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AYON AUDIO POLARIS II

A SYNDICATED ARTICLE FROM POLAND

This review first appeared in the May 2009 issue of [hi-end hifi magazine High Fidelity](#) of Poland. You can also read this [review of the Ayon Polaris II](#) in its original Polish version. We publish its English translation in a mutual syndication arrangement with publisher Wojciech Pacula. As is customary for our own reviews, the writer's signature at review's end shows an e-mail address should you have questions or wish to send feedback. All images contained in this review are the property of High Fidelity. - Ed.

Reviewer: Wojciech Pacula



Sometimes I'm sorry that I no longer give each review a line header as I did some time ago. I felt forced to eliminate them because while titles made the reading more pleasing, they were not always necessary. For some reviews titles came natural and suggested themselves, for others they were unnecessary. Since I wanted to avoid print magazine situations that often skirt the borders of good taste (Hi-Fi Choice and Hi-Fi News are masters at it but Stereophile and Hi-Fi+ aren't far behind), I resigned from using any titles at all. When something is missing however to show at a glance what we are dealing with, I sometimes regret it. But continuity is most important so for the sake of consistency, there no longer are or will be any titles. If I did change this rule however, this Ayon Polaris II review would bear the title: *Dream of flying fulfilled*.

A selection of discs used for this review: Bill Evans, *You Must Believe In Spring*, Warner Music Japan, WPCR-13176, CD | Christian Willisohn, *Hold On*, Stockfisch 357.4038.2, SACD/CD | Danielsson/Dell/Landgren, *Salzau Music On The Water*, ACT 9445-2, CD | Depeche Mode, *Only When I Lose Myself*, Mute, CD BONG 29X, SP CD | Derek And The Dominos, *The Layla Sessions. 20th Anniversary Edition*, Polydor/Universal Music Japan, UICY-93958/60, 3 x SHM-CD | G. F. Händel, *Acis & Galatea*, Dunedin Consort & Players, Linn Records, CKD 319, 2 x SACD/CD | G.F. Händel *Oratorios. Saul & Messiah*, Harmonia Mundi 2908280.83, 4 x CD | Kenny Burrell, *Soul Call*, JVCXR-0210-2, XRCD2 | Lars Danielsson, *Mélange Bleu*, ACT 9604-2, CD | Martin L. Gore, *Counterfeit2*, Mute, 582477, CCD | Patricia Barber, *Companion*, Premonition/Mobile Fidelity, UDSACD 2023, SACD/CD | Thom Yorke, *The Eraser*, XL/Warner Music Japan, WPCB-10001, CD | Włodek Pawlik, *Grand Piano*, Arms Records, ZP 140770 06-07, 2 x gold-CD | Wynton Kelly, *Kelly Blue*, JVCXR-0050-2, XRCD | Depeche Mode, *Violator*, Mute, STUMM64, Limited Edition, 180g LP | Frank Sinatra, *My Cole Porter*, Capitol. Pickwick Series, SPC-3463, LP | Madeleine Peyroux, *Careless Love*, Rounder/Mobile Fidelity, MSFL 1-284, 180g LP | Mel Tormé, *Oh, You Beautiful Doll*, Past Perfect/The Trumpets of Jericho, 904333-980, 180g LP | Paul Desmond, *Summertime*, CTI/A&M Records//Speakers Corner, A&M SP 3015, 180g LP.



Sound

I spent over two months listening to the Ayon machine, first to understand the phenomenon of its sound, later for pure pleasure to postpone its return date as long as I could. I have used the phenomenal [Leben RS-28CX](#) preamplifier for quite some time now. Unless far more money is at hand, it is really hard to beat. Except for a few rather disputable than inferior details however, the Polaris II now proposed a sound superior by a few classes, leaving behind hi-end and entering a domain that is better compared to live performances than reproduced sound. I exaggerate a bit of course but not for hollow effect. Audio discussions are crippled in some sense by having only a copy in our hands, a reflection which we try to play and compare to reality. Then there is the whole recording process and the carrier's physical limitations that stand in the way. This is why talking about any kind of reality is overused. On the other hand, it is difficult to judge what comes from speakers or headphones without any point of reference even if it is ultimately elusive. In the case of today's component, it is better to reference the sound of live instruments rather than other preamplifiers.

