



# REVIEWS

## hardware



# ayon audio

## Orion Integrated Amplifier

as reviewed by Tom Campbell



Two years ago, [I reviewed Ayon Audio's all-tube Spirit integrated amplifier](#) and came away highly impressed by this offering from the Austria-based company that was just then getting its feet wet in the American market. Since then, Ayon has done pretty well for itself, racking up a number of "best of show" awards at industry events in the

#### TOM CAMPBELL'S SYSTEM

##### LOUDSPEAKERS

Reynaud Orfeo; Harbeth  
Compact 7-ES

##### ELECTRONICS

Coda/Continuum Unison  
integrated amplifier, EAR  
834P tube phone  
preamplifier.

##### SOURCES

Nottingham Spacedeck  
turntable and tonearm, Grado  
Reference Statement  
cartridge, Bel canto PL-2  
universal digital player,  
vintage Luxman AM/FM  
tuner.

##### CABLES

Audio Note Lexus speaker  
cables; MAC interconnects  
and power cords

U.S. and garnering lots of positive press both here and in Europe.

Unlike most high-end audio companies these days that tend to specialize in one particular product category, Ayon offers a full line of components including CD players, a DAC, and 11 different loudspeaker models. But it is tube amplification for which they are best-known—in all, the company offers six different integrated amps, five power amps and three preamps, all of which share common characteristics: purist design, high-quality parts and tank-like build quality.

In my review of the Spirit I compared the amp to my solid-state reference integrated, the Coda Unison. Here is the "bottom line" excerpt:

*While I would score the Unison and Spirit very similarly on an absolute scale—the solid-state Unison is better in some areas, the Spirit in others—the ways in which the Spirit is superior are the most important ones for me in terms of musical enjoyment.*

*The Unison creates a larger and more enveloping sound stage, is slightly more transparent and detailed, and fixes individual musicians to a more precise point on the stage. It also delivers deeper and better-defined bass to my Harbeths. But the Spirit really—and I mean really—distinguishes itself in terms of tone, depth, and micro-dynamics. Instruments just had a palpable presence and dimensionality... (T)he subtle nuances of performance, the small-scale dynamic gradations that make music-making a living, breathing entity, were extraordinary.*

I ended up concluding that "All things considered, this is the best amplifier I've had in my system." High praise indeed, at that time encompassing close to twenty different amps I'd heard in my home during my fifteen-or-so years as an audiophile and eight-or-so years as a reviewer. My rating the Spirit as a personal "best" is not the same of course as, say, Michael Fremer—who has reviewed hundreds of components over the years, including the highest of the high end—doing the same. But the Spirit was right in the sweet spot of my experience—generally speaking, amps between \$2K and \$6K—and it was the best of the lot to that point. ;

The original Spirit has since been superseded in Ayon's line by the Spirit II, an update the company claims is in fact a substantial re-design. The Spirit II has new circuit boards, a significantly improved preamp section (with four tubes versus the previous three), and new features including an additional line input and a "pre out" line for direct-to-source power operation. The Orion, reviewed here, is a new model but looks very similar to the original Spirit with cost-reduced cosmetics: the huge transformer towers are no longer chrome-plated—instead, they're covered with a black, non-resonant compound material—and the back-lit Ayon logo on the front panel has been dispensed with in favor of an engraved, painted logo. Whatever internal differences there may be between versions one and two, it is clear that these small concessions to external style yield significant savings: the original Spirit's price was \$4000 while the Orion retails for \$2,800 (prices vary slightly by dealer). That's a lot of money, and in all honesty I may just prefer the more understated look of the black transformers over the somewhat over-the-top (and environment-unfriendly) chrome jobs.

The Orion has replaced the Spirit as Ayon's entry-level integrated—but make no mistake, every inch of the new model still exudes the exceptional craft and class that all of the company's offerings do. First off, and like the Spirit, the Orion is a beast: the manual specs it at 62 pounds (28 kilograms) but it arrived in a 95-pound package so the amp has got to be closer to 80 pounds. Said package was in itself remarkable: I've received audio products that were double-boxed or even triple-boxed, but the Orion is the first to be *quintuple*-boxed. The last two of those five boxes are reinforced with molded Styrofoam, and when you finally get down to the amp it is regally draped in a soft red velvet bag. Pure showmanship, perhaps, but a nice touch that is indicative of Ayon's general approach to things.



The Orion is entirely hand-assembled with high-quality parts and a high level of finish throughout. Given Ayon's purist ethic, there is not much in the way of bells and whistles—no balance control, no mono button, etc. But there is a matching black-aluminum remote control (volume and muting only); in an acknowledgement of the fast-growing popularity of PC-based audio, there is a USB input to go along with the 3 line inputs; and there is a (quite good) headphone jack on the front panel. The USB and headphone accommodations are both strong selling points and, interestingly, are exclusive to the Orion; none of Ayon's other models have them.

