

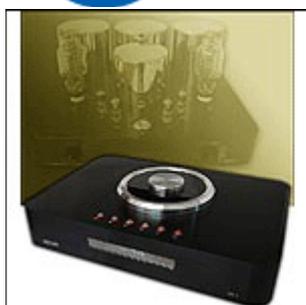
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AUDIO REVIEWS

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APRIL 2008



Ayon Audio CD-1

Reviewer: Ken Micallef

Financial Interests: [click here](#)

Digital Source: Raysonic CD-168, *Ayon CD-1* [in for review]

Analog Source: Kuzma Stabi/Stogi turntable/arm combo, Denon DL-103 cartridge, *Auditorium 23 Denon step-up transformer* [on loan]

Preamp: Shindo Allegro

Amp: Shindo Haut Brion

Speakers: DeVore Fidelity Nines

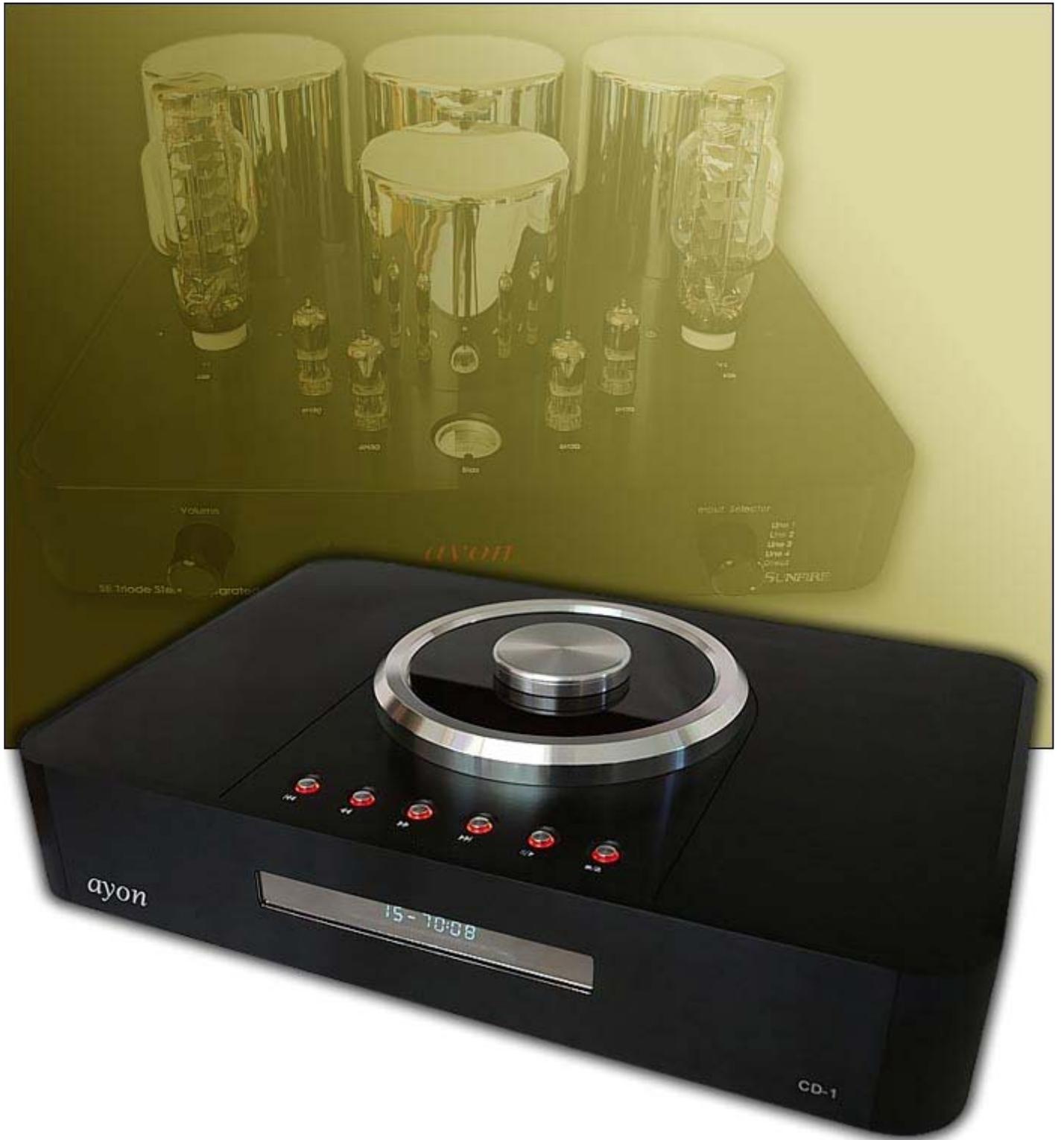
Cables: Auditorium A23 speaker cables, Shindo interconnects, *SilverFi interconnects* [in for review]