However, plugging the Ayon into our system does not plug it into a vacuum but in lieu of another preamplifier. So we must describe what differentiates the Polaris II from what we know. Switching from my Leben was a shock in terms of what opened up between the speakers but also culturally. It was a completely different version of reality. The first impression was of the Austrian preamplifier sounding significantly softer. For some time I thought it somehow wrong that the Leben with its sharper attack and a more distinctly 'ascendant' sound should be closer to reality. After a few concerts and -- this was perhaps more important -- the return to my preamplifier, it turned out I was wrong. Our experience of reality has nothing to do with any strong, visible, distinctive or other ingredients of the audio experience. Everything live is more natural and closer to the way the Ayon presents it so incredibly balanced. This is why it can occasionally seem soft. As you listen longer, it turns out that there aren't many elements in common with a softening or restraint but how it is all about the intrinsic richness of the transmission, its maturity and incredible resolution. This last characteristic hit me very clear and painfully when I returned to the Leben. While it is a very detailed and resolving device, it costs only what it does. I knew that better was possible in the abstract. The Polaris II showed that it can be done *much* better.

All vocals regardless of timbre or recording quality were incredibly energetic and just plain clear. I believed that

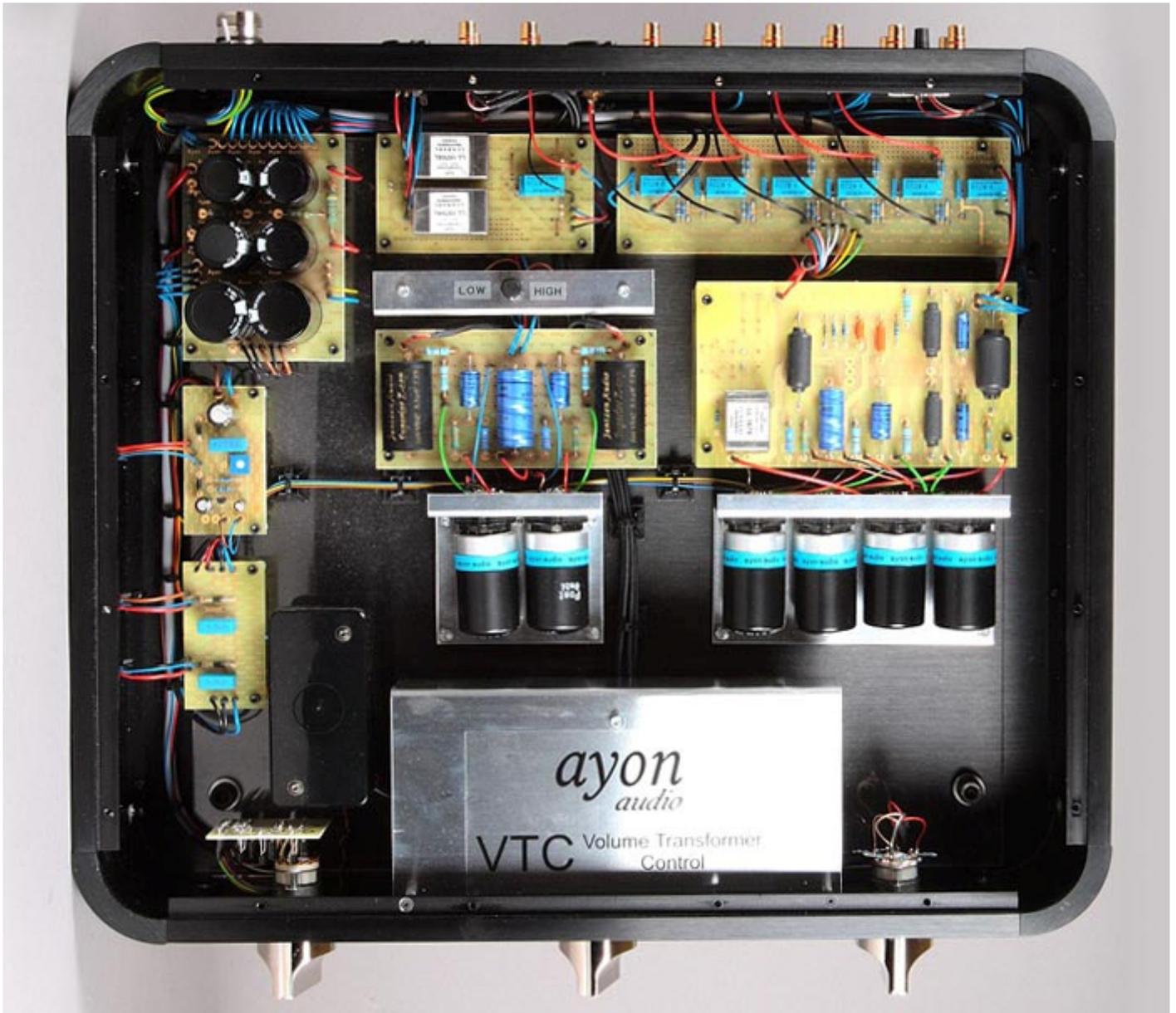
the Leben showed them clear and it does at least when compared to components between 20000-30000zl. The Austrian preamplifier showed them not clearer per se but deeper and fuller, with much better microdynamics and a better defined personal expression of each performer. I remember very well the first listening session with the new edition of the classic Derek And The Dominos *Layla* from Universal Music Japan. This was recorded on a multi-track recorder and not completely as it should have been, with flattened compressed dynamics and Clapton vocals deep in the mix. With the Ayon everything was clear, the choices were audible, the decisions made that together formed the final effect. And despite everything, this was to my liking but without pushing the vocals forward or warming them up. The Ayon does not do that. Its warmth derives from this incredible clarity and lack of distortion. This can be heard over very good systems. Instantly many discs once considered hard to listen to due to low recording quality become very listenable. We know what's wrong but we just don't give a damn as we receive a package that is completely satisfying. We hear the music and the recording is *behind* it.



