

High Fidelity

Ayon Audio CD-35 HF EDITION No. 01/50

Manufacturer: AYON AUDIO MADE IN AUSTRIA
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–Review–

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WORLD PREMIERE

Below you will find a text regarding the Super Audio CD Ayon Audio CD-35 High Fidelity (HF) Edition player. It is not a classic test, but rather a record of the state of consciousness in the face of its sound, its presence in the system. In my system, it has permanently replaced my former favourite – the small, inconspicuous-looking Ancient Audio Lektor AIR V-edition player, with all the modifications that I have predicted for it.



That was not an easy decision for me and the Ayon player had stayed in the box for about two weeks before I unpacked it, two more before I seriously listened to it and yet one more before I finally started comparing. It is because each modification of my reference system is a hard time for me. This is not the reason why the Ancient player had been my basic sound source for six long years – or even longer, since July 2011. It simply sounded and still sounds like a dream – like many times more expensive players manufactured by the company's excellent competitors.

I had only felt jealous twice during that time and seen the player's fully exposed problems – after the meeting of the Krakow Sonic Society devoted to the four-piece dCS Vivaldi system and while testing a two-piece CEC player, with the TL0 3.0 belt-drive transport and the discrete DA0 3.0 digital-to-analogue converter. I was also impressed with two other fantastic sources – the Métronome Technologie Kalista CD and the Chord Blu MkII/DAVE.

This time I had no more doubt and, with regret, decided to sell the Ancient player, even though it has confirmed the good intuition of its constructor and given witness to his knowledge, despite passing time. Let me add that this is the last test that I have written for the December issue of "HF". Since January 2018, I am going to start tests with another change in my system – the AC Siltech Triple Crown Power cable which beautifully matches the Ayon player (it is the same top level). The rest of the cables, i.e. the interconnects and speaker cables came from the same series of the same manufacturer.

| Context

When we met Janusz, a man of Renaissance (as he calls himself), the host of some meetings of the Krakow Sonic Society and owner of the Super Audio CD Ayon Audio CD-35 HF Edition No. 02/50 player during a concert break, we could not reach a consensus on whether the piano that Piotr Anderszewski played sounded dull or simply pastel. Rysiek, Wiciu and Bartek (participants in the same meetings of the KSS) thought that the sound of the instrument was phenomenal and the performance outstandingly smooth and balanced. Let us add that the artist got a few encores – both solo and with the Sinfonietta Cracovia orchestra that he performed with. Janusz claimed that the sound was dull and that it lacked definition and impact characteristic for a concert Steinway.

The discussion took place on the first floor of the NOSPR in Katowice, i.e. the seat of the Polish National Radio Symphony, regarded a concert that was played as part of the 12th International Gorceycki Festival and was continued during a meeting that we organized a day later at Janusz's. Did the differences in opinions result from the fact that Rysiek, Bartosz and I sat at a balcony right above the piano and Janusz at the front, slightly lower than we did, but quite far away from the stage? Probably not, because Wiciu sat with him. Or did they result from the fact that we hear things differently? There must be some truth in that statement, but years spent on listening sessions have convinced me that although we hear things in different ways, there is some kind of consensus on what good performance and sound are.

And perhaps it is about what Wiciu noticed, i.e. expectations? That could be closest to the truth. It was our first visit at that place and first exposure to the sound of the hall and its look – everything that the *genius loci* comprise, so we could have had different impressions of the same sound. It is something that we also deal with in the audio domain, perhaps mainly when it comes to absolute-top products. Both examples are connected by the fact that although we can discuss

different things, we discuss things unattainable for other people. Anyway, Janusz and I have exactly the same opinion of the Ayon player.

It is a shame to admit it, but we need to face it – after the ICE centre was built in Cracow, we come there so often that we are not attracted by other, even better concert halls, a few of which we already have in Poland (read more about the ICE and NOSPR halls [HERE](#)). But the NOSPR hall is excellent. Its sound is the result of cooperation between many project and executive teams, but the end result is the effect of collaboration with the Japanese Nagata Acoustics company. In Katowice, its work was supervised by Mr Yasushisa Toyota, a master in his field.

