

Gryphon Audio Designs Ethos CD player

by Alan Sircom

There are those who say the CD is dead and streaming is the only way forward. Gryphon Audio Designs would politely counter that those people are nuts! Because, while sales of both CD players and discs are down on their 2000 acme and new top-class transport mechanisms are thin on the ground, in fact CD performance has reached something of a zenith recently.

A part of the reason for this is down to chip development for streaming pushes the resolution ever higher, and making 16-bit, 44.1 PCM tracks on a CD sound good is not exactly taxing on a chip. However, a lot is also to do with a more discerning CD buying public; the standard of LP replay improved significantly after the launch of CD in no small part because the lower end of the LP market simply evaporated. What was left for the longest time was specialists intent on aiming ever higher. That last – aiming ever higher – is best evidenced by Gryphon's Ethos CD player. This is CD unapologetic, a device that – by necessity – makes playing a CD into an experience that no amount of web-browsing can ever hope to better.



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► We'll get on to the technology soon, but first just bask in the whole 'otherness' of the Ethos. Where most audio devices are rectangular boxes, the Ethos is triangular, with an aluminium alloy top, a curved Polyoxymethylene (POM)/tempered steel base and a manual swing arm to lift and lower the top-loader disc lid. This is more than just for show, and its constrained layer damping and carefully engineered mechanical integrity of the Gryphon Ethos eliminate digital noise and interference between the various stages of the player. That said, give it some flashing lights and it looks like it would abduct Richard Dreyfuss. The usual way with a top-loader is to try – and largely fail – to affix the disc-holding spinning magnetic clamp. Gryphon, instead, turns it into a valuable token, more like a coin than a puck, that you manually place on the disc before lowering the lid (just don't lose it).

Gryphon is well-known for its industrial design, but it knocked the Ethos out of the park. It's not simply a CD player; it's a source statement of intent. The only downside to this statement of intent is it's a big one... possibly larger than many equipment racks in their own right. Fortunately, Gryphon can now point you at its own StandArt equipment support system, which is perfectly accommodating of the deeper than usual chassis of the Ethos.

Back to that technology because the Ethos is as sophisticated on the outside as it is on the inside. Gryphon has a long and commanding reputation for building upsampling CD players; it first added a 88.2kHz asynchronous upsampling option to the CDP-1 of 1998, way before upsampling was fashionable. Gryphon went to 24-bit, 96kHz when the world was splitting between MP3 and DSD. However, Gryphon designed the Ethos integrated CD player to be a something of a moving target in the now-rapid evolution of digital audio. In addition to handling standard 16-bit/44.1 kHz 'Redbook' CD, the Ethos offers playback up to 32-bit/384 kHz PCM and DSD128 conversion on the CD-media but up to DSD512 on USB. These formats can also be accessed by external digital sources through its BNC-equipped S/PDIF, AES/EBU balanced digital connection and USB. It can also output a digital signal via AES/EBU for those wanting to treat the Ethos as a transport mechanism. Hardware is keeping pace with software here, with downloaded, streamed and CD-based files all treated equally by the Ethos.

Gryphon's electronics have always stressed a dual mono and fully symmetrical balanced operation, and the Ethos is no exception. It's fully balanced throughout the digital DAC domain as well, implementing eight ESS Sabre ES9038PRO 32-bit DAC chips in full dual-differential dual-mono mode. This makes the DAC 'block' capable of full 32-bit processing and the configuration drastically lowers the digital noise floor while improving the overall imaging properties of the Gryphon Ethos.

Typically, upsampling uses an off-the-shelf upsampling filter. This often effectively folds both digital datastream and any quantization noise or

distortion into the upsampled end result. Instead, Gryphon's Ethos sports a user selectable custom asynchronous sample rate conversion. This permits the use of a simpler, lower-order analogue output filter, and the upsampled signal is decoded via a digital filter with a much gentler roll-off than usual.

