

THE PERFECT
VISION 2003

multichannel
amplifier
of the year

Cary Cinema 5

\$3995 www.caryaudio.com

Our Multichannel Amp of the Year honor goes to Cary Audio for the outstanding Cinema 5. A high-end company that seems equally at home with tube or solid-state designs, Cary

has recently expanded its line of home-theater gear, and are we glad they did! The (solid-state) Cinema 5 delivers a healthy 200Wpc into 8 ohms and 350Wpc into 4 ohms. But there are plenty of amps out there that can match the Cary's power rating. What few of them even come close to matching is this model's superb sound—and believe us when we tell you that the few that do (or that can better it) cost a whole lot more.

The Cinema 5's trademarks are its immediacy and transparency, and an overall balance that sounds “right” with both music and film. Expect to hear a warm easy presentation, rich harmonic structure, silky extended highs, and a powerful, controlled, and visceral bottom end. And its natural, beautifully articulated midrange makes dialogue both clear and easy to understand. Most importantly, the Cinema 5 sounds alive in a way that removes the sense that you're listening *through* a box of electronics.

Whether you're a fan of art house films, high-octane action flicks, music, or all three, the Cary's combination of delicacy and power is sure to please. *(Reviewed by Wayne Garcia in Issue 50)*



From TPV 51



From TPV 50

Multichannel Power Amps from Adcom, Cary, and Ayre

Adcom GFA-7805: \$2400

Adcom shook up the high-end audio world back in 1979 with its GFA-1 two-channel power amplifier. Seven years later, the company's GFA-555 offered so much performance for the price that Adcom quickly came to dominate the market for high-powered, great-sounding budget amplifiers. I was an audio consumer back then (I became a full-time audio reviewer in 1989), and, after auditioning a GFA-555 on a trial basis at home, bought one.

Fast forward to 2003, and Adcom is still in the business of delivering high-power and solid build quality in a no-frills chassis—and at affordable prices. Take the GFA-7805 5-channel amplifier I've been listening to in my system. For \$2400 you get a monstrous 300Wpc, balanced and unbalanced inputs, and gold-plated input jacks and loudspeaker binding posts. Note that this 300Wpc rating is with all channels driven, and over the entire audio bandwidth. What's more, the GFA-7805 increases its power to 450Wpc into 4 ohms. The amplifier also features Adcom's Fast Analog Transform (FAT)

circuitry (with bandwidth of 100kHz) that the company claims delivers improved transient response.

Other models in the line include the GFA-7807 (identical to the 7805, but with seven channels), and the GFA-7605 with five channels of 125W amplification for just \$1000.

Listening to the GFA-7805 driving the highly revealing Wilson WATT/Puppy 7 loudspeaker system, I found the amplifier had a neutral tonal balance, with a smoother (but somewhat less airy) treble than I've heard from previous Adcom amps. Bass extension was deep and powerful, and the mid-bass tended to be full, warm, and a bit wooly. The overall perspective was somewhat forward, with the amplifier projecting the soundstage out in front of the speakers. This gave the presentation a bold visceral quality that was well suited to action movies.

There's no mistaking this amplifier's massive output power; the sound had seemingly unlimited dynamics, and the sonic presentation didn't change as things got loud and complex. The GFA-7805 handled the most demanding soundtracks (*Lord of the Rings*, for example) with aplomb.

For those who like to listen at THX reference levels (or louder), use low-sensitivity loudspeakers, have a large room, or a combination of all three, the GFA-7805 will drive any loudspeaker system to very high output levels cleanly. This is a lot of amplifier, and an amazing bargain at \$2400. It's hard to think of a better value in an ultra-high-power amplifier. —RH

	THUMBS UP
	Massive output power
	Low price Can drive any loudspeaker system
	THUMBS DOWN
	Not the last word in transparency

Cary Cinema 5: \$5000

Perhaps best known for its single-ended-triode tube amps, Cary Audio has been broadening its range to include CD players, speakers, and most recently home-theater components. The latter include the Cinema 6 DVD player, two A/V controllers (the Cinema 6 and Cinema 8), and a fleet of two-, three-, five-, and seven-channel solid-state amplifiers.