Earlier, the Japanese company worked on building such halls as the Suntory Hall in Tokio, Walt Disney Hall in Los Angeles or Concertgebouw in Amsterdam. Yasushisa Toyota took part in creating musical buildings with such famous architects as Frank Gehry or Jacques Jean Nouvel. What is interesting, it was Kristian Zimmerman, the most recognizable Polish pianist next to Piotr Anderszewski, who proposed engaging this company in works in Katowice.

That immediately directs us to the main topic of this article – the already mentioned Ayon Audio CD-35 HF Edition player and to how music played at home should really sound like. In this case, these two things go together because one provokes the other – listening to CDs on the Ayon player is so incredibly satisfactory that I ask myself whether this is not even better than a live event. In the end, I have the best seat, I listen to artists I have no chance of hearing during a concert and it all sounds the way which makes me *believe*, at the very moment *I believe* this is real music and not reproduction. That would be a point for Janusz, as a listening session with the Ayon player resembles that “ideal” location, i.e. ca. 12 meters from the instrument and not what we heard during the concert in Katowice.

On the other hand, I am painfully aware that listening to recorded music – and first recording itself – is transferring one type of art into another domain, irreversibly transforming a *live* event into a completely different experience. I also know it is not *real* in the sense that it has already taken place and only constitutes a reflection of something real, filtered through the sensitivity and skills of a lot of people. I cannot give up the doubt that I am dealing with something that Filip Springer wrote about travelling and maps:

Using a map is dealing with space that we own. We can do anything we want with it. A map lures us with and promises freedom, frees us from our duties. The more accurate it is, the easier it is to believe it.

There is only one problem – all maps lie. It has been like that since their beginning. It is obvious, as it is impossible to transfer the surface of a sphere onto a plane in a way that allows us to avoid distortions. [...] My map also lies [...]

Filip Springer, *Miasto Archipelag. Polska Mniejszych miast*, Krakow 2016

As regards Anderszewski’s piano, I forgot to add that it had no lid – we talked to each other after listening to the first part of the concert, with *Armide* Overture and Joseph Haydn’s Piano Concerto in D major *Hob. XVIII:11*. After the break we also listened to Apollo et Hyacinthus Overture and the Piano Concerto No. 17 in G major, KV. 453 by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart.

| The CD-35 overall

I am beginning to understand that I am dealing with an archipelago – not only of stories but also cities themselves. They cannot be connected using one line. I decide to divide them into groups and connect them using circles. The result is not that good, but looks more promising. So, I have some kind of a plan (that will soon disintegrate) and some kind of a map – everything I need to start some kind of a journey.

Op. cit.

From a technical point of view, the CD-35 HF Edition player is a very close relative of the basic model, i.e. the CD-35. It is a Super Audio CD player and its Signature version has digital inputs (including a USB), an analogue preamp with three inputs and an upsampler which lets us change PCM signal from Compact Discs and DSD64 signal (SACDs) to DSD128 or DSD256. It is a one-piece device, but is treated as a top Ayon Audio source by Gerhard Hirt, the company owner. We (i.e. the Krakow Sonic Society) also liked the player, which was demonstrated by the Special Award High Fidelity 2016, given to the device in December 2016.

During the world premiere of the player at the abovementioned meeting, Janusz and I got enchanted by what the small device can do. It was not the best in the world and not even the best among those that we had had in our systems – let us not forget about the incredible dCS Vivaldi, Métronome Technologie Kalista CD, Chord Blu MkII/DAVE and C.E.C. TL0 3.0/DA0 3.0. The thing is that everything it did, it did well and we could not find any errors in it. Regardless of the type of music played, it let us enter it deeper than other digital sources.

The CD-35 owes it equally to its digital and analogue section. It was created for a few years, the longest of which (three years) was spent on developing D/D digital filters that convert PCM signal to DSD. On the one hand, it is quite a simple task that is dealt with by small specialized chips, like in the Amare Musica Diamond Tube DAC DSD, but such actions have never convinced me when it comes to top high-end. In the end, it is all about changing one format into another, which always affects signal (its content).



