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Solid State Preamp Reviews

Ayre KX-R line preamplifier Page 3

I'll start with something that sounds simple: The KX-R was really quiet. (If this were a movie, somebody would have to say, "Yeah. *Too* quiet.") Aren't all audio components these days? Well, sure, but the KX-R, with an activated input selected and set to regular listening volume, was far more silent than the tomb. As Hansen said about the air, you don't notice it till it's gone.

Music sounded especially alive through the KX-R. I noticed this as much with the MF Nu-Vista 300 as I did with the MX-Rs. Want jump factor? The KX-R had it. John Atkinson kindly hand-delivered a CD-R containing his production mix of Cantus's *While You Are Alive* (CD, Cantus CTS-1208, available by the time this sees print), and I couldn't wait to hear it through my system with the KX-R.

Oh. My. God.

Not only is *While You Are Alive* the best performance I've ever heard from Cantus, it's JA's finest recording to date. From the opening notes of Eric Whitacre's *Lux Arumque*, I was hearing extremely deep into the hall. The "beating" within the harmonies sounded phenomenally lifelike, and the distinctive Sauder Hall ambience surrounding Paul Nelson's "A Lullaby" was as concrete as the singers themselves.

Then, when Edie Hill's "A Sound Like This" began, with its urgent exhortation to "*Listen!*," I just about jumped out of my skin. You'd think that triggering my fight-or-flight response would have been an unpleasant experience, but I just sat there grinning at the illusion that *I was there*. Then Cantus began singing harmonies that chased around the soundstage before blooming into a major chord—all interspersed with more whispered exclamations. The KX-R just kept taking me deeper and deeper into the soundstage—and my grin stretched to rival Heath Ledger's.

But that was nothing. When I wrote Cantus's music director, Erick Lichte, to congratulate him on the disc, he informed me that I should hear JA's pre-production master at 24-bit/88.2kHz resolution—and said to tell JA that he'd okayed a DVD-Audio dub.

O.M.G.²

Here's a little game you can play at home: Take everything I said above and, for the hi-rez version, add *only more so*—especially any part referring to the acoustics of Sauder Hall. (I'm not describing the hi-rez version only to taunt you—Erick Lichte wants to release it in the not-too-distant future. Stay tuned.)

"9/11," from John van der Veer's *The Ark* (CD, Naim CD 015), is, yes, an attempt to describe the events of 9/11/01 with five acoustic guitars. It begins with a strummed alarm, evocative of a fire station's call-out bell, and is overwhelmed by an urgent bass continuo and several excursions into melodic fragments. It's close-miked and, in one sense, not "realistic." However, the sonic world the track creates is convincing and immersive. It's also unbelievably moving, and the Ayre vividly conveyed the performance's deep musicality.

My buddy Jeff Wong recently introduced me to the Beau Hunks, the Dutch band devoted to re-creating Leroy Shield's scores for the Little Rascals and Laurel & Hardy comedies of the 1930s. If, like me, you grew up in an era when local TV stations repeatedly ran those old Hal Roach shorts, this music is practically ingrained in your DNA—but you've never heard it like this.

"Early Morning," from *On to the Show! The Beau Hunks Play More Little Rascals Music* (CD, Koch Screen 3-8705-2), begins with the theme played by the violins over a wash of vintage saxophone

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sound, the trumpet taking the high lead—but everybody gets some time in the spotlight, even the baritone saxophonist. Thirty seconds before the end of this cue, a gong is sounded—its tone loftily floats above the group's sound, and its overtones linger for an eternity. It was hard for me to wrap my head around all the competing images: lifelike solidity trumped by lifelike aether. The KX-R was astonishingly transparent.

Air apparent

I had on hand two preamplifiers that I consider paradigmatic—the solid-state [Parasound Halo JC 2](#) (\$4000) and the tubed [Conrad-Johnson ACT2 Series 2](#) (\$16,500)—so it seemed only natural to compare the KX-R with them. The results were simultaneously unsurprising and eyebrow raising.

On *While You Are Alive* (the hi-rez version, of course), the ambience of Sauder Hall was still discernible through the ACT2, but the entire soundstage seemed more compact and focused. "More focused" sounds like a good thing, right? Maybe, but the openness and sparkle of the KX-R made the ACT2's version sound darker and, well, smaller in scale.

"9/11" was slightly less immersive through the ACT2—it seemed to lie more between the loudspeakers than all around me, as it had with the KX-R. The string harmonics seemed less *zingy* than through the Ayre, and to float above the fundamentals less effortlessly.

When the gong is struck in Leroy Shield's "Early Morning," it was less splashy through the ACT2, and not as distinct from the band's harmonies beneath it.

Are these drastic differences? No, but they were audible—and as much as I didn't care about them when listening to one or the other, when I compared them, I clearly preferred the KX-R.

The Halo JC 2 nailed the Sauder Hall ambience on *While You Are Still Alive*, but where the C-J seemed darker than the Ayre, the Parasound sounded leaner—not bleached or lightweight, just leaner. And certainly *not* lightweight, as it proved with those tolling tocsins on "9/11." They came across with loads of power and leading-edge sharpness, but again the KX-R got the ratio of fundamental to harmonics more believably than did the Parasound. The JC 2 *did* float that gong perfectly on "Early Morning," but it sounded a little light in the loafers on the sax choir (although the bari was *very* convincing).

I could live with any of these preamplifiers. In my dreams, of course—the only one I could remotely afford is the Halo JC 2, which ought to say something convincing about what Parasound hath wrought. But I digress—we are gathered today to speak of the Ayre KX-R, and I can't think of a preamplifier that has impressed me more with its fidelity to music as I hear it.

Big air

An "extreme degree of madness" is a very fine description of how Ayre has approached the design of the KX-R. I seriously doubt that any single technology is responsible for the preamplifier's exemplary performance. The VGT isn't possible without an absence of feedback or the linearity that EquiLock brings to the gain transistors. Then there are the "little" touches—that extravagant display, or milling the chassis out of solid aluminum stock to create perfectly isolated pockets for each section—and so on, down to the tiniest detail. That level of fanaticism has its price. *Sigh*. I suspect there's not going to be a huge amount of trickle-down with the KX-R. In Boulder, it seems, you go large or you go home.

But just as perfection has its price, it also grants, umm, perfection—or about as close to it as I've heard from a preamplifier to date. This irritates the heck out of me—I've taken it as a tenet of faith that line-level preamplifiers logically ought to have the least effect on a system's sound of any component in the chain. I hate it when an ugly reality collides with a beautiful theory.

In my life, three much-hyped experiences have actually lived up to all the hoopla: trekking into Machu Picchu on a misty morning, climbing the Great Wall of China on a brisk December afternoon, and auditioning the Ayre KX-R. If it's not the eighth wonder of the modern world, I say demand a recount.

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Company Info

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