I can't speak about the rest of the line, but if those products are as good as the five-channel Cinema 5, then Cary is onto something sweet in multichannel sound. Here is an amp that gets the blood flowing. Straight from the box it connects us right to the heart of both music and film sources. In my experience, only a small handful of (more pricey) home-theater gear does that, and the only amp I've heard that betters the Cary, though more in degree than style, is



AMP SURVEY




a two-hundred pound, \$10,000, no-holds-barred effort—Balanced Audio Technology's magnificent VK-6200.

Like the BAT, the Cary is exceptionally transparent and direct-sounding. There's no sense of listening *through* something—that the amp is either adding or subtracting information (though of course no electronics are absolutely transparent), or that you have to fight through haze, grain, or other electronic gunk to get into the performance. Without sounding “fast,” though technically I'm sure it must be, the Cinema 5 sounds incredibly direct, and more importantly, it sounds “right.” It has wonderful air, a convincing (but not exaggerated) depth of soundstage, spot-on image placement (but not of the hard, laser-beam variety), fine top-to-bottom-tonal balance (its overall character is warm but not “dark”), complex harmonics, rich instrumental textures, a smooth, extended top-end, and bass that seems to go right through the floor and into the earth.

So far I've mated the Cary with Primare's SP31.7 controller (reviewed in this issue) and the “SuperTube” pre-amp stage of BAT's VK-300x integrated amp, with equally satisfying results. And when it comes to surround sound, the Cary uses all of the attributes described above to pull us into whatever on-screen world our DVD player conjures up. Dialogue articulation is wonderfully clean as well as nuanced—small shifts of tone, phrasing, and dynamic emphasis are that

much easier to hear—and the overall sound has a thrilling, all-encompassing tangibility. And if action movies are your thing, the Cary's combination of power and dynamic pop will raise goosebumps. Though not inexpensive, it's an outstanding value. —WG

	THUMBS UP
	Exceptional musical performance Thrilling theater reproduction Competes sonically with models at twice the price
	THUMBS DOWN
	None

Ayre V-6x: \$9250

Oh, how this mini-review takes me back. Ayre Acoustics' V-6 multi-channel power amplifier was one of the first products I reviewed after coming on board *The Perfect Vision* back in Issue 41. I was stoked to review the V-6 for two reasons. One, like the rest of the TPV staffers, I'm a music lover, and we always get excited when a true high-end audio company attempts to raise the home-theater performance bar. Two, my reference Theta Dreadnaught amplifier's basic design was created by none other than Ayre's Charles Hansen. Only trouble was, compared to the Dreadnaught I found the V-6 lacking slightly in front-to-back depth and light in the lowest bass, which put a spotlight on the midrange. In other words, for all its strengths the

V-6 had a signature tonality it imposed on the music.

While Ayre's Charles Hansen wasn't thrilled about my opinion of his amplifier, he accepted my review as a challenge and created the V-6x, a follow-up amplifier with improved performance in all areas. I was very impressed when he contacted me and wanted me to review the new model. Not many manufacturers in the industry would be so quick to send the updated product to its predecessor's critic I can assure you!

I'm going to refer you back to my original review in TPV 41 for a more thorough discussion of the V-6's technical attributes, most of which are shared with the V-6x. The most outstanding aspects of the V-6 and V-6x are: They're fully balanced amplifiers (from input to output); they use no global negative feedback; and they have a modular design that can be configured with two to six channels. Both amps also incorporate Ayre's proprietary “Ayre Conditioner” power filtering and conditioning.