However, upsampling in the Ayon player, or rather its algorithm prepared by specialists from StreamUnlimited, is a completely new experience. Not only does the sound lack nothing, but, in a way, it also lets us recover something from it, even if we play a SHM-SACD, not only a CD. That is greatly aided by the tube output section with tube amplification – probably the best digital player output section that has so far been invented by Ayon.

| The CD-35 HF Edition overall

Whipped up by the great success of the CD-35, we got more and more requests to launch a special and limited version of the CD-35, a quasi-*digital* machine that should sound as *analogue* as never before. All music lovers engaged in top analogue turntables and/or reel-to-reel tape recorders also may feel to be approached. Many ideas, thoughts, suggestions and a dedicated assistance of the people of the HighFidelity.pl magazine also were incorporated in the CD-35 HF project.

Source: ayonaudio.com

Some sparks flew between the participants in the meeting (not from a faulty plug). As a result, we met Gerhard before Christmas the same year at a restaurant in Cracow, close to the market, to discuss an idea that we all got at the same time, articulated by Gerhard: let us make the CD-35 even better. Please remember that one of its design assumptions was not to exceed the planned budget, i.e. €10,000 that a purchaser was to pay for it.

There were a lot of ideas and Gerhard promised to examine all of them with his engineers. It all proved more difficult than we had expected. Now it seems simple and although everyone can improve something in their player by changing components, please believe me – if this is to be a holistic project, it is not going to be an easy task (see *DC-Components: historia jednego apgrejdu* – Eng. *DC-Components: the history of one upgrade*). It took the Ayon team half a year and three people worked on the player at that time. After examining various options, a decision was made to make the following changes:

- V-cap TFTF coupling capacitors,
- Franc Audio Accessories Ceramic Feet,
- WBT-0210 Au NextGen RCA jacks,
- Tantalum 2-Watt resistors for the tube output-stage,
- AKM 4497EQ converters, one per channel, differently implemented,
- more silence drive,
- all important components matched at 1% tolerance level,
- black finish for silver elements – cooling slots, the CD-LID and CD-inside housing.

As Gerhard said, resistors took them most of the time. Originally, he and his engineers only wanted to replace those in tube cathodes, but when they heard how big a difference was made by that small change, they decided to replace them all. And here problems started – the device heats up a lot, as there are a lot of tubes within the little space in it and the selected top-class tantalum 2-Watt resistors are not commonly available, while the former ones did not yield the assumed sound results.

An important element of the device are also Ceramic Disc feet manufactured by the Polish Franc Audio Accessories company. Its owner, Paweł Skulimowski, specially made a version with a white body for the project. I was not initially sure about the colour, until I placed the player on my shelf – then everything “went together well”. Thanks to the feet, the device becomes lighter, is not heavy and “floats”. Additionally, it sounds much better than on the original feet. It is a great distinction for the Polish company, but a well-deserved one.



Another element that has been made with special care is the amplifier. It is based on two R-core transformers and a choke, with a tube full-wave rectifier for output tubes (a Soviet NOS-type tube) – this role is played by double triodes – the 6H30N Electro-Harmonix and General Electric JAN-5687WB from army supplies (JAN = Joint Army Navy). In a Pi filter, one of the branches consists of very large polypropylene and not electrolytic capacitors – this solution has been tested in the manufacturer’s top preamplifiers. I only changed the fuses – the one that can be reached from the outside is now Verictum, while the four inside were manufactured by Creative Hi-Fi.

Assembling the tested version of the CD-35 takes the company two weeks – the longest of all its products, with the exception of the Conqueror – the firm’s top preamplifier. There are plans to assemble only 50 units. At the back panel of each there is a special plate with the “High Fidelity” logo, a subsequent number and Gerhard’s signature. This version is called High Fidelity Edition.

| Hard facts

I was a little afraid of the first meeting with the version named after the magazine that I had created – it is always an unknown, even if everything that is done is based on good assumptions. That was unnecessary – the result exceeded my greatest expectations. It will not be an exaggeration when I say that this is one of the few best digital sources in the world and, at the same time, it is closest in sound to an analogue master tape, which makes it different from the few players that I am talking about.

