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AYON AUDIO'S CD-3S KICK
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EQUIPMENT REVIEW



Ayon Audio CD-3s CD player

By Alan Sircom

Ayon Audio is an Austrian electronics brand with three distinct attributes. First, the products are built to a level of fit and finish that is rare even among big ticket audio (our sister title, *The Absolute Sound*, dubbed the brand 'The Bugatti of Audio'... and not without justification). Second, it's a company driven by thermionics and the output stage of the CD-3s features both tube regulation and a brace of 6H30s a side and finally the player goes for the minimalist, short signal path, no-feedback concepts common to valve amplifier designers.

Let's spend a little more time on the fit and finish. It's astoundingly good. It makes for a big and heavy player, but the none-more black deep anodised finish, the rounded edges and solid construction inside and out should be considered a standard by which high-end devices should be measured. OK, so if we are talking internal architecture, it lacks the regimented cable trunking of a Naim amplifier, but otherwise this is unashamedly high-end in look and build.

The CD sits in a silo on top of the player with something that looks like a deluxe semi-opaque cookie jar lid holding it in place. Fellow Austrians Stream Unlimited (as the name suggests, the company is better known for its streaming

products) make this distinctive transport mechanism. In front of this are the seven control buttons that drive the deck and the red display cut into the thick front panel make for an entertaining, but functional, ergonomic. Entertaining in this sense is not said with cynicism; you will be a little enthralled by the disc spinning beneath the dark acrylic cover.

The four vents in the top plate (and two cut into the side) are proof that we're in the presence of tubular digits, because the Ayon features two 6H30 triodes running parallel single-ended per side, and these are fed from a power supply sporting a quartet of 6Z4s as rectification. And that should give any bottlehead worth his or her salt pause; there are valve preamplifiers that don't go as deep, and select solid-state rectification in place of those extra 6Z4s.

Part of the reason for that might be because it is pretty much a CD player with a preamp built in. You can switch the CD-3s to fixed volume, but it also has a volume control (not bit-reduction, it's in the line stage) and there's both two analogue inputs (and one tape out) and a comprehensive set ▶

► of digital inputs (including Asynchronous USB, AES/EBU and even I2S) that you can hook to the CD-3s if you are wanting to go pre-free. A quartet of toggle-switches on the back panel switch between fixed and variable output, as well as absolute phase, a +6dB gain pad and the choice of balanced or single-ended output. As a mark of how damn seriously the company takes its audiophile credentials, there's even a push-button to invert power phase. Naturally, that also means some very high-grade components on those individually isolated, industrial grade PCBs.

This is clearly a valve amplifier manufacturer making what it considers to be the best way of making a CD player – essentially an excellent valve amp with good digital bits, rather than the other way round. The Burr-Brown based, 24/192 digital part is extremely well handled, both in terms of CD and USB and the conversion thereof, but the bit that turns this from 'good' to 'outstanding' really starts where the digits end. Curiously though, the knee-jerk (valves = warm sounding) trope doesn't apply here. What does seem to apply is their application of valve amp concepts to the analogue side of the digital domain works, and works well.

Ayon recommends a 50+ hour break-in period (which seems sensible, as it will take time for the tubes to bed in if new) and anywhere between 5,000-6,000 hours between retubes. It also suggests if you turn the player off for any reason (the button is on the underside of the player) wait 30 seconds before turning it on again. To that end, there's also a soft-start circuit to prevent any thermal shock potentially shortening the lives of the valves.

The CD-3s is a player of considerable grace and poise. Music seems to flow effortless from the Ayon player, whether

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that music is from the Golden Age of 1950s classical brilliance (there are so many gems on those two Mercury Living Presence boxes, it's hard to begin, but Menuhin playing Bartók's Second Violin Concerto is an obvious start) or Daft Punk's disco aspirations from earlier this year, the results are the same – a sense of musical understanding in the listener, developed out of that sense of communication and flow.

We all listen to our music in slightly different ways. Some listen out for a big, impressive and three dimensional soundstage – those people will praise the CD-3s for delivering exactly that. Others go for resolution – and they will also think the CD-3s has great prowess in detail retrieval. Those who look to dynamic range in CD player selection will find there is much to praise here. Then there are the rhythm kings, who will also find the player hard to beat at the beat. ►





▶ Despite being a failed guitarist, I'm often drawn to a well-turned lyric and good vocal articulation is often my 'thing', and I found Laura Marling's gamine Joni Mitchell-esque voice beautifully expressive and clear, standing proud of the background perfectly. The same applied when playing the CD-3s with some well-worn Dylan tracks (anything that adds to my enjoyment of Hurricane from the Desire album wins in my opinion, and the Ayon did just that, making his Bobness' drawl-diction that bit more understandable; not changed, not laid bare, just more communicative and more articulate).

What applies to the CD side, applies just as much to computer audio. The player comes with drivers for Windows PCs (up to and including Windows 8) and Mac users get USB 2.0 out of the box. I'm not sure if this is the perfect transition product from CD to computer audio, because you will always be drawn back to CD, but if you decide the computer is just another source for acquiring high-res or music unavailable on any other format, the CD-3s will spend a lot of time on your shelf.

Criticisms are mild, and more accurately 'observations'. I'm not completely convinced by the CD-3s as preamp proper. The line inputs are good, but can be bettered elsewhere by a good line-stage in terms of stereo separation and detail resolution. Perhaps more importantly, ergonomically this doesn't work as well as a dedicated set of knobs and dials to do the job. Also, the overall tone of the player is possibly going to be less attractive to those who think CD should be all about leading edges and high-frequency energy. That will endear the Ayon CD-3s to those who find a lot of current digital 'hard-edged', however. Finally, some may find the low-level settings too low and the high-level settings too high, especially on single-ended systems, where 5V could be into overload with some preamps. This isn't a deadly sin, because there's always the possibility of using the variable setting and turning the volume down slightly.

Finally, a seemingly pointless test actually divulged some interesting findings. I hooked my trusty-but-rusty discontinued Lyngdorf CD1 through AES/EBU, essentially to compare transport mechanisms. The CD1 itself is

(was?) a fine CD transport in its own right, but the Ayon had the measure of it. OK, the differences in performance were mild at best, but I did detect a slightly more refined and smoother sound from the Ayon.

The British often suspect beauty is only skin deep and beneath every lovely exterior, something dull and prosaic lives under the hood. This is not that kind of device. This is instead one of the best sounding CD players you can buy. In fact, it's so good, it makes you question the need to rip all those discs to a computer, when they sound this good. In 2013, audiophile CD replay needs a champion to fight for the cause. In the Ayon Audio CD-3s, I think we've found it. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

CD player

Digital inputs: USB, AES/EBU, S/PDIF
Toslink and coaxial, I2S

Analogue inputs: 2x RCA
(+1 tape out RCA)

Digital output: 1x S/PDIF coaxial

Analogue outputs: RCA and XLR

Conversion rate: 192 kHz, 24 bit

CD transport mechanism – Stream

Unlimited (Austria) custom top-loader

Tube complement: 4x 6Z4 (PSU), 4x 6H30
(output stage)

Frequency Response: 20Hz-20kHz
±0.2dB

THD+N: <0.002%

S/N ratio: >120dB

Dynamic range: >110dB

Maximum output level: 2.5V (RCA low),
5V (RCA high/XLR low), 10V (XLR high)

Output impedance (bal/SE): 900 ohms

Dimensions (WxHxD): 48x39x13cm

Weight: 17kg

Price: £5,350

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