That was the case with *Layla* but also with Martin L. Gore's solo disc *Counterfeit2* recorded with copy protection so it was ruined before it ever sold. I don't listen to it often because its copy protection is heard as an incredibly sandy treble and the presence of *something* (a kind of sub harmonic perhaps) that leads to a headache in minutes. With the Ayon there were no fireworks either but the sound was not as annoying as usual. It did not prevent me from listening. Plus, the vocals were incredibly good for the recording and repeated on Patricia Barber's *Companion* whose cuts displayed passion and rare mastery. This is a live recording and the club seemed within reach of my hands. I am talking about the energy and dynamics although as I wrote, the Leben seems the livelier device - or others like BAT's VK-3iX preamplifier or the [Belles IA-01](#) integrated. But all was not fully as it seemed. Those only pretended and suggested at superior micro and macrodynamics by being more penetrating. I don't mean brightening but penetration. The Ayon seems far more contained because it never allows for such playing. Ever. When we turn up the volume on the Leben, BAT or other preamplifiers, we get a stronger louder sound. Good. But the Polaris II does not increase the level selectively, it enlarges the sound. It increases the size of the virtual sources, *their* volume and not the general sound level. I hope you understand the difference. Playing louder does not irritate but rather fills the room with sound by

enlarging the bubble between the loudspeakers. For many the decisive point may well be how the Ayon treats the piano. It is at once vivid and smooth. In recordings where it is merely one of many equally important contributors, this characteristic was audible but not dominant. If however we take on a Bill Evans with his wonderful album *You Must Believe In Spring* (lately I bought all his Warner Bros discs as SHM-CDs on [CD Japan](#)) and listen to "B minor Waltz (For Ellaine)" first over the Ayon, then the Leben, we will be sorry. Everything is far worse over the cheaper preamp though it is not its fault. Without direct comparison, everything is super but only the Ayon extracts the deep tones and bass foundation of Evans' instrument. It was similar with Willisohn's piano on *Hold On* where it combined with his deep voice for a powerful effect of transcending the boundaries imposed by the loudspeakers; without attacking us like classic tube amplifiers but by erasing the border between the stage created by the loudspeakers and the one that was recorded. And although the sound came to us with the Polaris II like the beautiful piano of Lars Danielsson on *Mélange Bleu*, which appeared out of nowhere close, big and resonant with emotions in the title cut, I had the same impression when listening to *Salzau Music On The Water* recorded live between him, Christopher Dell and Nils Landgren on a wooden lake-shore platform at 5:00 am. The *intensity* of sounds was overwhelming on the condition that we reproduce them well. The Leben with the [Luxman M-800A](#) fared much better at this than all the integrated amplifiers I know. Yet the Ayon transmitted this event at a completely new level, filling the space between the instruments with air, silence and a background of *presence*. Special attention must be devoted to the bass. In that regard I clearly remember the BAT VK-3iX. In my experience only two preamplifiers bettered it: the VK-52SE sibling (I have not heard the REX) and the Reference 3 by Audio Research. These are two of the four best of their kind which I experienced in peace under controlled conditions. To those two and the Polaris II we should also add the Swiss NHB-128NS DartZeel. And Reimyo's CAT-777. So it comes to a comparison between state-of-the-art units. I will repeat what I always do for every comparison. I talk only about components I know well, which I heard under known conditions and of which I have absolute certainty that they sound exactly as I think. There are of course products omitted that are very good but which I have only heard at shows or read about. Those would include Ayre's KX-R and VTL's TL-7.5.