Properly implemented upsampling should eliminate the need for conventional, steep-slope analogue filtering altogether. In the Gryphon Ethos, this filter is replaced by a single, silvered Mica capacitor acting as a simple, first-order analogue output filter. Ethos also features a range of digital roll-off options, seven distinct PCM filters and three DSD filters, which allow the user to fine-tune the tone of the player to personal taste.

Meanwhile, the jitter demon is slain by the use of two independent, specially designed, temperature-compensated crystal oscillators accurate to better than five parts per million. And because the company is called 'Gryphon', using terms like 'demon' and 'slain' are entirely fine. Honest.

Power supplies are handled with the same degree of dedication, thanks to two separate custom-built analogue toroidal transformers and two separate digital power supplies. In short, the digital, analogue, transport and display circuits all have their own isolated, heavily regulated power supplies.

That heavily regulated Class A analogue output stage is also fully discrete, fully balanced, employs zero negative feedback and offers both balanced XLR and single-ended phono outputs. Another one of Gryphon's watchwords becomes relevant here; the use of short signal paths. The internal architecture is built to keep tracks as short as possible and minimises the use of internal wiring throughout. ►

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► We could bang on and on and on about the design, build, and execution of the Ethos, covering everything from the fluro front display with its soft-touch hard buttons and Gryphon’s battlefield grade remote handset, to the extensive puck-to-spike decoupling that underpins the design, but it’s simpler to just round it all up by saying ‘above and beyond the call of duty.’ However, all this would be for nothing if the player didn’t deliver the sonic goods too.

The player itself requires some running in to sound at its best, although in fairness the model we received was not fully factory run-in, in order to make our deadline. So, this got

some hefty listening brinkmanship and a last-minute write-up. Set-up and use, however, are straightforward, so long as you observe three important rules. First is to never lose that puck, the second is to use the spikes and supplied spirit level to make sure the Ethos is absolutely level, locking them down with the supplied Allen key when finished. Third, never lose that puck (it’s worth saying multiple times). Once levelled, run-in and hooked up to a system, that first disc gets played... and about 10 minutes later you find yourself crawling about in your attic trying to find those discs that went into the “I’ve ripped them, I’ll not need them again!” pile.

The Gryphon Ethos player makes CD sound a lot like high-resolution audio is supposed to sound. It’s impressively clean (yet less bright and forward than people expect), remarkably dynamic and extremely extended into the upper and lower registers. Around about five discs in, you begin to ask yourself whether audio took a massive wrong turn by going down the streaming route when Compact Disc really can sound this good. ►

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▶ Then you put on something you know really well. I'm at once proud and not proud to say that first disc was *Back In Black* by AC/DC [Atlantic]. This is one of those albums I had on LP, cassette and CD (the LP got destroyed by playing on cheap equipment and was stolen by a junkie friend of an ex-girlfriend, the tape got mangled in a car cassette player and the CD has led a comparatively sheltered life by way of comparison). From the opening peel of 'Hells Bells' through to the title track, Ethos played these early 1980s arena rock tracks with the sort of force and intensity that makes you reach for the volume control and wish you were young enough to headbang without all the crepitus. The guitars on this disc can often sound 'toppy' and compressed, but here although you can still hear the compression, you realise its both deliberate and a pedal effect before the amp's own distortion rather than laid on afterwards. As a consequence, it causes an equalisation of plectrum strike and makes for those intense power chords the Young brothers used to such good effect.

This all comes from an extraordinary degree of resolution of fine detail. This is perhaps why you keep thinking CD is high-resolution audio through the Ethos. Those who have turned their back on CD to pursue high-sampling PCM and DSD dreams should give the Ethos a serious and critical listen, in order to see just how much information there is to be extracted from a 16/44 PCM file, and in particular how much more information can be pulled from that disc. The Ethos makes that supposedly old-hat task significant and every bit as relevant as it was when first heard in the early 1980s, but now its potential is realised.

