiveness in which the instruments extend naturally. I pulled out Michael McDonald's Motown disc and relived "Heard it Through the Grapevine" and "Ain't Nothing Like the Real Thing". If I wanted to flood the sound with a "heavier" nostalgic feel, the Moscode 402Au thickened Michael's voice and fattened the bass. Conversely, the Azur amps had the speakers chasing the myriad of stereophonic background effects from left to right with the lightness of a fly darting to and fro. I find the Ayon players to be balanced very well between the plumpness of tubes and the precision of solid-state. The CD-2 dances on an even thinner tightrope between those two extremes than its siblings, which makes its balancing act all the more captivating.

## *Direct Output from the CD-2 to Amps*

With the CD-2 you can utilize the onboard variable output and run it directly into an amp, or pair of amps, and get *to-die-for* results! Years ago, when I had an Ah! Njoe Tjoeb 4000 player

with upsampler, I tried the “direct to amp” method – and was sorely disappointed. The Ah! Njoe Tjoeb modded Marantz player needed a preamp to excel. I was not alone in thinking I would be able to streamline the rig, recapture some money and get better sound all in one move. Many have failed, as their players have not delivered the finely contoured, velvety sound that comes from a good preamp.

The CD-2, however, is a *different story!* It has such a clean, well-balanced output that most preamps are not going to help it. Literally, there is a good chance that a preamp will *detract* from the CD-2’s sound. Lately, I have been using three respected preamps at various price points, namely the Cambridge Azur 840E, Jeff Rowland Capri, and VAC Renaissance Signature Preamplifier MkII, and every one of them has to work to recapture what is lost from the CD-2. Shoving the signal through an additional set of interconnects and another component simply is not conducive to the ultimate Redbook performance. Consider that adding preamps vastly increases the cabling and electronics after the source. The VAC preamp is exceptional, and gets one almost back to the point of the Ayon’s pristine signal. It takes some of the best gear available to pass on a signal from the CD-2 unmolested. The cleanest and most cost effective solution for the audiophile on a budget is to run it direct into the amp(s). There is, however, one caveat which I will address shortly.

## *Tried My Level Best*

Part of the excitement of reviewing is that one never knows precisely what will be encountered when assembling a rig. A surprise is always just around the corner, hopefully of the fun kind and not the rude kind. I did not anticipate a rude surprise with the Ayon CD-2, but got one anyway. In this particular instance it wasn’t really the player’s fault, but mine – it would be foolish to assess fault to the player, somewhat akin to being in a one-car accident and saying, “The tree came out of nowhere...!”

I chose to try out the CD-2’s internal volume control with the Cambridge Audio Azur 840W amps, both set to Bridged Mono mode. I’m very happy Cambridge designed the 840W with five levels of protection circuitry, as they used at least one on that particular instance. When I fired up the rig they “blew” immediately and went into protect mode even though I had reduced the level-out from the Ayon to zero.

Under normal circumstances I would have been freaking out. However, having perused the amp’s manual, I was aware that the protection circuits would allow for a reset under such circumstances. So, it was with a “Huh” level of curiosity that I noted the flashing light on the front of the amps, turned off the player, reconfigured and powered up again. Click...pop, and presto - all better! “*I love these amps,*” I gushed. In assessing the situation, Gerhard thought that since I used XLR interconnects there might be a ground loop between the two units causing the failure, and if so I would need to “float” the amps.

I, however, believe the issue involved my using the Azur amps in Bridged Mono mode with the [King Sound the King](#) electrostatic panel speakers, as I had no issues with the [Legacy Audio Focus SE](#) speakers when the amps were in Bridged Mono. When I reconfigured the system with the same amps in the *Dual Mono* mode I encountered no problem. The “Mystery of the Blowing Monos” is not yet solved (Sounds like a techie Hardy Boys mystery; I think I read every one as a teen but don’t recall that title). My thought is that the impedance of the King speakers was too low for their operation in Bridged Mono mode.



