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Ayon Crossfire - integrated SE valve amplifier

"The Thrill is Gone" (*)

Products: Crossfire Integrated Valve Amp
Manufacturer: [Ayon Audio](#)
Cost, approx: 8500 Euro
Italian distributor: [HiFi4music](#)
Reviewer: [Geoff Husband](#) - TNT France
Reviewed: April 2009



Introduction

I've bemoaned the lack of originality in valve amps more than once in this august publication. It seems odd that the majority of the better valve amps are based around 50+ year-old valves and circuits. Perhaps there was a 'golden age' when perfection was attained, but that the 300a/b valve should be widely seen as the greatest of them all, a valve designed in 1933, is just a little disappointing.

So having spent a lot of time reviewing, and owning various Single-Ended (of course) 300b amps, I've decided my next quest is to chase up the alternatives, whether they are less well known 'classic' valves or part of the new-wave of modern variations on the theme. That these latter valves should surface now is hugely gratifying - it's easy to forget that though the transistor almost entirely replaced valves in the West over 40 years ago, in the old Communist Bloc and China valves were actively developed well into the 1980's. My fear has been that the expertise, and more importantly the manufacturing facilities of these would be lost as their markets collapsed with the free passage of technology.

The 300b is of course a great valve, and in single-ended mode it has powered my system in one amp or another for the last 5 years. But it does have limitations and the most serious in the real world is that the power is limited to somewhere around 8 Watts, you can get more but only at the cost of greater distortion and shortened valve life. Though 8 watts may sound OK compared to some flea-powered SET's using 2a3 or 45's it's still a factor that limits it's applications to systems with high efficiency speakers - not necessarily horns, but not mainstream speakers either, you just need more power and driving ability. Of course the 845 and 211 and derivatives manage this trick but these transmitting valves were not, unlike the 300b, designed specifically for audio. So for now most of the newer audio

valves have primarily sought to improve on the 300b in the area of output.

Design/construction

Which brings us neatly to the first amplifier in this series, the Ayon Crossfire. Ayon are a relatively new name in amplifiers, but they bought the Viac company and name - which was one of the biggest and most respected valve and amplifier manufacturers, and one of the few pushing new valve designs. This factory in the Czech republic makes all the Ayon valves (and some other OEM valves) and those valves are exclusive to them. All Ayon amps are built in-house in Austria using mostly German components.

This pedigree was why I so wanted to play with one of their designs, and to my great delight a very large and heavy box arrived on my doorstep on the day promised (top marks for that for a start!). The amplifier I decided to review was the new Crossfire. There were several reasons - it's the cheapest model that showcases Ayons top AA62B power tube, it's price was not a million miles away from the majority of 300b amps I've had here, and I was quite keen to see how such an amp stacked up against my own [Audionote M3 preamp](#) (circa 7000 Euro), and [Opera 300b PSE monoblocks](#) (ditto), a combination that cost considerably more than the Ayon's 8500 Euro.



Opening the box won Ayon some more points in their favour - well boxed and with the amp and each chrome transformer cover covered in deep red velvet. These are small points but when you shell out the price of a small family car on an amplifier you need a feel-good factor when it comes to unpacking your new toy.

And that feeling continued because the Crossfire is a very beautiful piece of kit. It looks very different to the wood and alloy delights of my gorgeous Opera amps, but in it's own way - all black anodized alloy and those huge transformer covers - it looks as good. This is an expensive amplifier, but it looks the part and in my book that's important too.

It's also very heavy, and at 40 kgs it's at the very limit that this reviewer is happy to move about. In fact leaning into my equipment shelf and gently lowering it whilst bending over I felt the strings of my old back pinging - people smaller/less stupid than me should get help...

The weight is mainly because of the huge transformers needed to feed the AA62B power tubes. These are monsters, considerably bigger than any 300b and with a different shape to the glass. They are beautifully made, very solid and reassuring - the only valve that matches its build quality in my experience is the KR300b. This valve allows the Ayon to produce a claimed 30 Watt per channel continuous, 45 watt peak. That is a huge output for any single-ended amp. Even the best 845/211 struggles to match that, and my own parallel 300b amps (2 x 300b per channel) are left well behind.



Talking to Ayon it transpires that the '62 is a cousin of the 300b - it's connections are the same for example - but it is in no way a plug-in replacement - certainly the internals are quite different, it is just too distant a family member.

