



Ayon Audio Vulcan II Power Amplifier,

the Line

Polaris III Preamplifier,



Between

and CD5s CD Player/DAC



Real &

by Peter Breuninger

Reproduced

Music





Ayon Audio joins a select group

of audio companies that are redefining the art of sound reproduction. Based in Austria, Ayon designs and manufactures cutting-edge tube components and loudspeakers. When you think Ayon, think...red-velvet protective covers, black-and-chrome artistic sculptures, and dazzling limited production tubes.

Ayon values producing *objets d'art* at the same level as it values sound reproduction. We are talking Bugatti- and Bentley-class products.

Ayon Audio was founded by Gerhard Hirt. His eye for design, ergonomics, and sound is astounding, as is his business acumen. The company started out as VAIC audio in the 1990s. VAIC was a small company best known for its tube manufacturing factory (triode output tubes). Hirt was a colleague of Alesa Vaic. He successfully acquired the company, changed its name, and expanded the product lineup to include preamplifiers, CD players/DACs, and loudspeakers.

Hirt is surely gifted in the form-meets-function school of design. Each Hirt creation has a unique feel and *style* to it that stands above today's "me-too" audio components. If Steve Jobs were an audio designer, I reckon he'd be Gerhard Hirt.

You must see, touch, and feel these products to appreciate this level of industrial art and ergonomic engineering. As striking as the photographs are they do not do justice to the incredible beauty of Ayon components. Like Jobs, Hirt is not only show—he's go. His products break new ground in sound reproduction. It's this that puts Hirt at the apex of today's modern audio designers.

The kicker is Ayon products are priced at, dare I say, realistic ultra-high-end levels. Only three components are MSRP'd at over \$25,000—unheard of for this level of European manufacturing. Without a doubt, these are world-class, high-desire instruments that actually offer value. (Please note: Ayon is pronounced *a-ohn* (the "ohn" rhymes with John), not Ion, as in physics class.)

Imagine the perfect audio system... a system that puts Pavarotti, Callas, and Tormé smack-dab there in your room. A system that (more easily) allows you to visualize reality. What would it be? Digital or analog? Solid-state or tube? Muscle or micro-power?

Wait a minute, what if you could pick and choose, *à la carte*, the best attributes of each technology and create a new sound—a new way of listening. Gerhard Hirt has done this and the audio world is taking notice. His Ayon products blur that line of real versus reproduced. Perhaps it's the sound we've all been searching for.

What follows is an introduction to several Ayon products: the Vulcan II amplifier, the Polaris III preamplifier/regenerator (power supply), and the CD5s CD player/DAC.

Vulcan II Power Amplifier

The Vulcan II is Ayon's cost-no-object, 55Wpc power amplifier that combines the speed and verisimilitude of solid-state with the "you are there" holographic midrange of single-ended triodes. Plus, there is bandwidth extension and lighting-fast snap with zero upper-frequency roll-off.

The Vulcan II is a monoblock, pure tube, parallel SET, Class A design. Each amplifier has two primary output tubes and two sets of output transformers. The venerable 6BQ5 (EL84) drives each output tube. The amplifier's roots hail back to the VAIC 52b Reference, one of the first SET amplifiers to provide accuracy at the frequency extremes. It is thus an evolutionary product and is an outstanding example of audio Darwinism.

The Vulcan II utilizes the latest generation AA62b output tube. They look like two futuristic thermionic sentinels sitting atop each amplifier deck. The AA62b is one of the largest single-plate DHT's (directly heated triodes) produced today. It has a beautiful lattice plate (anode) superstructure that makes an ordinary 6550 look like your father's Oldsmobile. It is capable of power output to 30 watts. Each tube location is alphanumerically labeled so you can't screw up tube placement—a nice touch.

Ayon owns the actual tube manufacturing facility in the Czech Republic. The AA62b tube is a rethinking of the venerable Western Electric 300B, but with "balls." In the early-to-mid 90s VAIC's quality control was spotty. The



tubes were so avant-garde that the manufacturing process had to catch up to the design. The plant, under the guidance and control of Hirt (and team), got the bugs out and now currently produces a full range of triode output tubes with *astoundingly* low failure rates. In fact, no AA62b tube has failed since production began over three years ago. Think of that the next time your 6550 goes cherry red.

Hirt says he's constantly approached to make OEM tubes for other companies but politely declines. "I want to focus on making the world's best audio components," he says, "not the world's best parts." As a result, Ayon does not sell its tubes to anyone but actual Ayon owners. It's an exclusive club!