## *The Sonar “ping”*

Most of us are familiar with the sound of the classic sonar “ping”, the high pitched echoing tone which trails off. Using the CD-2 direct to amplification, the unit was found to emit such a ping through the speakers. Every time a new disc was initialized and the “Play” command was issued, the player emitted such a sound. It did seem that consistently the first instance after turning on the player produced the most intense “ping”, and playing subsequent discs did not cause as strong of a “ping”. As it is sent to full power amplification, this “ping” *in* certain systems *can be* a serious noise emitted through the speakers.

In use with the Cambridge Audio Azur 840W amps at their 250wpc setting, the ping was surprising, but I knew it was harmless to the speakers. After my initial surprise I learned to ignore it. The effect was similar to the popping sound made when a Naim amp is turned on, only at a much higher frequency. However, when I configured the amps to Bridged Mono mode, at 800wpc, the ping packed quite a wallop – the level of the burst was such that I did *not* like it at all - on the tweeter especially, and I felt it was not safe to continue subjecting the speakers to that burst of power.

Gerhard explained the reason the ping exists is that the Jantzen capacitors used in the CD-2 have a large diameter with many foil windings. As well, the 6H30 tubes have a big filament grid. When the relay contact is made and the unit first begins playing, the fully charged caps discharge. The ping could be eliminated any number of ways, including using different caps, reducing the output voltage, using a different tube with a smaller filament grid, or including 1dB of feedback at the output stage. However, in every instance Gerhard found the sound to suffer, thus the ping remains. As he states, “We designed the CD-2 without any sound performance limitation... For us, we can accept a tiny ping during pressing “play” the first time...but we can’t accept any sound limitation; we go ahead always without any compromise as much as we can.” I appreciate that engineering insistence when it comes to sound, and I feel it matters. I have always been of the mindset that I will often accept the idiosyncrasies of gear if it means better sound. However, I will not do so at the potential for concern over the equipment.

Yet, it should be noted that in my experience, necessarily, the higher the power of the amp coupled with higher efficiency speakers, the louder the ping. In a different configuration, the [Pathos Classic One MkIII](#) (270wpc into 4 Ohms in mono mode) integrated amps running mono along with the astounding King Sound the King speakers (very inefficient at 83 dB and 1.8 Ohms at 20,000 Hz) the ping was all but nonexistent. There is a continuum of intensity to it, and as one moves upward in power and speaker efficiency it is more of an issue. At some point, say 500wpc, the ping does become an issue of concern, at least to me. If I were to put 800 or 1,000 Watts on the system, I would use a preamp with the CD-2, which eliminates the ping altogether. The tradeoff in clarity (i.e. the loss of clarity by utilization of the preamp) would likely compel me to continue with less power and use the CD-2 direct to amp.

## *Direct Drive*

If one can use the CD-2 directly to amp(s), caution must be exercised that the volume is down to the “Min” setting, as when I received the unit it was set to “Max” from the factory! Note: on the player’s display -60 is mute and 0 is maximum volume. Having talked to Charlie Harrison about it, he thinks Ayon may reverse gear and have the player set at the factory to minimum, instructing the owner to adjust the volume via remote (there is no level control on the chassis, only on the remote). This would avoid any unpleasant surprises if someone did choose to take the signal output directly into amplification.