I already pointed it out in the basic version, as its sound character was then already so incredible and different from other digital sources that a large group of music lovers, disgusted or confused,

could immediately start looking for something else, as this is sound practically without edges, details, planes, 3D images and space. I am exaggerating a little but not too much. I know the sound of analogue tape played from a top tape recorder, as I took part in the recording sessions of the Studio Muzyki Przestrzennej Teatru imienia J. Słowackiego (Eng. Studio of Spatial Music of Juliusz Słowacki Theatre) in Cracow, established by my mentor – Józek Rychlik. That was a fully analogue studio – at that theatre, I played music from the Studer 820 and ReVox PR99 MkII tape recorders (three per each stage) and then I heard master tapes played during shows, presentations and private meetings (e.g. [HERE](#) and [HERE](#)).

So, I have never understood respect that music lovers pay to vinyl. I was brought up on black discs, but they have just been one of the possibilities for me, as far from analogue tape as other ones, but *in a different way*. The CD-35, especially in the HF Edition, is closest to my experiences of all the digital and most analogue sources that I know; only the abovementioned CEC player does something similar. It is an absolutely fulfilled sound. It lacks nothing, as it is not listened to as a hi-fi product for even a moment. We choose recordings based on their musical content and if this is good music, each has its own story to tell.

Of course, one can attribute certain features to this sound – it is not ethereal or bland. A listener's attention focuses on the midrange, although the bass and treble are at their place. But, for example, the CD Kalista and dCS Vivaldi pay more attention to high and low sounds – not because they emphasize them but due to the fact that they construct instrument shapes in this way, opening sound and giving it a solid foundation. Compared to them, the Ayon player may seem to have little courage – I got a similar impression when I listened to Chord and CEC systems.

However, this is because the Austrian player builds the musical message from the inside – it brings sounds to the surface and does not construct them. Its message is incredibly homogeneous, similarly to the sound of analogue tapes. All elements go well with one another, rule together and nothing is specially energized. However, the incredibly high dynamics characteristic for the way the CD-35 HF plays recordings is unique. Never before have I heard anything like that from a CD or SACD and only few, absolutely top turntables reacted similarly to an impulse in my system.

It is sound at an incredibly high level – world class, not something typical for a provincial artist or businessman. The sophistication is manifested by a lack of complexes and perfect knowledge of one's strengths and weaknesses. However, this is also sophistication without pretentiousness, as the Ayon player pays equal attention to the new Seong-Jin Cho album with a selection of Debussy's recordings, carefully created by the Japanese and released as a SHM-CD and to a limited edition album with Jens Pauly's music that is close to drone, released in a microscopic number of units by our friends from Karlrecords on a CD-R (*r/f* album). What matters is what is concrete – music, emotions, value.

It is not that the player does not differentiate. It naturally does it in an outstanding way. However, if I can put it this way, the differentiation is favourable – it neither sharpens anything nor opens a battlefield where it does not exist. It perfectly points out the differences between Master CD-R versions and ordinary pressings, which could be witnessed by the readers who are members of the Krakow Sonic Society during meetings in Warsaw, at the Audio Video Show 2017. Having listened to a better version of a given album on it – a Platinum SHM-CD, an Ultimate HQCD, or perhaps the still inimitable XRCD in each of its versions, we will look only for them, mostly

because we will get more music with them and not because they “sound better”, as this is, as Janusz puts it, pure bullshit.

It is the first SACD player which makes me understand what this format is about, which places it higher than a CD. So far, I have had an impression that I am dealing with promises or perhaps potential possibilities. The CD-35 HF immediately puts us in the right position: sound with SACDs is smoother, deeper, more subtle and fuller (into the inside). These may not be fundamental differences, but they are important enough for me to start looking for these discs. Once heard, SHM-SACDs or simply single-layered ones make us seriously deal with the issue, on the same level as with the Master CD-R.