Each chassis of the Vulcan II is manufactured from thick machined-aluminum slabs, as are all Ayon products. Four shiny transformers sit behind the sentinel-like tubes, as if they were guarding some outer space missile-silo complex. The cool factor is off the charts. The transformers are circular and chrome and you can see yourself in their high-def mirror finish.

The front face of each Vulcan II chassis has the Ayon company name CNC-machined into the 1/2-inch aluminum. It's an hour-long process on the CNC machine, and it's the finishing touch to this *tour de force*.

These cutting-edge amplifiers look as serious as a starship though as delicate as a ballerina. Every person, of either gender, who laid eyes upon them wanted to take them home. Hirt is very clever—he designs products for *both* decision-makers. They are futuristic beauties in a world of grey and black boxes.

The Vulcan IIs can drive a wide range of loudspeakers due to their robust 55Wpc output power. They offer 4- or 8-ohm taps for the speaker connections with seriously large German WBT multiway binding posts. There is no feedback of *any kind* employed within the amplifier. The turn-on rocker switch is interestingly located (hidden) under the right front corner of the amplifier on the chassis bottom. After a couple of turn-ons and turn-offs, using it becomes second nature.

When you fire the Vulcans up, the machined "Ayon" logos start to blink with a backlit red glow, like they're alive and starting to breathe. After a minute or so the backlight stays lit, and the depth of the milling of the word "Ayon" reminds you that this is one goshdarn serious amplifier.

The grounding of the amplifier is unique and one that I wish every amplifier would employ. It's a dual-switchable configuration, employing star-grounding. There is a little toggle at the back of the amp and if you hear any ground loop or power supply noise, simply flip it up or flip it down, and it will disappear. There is an input gain knob with three settings so you can match input source gain to amplifier output. Inputs are RCA and balanced.

Ayon Polaris III

The Ayon Polaris III with the "regenerator" power supply serves as the preamplifier. Machined from the same billet-quality, aircraft-carrier aluminum as the Vulcan II, the Polaris III sits one notch below the top-of-the-line Spheris lineage and accompanying phonostage. The Polaris III has five line RCA inputs and one mc phono input. Outputs are RCA and balanced. There is a remote control that operates the preamp and other Ayon products, including the CD5s CD player/DAC I tested.

The remote operates a servo within the Polaris III that turns and gently clicks the big silver volume pot with authority. There is no mistaking a volume change. It is a click-swish-click sound that you will either love or hate. It's part Rube Goldberg, part fine automobile. Unlike the amplifier or CD player/DAC, the Polaris III employs a front-face on/off switch. It is silver chrome in color and the diameter of a five-cent piece. When you press it, there is a feel like putting a key in a Bugatti—a combination of "click" and tension release as the button engages the power-up circuit. It's thrilling.

The shiny chrome-handled Elma/Swiss input selector is another high point. It's a multi-stepped unit with front-face notches, so you'll have to mark or remember which device is on what setting. It's marked L1, L2, L3, etc. Turning it is a thing of beauty, a soft click and then it engages and switches the source—all within a millisecond. Touch points are vital in equipment at this level.

The Vulcan II combines the speed of solid-state with the holography of tubes

Like many of today's top preamps, the Polaris III utilizes the 6H30 super tube. I'm a big fan of this tube. I believe that, when properly implemented, it can equal or exceed the 12AX7 and 6DJ8. It offers fast, fast dynamics and is not prone to microphonics like 6SN7s.

The Regenerator power supply is the same size as the control unit. It provides full tube rectification. Many believe this is the best approach for amplifiers as it eliminates any solid-state-device noise, which can enter the power supply and harden the sound. On a practical basis, today's solid-state devices are so well made that this is a myth. It is interesting to note though, that some of the most respected products are tube-rectified, like the Lamm LL1 I reviewed in TAS issue 208.

The Regenerator recognizes the power-line frequency and reads it out numerically in red letters in a small window. It's a design touch that makes you appreciate the details of engineering within the unit. The Polaris III and its Regenerator power supply, when placed on a rack above and below each other, have a look that's modern-age impressive. Perhaps it's the large chrome knobs or maybe it's the cooling grids/ducts on top of each unit (also chrome) that set the units apart from other products.

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Ayon CD5s CD Player

Cut from the same visual cloth as the Polaris III, the CD5s is a top-loading CD player with inputs for a digital bitstream (read music server) and line source. The digital inputs are USB, AES/EBU, S/PDIF, and TosLink. So it's future proof (at least *for now*). The sampling rate and resolution are sensed automatically up to 192kHz/24-bit. Plus, it has an upsampling switch to the same full conversion rate (also on the remote control).