According to Ayre the most substantial changes in the V-6x are in the voltage regulation for the input circuits—a new zero-feedback hybrid design that incorporates JFETs at the input and bipolars at the output. The new model costs \$3000 for the base chassis and \$1250 per channel, but owners of the V-6 can have their units upgraded to the V-6x for the cost difference, which is \$50 for the chassis plus \$250 per installed channel. My review sample was loaded with five channels.

As for its sound, the V-6x is a quite simply a homerun for Ayre. It sacrifices none of the things I loved about the V-6 and improves substantially on its few weaknesses. The low bass is there, and it's clean, tight, tuneful, and articulate. It doesn't have the iron low-end control of a Levinson 33H or a Linn Klimax, but neither do those amps exhibit the purity and musicality of the zero-feedback Ayre. It's as forceful in the bass as the Theta Dreadnaughts that I use, and cleaner,



rides, but the V-6x still has the quietest, blackest background I've heard from an amplifier. Theta's Dreadnaught II has more power and bass authority than either the original Dreadnaught or the V-6x, but isn't as musically satisfying to me.

The Ayre V-6x is an amplifier I can (and do) recommend without reservation. It's equally at home with music and movies, and more than that, it's a revelation to the music nut who wants to build a reference-quality cinema system around a reference-quality

although not quite as weighty as the Dreadnaught II. However, it's good enough that tonal coloration is no longer an issue of any kind. The bal-

The V-6x is a quite simply a homerun for Ayre.

ance is right on, and the increased low-end response adds some front-to-back dimensionality.

The Ayre V-6x is startlingly quiet with the blackest background you'll hear—a noise floor so low that it's unequaled in my experience. This allows for greater swings in dynamic contrast and more snap with transients. With music this can make a piano sound more like what it is—a percussive instrument in which hammers whack the strings to make sound. Movie tracks don't just play loud; they play with a broader and more realistic range of impact. The explosions and transient music cues that punctuate a film's action are just that much more involving.

The other attribute that separates the V-6x is its staggering amount of inner detail. The V-6x consistently reveals the lowest-level information with layers of clarity and focus. On music I was particularly mesmerized

by the way the bodies and cavities of guitars were rendered along with the string sounds. As the player's hand brushes up and down the neck or if he/she bumps the body of the instrument, you'll hear it with this amp. And imaging is simply superb, placing musicians and sound effects in a convincing three-dimensional space, not even remotely confined to the speaker boundaries. The V-6x is still not quite as open and airy on top as my Theta Dreadnaught, but my Dreadnaught is not (quite) as revealing through the midrange. The Dreadnaught has a little more gas for home-theater thrill

music rig. The Ayre V-6x simply lets you have it all. —SB



THUMBS UP

Terrific music and theater sound
Gorgeous build quality
Modular design allows custom channel configuration



THUMBS DOWN

Expensive

MANUFACTURER INFORMATION

ADCOM

8541 East Anderson Drive
Scottsdale, Arizona 85255
(480) 607-2277
www.adcom.com
Price: \$2400

CARY AUDIO DESIGN

1020 Goodworth Drive
Apex, North Carolina 27539
(919) 355-0010
www.caryaudio.com
Price: \$5000

AYRE ACOUSTICS, INC.

2300-B Central Ave.
Boulder, Colorado 80301
(303) 442-7300
www.ayre.com
Price: \$3000 for chassis plus \$1250 per installed channel

SPECIFICATIONS

Adcom GFA-7805

Number of channels: Five
Power output: 300Wpc into 8 ohms; 450Wpc into 4 ohms (all channels driven)
Dimensions: 17" x 8.75" x 19.75
Weight: 95 lbs.

Cary Cinema 5

Number of channels: Five
Power output: 200Wpc into 8 ohms, 350Wpc into 4 ohms
Dimensions: 17.7" x 6.25" x 19.5"
Weight: 80 lbs.

Ayre V-6x

Number of channels: Modular (up to six)
Power output: 150W into 8 ohms; 300W into 4 ohms
Dimensions: 18" x 19" x 7"
Weight: 110 lbs. (as tested with 5 channels)