The Orion is equipped with (reissue) Gold Lion tubes: four KT88s (generally \$50 to \$70 apiece from online retailers) for the power section and three 12AU7s for the preamp section. The tubes are pre-tested and matched, and each tube box is marked with the socket into which that particular tube should be placed on the amp. (Like most amplifier design companies, Ayon does not encourage "tube-rolling.") Upon initial installation and periodically thereafter, the tubes must be manually biased via pots on the back panel, so you'll need to stop by the Rat Shack and drop twenty bucks or so for a bias gauge if you don't already have one. The amp is switchable between pentode (push-pull) and triode (single-ended) operation, producing 50 watts per channel in pentode and 30 in triode.

When connecting your speaker cables to the amp, you will need to choose between connectors for 4-ohm or 8-ohm impedances. I tested the Orion with two pairs of speakers, and my old Harbeth Compact 7 stand-mounts were suited to the 8-ohm taps and my new Reynaud Orfeo floorstanders to the 4-ohm taps. I tried both speakers both ways and the qualitative differences between the "right" and "wrong" taps were obvious for each speaker, so this is something you want to be sure to get right.

I began the auditioning process with some apprehension—as mentioned, apart from the cosmetic differences the Orion was a near-dead ringer for the Spirit I had already reviewed. So I wasn't really sure if I'd have much to say about this one, and I feared it might simply be a less-good version of the Spirit.

But Ayon, for its part, claims the Orion represents a "dramatic rethinking of vacuum tube based integrated amplifier design"—and while that may sound like empty catalog copy, it appears they are not kidding. Because, as it turns out, the Orion whips the original Spirit's butt pretty decisively. In short, it does everything that the first Spirit did well while adding better top-end extension and *dramatically* better bass performance.

My review of the Spirit praised that amp's many virtues but conceded that my solid-state reference "deliver(ed) deeper and better-defined bass." The Orion turned that conclusion completely around, extracting notably deeper, firmer and more supple bass than the Coda Unison from both my Reynauds and Harbeths. Ayon seems to know exactly what they've achieved here, as they included in the review package a sample CD with bass-heavy tracks from Sarah McLachlan, Stevie Ray Vaughan, Leonard Cohen and numerous modern jazz and blues performers. These tracks (and everything else) sounded slammin' through the Orion and Reynaud Orfeo

combination—I feared that the Orion would not have enough juice for the big Reynauds, but the two got along wonderfully well (at least in higher-powered pentode mode; more on this in a bit).

As of late, I've been listening to a lot of the Blue Note and Impulse 45 RPM vinyl reissues from the Music Matters and Analogue Productions labels; the re-mastering team of Steve Hoffman and Kevin Gray have coaxed the clearest, most dynamic, most organic sound from these fifty-or-so-year-old tapes that they've ever had. Perhaps best of all, they've found the warm, deep, natural-sounding bass that was in the original recordings but which had never been properly portrayed before. Rudy Van Gelder's original LP pressings are a little bright and his own CD re-masterings extremely so; the CDs, in particular, often have little or no deep bass at all. But the Hoffman/Gray masters are just fabulous. Via these LPs, the Orion did a tremendous job of conveying the artistry of great stand-up bassists like Charles Mingus, Paul Chambers and Richard Davis—the sound was clean and powerful, with excellent portrayal of attack, transients and decay.

That last fact would not be possible if the Orion did not have its act together at the top end of the range, too. And so it does. The improvement here is more subtle, but the Orion had a bit more sparkle and air than my memory of the Spirit from 2008. It is not the last word in top-end extension, but neither is it at all the soft or dull sound that some people associate with tubes. Funnily enough, I've noticed in recent years that as tube designs have become better and more resolving than ever, a lot of solid-state amps have gone the other way: in order to avoid transistors' often lean, harsh sound, many designers have begun engineering a syrupy coloration into the treble area. It is an odd, artificial effect that I immediately notice and strongly dislike.

The Orion's treble, on the other hand, is smooth and natural-sounding and plenty extended enough to boogie with rock or r&b or make you jump in your seat during, say, a Mahler symphony. There is a hint of darkness at the very top, but in general the amp is detailed, dynamic and very balanced across its range. (For what it's worth, the Ayon website has [one of the most lucid explanations you will find](#) of why tubes, in theory, tend to sound more pleasing, more pure and fluid than transistors, and it has nothing to do with "euphony.") The terrific soundtrack to David Lynch's *Mulholland Drive* is a great test disc, with subterranean bass, piercing highs and striking stereo effects. The Orion captured both the low bass of Angelo Badalamenti's "Mr. Roque" and the slashing treble effects of Lynch's own "Go Get Some" with equal facility. It's a great top-to-bottom performer.