It can function as a two-source linestage with one RCA and one AES/EBU analog input. Outputs are both digital and analog. It's part of a new class of product that combines linestage, DAC, and transport in one box.

The top-loading transport is the widely available Phillips CD-Pro 2. The smoke-colored cover lifts off the large silver housing. The whole thing looks like a flying saucer landing deck. The small selection buttons are on top and they are also chrome with the same high-sensitivity touch-points as the Polaris III. When the unit is powered up, they sit within the

What is the Ayon sound? It is at the same time pure and exquisite and very appealing

SPECS & PRICING

Vulcan II Monoblock Amplifier

Power output: 55W
Tube complement: Two AA62B outputs, two 6BQ5, one 12AX7, one 5U4G
Input impedance: 100k ohms
Inputs: RCA and XLR
Dimensions: 14.2" x 9.8" x 22.8"
Weight: 100 lbs.
Price: \$39,500 a pair

Polaris III Preamplifier & Regenerator

Tube complement: Four C3m, two 6H30, four EY91
Inputs: Four RCA, one XLR line, one RCA phono, one RCA phono loading
Outputs: Two RCA, one XLR
Dimensions (each): 20" x 4.5" x 17"
Combined weight: 86 lbs.
Price: \$28,620

CD5s CD Player/DAC

Tube complement: Four 6H30, four 6Z4
Conversion rate: 192kHz/24 bit,

upsampling switchable

Transport mechanism: Phillips CD-Pro2

Output level: Variable

Output impedance: 300 ohms (RCA and XLR)

Digital output: S/PDIF (RCA), I²S, AES/EBU

Digital input: USB (up to 96kHz/24-bit), AES/EBU, S/PDIF, TosLink (up to 192kHz/24-bit)

Analog input: One RCA, one XLR

Analog output: One RCA, one XLR

Dimensions: 19.7" x 5.12" x 16.2"

Weight: 50 lbs.

Price: \$11,995

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red glow of a circular backlight—similar to the look of a BMW's halo headlights.

When you step back and admire these products the central theme is black-and-chrome sculpted modern shapes with glowing red highlights. Totally Bugatti.

Ayon has a sound, and it's unlike any you have heard before. If you read that an audio component has no signature, well... that is, itself, *the signature*. This is the heart of our hobby, finding the sound signature we like. Whether it's the spring water clarity of Audio Research or the 3-D conrad-johnson approach, no one company does it all. And friends, that's the fun *and* the frustration of it. It drives us to seek out and/or invent new products like Ayon has done.

Listening to the Ayons

What is the Ayon sound? First of all, it's not a sterile high-resolution sound, and it's not a "golden glow" sound. It is at the same time pure and exquisite, and it is very appealing to the ear. It is a blossoming sound that captures the full harmonic envelope of the music without smoothing over its warts. You get your cake and get to eat it too, with all the detail intact. This is a hallmark to the Ayon sound—the knack of presenting an extraordinary amount of detail without any edginess or sharpness. As you listen to it, you will want more of it. It's addicting. The Ayon *sound* will be a new reference for many audiophiles.

To better describe the Ayon sound is to look at the "sonic" canvas upon which it paints the music. It's an endless, silky, velvet-like environment that fills your room. This is where Ayon performs its magic with the dexterity of a surgeon. Think of it as a living, almost-breathing atmosphere. Now imagine the music, instruments, and notes magically popping out from within it. It is amazing and it is startling. It's an IMAX *panorama* of three-dimensional sound.

Listening to the Vulcan IIs

The Vulcan II, as a standalone product, has these traits in spades. Whether fronting the Lamm LL1 linestage or the Wyetech Opal, the Vulcan II presents huge panoramic vistas. To best demonstrate this I encourage you to play Dead Can Dance's "Son of the Stars." This music is custom made for IRS Vs, MBL X-tremes, and VTL Wotan amplifiers. It offers up a multitude of intertwining sonic landscapes with tons of out-of-phase detail. Perhaps sonically, this track is superior to any song on *Into the Labyrinth*. It starts off innocently enough: The shakers enter softly from the left, trailing off to the right before they begin a steady rhythm. The tabla drums suddenly explode across the stage, and Brendan Perry begins the chant "We are the stars that sing," backed by a huge electronic sonic landscape. I'll tell you: This is a guaranteed goose-bump track.