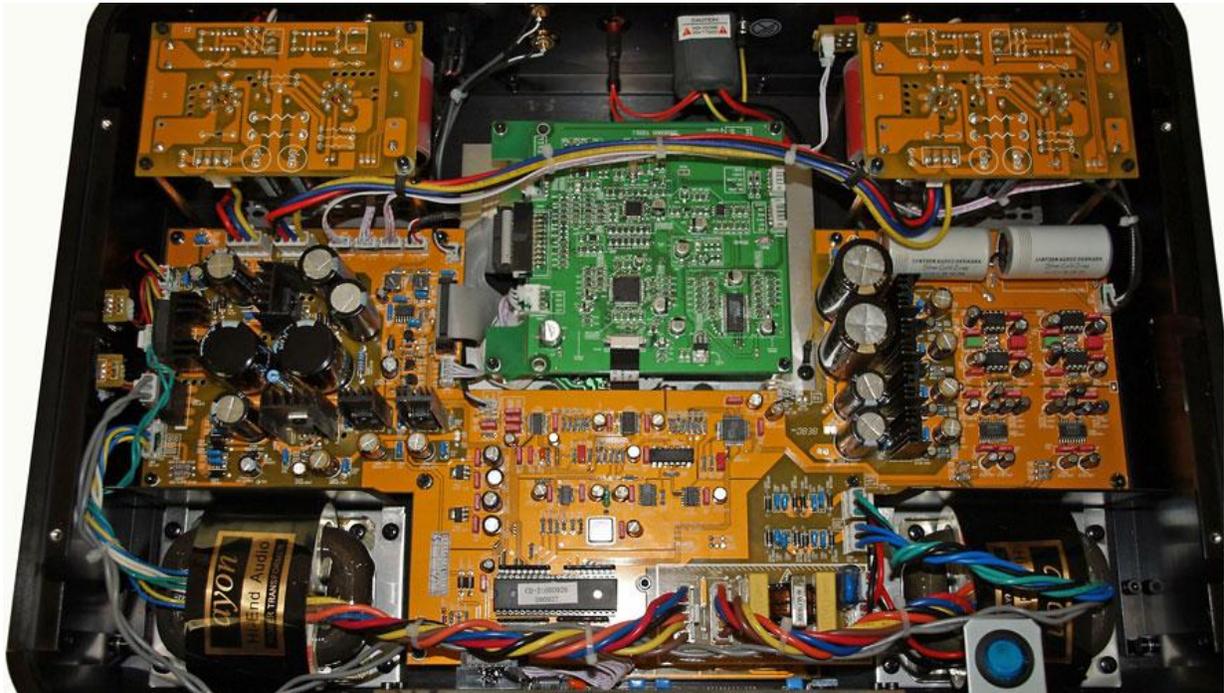
In fact, experimentation using the Ayon directly to amp(s) has led to an idea which I call my “Macro-system”. Larger, more complex molecules are called macro-molecules, and similarly, my concept of this rig is a *larger, more complex* two-channel rig, one which *operates*, however, in a more streamlined fashion than most. My macro-system will consist of two options of tubed or SS amplification, either one available at the touch of a switch on the CD-2, and a switch of the speaker cables at the amp(s). The CD-2 would source two distinct amplification schemes, *both* anchored by the CD-2. It would allow two different, parallel

options of dedicated player-to-amp performance, as well as system-wide integration of sources.

How can this be achieved? It requires a player with *three* critical features, all of which the CD-2 has already: 1. Level out control, 2. Digital inputs, and 3. Two analogue outputs; in the case of the CD-2, both RCA and XLR.

Here's how the Macro-system would look like, starting with the Ayon CD-2:

1. The CD-2 has volume control. With the Pathos integrateds set to bridged mode, the volume on the player will remain at "max" setting and listening level controlled via the integrated amps. Conversely, with any other power amp, tubed or SS, the CD-2 will maintain at the listening level.
2. There is no dedicated preamp used anywhere in this system; the Pathos will be one destination direct from the player and can accommodate other inputs, while the amp(s) of my choice will be the other destination. It is quite likely I would utilize solid-state amps for the second option, as the Pathos have a tube preamp stage. Since the CD-2 has both RCA and XLR outs, each can be directed to each amplifier destination. Note, again, that in both cases the preamp is eschewed. This is a critical point, as the presence of an additional set of cables and a preamp is *highly obscuring* to the ultimate performance of the system. I chose those words carefully, as I know how important a preamp is to many rigs, but the vast improvement of the system by honing the signal transmission from player to amp is unassailable (Of course, *the player must be up to the task!*).
3. The interconnect becomes *critically* important, as it is the umbilical to the sound being birthed. Any fault or weakness is immediately evident. I often utilize an extremely high quality XLR interconnect.
4. The amp(s): The necessity would be to switch speaker cables when switching amps. The destination amp is *determined by the XLR/RCA switch on the back of the CD-2*. There is the one possibility of major damage to power amps fed directly from the CD-2. If the level remains at "Max" when reconnected to power amps, damage could occur. The volume of the Pathos integrateds are always muted at start-up, but your integrated may not be. The CD-2's level *must be* reduced at the time of the switch to different amps! One mistake could be very costly, so consider this approach carefully.
5. One would need a highly appealing brand and model of speaker cable which would be enjoyed with either amp; it is *not advised* that one keeps two sets of speaker cables attached to the amps simultaneously. Care must be taken to assure that the leads will reach posts located further apart – amps which are bridged often use widely spaced binding posts. Also, the speaker cables must reach to both sets of amps if they are left in a permanent installation. Further, consideration of terminations is necessary, as some amps accommodate only one set of spades (i.e. the Pathos Classic One), while others accommodate only spades (i.e. Jeff Rowland amps using the Cardas "wheel" post). Consequently, I have three sets of speaker cables available, two sets with all spades, and one set with all BFA banana terminations, so that I can work with any configuration of binding posts.