These valves, as already stated, are only available as service items to Ayon owners, and at a price of 350 Euro. Ayon apologised that they were so expensive, but in my opinion they are better made than most of the boutique 300bs which command similar prices, and produce more power than pairs 300b's. The other thing I like about these valves is that Ayon have great confidence in their longevity. The '62's come with a 12 month guarantee, a failed valve being replaced by a pair of new valves free of charge. If in the second year a valve fails, the *pair* are replaced for the cost of a single valve - very impressive, but not as generous as it sounds, because to date Ayon tell me they have yet to have a failure! To put that in perspective, my Opera PSE's ate a set of two matched pairs of Full-Music 300b mesh plates in just over 12 months at a cost of about 700 Euro, and few manufacturers extent valve guarentees past 3 months.

Both the pre-amp stage (yes this is a proper integrated - not a power amp with a pot) and the driver are powered by one of the hot valves of the moment - the 6h30 - two for each section.

Beyond that the technical specs can be found [here](#) so I won't repeat it all and pretend I know what I'm talking about.

The controls are a simple volume and selector for the 4 inputs, and the volume is operable using the simple remote - what else would you need?

At the back are the usual phono inputs and speaker binding posts (with 4 and 8 ohm taps) - all excellent as you'd expect. The power valves need to have their valve bias adjusted using the meter on the top plate and two screws behind - no chore and rather exciting in a hands-on way;-) There is also a 'direct in', which completely bypasses all controls and the pre-amp section to leave you with a pure power-amp, more on this later.

On the front the Ayon logo is cut through the front plate and glows red when the amp is on - it's different and I quite liked the effect - YMMV.



Lastly there is a little neon light on the back panel that will glow if the polarity of your mains is in reversed phase - nice touch.

Complaints

Normally this comes after the sound section and before the conclusion, but for reasons that will become apparent it's more appropriate to put them here...

1 - The on/off switch is next to the IEC socket, at the back of the amp. Unless you have full access to the back you will end up with singed arms ever time you reach back to switch the thing off. Now I know that most people

recommend that such amps are kept on all the time, for both sonic and for the life of the valves, but in this day-and-age burning a few hundred watts for no good reason isn't really where it's at. The amp chucks out a lot of heat as well, great in winter but in summer a bind.

2 - The control knobs are beautiful lumps of alloy, but their movement is very stiff, not helped by their small diameter reducing leverage. I frequently found myself trying to move the selector beyond the first position (i.e. against it's stop) because it required quite a lot of force to clunk between inputs and this, added to slack in the system, meant I was never really sure where the selector was without bending down and looking carefully. It's a minor point, but it was the first time that the magic of using a beautiful, perfect piece of machined engineering was broken.

3 - Even more trivial, but in the context of such build quality, worthy of note, were the small threaded holes in the top plate. These are there to allow the fitting of the protective valve cages that are required in order to obtain CE approval. Ayon tell me that no customer has ever asked for these, so the cages, and therefore the holes are superfluous - a real obsessive like me can spot them though:-)



Sound

"My" Crossfire was brand new and so needed running in. I always hate this bit and try to do it in my new music/review room where I can leave it on without disturbing people. However the Crossfire was to be tested in my living room, where my own, personal system resides (i.e. the stuff that belongs to me) - and blowed if I was going to haul 40 kgs back and forth more than I had to.

So it was plugged into my Loth-X Polaris horns. Now I know what you are going to say, "here is a new, relatively high-powered SE amp and he's gone and plugged it into a pair of speakers that can make your ears bleed with a Watt".

Yes you're right - but for me the point of these reviews is not to find out what SE amplifiers are available to drive real-world speakers. No. For me I wanted to see what the sound quality was of amplifiers using alternatives to the 300b. I took it as read that the Crossfire will drive more difficult speakers, but that's not my point, any more than I will criticise the 2a3 amp due in a few weeks for low power...

And of course that's a bit tricky for Ayon - if in this review I ignore the one undeniable advantage the Crossfire has then its task is all the more difficult. The Ayon was to be judged on sound quality alone.

Driving the amp were my [Acoustic Solid](#) turntable with [Opera ST600](#) fitted, and the Dynavector Karat 17 into my [ESE Nibiru phono](#) stage. But sitting next to the amp was it's matching sister - the Ayon CD-2 CD player. I will be reviewing this in a couple of months so I won't spoil that review by giving the game away but needless to say it didn't let the side down.

After checking the connections half a dozen times (I'm paranoid) I switched everything on. With it cold and new, I wasn't expecting to hear the best from the amp, but in such circumstances I often find that you get a clear, if a little mechanical presentation that can be quite appealing - for a few minutes until you start to get bored with it. In fact it sounds like a good transistor amp, and the Ayon certainly filled the stereotype. But there were some promising signs. Firstly the amp had one characteristic I hadn't considered - as an integrated the Crossfire regulate volume by reducing the output of the power section.

