

Doug Schroeder probes the prospect of authentic high-end in Ayon Audio's \$4,299 CD-1 CD player & \$3,999 Spirit tube integrated amplifier

March, 2008



SPECIFICATIONS CD-1:

Class-A
Conversion rate 192kHz / 24 bit
CD transport Sony KSS-213Q
Tube complement 2 x 6H30 EH, 2 x 6922 EH
Dynamic range > 108dB
Output level @1 kHz / 0,775V -0dB 5V / rms
Output level @1 kHz / 0,775V -0dB 12 V / peak
Output impedance Single Ended-RCA 30 Ohms
Output impedance Balanced-XLR 170 Ohms
Digital output 75 Ohm S/PDIF (RCA)
S/N ratio > 102 dB
Frequency response 20Hz - 20kHz +/- 1dB
Total harmonic distortion @ 1kHz < 0.002%
Remote control
Output complement RCA & XLR

SPECIFICATIONS SPIRIT:

Class of Operation Triode or Pentode mode in class-A
Tube Complement 4x KT88, 3x 12AU7 EH – KT90 compatible
Load Impedance 4 & 8 Ohms
Bandwidth 15Hz-60kHz
Output Power / Pentode mode 2 x 50 Watt
Output Power / Triode mode 2 x 30 Watt
Peak Output Power 2 x 70 Watt
Nominal voltage gain 40dB
Damping factor 1.02
Frequency Response 27 Hz - 42 kHz/ 0.5 dB
Input sensitivity for full power 1 V
Input Impedance at 1 kHz 100K Ohm
S/N ratio at full power 80 dB
Hum 0,003 V

Power consumption 45 Watts
Dimensions (WxDxH) cm 43x31x10 cm
Weight 11 kg
MSRP CD-1: \$4,299

NFB 0dB
Volume Control Potentiometer
Remote Control
Inputs 4xLine
Power Consumption 145 Watt
Dimensions (WxDxH) cm 46x34x26 cm
Weight 29 kg
Shipping weight 33kg
MSRP SPIRIT: \$3,999

Distributor:
U.S. / Canada / Mexico
Ayon Audio USA

Tel. 1-888-593-8477
URL: www.ayonaudiousa.com
Email: sales@ayonaudiousa.com

I thought I had ruled out tube cdp's. I was under the impression that quality solid-state players had advanced to the point where they had eclipsed hybrid designs. In years past, my disc player comparisons had taken me from the Rega Planet 2000 to the Ah! Njoe Tjoeb 4000, a tube hybrid design. I went all out, having added the upsampler, upgraded power cord, etc. to make this player a real winner. As time passed, I yearned for more, so I posted an inquiry online: What's an upgrade from the Ah! Njoe Tjoeb 4000? The most consistent answer was the Rega Saturn. I went and heard it, and had to have it. Later, with the Saturn in my home, I was amazed, but very pleased to hear this SS design sounding *more tube-like* than the tube player! What delighted me about the Saturn was its openness and clarity. I thought, "It'll be a long time before I pay attention to tubed players..."

Wrong! I was chasing another SS player for review, so when Constantine mentioned the Ayon CD-1 tube player, I agreed but was not expecting anything out of the ordinary. There are times in your life when you reluctantly agree to something that turns out to be better than you expected. I want to publicly thank Constantine for calling me and asking if I would review the CD-1. I don't know if he's ever heard it, but if he has, he is a generous man to allow me to write the review, because this player oozes luxury and has lovely sound.

USING THE CD-1



Ayon, a newer name on the North American audiophile scene, is an Austrian concern, headed by owner and chief designer Gerhard Hirt, a young man who finalizes the products he creates using subjective testing. From what I'm hearing of the company's CD-1 and Spirit, he has a bright future ahead of him! Ayon is distributed in the states by Ayon Audio USA, with Charlie Harrison at the helm.