Janusz, the host of the Krakow Sonic Society, is a man faithful to his beliefs, consistent in what he does. It was him, a music lover, who opted for Japanese mini LP editions a long time ago and then for all their upgrades, and now zealously believes in SHM-SACDs and does not want to hear about anything else. Even though I do not give up CDs so easily and do not get nervous when I listen to them, as they also sound great, I fully understand him, also because the softness, the inner softness of the sound makes us able to listen to music for a long and very long time, loud and very loud – and yet we do not feel tired. We get a lot of information, but not through an attack, but osmosis – like in real life, like during a concert.

This is a player which most deeply and successfully appeals to my sensitivity, my aesthetics and my needs. It does not occupy much space, but offers a lot of conveniences, e.g. a fantastic DAC that I successfully tried out during the test of the Fidata HFAS1-S10U audio server/file player and, more recently, with the Lumin D2 file player. There is also an analogue preamplifier, even though in my system sound was better with an external preamp – the Ayon Audio Spheris III.



However, it is not an ideal, at least when it comes to using it. The most irritating thing for me is that it creates pauses between tracks on SACDs. Janusz claims that he does not mind anymore, but I still get nervous. Unfortunately, it cannot be changed for the time being, because of the costs of such a modification. The transport itself is not the best, either. We can forget about the flawless quiet operation of the Philips CD Pro-2, as well as about its reliability and the sense of

security provided by the top CEC belt drive. Also the Esoterica VRDS-NEO SACD transport, for example in the dCS Vivaldi system, as well as the Accuphase mechanism belong to different worlds, or even galaxies. However, the Ayon player is THE choice, it was the Ayon that seduced and enchanted me.

| Story

I have been trying to present the essence of my observations regarding the Ayon Audio CD-35 High Fidelity Edition player. I did not want to make it an obvious story based on the assumption that something that bears a “High Fidelity” logo and that has been created taking into account the remarks and comments of people from the Krakow Sonic Society cannot sound bad. I have wanted it to be a reliable and accurate sound analysis. I collected materials, listened to music, compared and analysed. I made a few attempts at writing the test and I felt the absurd of what I was doing each time. Finally, I decided to write individual paragraphs as if it was a conversation. I think I have managed to tell you more in this way than with the aid of a classic test.

It was Professor von Ranke who established a lot of standards for the work of a historian and, as one of the first researchers, put emphasis on the narrative aspect of history. Meeting him allowed me to understand that even such a precise rule as a law of physics must be told to be understood. I think that, in fact, the story does not have to differ too much from a poem. [Leopold Ranke (1795–1886), a German historian – Editor’s note]

Filip Springer, op. cit.

It is the kind of a player that makes a classic description a little pointless, as it twists what can be said about the device a little – the more that this story continues and I am still learning about the player. So, I decided to present you my thoughts on it, my reasoning, counting that conclusions will be obvious. The basic one is the following: it is one of the best sound sources in the world and only good tape recorders with master tapes or their copies and a few turntables can produce yet more natural and better sound. The same level is represented by, perhaps, three abovementioned SACD and CD systems that are still so different that it will be easy for potential purchasers to say “yes” or “no” to the Ayon player. It is state-of-the-art modern digital technology.

Technical specifications (according to the manufacturer)

Conversion rate: 768 kHz/32 bit & DSD 256

DAC: 2 x AKM 4497EQ

DSP module (option): PCM→DSD & DSD→DSD

Tubes: 6H30 + 5687

Dynamic range: > 120 dB

Output level (1 kHz):

- Low: 2.5V fixed or 0 – 2.5V rms variable

- High: 5V fixed or 0 – 5V rms variable

Output impedance (XLR | RCA): ~ 300 Ω | ~ 300 Ω

Digital output: 75 Ω S/PDIF (RCA)

Digital inputs: 75 Ω S/PDIF (RCA), USB, I2S, BNC, AES/EBU, 3 x BNC for DSD

S/N ratio: > 119 dB

Frequency response: 20 Hz – 50 kHz (+/- 0.3 dB)
THD (1 kHz): < 0.001%
Dimensions (WxDxH): 480 x 390 x 120 mm
Weight: 17 kg