Stands: Salamander rack, 2" Mapleshade platforms (8" x 15" x 2"), Blue Circle custom amp stand

Powerline conditioning: JPS Labs Kaptovator, Shunyata Black Mamba and Anaconda Vx Powersnakes, *Hydra 4* [on loan]

Accessories: Mapleshade Surefoot and Heavyfoot brass points and IsoBlocks; (8) RPG ProFoam damping panels/ceiling treatment, Mapleshade Ionoclast for static cling

Room size: 24' x 12', short-wall setup, suspended wood floor, 1-foot deep plaster covered 2x4 walls, wood-beam 10-foot to 11-foot ceiling



Ayon Audio is an Austrian concern with a deep product line. A quick visit to their website reveals dozens of products of every stripe possible but typically tube-driven designs: four integrated amps (three of them single-ended triodes); a single-ended stereo amp; two sets of monoblock power amps; Polaris and Spheris preamps; and seven different speaker systems. Prices range from the \$3,999 pentode/triode switchable Spirit integrated amp to the new \$29,399 60-watt Vulcan SET monos. Founded by Gerhard Hirt, Ayon seems nothing if not ambitious.

Deja Vu

Ayon makes two CD players: the CD-1 and CD-3. The latter features a hefty outboard power supply and four 6H30 'super tubes', the number of 6H30s in the CD-3's design seemingly being the main difference between it and the piece under review, the Ayon CD-1. Using two 6H30 tubes and two 6922s in its output stage, the CD-1 also features: "ceramic tube sockets; automatic upsampling (24bit/192kHz); Sony KSS-213Q transport mechanism; 9 separate voltage regulators (power supply); MOSFET tube anode-voltage regulation; Mundorf and Solen MKP capacitors; large noiseless

custom C-core power transformer; AC phase control indicator; hand assemblage to insure the highest level of craftsmanship; high-grade 8mm brushed and anodized aluminum chassis; display dimmer and mute function; heavy-duty RCA gold-plated output jacks; absorber aluminum feet."



Ayon apparently uses the same enclosure as that of the Canadian Raysonic Audio CD-168, my highly prized unit. The two players look virtually identical save for the location of control and power buttons and digital display. Otherwise, they both employ the same top-loading, aluminum stabilizer arrangement. Even the acrylic top plate is similar if not indistinguishable. The companies' CD remotes match as well. Even the specs pan out similarly but with some slight/major differences (depending on your viewpoint and concern for specs): both use Solen and Mundorf caps, weigh in at 11kg, use ceramic sockets and C-core transformers and run class A outputs single-ended and balanced. The CD-168 uses a Phillips VAM 1202 transport, produces an output level of 2.3 volts to the Ayon's five volts and maintains an impedance of 110/330 to Ayon's 30/170 (RCA/XLR). The CD-168 uses two Burr Brown PCM 1792 chips while Ayon relies on the Crystal CS 4398 chip.