Top loading designs, as utilized in the CD-1, are not exotic as they were a decade ago, so audiophiles will not be wooed only by aesthetics. Ayon seems to know this, and they have included many features conducive to superior CD playback including the following:

- **Class A triode vacuum tube output stage with two 6H30 Electro Harmonix and two 6922 EH tubes**
- **Warm up function to extend tube life**
- **Upsampling to 24 bit/192 kHz**
- **9 separate voltage regulators**
- **Mundorf and Solen capacitors**
- **8mm aluminum-brushed and anodized chassis**
- **Hand assembly**

The CD-1 is an example of designing a great sounding component which uses inexpensive military tubes; the 6H30's to be specific. It struck me that the Monarchy Audio M24 DAC also uses military tubes. From what I have heard of these components, it certainly is no longer the case that one must have esoteric designs and rare tubes to achieve a very palatable sound. There seems to be new life breathed into the mid-price range of tubed equipment, and part of that freshness is due to the superb performance of these affordable military tubes!

Unlike the Rega Saturn, another top-loader, the CD-1 does not initialize a disc when inserted.

Upon initial startup with a disc inside, the CD-1 enters a warm-up phase for about 1 minute, then initializes. All subsequent discs call for the user to depress the STOP button three times. The first time stops play. The second time the unit displays "Open", at which time the disc is exchanged. After the new disc is inserted, depressing the STOP button a third time causes the disc to be initialized.



Given the fact that the magnetic clamp and acrylic glass cover contain no electronics, the unit needs the command to begin initialization. Since I am used to automatic initialization, there were a few times I waited as the unit sat silently on “Open” until I realized the additional command was necessary. Once I caught on, the sequence became second nature. I did find that the unit would both initialize and play if I merely depressed the PLAY arrow, but Charlie Harrison of Ayon Audio USA advised me that the proper way to do it was by using the STOP function.

The CD-1 is a mix of high-end hassle and ease of ergonomics. I found that replacing a disc involved use of both hands, as I did not want to put the smoked Acrylic cover down onto hard surfaces often. I know that the more times such a lid comes into contact with a hard surface, the more that scars will show on it over time. I ended up juggling two discs, the magnetic clamp and the acrylic cover. As long as one does not *drop* something, the player’s parts are spared any contact and remain pristine. Salvation was found in the top mounted controls, which were blissfully clean and effective.



Much more confusing is the remote control. I appreciate the heft of the metal remote, but the monotonous array of identical buttons spaced in a regimented manner and not backlit is overwhelming. It is laudable to have every function at fingertip, but the congestion of the remote makes for having to concentrate every time a function is entered. Ayon might want to consider a second, more basic, remote including track selection, start and stop, which would make everyday use much more carefree.

The CD-1 has a “cost no object” feel and appearance, and is one of the most aesthetically pleasing players I have used. The thick aluminum casing, substantial magnetic disc clamp and smoked Acrylic cover add to the sense of purposefulness of design. The unit has one set each of balanced and single-ended outs, in addition to a coaxial and optical out. It does not pretend to mesh with HT applications – it is for music lovers, HT be darned! It seems to strut, “I’m for *real music* playback, not combination DVD/CD purposes!”

Indeed, when I heard what the CD-1 extracts from a disc, I felt more than ever before that people are premature in dumping CD’s for music files. With every month that goes by, I see signs that the inevitable is coming, the lurching to the end of D.A. (Disc Age) and the continuance of the E.D. (Era of Download). But, when I hear a player beautifully sketch what can be heard from a media collection I have been through several times, my heart skips a beat thinking, “People are abandoning this technology and they have *no clue* how good it can get!” Indeed, I also had no clue.

USING THE SPIRIT



The Spirit integrated amp is yet another delicious offering from Ayon. With similar chassis construction, it is a perfect complement to the CD-1. I was not initially going to review the Spirit, but I had mentioned to Charlie that I was returning an integrated to a manufacturer and would be looking for a new one. He suggested the Spark, a 22Wpc offering, but I felt it might be a bit thin for working with magnetic planar speakers, such as my Eminent Technology LFT-8B, so the Spirit at 50Wpc was settled upon.

As in the CD-1, high quality construction is apparent throughout. It is a single-ended class-A triode, negative zero-feedback design with selectable TRIODE or PENTODE mode. Output in Pentode is 50Wpc, and 30Wpc in Triode, and it has four pairs of single-ended inputs. Its tube complement consists of four KT-88 and three 12AU7. It is designed for more difficult speaker loads, which offers load impedance of either 4 or 8 Ohms at the speaker posts. It has a power supply which is said to, "...provide high speed energy delivery on transients." It incorporates a timer warm-up circuit for the tubes, has an external STATIC BIAS adjustment on the back for each of the KT-88's, and like its sibling, is hand assembled. The KT-88's have a reputation for beautiful sound, and this unit does nothing but reinforce that reputation!