Like a switch, the Vulcans remove the walls of your room the very moment the drums and voice enter. Folks, there is nothing like it. No amplifier I've heard can knock down the walls of the listening room like

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this. The Lamm ML3s will more accurately portray Perry's unique vocal signature but they will not clobber you with the amount of acoustic space that the Ayon does. There is so much being thrown at you that your senses can actually overload. When Lisa Gerrard finally solos, your hair will stand on end! It's a total panoramic effect and it will change the way you listen to music.

Amazingly, the Vulcans achieve this effect with *all* music. The downward cascading theme in the Praeludium of the Bach Suite for Cello Number 3 [Starker/Mercury] not only showcases Starker's playing and technique but also highlights the air the cello excites, just as in real life. You not only get lost in the performance but you also lose yourself in the space in which the performance takes place—if that makes sense. The Vulcan's nail this acoustic and bring you a step closer to the live experience. Also, there is a greater sensation of rhythm and power due to the inordinate amount of air that is captured and moved by the Vulcans. It does not take long to realize that there is also an increase in *richness* to this air density that other amplifiers miss. The Komuro 212Es capture the life of an instrument (like the Ayon) but with less air-space richness. The Jadis JA-500 comes close to doing this "air-capture thing," but these guys cost far more, are twice the size (four chassis), and take a power-lifter to move.

Of course, there is more to the Vulcan II than fantastic air-capture, pace, and drive. There is that unparalleled SET midrange magic. Remember, the Vulcan is a true single-ended triode amplifier, although purists will argue that paralleling an SET design costs some of the image "exactness" that a single SET circuit provides. The trick is getting the tubes, both the outputs and drivers, on both sides of the amp to run the same. Hirt has done his homework here. Once you set the bias for each side, it stays

put. I've changed individual drivers (same brand though) and darn if the meter doesn't indicate the identical bias current as the prior tube did. Plus, over time I've had no bias drift on either side of either amp.

Demonstrating this exacting balancing act of the Vulcan's paralleled circuit is best left to the solo performer. Rita Rays singing "Autumn Leaves" on the outstanding *Mercury Songbook 4* CD set will do just fine. Rays is recorded live and her voice is centerstage. Her signature vibrato is captured as accurately as her initial consonants, with no smearing. Rays is standing, 3-D, right in front of you. The Lamm ML3 and its single circuit is also adept at this. This is what SET amplifiers are supposed to do—it's why you pay the big dollars per watt.

The Vulcan IIs, though, then seal the deal with real, honest-to-goodness, *and* tonally accurate bass. What? Bass wallop *and* accuracy in an SET amp? Yes, this is indeed uncharted territory in SET land and is why you should audition this amplifier as soon as possible. No, it's not Krell bass—not much is. I keep a pair of Krell KMA 400s hanging around as a reference to hear just what high-power solid-state bass can do. The Vulcan IIs dish up all the low-frequency tones; they just don't grip the woofers quite as firmly as the Krells. For that matter, neither does the Jadis JA-500 with its extraordinary 400 watts per channel. I may ruffle some feathers here, but I believe that a tube amp can never reproduce the

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hammer-head bass impact of a solid-state amplifier. It's simply a limitation of tubes.

Let's go back to the Dead Can Dance. The amount of force from the drum whacks is both room-shaking and enveloping. The Lamm ML3 Signatures may give you a little more tone to the drumhead hits, but not the sheer low-end envelopment that the Ayons do. Is this the difference between 35 watts per channel and 55? Perhaps, but remember that Ayon is not going to sell its tubes to anyone else. I believe the Ayon AA62b output tube is in a class of its own when it comes to low-frequency reproduction.

Why are these amplifiers so full of life and air and impact? Is it the front end? Not really. All the above sonic traits were revealed with the Wyetech Opal and the Lamm LL1, not just the Ayon Polaris III. Is it the digital? The Ayon CD5s is a remarkable player, very analog-like, but the workhorse EMU 1616m showed the same stuff through the Vulcans (but with way less three-dimensionality). So suffice it to say, regardless of front end, this is one heck of an amplifier.

Listening to the Polaris III and the CD5s

At first blush, these two components seemed to "soften" transient attacks. There was nary a doubt when they were in the system. Well, this ended up being a break-in issue. Make sure you allow for "on time" of several hours per day for a minimum of four weeks to settle and form the capacitors and break in the boards. As mentioned, the CD5s is a multi-purpose design. I tested it as a stand-alone linestage, as a stand-alone CD player, and as a separate DAC.