So how do they compare? First, let's take the Ayon on its own terms. Even before breaking in the machine -- kicking it hard and heavy in repeat mode for days on end -- it sounded nothing less than exceedingly dynamic, rich, fat and - er, *musical*. Sure, that term is overused to the point of distraction. How many eyes have glazed over at yet another attempt to describe yet another fantastic sounding CD player? Years ago when digital sounded like a train wreck or glass breaking in your ears, reviewers put on a brave face. Now with so many great digital products to choose from just as the CD format seems to be dying a million deaths, the real task for any reviewer is to communicate why this player, in that room, is worth your hard-earned green, your children's college fund. I have been lucky to review many CD players for 6moons and back in the day, for *Downbeat* magazine. If memory serves, the best cost-no-object players in my opinion remain those from Esoteric, Oracle and, for sheer efficiency and jaw-dropping noise floor, Wadia. The Ayon is yet another mighty beast to add to my digital hall of fame.



Sidebar I: Ayon US Head Honcho, North American Union Man - To learn a little more about this outstanding product and what I imagine to be many more like it from this unknown (to me) company, I spoke with Ayon Audio's North American distributor Charlie Harrison.

When and where was the company founded?

The audio firm began with Vaic in 1995. Founder Mr. Gerhard Hirt still owns the Vaic trademark. In 2001, Vaic merged into Ayon Audio founded in Austria.... [continue](#)

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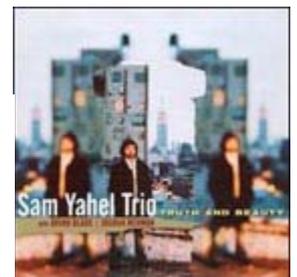
The Return of the Titanic

The first words that come to mind when listening even casually to the CD-1 are *calm, correct* and *concise*. The CD-1 puts my ears at ease like no CD player I can remember. Not that it lacks energy. Anything but. Yet what it does lack is anything resembling digital glare. It also maximizes attributes like extension, ambience, spatial reality, back of the hall/room ambient cues and coherence, all adding up to one really sweet CD player. The CD-1 has the best handle on absolute extension of notes I've heard. From acoustic jazz trios to chamber string quartets, from vocals to acoustic bass, from electronica to post bop, the CD-1 presented all the texture, note ambience and decay, the reverberation and absolute power of the recorded event. Blood flows through the CD-1 like water gushing down an amusement park chute. I hate to say the CD-1 sounds like analog because it doesn't. It out-powers my Kuzma/Denon vinyl rig but also out-soundstages it. The CD-1 presents a grand view into and out of the music, its palpable music plane extending deep and wide in every direction. And like my latest amplification addition, the Shindo Haut Brion power amp, the CD-1 follows a musical line with the kind of understanding and musicality that it almost seems to have a flesh and blood heart beating in its high-tech core.



Playing organist Sam Yahel Trio's *Truth and Beauty* [Origin 82479] was like a trip to the recording studio if that studio was a Blues-drenched Philly soul bar circa 1975. A hot-wired organ trio of drums, Hammond B3 and tenor sax, the CD-1 served up *Truth and Beauty's* energetic stick flurries (Brian Blade), blasting tenor beauty (Joshua Redman) and deep-boweled organ growls (Yahel) with exquisite humanity. Hammond B3 organ is the be all and end all for low-end verification and the CD-1 did it proper justice.

Bass. The CD-1 excelled in that regard as perhaps no other machine I have heard, laying out clean, very tight, tonally correct notes that let my brain swim in its luxuriousness. The best word I can use to describe its character is *palpability*, if that is really a proper word. The CD-1 also has the lowest noise floor, producing astounding clarity coupled to its already generous and big-hearted grasp on the music. The CD-1 never faltered or sounded closed in when relaying complex dynamic passages and it simmered like soup on ballads, gentle solos and sensitive pianissimo instrumental efforts.