One small caveat: the vast majority of my listening was done with the amp in pentode operation. Pentode's 50 watts (almost certainly a conservative spec) drove the Harbeths and even the big Reynaud Orfeos with impressive authority, but triode's 30 watts couldn't quite cut it with either: the tonal purity and silent backgrounds so beloved of singled-ended fans were impressive, but soundstage width was significantly shrunken and the sound lacked drive and dynamics. As one would expect, the stand-mount Harbeths fared better, especially with smaller-scale music—the Takacs Quartet's amazing recording of Schubert's "Rosamunde" and "Death and the Maiden" quartets (on Hyperion CD) was eerily present and tonally spot-on. But overall, the trade-offs between positive and negative were too significant with the speakers I happened to have on hand; the difference between 30 and 50 watts seemed to be the difference between not-enough and just-enough. So consider it a limitation of my review and not of the amp itself—I suspect that partnered with appropriately efficient speakers, the Orion's triode performance is superb.

Apart from that caveat—which is a failure on my part, not Ayon's – I've found little to fault with the Ayon Orion so far. So what is it that you *don't* get for the price of \$2800? Well, obviously you don't get all the refinement that much more expensive amps can offer. The Orion gives you a *lot* of everything, but the extra dollars, assuming they're well-spent, can give you *more* of everything: deeper, blacker backgrounds, a bigger sonic picture, more speed, more detail, more tonal exactitude. The very best amps remove the floors and ceilings from the sound, allowing you to hear as much as possible of the musical performance and as little as possible of the electronic medium. The Orion is not quite in this league, but it gets you an almost shockingly long way there for relatively short money. It is by far the best amp I've heard in this

price range, and second only to the Blue Circle FtTH integrated (at a retail of \$5,600) as the best I've had in my system, period.

The FtTH is a more refined performer than the Orion. It has a large outboard power supply that helps give it a lower noise floor and a bigger sound. It has a great sense of air and superb treble extension while giving nothing up in sweetness. Of course, it is also twice as expensive as the Orion—a fact which puts the Orion's fairly close second-place performance in perspective.

Outraged letters to the editor concerning the price of high-end components are a staple of audiophile magazines, both printed and online. In recent years, however, the outcries have become ever-more frequent and pitched, as readers' hackles have been raised by five-figure phonostages and six-figure turntables and speakers. The proliferation of the ultra-high end doesn't happen to bother me—it's mainly a product of more people (albeit still a tiny percentage of the overall population) having a great deal more disposable income than they ever did twenty or thirty years ago. In the past, most audio companies never could have created viable products of such expensive designs; simply put, now they can, and they are following the money.

What often gets short shrift in this discussion is how much the lower end of the high end has benefited from the R&D investment in these super-products. In the past year I've heard any number of \$1K to \$3K speakers and amps that are far superior to most anything you could have bought at the same price five to ten years ago—not even accounting for inflation. So while some think that the industry is pricing itself out of the range of the average music lover, I feel truly excellent performance is more accessible than ever before.

The Ayon Orion is a case in point. In my experience, it is miles better than what would have been considered state of the art at its price—or substantially above it—ten years ago. It beats Ayon's own Spirit amplifier from just a couple of years ago, which retailed for \$1,200 more than the Orion does (though I am sure that the new Spirit II, at the same price as the original, carries forward the advances of the Orion and then some). If you can find a higher level of performance—not to mention a higher level of build and finish—at anywhere near this price please let me know.

As I was finishing up this review, I saw that my *PFO* colleague Gary Lea [has just published a review](#) of Ayon's top-of-the-line integrated, the Triton. I am pleased to see that he is in concordance with my assessment of Ayon's remarkable combination of performance and value; and I hope that the dual reviews of the top and bottom of the company's line will prove instructive to readers.

As for myself, I am seriously considering buying the Orion review unit—though I can't help but be curious as to what Ayon's design developments have wrought with the Spirit II. I have a feeling, though, that it's a can't-lose proposition either way. **Tom Campbell**

#### **Orion Integrated Amplifier**

Retail: \$2800

#### **Ayon Audio USA**

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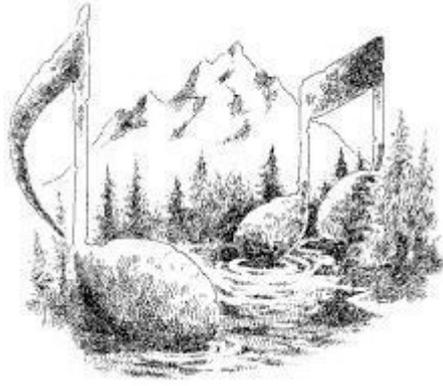
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