Let me explain. Amplifiers have background noise - all of them. Valve amps are poorer than transistor amps and SE amps the worse of all. Here there is double-trouble because the speakers needed for such amps, e.g. my horns, will make this background far louder than normal speakers. In the case of my own Loth-x horns, two SE 300b amps have been returned to their manufacturer before review simply because they were so noisy as to be unusable.

With my own Audionote/Opera combination the background noise is a hiss and slight hum - it's enough to irritate my wife when I'm not playing music, but no worse than any other valve pre/power I've had here. And because the power-amps are in effect flat-out waiting for the signal then there's no way of getting rid of this background.

With the Ayon, turning the volume to zero left a silent speaker, racking up the volume to max (with no signal) increased the background noise to similar levels to my pre/power. You see the point? With very high sensitivity speakers the integrated had a major advantage over the pre/power. The noise levels only rose when volume was turned up and of course then it's utterly drowned out by the music. My wife liked this... This is not insignificant - especially if listening to music at low levels.

So we have a very pleasant amp, sounding a bit glassy but very promising. A day or two later it sounded a little dull and restrained and then on day 4 it started to sing.

Gushing review alert...

Transparency. I'm trying to hold back on the hyperbole here, especially as I'm painfully aware that next week another amp may arrive that sounds even better and so going over the top will leave me little 'headroom'.

Nah - what the hell, tell it how it is...

This is the most transparent amp I've ever heard - including similarly priced 300b amps from Wavac, Audion, Audionote, Loth-x and Opera, not to mention half a dozen other valve amps, five of the new digital wonders and the shed load of more prosaic transistor amplifiers...

Through the Loth-x [Polaris](#) the veils were removed, the crystal clear mountain stream babbled down the mountainside - it sounded like after I have my ears waxed, but not so glassy. It was as transparent as a see-through thing. The sheer natural, openness of the thing had me in raptures. How can this sound better than 12,000 Euro of pre/power? Sheesh I maybe I should write for someone other than TNT because I'm in danger of talking about palpability and I always promised not to...

Examples? You want examples? Well you've read my eulogising of the ['King James'](#) album, well if ever there was an amp made to demolish your back wall and insert the Wylie Chapel and a big band in the hole then this is it. I'm not (I think) talking about extra detail, new tunes, massive soundstage - though it has all that - but simply the opening of a window, I honestly cannot think of a better, and less cliché'd description.

And it didn't sound like any of the 300b amps I've had here. I've never considered the 300b to be particularly warm, but it was as if the 300b amps were putting a little rosy haze over the midband and the Ayon had just ripped it off. It's NOT a question of balance. The Loth-X 300b actually sounded brighter and more forward - it's possible to engineer almost any balance, but even with the Loth-X amp, there was something that the Ayon stripped away. The best I can do is to imagine that the air around you somehow damps down what you are hearing, and the Ayon removes this effect.

Let me emphasis the point, I don't want anyone to get the wrong idea - the Crossfire isn't forward, bright, pushy, aggressive, etched. At no time did those adjectives come to mind, in fact you could listen to it (as I did) at high levels for hour after hour. Because the presentation is so open and there's so much space for it all to breath it never becomes congested.

Underpinning this is the best bass I've ever heard from a valve amp, a street ahead of any 300b - in fact in terms of speed, and tunefulness, and verve it bests even the Korato Class 'A' transistor monsters that have been my reference. But that bass doesn't stand out - it just integrates in a seamless sweep through the mid-band and onto the high treble.

How significant is this? - Just before the Ayon arrived Kate said "you don't seem to listen to music any more" and she was right. Sure I'd put on the Stones and dance around whilst doing the washing up, but it was getting to the point where I'd just as likely put it on the kids ghetto blaster as playing it through the 30,000 euro system in the living room. I'd starting reading without music. Watching the odd DVD. Or just putting the nearest CD to the player on (and on and on) - I couldn't be arsed to put an LP on.

Maybe I was just getting old - maybe just jaded after having so much hi-fi go through my hands and having to dissect every piece of music they produced - Yea, I was jaded.

Then the Ayon landed, and though it was hard to fundamentally pin down what it was doing to me, I found I listened every evening. Vinyl came out and sleeves spread on the floor. My enthusiasm for music and even hi-fi came back. Suddenly I was back to checking tracking weights, fiddling with supports and so on. Why? How can an amp that is providing only subtle changes over a very fine system possibly have this effect? I have no idea...