Just as a Macro-molecule is larger/longer than a “simple” molecule, but (amazingly!) folds up automatically into its three-dimensional form to carry out its functions efficiently, so also the Macro-System is larger than normal, but operates more efficiently than most traditional rigs. It is authentically a full-fledged component “separates” system which is also streamlined and yields a very high level of performance *in two parallel rigs!*

There are profound advantages to this setup, among them:

1. An *extremely* streamlined signal path in a system with two distinct amplification schemes.
2. Nearly complete flexibility and availability *instantly*. No “retooling” the rig.
3. Nothing sacrificed in terms of audio excellence. One amp can be SS while the other tubed (both integrated, both power amps, etc), and both can be *repurposed* if desired. One having no secondary sources while the other accommodated the panoply of HT and internet sources.
4. Direct high-end DAC treatment of the streaming audio (via the CD-2).
5. If at least one integrated is used, no need to swap cables and reconfigure the system to switch sources.
6. High cost-to-performance efficiency; elimination of a set of cables and preamp aids purchase of second amp(s).

It may be argued that one might make more progress toward their ultimate sound of their system by merely using one power amplifier with the CD-2. I would not advocate abandonment of one's sonic ideals, but *extension* of them. Running two parallel amplification schemes allows for comparison between amps as well as additional inputs via an integrated. There are likely more issues and advantages, but let these suffice to introduce the idea.

## *Upsampling Intrigue*

The CD-2 is an upsampling player, and frankly is the first of its kind to convince me that upsampling is a necessity for the audiophile. I was not overwhelmed by the upsampling feature of the very respectable [Cambridge Audio Azur 840C](#) player, a unit which is good enough to be considered a budget reference player. On numerous comparisons between standard 16/44 processing and upsampled music, there was a questionable trade-off between the smoothness of the upsampling and the indistinctness it added. For quite a while using the Ayon CD-2, I had concluded the same; one had to choose between the tightness of the standard Redbook playback and the smoother, but less distinct upsampling.

*Then it happened*, a result of a combination of cables and processing I'm still trying to understand. I have made it a habit to try with every rig a pair of Wireworld Gold Starlight Digital cables *as interconnects*. Why? It sounds fairly fantastic! There is a supple tonal richness imparted with the digital cables, tuned to 75 Ohm versus the traditional interconnect at 110 Ohm, which I have not been able to hear using any manufacturer's RCA or XLR 110 Ohm interconnects (Recently I discovered at least one manufacturer *who includes among their interconnects a set of digital cables as interconnects!* "My idea" is being surreptitiously utilized by cable makers!). David Salz of Wireworld is a bit frustrated by this, as he has told me that the digital cables are less clean than the proper interconnects. I have politely held my ground, saying that what miniscule loss of detail may exist is more than compensated subjectively by the decadent increase in fullness and ever so elusive element of "live" sound.

Meanwhile, in discussion with Gerhard he described the Upsample mode as, "Most clients prefer the upsampling; the soundstage is more 3D and holographic – I personally prefer it." Regarding the non-upsampled mode, "...it is a bit more focused and compact, but again it depends also on the rest of your components, room acoustic and taste." For me, cables were the key which unlocked the upsampling magic of the CD-2.

Consistently in trial after trial, in rig after rig, *individually* the Gold Starlight digital cables and the Ayon's Upsample mode were each a touch less sharp than their counterparts. But using them together released a power of acoustic clarity and depth akin to splitting the atom (How's that for reviewer hyperbole?)! I have put together dozens of digital sources and cables in my systems over 20 years and have never experienced anything approaching that scale of

performance change in a digital product. It was literally as if a chain reaction had occurred, unleashing a far more powerful acoustic energy that was waiting to explode from the disc.