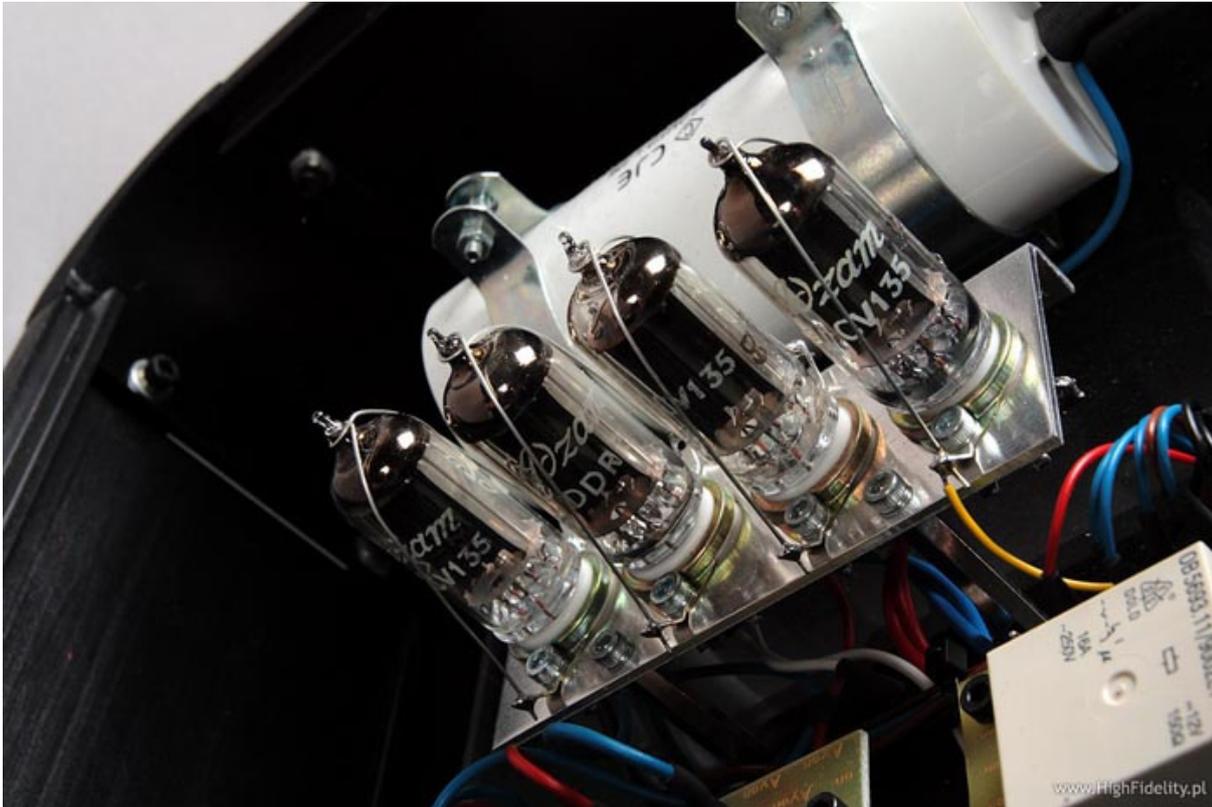
For today, only the Audio Research and BAT reach lower in the bass than the Ayon. In the bottom end, the Austrian is so well differentiated and defined that my Leben sounds as though it did not fully comprehend the goings-on in the cellar (I am thinking about the very low bass in pieces like "Makro" from *Mélange Bleu* or the bass from the single *Only When I Loose Myself* by Depeche Mode). Both American preamplifiers play this sub range a bit stronger than the Ayon but I am not certain their presentation is any truer. It will all depend on the entire system. If I had to compare the Polaris II to something, it would be another preamplifier but a solid-state one. It only happens once in a million to get something unique from a transistor but DarTZeel managed and that makes their NHB-128NS phenomenal. It sounds a bit sweeter than the Ayon and can cast a deeper soundstage. The perfect treble reproduction of the Ayon is not endangered however as the Swiss machine sounds smoother but with not as rich an internal life (remember that we are talking about state-of-the-art units here). The dynamics of the ARC and BAT seem a bit better than the Polaris II. This is audible after returning to the Leben which also throws a deeper stage if perhaps not as intense and natural. At first it also seems to have more treble, which is probably true but an oversimplification.