As the amp works as a dedicated power-amp I did try a pre-amp direct into it. As I suspected the big advantage of that low noise at low level was gone, the combination becoming as noisy as my own pre/power. The music took a small, but noticeable step back. What that tells me is that the Crossfire pre-amp section, gaining all the advantages of

no cabling, no connections and perfectly matched to the power section would be very difficult to improve on. Indeed, for my application I would think it unlikely I'd improve on the Crossfire by using one of Ayon's pre/power amp combinations. I don't need the extra power, I'd miss the silent background and I'm not sure I could cope with more information:-) However there's a twist to this. The 'direct' setting is just the fifth stop on the input selector. There's nothing stopping you running four line-inputs AND a pre with as many extra inputs as you want, or a CD player with a variable output direct. The Ayon could easily run 10 inputs in such a way, or be used as the front amplifier for a surround system run from a five-channel pre and so-on - it's a remarkable flexibility.

So now I get to the bit where I say that I was "so impressed I bought the review amplifier". And here the wheels came off.

I've used and loved my Audionote preamp for four years now, but in my system, for the very first time I could see myself letting it go. And of course those gorgeous Opera amps would have to go too. Before I knew what I was doing they were on EBAY. In order to buy them in the first place I'd sort of "borrowed" from the family kitty on the condition I'd pay it back, but I'd every confidence there would still be enough to buy the Ayon. Well you've guessed it. They sold, but they didn't sell well. A week of agony followed, but though far from destitute it's not a good year in the cycling holiday business and so I took a deep breath and unplugged the amp, slipped the velvet over it and boxed it up...

Then after the Ayon had gone. What then...

I took a valve pre-amp I have here and played it into the Lehmann Stamp digital power amp - sheeeesh it sounds so grey! It improved once warm, but this fine little amp, the best of the digital breed just seems to lay a slightly grubby layer over everything - a dull putty filled the spaces between instruments where before there had been nothing - nothing at all... True the Stamp costs a fraction of the Ayon but the total cost including the pre-amp was close.

I couldn't live with it...

So out comes one of my favourite amps, the SQF Son-of-Pharao. At much the same size, weight and cost as the Ayon this EL34 PP amp produces more power, and through the Polaris it sounded... well... very good. Anyone walking into that room who had heard the Ayon there the day before would have recognised another fine amp and thought nothing more of it. But then you sit down and you listen. Or rather, in my case you don't. Because it's as if a dead hand has been put over the music. The life, and sparkle and the damned transparency have gone - Since the Ayon left and been replaced by the two amps above I can honestly say I've not sat down and listened to music for pleasure, rather than background, once in six-weeks. It's pathetic and I hate myself for it because it's the music that matters, but once you've tasted that magic everything else seems to turn sour.

Conclusion

I've been reviewing hi-fi for well over 10 years now and in that time I've heard very few poor systems, quite a few reasonable ones, a few excellent ones that frequently I ended up buying, but only three components that changed the way I listened to music so much that once sampled, everything else sounded wrong. The first were my Loth-X Polaris, a pair of speakers that at the time cost more than the rest of my system combined. Again it was difficult to pin down why they were so good, but over the review period they got under my skin so much that when they had gone I was bereft. Though they cost more than I could possibly justify, I managed to get the money together to buy them and I've not regretted that for one millisecond. The second was the ESE Nibiru phono stage which just was an order of magnitude better than any phono stage I'd heard, and more to the point showed me just how much most people missed from their vinyl. Hideously expensive and well out of my price range, the manufacturer made me an offer I couldn't refuse and so it now sits on the equipment shelf and I can't see it ever being replaced.

And the last is the Ayon Crossfire. It shares with the two previously mentioned components a transparency that takes you ever closer to the musical event, and because each is voiced in this way they share a stunning synergy. The Crossfire too is very expensive, but not ludicrously so, and in a way that almost makes it worse, because I can almost afford it... But I'm coming to the conclusion that if I want to continue to really love music then somehow I'll need to get the money together to buy one, or find something out there that matches it. Such is the sad life of the Audio addict.

And if I do you the reader will be the poorer. I don't review speakers in my main room any more because I just don't want to move the Polaris and I really don't want my personal listening screwed up. Ditto the ESE, I've stopped reviewing all stages. In fact I've now built a reviewing room where all these pretenders can come and go to be listened to, and reviewed and appreciated, but never loved, without disturbing my personal system. The Crossfire I fear, would shut all other amps out of my living room - they too banished to the also rans. But on the other hand, at least my enthusiasm for the subject would be rekindled.

() By Rick Darnell and Roy Hawkins in 1951 and popularized by B. B. King in 1970*

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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