

Ayon CD-2 CD Player

CD player, DAC or preamplifier?

Products: CD-2 CD Player

Manufacturer: [Ayon Audio](#)

Sample from the Italian distributor: [HiFi4music](#)

Reviewer: [Geoff Husband](#) - TNT France

Reviewed: October 2009



Introduction

I've a confession to make.

I don't really like reviewing CD players and DACs. Firstly I know nothing about the electronics that make them tick, and so I'm in no position to make technical comments or evaluations of a player's innards. But then I don't know a lot about amplifier electronics either and that doesn't stop me chasing valve amps for review.

No the real reason is that personally I find them boring to listen to. I'm a vinyl addict and whether it is because of the ritual of vinyl, or (I suspect) the fundamental superiority of the medium, my 'digital' listening is primarily of the background variety.

Added to this is the fact that as a species CD players are a relatively uniform bunch. They all have near flat frequency response, similar Signal to Noise and so on, and so you rarely get that 'oh my gosh' feeling as when a new turntable just throws music at you in a way you've not heard before, or a speaker provides an unbalanced and distorted view of events (which of course makes good copy...).

Yes they do vary of course, and over the years I've got increasingly fussy and find most cheaper players simply unpleasant, sounding harsh and compressed, but

pinning down the differences and capabilities of more expensive players is hard work and I often find I'm dancing-on-the-head-of-a-pin to describe why one beats another...

So why do I review them - well to be honest they often come as a 'package'. For example one manufacturer recently emailed me to ask if I'd review their new DAC - I groaned inwardly, but then saw they made a rather interesting valve pre-amp so sort of said I'd like to review that. In the end I got both and of course I quite enjoyed reviewing the pre-amp and having to review the DAC was worth the effort...

And the subject of this test arrived under not dissimilar circumstances. I really, really wanted to review their [Crossfire](#) amp as one of my series of 'anything-but-300b' reviews, and the CD-2 came with it soooo....

Anyway, having spent the best 2 months of my hi-fi adventure playing with the stunning Crossfire and writing a rave review (*[link here](#)) I find myself dragging myself to the keyboard to write about the second half of the review pair.

So here goes.

Design, Construction.

The CD-2 shares the same general form as the Crossfire's body. Made from thick slabs of dark anodised alloy with radiused corners it's an imposing and attractive case with the sort of build quality you'd associate with the cost. The display is simple and clear, the disc loaded into the top of the player after you've lifted the big alloy and acrylic lid. I like top loaders, mainly because of that 'ritual' I talked about, I hate putting the disc into a wobbly draw to see being sucked into the machine:-)

The interesting bit isn't the front, but what's round the back because the CD-2 is much more than a CD player. Of course it has Digital-outs, both RCA and AES, so that it can run as a transport, but more importantly it also has a switchable digital 'in'... Combine that with the on-board volume control - accessed via the remote - and the CD-2 transmogrifies from being a one-box player into a player/pre-amp that will play CD's and provide an input for your other digital source. This variable output goes up to 4.8 volts so should drive most things.



This is going to be increasingly significant - many audiophiles are now running systems that need just a CD player and a hard-drive based player, the CD-2 provides such a squeezebox with a very high-quality DAC and switching. So though the CD-2 is an expensive player, it starts to look like a value product if it means you save the cost of a preamp... Of course the phono and balanced outputs mean it'll match most power-amps, or conventional pre-amps.

The other trick is that in common with an increasing number of DACs the CD-2 offers optional and switchable upsampling to 24/192.

The output stage is Class-A valve with four 6H30 and a quick look inside showed some very high class built-quality including completely separate power-supplies for analogue and digital sections and a lot of regulation. Beyond that I'm lost so you'll have to go to the [Ayon site](#) for details.

In Use

A short section this, because the Ayon was extremely easy to use. On switch-on, (the switch being cleverly hidden under the front plate) the player warms up for a few seconds and then is ready to go. Drop a CD in and replace the puck and you have to wait a few seconds before the disc is recognised - a bit slow but better than the operationally similar Opera CD player, and something that seems quite common with players nowadays. My old Onkyo (circa 1998) swallows a CD, reads the TOC and starts playing in about a second - with the Ayon it's a question of replacing the lid and then waiting patiently for 3-4 seconds before you can press play. Sometimes I'd press play, sit down and then find the player hadn't yet recognised the disc and have to get up again... It's not really a complaint, but I don't know why it should be so much worse than 10 years ago. And the Opera is truly glacial!

The buttons on the top are clearly labelled, and though the remote is full function and rather attractive, I generally didn't use it - for me that's important, some players are unusable without the remote and [I hate the things](#).

Sound

So how am I doing? Still awake? Good, because something a bit odd happened during the review period. As you know I fell deeply and passionately in love with the Ayon Crossfire, and it provoked me into listening to more music than I've done in a very long time. In fact after a couple of weeks I found that I'd got into the habit of sitting down every evening and listening to a couple of hours of music - something I'd not done for some time. This is why I'm saving money and selling gear to try and buy one:-)

But the surprise was that on those long evenings wallowing in good music, a good book and a glass of wine, I was spending more and more time with CD's on. Now normally this is exactly the situation where the CD player stays off as I have the time to play with my records and am listening carefully enough to know what I'm missing with CD. But no - now I was listening critically, and out of choice, to a CD player.