Rimsky-Korsakov on call

Still coming to grips with the CD-1's fantastic low end grasp, I marveled at *Truth and Beauty* one more time, how the Ayon relayed the tremendous oiliness and growl of the Leslie-amplified Hammond while also extracting the top-end air and space of Brian Blade's cymbals. Within a rich soundstage, the CD-1 drenched my senses in full color music, a fullness that is usually only heard with vinyl. But in some ways this was better than vinyl. The sound was equally relaxed, smooth and transparent but its power and extension were superior to *my* vinyl rig.

Okay, I've established that the CD-1 is tops at recreating bass notes of terror-inducing proportions. But what about the overtones, the dynamics and hall ambience of a good classical recording? Playing a Rimsky-Korsakov collection with Ernest Ansermet conducting the L'Orchestre De La Suisse Romande [London CSCD 6012] proved the CD-1 to be more than up to snuff in this regard. The full-scale dynamics of this 60s era disc were truthfully displayed, from the sweet timbre of bells and strings to the soaring sonics of brass and canon-like bass drums. I could hear deep into the recording, sensing all the various instruments within a vast hall (though my small room doesn't allow for much back-to-front layering). Best



represented were the tremendous dynamics and humanity of this London FFRR disc. *Humanity* is another prime word in describing the Ayon Audio CD-1. It expresses all the warmth, depth and musicality, the speed and texture of the notes.

The CD-1 consistently moved me. It seemingly went beyond the basic digital domain to reveal the recorded experience with all the emotion intact. The CD-1 has much character - meat on the bones in spades. Strings and organs take on warmth and richness but never at the expense of speed, clarity or transparency. The CD-1, like my Shindo Haut Brion amplifier, simply follows the notes and lets go of them with speed and again, humanity. It allows me to forget the player and focus on and become enthralled with the music, a trait the CD-1 shares with the Shindo products I have heard. Japanese and Germans making love over 1s and 0s? It may not look pretty but it sounds great.

I drink your milkshake!

Enough of the love fest, how does the CD-1 compare to its lookalike, my very own Raysonic CD-168? The players use different tube and chip sets so you already know that while they may look the same, they are going to sound different. Returning to the Rimsky-Korsakov, the Raysonic portrayed the CD's large hall acoustics with similar soundstage characteristics. Ditto for its bass treatment though it was a mite cloudier in that respect. The Raysonic's midrange was more closed-in and less expressive however and when required to reproduce complex passages at higher volumes, it could turn strident by comparison to the Ayon. The Raysonic created more of a 5th-row perspective compared to the Ayon's front-row center perspective. Though its tonality was generally of a similar mien, what the Raysonic really lacked compared to the almost twice as expensive Ayon was that machine's sense of pure, unadulterated emotionalism. The Ayon drinks of the Raysonic's basic ingredients yet produces superior results of creamy liquid goodness. The Raysonic benefits from tube rolling and proper cabling (Shindo interconnects work warm wonders) and within its price range, it's unbeatable but the Ayon gives a more powerful, heart-pounding take on the same music.

And so, for its sheer musicality, versatility in recreating all forms of music, fleetness of tonality and colors, profound emotionalism and consistently earth-shaking dynamics and extension, I award the Ayon Audio CD-1 my second-ever Blue Moon Award. The Ayon CD-1 is a superb musical CD machine. Fans of both blood and guts showmanship and gentle audio epiphanies avoid this extraordinary player at their own peril.



Ken Micallef

**FOR:
SUPERB SONICS, BUILD AND MUSICALITY
• IN THE SINGLE-BOX TUBE CD PLAYER CATEGORY •**

Quality of packing: Heavy cardboard box, styrofoam inserts, indentions for puck and CD cover.

Reusability of packing: Yes.

Ease of unpacking/repacking: Painless.

Condition of component received: Flawless.

Completeness of delivery: Includes batteries for remote, power cord, manual.

Quality of owner's manual: Acceptable.

Website comments: All the necessary info is there though reviews translated into English would be a welcome inclusion.

Usage conditions: Plug 'n' Play.

Human interactions: Prompt e-mail responses.

Sidebar II: For a photo gallery on the CD-1's innards, [continue](#)

UP

