



That's the Spirit!

Pentode and triode operation are both available from this muscular, integrated amplifier from Austria

PRODUCT Ayon Spirit

TYPE Integrated valve amplifier

PRICE £1,745

KEY FEATURES Size (WxHxD): 46x26x40cm

● Weight: 29kg ● Output power: 50 watts per channel

● Output impedance: four-ohm or eight-ohm

● Operating modes: Triode/Pentode

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Ayon Audio might not be that well known to UK enthusiasts, but it's a situation that is sure to change. Brought into the UK by John Jeffries' Sussex-based distribution firm, Metropolis Music, Ayon is based in Gratkorn in the Styrian region of Austria, where it produces high-end valve amplifiers, cables, loudspeakers and a pair of CD players. As if that wasn't enough, the company even designs and manufactures its own valves. All of these products, according to Ayon, are designed to: "reward music lovers with an authentic and excitingly realistic reproduction of music as a real live event."

The new Ayon Spirit is an entry-level, four-input, integrated design that can operate in either Pentode or Triode mode thanks to a small rotary switch that nestles on the amplifier's

top-plate, between the valves and the shrouded transformers. The layout of the Spirit is delightfully straightforward. The fascia houses a volume knob, an infra-red eye for the remote control, a backlit logo that glows red when the amplifier is powered up and an input selector to choose between the four line-level inputs.

At the rear, you'll find RCA phono connectors for the inputs, two sets of chunky binding posts for four-ohm or eight-ohm speaker connections, trimpots and test points for setting the bias on the output valves, and the mains connector/switch alongside a phase-indicating lamp that illuminates to tell you whether your mains is wired with the correct polarity. Unless you are of a super-tweaky disposition, or have to change the valves without help from your dealer, you can safely ignore the trimpots and test points and simply plug your speaker cables and interconnects into the relevant orifices. The only concern will be whether to use the four- or eight-ohm sockets: if you are in any doubt, phone your dealer.

On top of the amplifier you'll find two shrouded output transformers flanking a similarly encased mains transformer and seven

exposed valves: a trio of 12AU7s and two pairs of KT88 output types. Apart from its substantial weight and bulk, the Spirit gives the impression of being very well built, no matter from which angle you assess it. Every part of its construction, is reassuringly solid and robust. If the Spirit were a 4WD vehicle it would definitely be a no-nonsense, farmer's Land Rover, rather than some prissy school-run special. Its 50-watt power output speaks volumes for this amplifier. In fact, that wouldn't be a shameful figure if this were a push-pull design, which it can be, but 50 watts is very respectable for a single-ended Triode.

SOUND QUALITY

To fully assess the Spirit's performance it was hooked it up to a Naim CDS CD player, with Chord Company Indigo interconnects and Signature bi-wire speaker cable to Neat Acoustics' Momentum 4i speakers. The Spirit happily drives these to the sort of listening levels we enjoy with enthusiasm and ease, even in its lower-powered, single-ended Triode mode.

Mind you, the Spirit does encourage you to listen to rather more thoughtful music than you might do under other (solid-state powered)



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circumstances. This certainly isn't an amplifier designed for drum'n'bass fan, for example. That's not because it can't handle the genre, but because such music doesn't really offer it appropriate scope for expression. We're not being snobby, simply pointing out that the range of musical 'colour' and expressive vocabulary that this amplifier is capable of delivering is wasted on music that doesn't properly exploit it.

The Spirit seems particularly enamoured with vocalists, especially female ones. A selection of our favourite female singers sounds particularly splendid through this amplifier, especially when it's in Triode operating mode, which seems to bring out the subtlest qualities in their voices. The way in which Christine Collister or Pat Mears can dig into the lower, almost masculine registers of their ranges, yet retain the obvious femininity in their voices is particularly rewarding, while it simply adores Nancy Griffiths.

Similarly, the male voice also relishes Triode operation. The Spirit, despite its Austrian origins, does a superb job of unravelling Christy Moore's often convoluted Irish lyricism and Dr John's lazy Louisiana drawl, rendering both with the utmost clarity and expressive feeling.

Switching to Pentode mode does seem to benefit some music. The aforementioned D'n'B has more punch and rhythmic impetus, as does Rage Against The Machine, where the percussion and bass guitar have more overt snap and leading edge impact. Nonetheless, in Triode

mode it is far clearer how, for example, Tom Morello is extracting the weird and wonderful tones from his guitar.

Ultimately, Triode operation beats Pentode into a cocked hat with all musical genres. The slight lessening of rhythmic snap and impetus, along with the reduction in volume, is a small price to pay for the enhanced exposition of timbre, tonality and three-dimensionality that is so evident on vocals and all instruments.

The amplifier really shifts up a gear when presented with the John McLaughlin Trio recording *Live at The Royal Festival Hall*, which it savours for its mix of vibrant acoustic guitar, sonorous electric bass and Trilok Gurtu's dazzling array of percussion. It portrays this last element with an appropriately deft mix of delicacy and dynamics to complement McLaughlin's nimble guitar play and Kai Eckhardt's fluid bass-lines.

And therein lie the strengths and weaknesses of the Spirit. It isn't the ultimate pace, rhythm, and timing machine (understandably, it can't match our solid-state reference amps), but it is exceptionally and delightfully revealing of timbre, tonality and small dynamic shifts. And especially with voices, that can be truly captivating. If you're keen on stereo imagery you'll find much to like here, too. The Spirit

creates a broad and deep soundstage with sympathetically recorded material, and its dynamic capabilities generate tangible atmosphere

through picking up on reverberation and the subtlest of spatial clues. The same ability also makes light work of discriminating between period and modern orchestral instrumentation. Interestingly, the Spirit also seems to time more insistently with classical recordings than it does with rock, such that its musical presentation is on a par with the more cosmetic aspects.

In fact, the only question we really can't answer is why Ayon bothered with the Triode/Pentode switching when the single-ended mode sounds so superior to the push-pull alternative. **HFC**

Malcolm Steward



VERDICT	
SOUND >> 85% [Progress bar]	PRO Triode mode is a timbre-lover's dream, especially when coupled with silken, folky female vocalists.
FEATURES >> 85% [Progress bar]	CON One has to wonder why Ayon bothered equipping the Spirit with Pentode operation, when the alternative Triode mode clearly outperforms it.
BUILD >> 90% [Progress bar]	
VALUE >> 85% [Progress bar]	
CONCLUSION If you're after the finest in pace, rhythm and timing you might prefer to look elsewhere. However, if you're seeking a bargain-priced slice of subtle, single-ended Triode magic, then look no further.	
HI-FI CHOICE OVERALL SCORE >> 85%	