So what's going on? Well it's just the most beautiful, warm, beguiling CD player I've heard, and combined with the incredible transparency of the Crossfire it made a combination that gave insight without offence.

I played with the 24/192 upsampler, and on this player it proved to be superior enough to make the switching redundant. Without it the sound was just a little grey and edgy in comparison. I guess a very warm sounding amplifier might benefit from this added edge, but it sounded like an artificial edge rather than extra level of definition when laid bare by the Crossfire.

I also tried the CD-2 as a pre-amp into the Crossfire run as a power-amp - bypassing its pre-amp section. I preferred the sound of the Crossfire run as an integrated, but that had as much to do with the lower background noise as anything else, and when compared to using other pre-amps the CD-2 made a good account of itself - to the point that if you do only need two inputs the CD-2 will do very well thank you with out the crutch of a pre-amp.

I also compared the CD-2 as a transport with two off-board DAC's (Audionote and Acousticbouy), comparing them with it's own on-board DAC and again could see little need for adding anything to the original. In fact both DAC's removes a touch of the magic and reduced the player to the more ordinary. In contrast I tried running my Audionote CD transport into the Ayon, with it acting as the DAC and this too proved extremely successful, providing a warmer and more rounded view of events than the more dramatic AN DAC it's usually partnered with. But the real magic, the best sound overall, and by some distance was the Ayon run as an integrated player into the Crossfire as an integrated amplifier. Once I'd decided on this I saw little point in fiddling about and just enjoyed listening...

So now the tricky bit, the dancing-on-the-head-of-a-pin I told you about. Why does the Ayon sound so good? Again there's no big tonal shift, big increase in definition - you just don't get that when comparing very good CD players, but what you do get is a comfort zone. How long you listen before you start to feel you are missing out on something and reach for the black stuff. For many superficially fine-sounding players that 'zone' lasts less than the side of a CD, others after impressing me for a while become wearing, yet others begin to irritate with their lack of dynamics that makes everything boring. In the case of the Ayon I just found myself quite happy listening to CD's and on a couple of notable occasions days went by without vinyl being put on.

I don't want this to degenerate into a hoary old CD vs Vinyl debate, but there's no doubt that the CD-2 made me very, very comfortable with the silver disc in a way that only the Audiomeca Mephisto did a few years back, but in this case with more in the way of weight and power akin to vinyl.

The overwhelming characteristic is of a full, rounded and powerful player. Now this is something my Opera CD player does as well, but the Ayon manages to combine this with the detail and speed of the Audiomeca - a player that makes the Opera sound just a little bit off-the-pace. Of course this is a characteristic of good vinyl and so the two matched really well, meaning that switching from one to another didn't require a period of acclimatisation. It doesn't really have quite the fire of the zero-oversampling Audionote combination, but I sometimes feel that that worthy player is trying to engineer the energy of vinyl without the substance behind it, and though impressive it's a presentation that can get wearing over an evening with some recordings, and really needs a slightly more sympathetic amp than the Crossfire.

A huge part of this is of course down to the Crossfire, but having an amplifier that transparent isn't necessarily kind to CD players - when put under such a microscope often a player that sounds fine in most systems starts to fall apart. In particular, if you listened to the dynamics, extension and soundstage scale of vinyl a really good system will show the CD as hamstrung in comparison. That this didn't happen with the CD-2 is a tribute to it's ability.

But I'm still struggling to pin it down - like I say it matches the power of the Opera with the transparency of the Audiomeca. It's full of bubbling energy though a little more laid back than the AN. Is it the valve stage fooling me with some nice harmonic distortion? Perhaps, but the Opera and AN share the technology. Is the close tonal match with my vinyl front-end giving it an advantage? Of course, but the Opera shares that balance.

I guess that in the end it doesn't leave me feeling short changed in any area - detail, soundstage, bass extension - whatever, and at the same time it seems totally free of the common faults of CD. In effect it does everything right and nothing wrong. Is it perfect? Of course not - you can always have more of anything, but it is perfectly balanced, and like the Crossfire it is a transparent, high information design that is nevertheless easy to sit in front of all evening. I think that makes it special.

Conclusion

Someone at Ayon knows what they are doing. Not only have they impressed this reviewer hugely with both products, but those products have a synergy that makes system matching simple.

In isolation the CD-2 is well built, sounds excellent and is very flexible. For the first time in a long while I will be very sorry to see a player go from the listening room. I think congratulations to the Ayon team are in order...

systems used

- Vinyl: [Opera Audio LP5.0 Dynavector 507 MkII](#) /Dynavector [XV-1](#), [XX-2](#), [Music Maker](#)
- Phono stages: [GramAmp Era Gold](#) [Lehmann Black Cube Twin](#). [ESE Nibiru](#)

- CD: [Audionote Zero CD/DAC](#)
- Preamp/poweramp: [Audionote M3/ Opera 300b PSE](#)
- Cables: FFRC and Sonic Link speaker cables. DIY silver interconnects. Audionote silver interconnects.
- Speakers: Loth-x [Polaris](#) and REL Stentor.

Test records used... - [Killers](#)

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