The front of the Spirit is elegant in its charcoal black and stainless steel appearance. The rotund transformer towers glisten in sharp contrast to the more austere, 10mm brushed aluminum anodized casing. The front panel is super clean, with volume control and input selector, aside from the red glowing "Ayon" logo, which doubles as the infrared sensor. The unit can be switched to Pentode mode via a selector located smack in the center of the tubes topside. Equally as clean is the hefty, aluminum remote with MUTE and LEVEL controls (This would be an ideal remote to configure for the CD-1 as well!).

The Spirit is a spirited-sounding amp which I felt was highly comparable to the Pathos Classic One MkIII. The distinctions between the two were not as large as I might have thought, given that the Classic One is 70Wpc and the Spirit 50Wpc. The Classic One is a romantic-sounding, smooth and slightly bass-emphasized amp. It's utterly non-fatiguing, even with bright speakers. The top-end is conservative, and some might even say curtailed slightly.



On the other hand, the Spirit is surprisingly powerful for its 50 Watts in Pentode mode. I am guessing that what it lacks in watts is made up in current capacity, as I felt it drove all of my speakers with an ease equal to the Classic One. Whereas the former is slightly bottom heavy, the Spirit is lighter on the top-end with a better grasp of detail from the mids on up. When paired with the CD-1, it has a sound the equivalent of a filigreed vessel, with layers of detail. Its tubed nature kept it from overstraining in the treble.

I could easily listen to either of these amps for an indefinite period without feeling fatigue. I suggest that they are distinct in nature but very close in overall satisfaction. The Pathos Classic One MkIII might be likened to salt and the Ayon Spirit more like pepper – both with distinctly strong flavoring but very palatable. The Classic One is strong and straightforward; it will never offend because it stays well within conservative bounds. The Ayon, being more like pepper, is spicier and hot, yet very crisp and clean.

I myself love detail and seek to increase it in my system whenever it can be done without adding harshness. This is a difficult trick, and all it takes to tip the scale too far is one component. Gerhard has tuned his equipment to balance on the edge between detail and edginess, and my ear very much appreciates the finesse in that accomplishment.

LISTENING IMPRESSIONS OF CD-1 and SPIRIT

Initially, I had the CD-1 prior to the arrival of the Spirit. I grouped the CD-1, McIntosh MA6300, Legacy Focus HD speakers and Wire World cables together. This combination had vibrancy, and clarity. I pulled out Dan Fogelberg's *Windows and Walls* to hear "False Faces". The CD-1 pulled out of the older recording details which had all but escaped the Rega Saturn. I was hearing runs on the harp, bells following the melody, and chimes, all of which had been discreetly tucked into the overall sound on the Saturn, but which stood out in contrast with the Ayon.



There is a sense of brightness, not harshness at all, but intensity from the CD-1 which the Saturn is not capable. I liken the difference to two bulbs, one frosted and the other clear, both with similar wattage but very different light. I tend to lean toward the CD-1 presentation, the “clear bulb”, as the signal seems clearer.

I like listening to echoes in recordings as they give superb spatial clues to the venue. A disc which I pull out for virtually every cdp review is a mellow collection of female vocals *Women & Songs*. I find myself clicking between three selections – Beth Nielsen Chapman’s “Sand and Water”, Joan Baez’s “Diamonds and Rust”, and Tanita Tikaram’s “Twist in my Sobriety”. I wonder what the captivation is, since all three are altos. I’m not sure, but I do find myself gravitating toward altos, possibly since it seems that sopranos claim the spotlight so often.

In a good system, changing cdp’s can reveal such ambient clues. In this particular case, the Saturn consistently presented less information in the background echoes, which were somewhat truncated. The Ayon, in contrast, revealed more extension to the reverberation, similar to the way a cymbal reproduced properly on a good audio system resonates long after struck.

Charlie Harrison of Ayon Audio USA has been among the most helpful, service-oriented of distributors I have worked with. I am impressed with the build quality of the Ayon equipment. I have had opportunity to review some hand wired rave reviewed components from other manufacturers which I wasn’t impressed by; when two amps from a manufacturer have binding posts which are loose when tightening speaker cables, it’s not a good sign. I felt the opposite about Ayon gear in that it’s built to be substantial and reliable. The solidity of binding posts, smooth operation of the volume control, and ruggedness of the casing all say to me that pride of craftsmanship is an emphasis at Ayon.