The Polaris III and the CD5s's linestage are cut from the same sonic cloth. Both offer the signature Ayon sound of huge sonic panoramas,

silky black-velvet backgrounds, and gobs of natural detail. The Polaris III (as a linestage) is the superior performer as should be expected. There is more density to the images and the sonic landscapes are larger, but not by that much and certainly no night-and-day difference. If you didn't do a series of back-to-back comparisons you would think the CD5s is unbeatable as a linestage. Both units give you a sweeter and a more refined top-to-bottom balance than the Wyetech Opal.

What I'm saying here is that the Wyetech is providing a different lens on the orchestra. It's a more va-va-vivid midrange view that's several rows closer to the conductor than the CD5s linestage and the Polaris III. In order of preference for the "believability factor," I would place the Polaris III equal to the Wyetech followed by the CD5s. However, the Polaris III outclasses the others with additional image density and solidity. Its air and space fill more of the room, and I mean every nook and cranny of it. It is remarkable.

I tested two of the CD5's digital inputs, the USB and S/PDIF coax. This was interesting. There is some controversy out there about current USB technology in regard to clocking and jitter. I'm not a guru here—I'm more the amp/speaker expert. But I did hear a bit less ambience with the USB input. It still had the same huge sonic vistas but with a smidgen less atmosphere and less room pressurization. I admit it's a subtle difference.



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Next, I compared the transport with my hard drives. This offers many variables, but it's a can of worms. Every computer sounds different whether it's due to the motherboard, the memory, the operating system, or even the type of hard drive. Different computers have different sounds. Remember, my system uses a pro soundcard (EMU 1616M), and yours may not. No matter how many CDs I played and compared to the rips, I can honestly say I slightly preferred the rips. It's difficult to describe the differences, but there is a more relaxed *gestalt* with the hard-drive rips. Both CD and rip have the same detail, air, and staging... bits is bits, right? With the CD5s you can test this yourself with its switchable inputs.

Alas, not everyone is able or inclined to merge his computer system with his audio system. Let's not forget that ripping a CD collection is no easy task. It's time-consuming and you have to manually type in many titles and tags. A transport is still a requirement for many of us; plus, the CD5s offers marvelous flexibility. With the CD5s, you can play a CD, and then click the remote and play a hi-res download, then click again and play an analog input such as a tuner or phonostage.

Speaking of versatility, the Polaris III is not just a linestage. It's a full-function preamplifier with a high-gain moving-coil phonostage. I have to warn you: I am a fan of step-up transformers (SUTs). I like the big dynamics that SUTs give my low-output coils. I know it's at the expense of immediacy and air, but *c'est la vie*. With the Polaris III, I preferred my low-output coils straight in, even the .2mV Cello Miyabi. There was more than ample gain, no noise, and zero tube rush with equally satisfying dynamics.

I then compared the Polaris III's phonostage to my benchmark Motif MP-11. I've grown accustomed to its speed, snap, and almost invisible noise floor. The *nod* here had to go the Polaris III. Not only is it lightning fast, it's also got that "tube" holography. The transient and trailing-edge detail is remarkable for a tube unit.

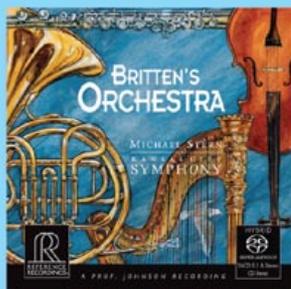
Playing a Keith Jarrett track from the historic *Sum Bear* concerts, without a doubt, showcased the 3-D effect of the Polaris III. This old ECM set has great pressings, but the piano sounds almost toyish. It's distracting. The Polaris III portrayed the piano as a more real and solid instrument on the stage.

Another recorded misconception was the John Coltrane Atlantic box set, *The Heavyweight Champion*. Coltrane's horn can be sharp and digitally edged especially with the Cello, a very revealing cartridge. I'm not totally sure these are pure AAA records. With the Polaris III, Coltrane's horn is more realistically "there" between the speakers. It's a more robust presentation and far more authentic. Even the Std. Koetsu (new version) had some hardness with this set. Not anymore. Remember, I mentioned that Ayon *analogs* the sound? Hard-sounding records are now far more listenable through the Polaris III, and yet, the detail sparkles through. This is a world-class phonostage and another Ayon home-run product.

Taken as a set, the Ayon Vulcan II, Polaris III, and CD5s offer "game over" sonic reproduction—the most involving I've ever experienced. If you value panoramic soundscapes and holographic imaging with no loss of detail, you have a new class of product to discover. The art and sound of Ayon Audio is Pebble Beach Concours d'Elegance level. Ayon *is* the Bugatti of audio. **tas**

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