The Polaris II is a line preamplifier although looking inside we'll see that the bigger PCB (actually two) are taken up by a phono stage. It can be seen and sensed that this is one of the designer's hobby horses. Built around the same tubes as the line section, it also has a similar sonic signature. Regardless of the music selection, the reproduction is ultra pleasing (or whatever we shall call it), be it Depeche Mod's *Violator*, Madeleine Peyroux's *Careless Love* or most of all, Paul Demond's *Summertime*. All these performers played back very good 'sets', extremely even and well balanced, with a lot of treble and clearly no case of withdrawal but the midrange and its borders were slightly rounded, the bottom end balanced rather than dynamically unlimited. This rendered the recordings more alike than dissimilar. With the [Kuzma Reference](#) turntable this was extremely pleasing as it was earlier with the [SME 10](#) and Avid Volvere deck reviewed for *Audio*. Bass did not reach down as low as over my own [RCM Audio Sensor Prelude IC](#) phono stage but tonal balance was stable and counter-weighted by a warm full midrange. Frankly speaking, the Ayon's performance was very close to the sound of the ASR Basis and still related to the C-27 Accuphase and its AD-20 phono card equivalent in the same company's integrated amps. Interestingly enough, those are solid-state devices which sound like tubes. On the other hand, the [Manley Steelhead](#) sounds more like my RCM...

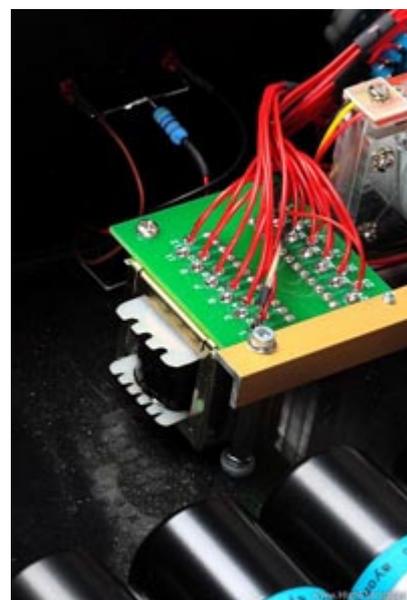
The American competition is more resolving and has more extended frequency boundaries with better dynamics. The RIAA section of the Polaris II, for the money, has difficulty achieving the same fluency and coherence. It is not the most resolved sound I've heard but at the same time very attractive. It has body, differentiates and defines vocals and anything else that occurs in the midrange also in difficult mono recordings like Mel Tormé's *Oh, You Beautiful Doll* and the heavily processed 'enhanced stereo' *My Cole Porter* by Frank Sinatra. With the latter, it was clearly heard that the Ayon slightly masks the clicks by not allowing them to appear in front of the music.

I clearly have not heard all the world's great preamplifiers. But the Ayon is at the very top of those I have heard and thus in the company of a select few equally tasteful components. Its sound is incredibly vivid and involving, making my eventual separation from it very painful. Now I know that I need a better preamplifier. The rest of my system showed the changes clearly. Hence I need to sell my beloved Leben. But that's only a digression. The clue of this summary is simply that the Ayon is not perfect as there are no such devices. The soundstage could be more elaborate and the bass could extend lower. Still, it presents the sound in a very satisfying way. You have to listen to it longer to appreciate that this is the case. It would probably be better still if it were fully balanced but okay, it is big and it is black. And it comes with a remote. It's brilliant.



Technical data:

Description: Pure class A, pentode in triode setting
Tubes, line section: 2 x Siemens C3M
Tubes, phono stage: 4 x Siemens C3M
Tubes, power supply: 4 x CV135
Maximum output voltage: 40Vrms
S/N ratio: > 96 dB
Output impedance: 30Ω
Input impedance: > 1MΩ
Frequency response (line section): 0,5 Hz – 400 kHz
Harmonic distortion (1V), line section: <0.01 %
Harmonic distortion (1V), gramophone section: <0.1 %
Inputs: 5 x line RCA, 2 x gramophone MC
Outputs: 2 x RCA, 1 x XLR
Power consumption: 40 W
Dimensions preamplifier (WxDxH): 500 x 403 x 110mm
Dimensions power supply (WxDxH): 500 x 430 x 110mm Weight: 33kg



Wojciech Pacula