There will be those reading the above and think it 'a bit' pretentious. Then there will be those who've heard what the Gryphon Ethos actually does in playing a disc and will nod in agreement, wondering just how the company manages to make the CD have that much spaciousness, transient snap and accuracy, musical and melodic integrity, harmonic precision and sheer focus.

The odd thing about the Ethos is that it makes the disc – any disc – sound like it was pressed specifically for that player. It is a vibrant and dynamic performer, with sounds rising out of a noise-free background (anyone who pipes up with 'digital has no noise' forgets just how much analogue circuitry is used to deliver that digital datastream, and just how much of that noise gets eliminated by the Ethos), and the sort of image properties and solidity not normally associated with digital of any kind.

I want to say that the Ethos is like shining a powerful light on the music, but that makes it read like it's bright. Similarly, I want to say it's like putting a magnifying lens on the music, but that makes it sound like its over analytical and fails to take in the bigger picture. In fact, it does both of these things, and shows just how fast analogies run out of puff in the process. But, the fact remains, the Ethos is musically illuminating without making the sound 'brightly lit' and it is a very focused sound without it eviscerating the musical intent. The result, however, is an uncannily un-digital, in fact un-audio like presentation; big and bold, yes, but ultimately enjoyable and musically deeply satisfying. ▶



▶ Most of all, though, two big things struck me about the Ethos. First was a sense of cohesiveness and coherence to the sound, which – coupled with that epic sense of dynamic range – made music sound like the real deal, not a digital facsimile. This was universal, applying to all discs, but I quantified the experience first on the title track of Anouar Brahem’s *Blue Maqams* [ECM], as the interplay between musicians became almost hypnotic (this can easily descend into elevator music). Next was a degree of detail that transcends the normal ‘all the information on the disc’ and got into the inner space of the music itself. Yes, it had all the information audiophiles would happily commit crimes to attain, but behind and beyond that was a sort of Zen-like musical clarity of intent.

Finally, I turned to its digital inputs to see if what I happened on CD stays on CD. And the good news is the DAC is (perhaps understandably) just as good with other digital sources as it is with the disc. I did find myself flipping through the filters a little more when playing stored files (moving from my Naim Uniti Core into the DAC using a BNC-BNC connector), but even streaming Tidal via USB from my aging Mac Book Pro, you could hear the stereo separation, dynamic range and range extension of the Ethos coming through. I’d still maintain that given the choice here, I would prefer to play a CD through the Ethos than stream a higher-resolution file of dubious provenance from the internet, but that’s more a concern of the format in general than the Ethos in particular; it can’t make a silk purse out of a sow’s ear, but it makes fine pigskin.

I had heard the Gryphon Ethos at a number of international audio shows (in the before time, that is), so I thought I had a fairly good grasp of what it can do. Then I had the Essence pre/power amplifiers in for review, and they impressed me far more than I expected them to do, given what I’d also heard at shows. So, I was willing to suspend disbelief in the performance of the Ethos; I knew it was going to be good, but how good? In truth, I didn’t expect

it to be this good, I didn’t expect to put it among the top flight players, all of which cost around three to five times as much as the Ethos. More importantly, I didn’t expect the experience to be quite so entertaining, as sometimes the best in audio can get a little self-flagellating. Forget all the preamble; this is music played at its absolute best. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

- Type: Dual mono Red Book CD player
- Analogue outputs: 1× unbalanced fixed RCA, 1× balanced fixed XLR
- Digital input: 1× BNC 75ohm connection (S/PDIF), AES/EBU (XLR), USB-B
- Digital Output: AES/EBU (XLR)
- Resolution: to 32bit, 384kHz, DSD512
- Distortion: Less than 0.007%
- Dimensions (H×W×D): 11.2 × 45 × 38.5cm
- Weight: 13.7kg (shipping weight)
- Price: £29,900
- Manufactured by: Gryphon Audio Designs
- URL: gryphon-audio.dk