I had the King Sound the King speakers running at the time, and they shattered an invisible barrier of restraint which previously stood between the system and myself.

A much more subdued facet of performance was the tip given by Gerhard to not leave both pair of RCA and XLR interconnects connected to the unit at the same time. The new signal path is extremely short and efficient, such that, “If you connect the RCA and XLR together...it has an immediately negative side effect to all electrical circuit parameters and decreases the sound quality significantly.” In my listening I found that the difference was marginal, and it did not pass the Law of Efficacy. I left both sets of interconnects connected. The change effected by the use of the digital cables as interconnects was perceptually on an order of magnitudes larger.

## *“You get the CD player thrown in!”*

If I were to recommend a terrific, high-end stand alone DAC, based on my listening sessions, I might recommend the CD-2 and observe that you get a CD player with the deal. I have been enjoying Sonos, the modest whole house internet and NAS source with surprising quality. Over the months I have worked to ramp up its performance to match that of Redbook. With the Digital Input capabilities of the CD-2, I have fairly reached that point. For this review I used the SPDIF output of the Sonos directly to the CD-2. The digital cable is of critical importance, and Wireworld’s hot new design, the Gold Starlight 6 was critical to the elevation of this internet source to Redbook level. In this case the single Gold Starlight 6 linked the Sonos and CD-2.

One of the groups ready to be queued at any time on Sonos is the Little River Band (I know, syrupy nostalgia!). I played their music incessantly as a teen, and I have a few of their discs to compare head-to-head with a streaming source. One of my frustrations with internet-sourced music to this point has been its lack of depth, character and richness. Even on very good systems it seems flat and relatively uninviting, which is why I always end up back to the Redbook source.

This review was a new experience for me in that I used internet-based music to assess quality of sound every bit as much as physical media (NAS based music is a distant third place at the moment). The quality of the experience hearing LRB was so good that I at times forgot I was hearing streaming audio – sent wirelessly from the opposite end of the house! The CD-2 showed itself to have an immensely forgiving nature, taking the humble Sonos’ signal and crafting it into satisfying music.

What’s all the more impressive about this feat is that I was using a most exquisitely articulate

full-range ESL speaker, King Sound's the King. If a DAC can't cut it, the King will make mincemeat of it. Any lack of fluidity, any digititis will not escape unnoticed. The CD-2 was fully up to the challenge, and had a fluidity which I normally associate with analogue. When the opening line of "It's a Long Way There" was sung in the expanse of the auditorium, "Hey everybody, yeah, don't you feel that there's something," yeah, I *felt it!* It was *not* a long way to the stage, and it most definitely was not a long way to mentally place myself in the audience.

These are older recordings, so one might not expect superb resolution and dynamics, but it was right there, parallel in quality to the Redbook playback. If I walked into the room and did not know the source, I would not be able to name it by listening – it was *that close!* The more affordable and pleasing [Monarchy M24 DAC/Pre](#) could not keep up with the depth of sound field, precision and fullness of the CD-2. One could purchase very respectable separate player and DAC, but with the level of quality of the CD-2 it's not necessary; you get extremely high performance from both functions of the player. The quality of the CD-2's digital treatment was such that it could not be pushed "beyond the edge" to sound harsh. With rising levels, the music was not jagged or edgy. Even more poorly recorded classic rock such as Boston or Kansas on full-range ESL speakers was incapable of being irritating to the ears! That's a real world test showing the mettle of an ultra-smooth player.

## *There will be yet another*

Very soon on the horizon a new player will appear from Ayon, it's named the CD-5. At some point it will take up temporary residence in my room, extending my experience to the full line of Ayon players. As has become the norm, the expectation is that Gerhard will once again top his last effort. That would take some doing, but from the experiences with three of his players I wouldn't want to bet against the man.

Where does the CD-2 stack up? Consider that for most serious audiophiles who want outstanding Redbook performance, the CD-2 easily earns the right to be their reference player. That in addition you would get an outstanding DAC for alternative digital sources is a marvelous design gift from Ayon. I would keep the CD-2 for my reference if not for one thing – *I know the CD-5 is coming.*