If a person has an issue with their unit, I get the distinct sense that Ayon will stand behind their products with superb service. The unit sent to me had been used on several occasions as a demo, and had been transported across the country three or four times. By the time it had reached me some damage had been done. I encountered an anomaly, an intermittent silencing of the unit playing as I commanded it to skip a track. When I stopped the unit and restarted, it emitted a plastic sounding rapid clicking sound, like a gear slipping prior to engaging. The

other issue was a completely dead coaxial digital output. Obviously this unit had been mishandled, despite the thorough packing – a new unit was in order.

Charlie was quite concerned and jumped to action following my phone call. I get the distinct feeling a unit would have been on my doorstep in 24 hours had one been available. The CD-1 is popular as a newcomer and has been sold out of its initial run. In a few days I was sent a new unit with a black face plate to match the black Spirit amp which had just arrived. The new unit functioned normally, and better yet, its black finish matched the Spirit. I would love to have seen a similar glowing Ayon logo on the CD-1, as it would make the pair look formidable. As it is, the basic sea foam blue digits of the CD-1's display are functional and inoffensive.

Near the end of the review period I acquired the Sonos Digital Music system for review, and I made sure to use the Spirit with it. Setting the wonders of internet-based music and server functionality aside for this review, saving it for the Sonos report, I will state that the experience was hugely positive. I have used the Sonos with three or four amplification schemes to date, being powered from Ayon's 50 watts, to 1,000 watts. There is no doubt that expansion of the soundstage and control over the bass drivers comes with power. However, the Spirit was most commendable in this regard. I did not feel that I had stepped down substantially when using it. Know, however, that I am a conservative listener, as I find no delight in hastening hearing damage by overdriving equipment to ridiculous levels. If you must have ear bleed volume, or have tremendously inefficient speakers and play them at higher levels, then look elsewhere, since the Spirit does not have endless reserves of power. For most sensible listeners, this integrated will not run out of oomph.



One of the greatest assets the Spirit possesses is the ability to be configured with either 8-Ohm or 4-Ohm output and Triode or Pentode operation. This allowed me to find a pleasing sound no matter which speakers and cdp I used. With the efficient Tannoy Glenair speakers I set the amp to 8-Ohm Triode mode. Clean and distinct, the Spirit and CD-1 were a distinctively good match for the Glenair.

Conversely, with the Legacy Audio Focus HD, another speaker with higher sensitivity, at 96dB, I elected to use the 4-Ohm Triode mode. In both cases, I felt the clearer presentation offered in Triode was preferable. However, the Focus HD with its twin 12" woofers is capable of prodigious bass and I felt the 8-Ohm output was a bit lacking in the 30Wpc Triode mode. Using the 4-Ohm outs did the trick, and the presentation improved.

I did not encounter difficulties in terms of cable matching with the Ayon equipment. They are so well balanced that a cable which either gave a presentation more forward, or one that subdued the signal slightly didn't elicit a negative reaction from me. The odds are good that a purchaser would be able to make numerous cabling combinations, even hodge-podge collections of cables, work relatively well with the CD-1 and Spirit. They are not tuned in such manner that one parameter will throw them off and make them sound ugly. This, and the fact that they passed muster with me on planar, dual concentric and larger dynamic speakers suggests they would be more than adequate for the music lover who wants better than just good sound, but doesn't want to spend \$15k

to get it.

I am very cautious about recommending one brand solutions for audiophiles. While allegiance to a company is laudable, there are too many outstanding pieces which can bring a vitality, a synergy, to the experience. Ayon, however, is an exception, and I would heartily recommend an audition of the combination of the CD-1 and Spirit.

These two dodge the warm, wet blanket sound of an all-tube system with a tube source, yet retain the best of the glow and vitality of tubes. As a relatively new name to North America, and to win the hearts of audiophiles, Ayon's products have to be not only good, but very good. Having run this pairing through my gauntlet, I can recommend them without reservation. Putting myself in the shoes of an audiophile who wants a taste of the authentic high-end, but without the worry of component matching or spending one's self into the poor house, Ayon is a name to remember! Individually or in tandem these pieces play well with elegance and effervescence. They are champagne for a person with a wine box budget.





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