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AUDIO REVIEWS

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CAYIN A-88T

Reviewer: John Potis

Analog Source: Rega P9 turntable, RB1000 & Hadcock GH Export arms, Benz Micro MC Silver, Rega Super Elys & Garrott Bros Optim FGS Cartridges

Digital Source: Accustic Arts Drive 1/Audio Aero Prima SE DAC

Preamp: Bel Canto Pre2P

Power Amp: Art Audio Carissa, Bel Canto e.One REF1000 and Canary CA 160 monos

Speakers: Hørning Perikles, Anthony Gallo Acoustics Reference 3, Ohm Acoustics Walsh 4 with 4.5 mk.2 upgrade; Thiel CS2.4

Cables: JPS Labs Superconductor and Superconductor FX interconnects and speaker wire, Furutech Digi Reference digital

Power Cords: ZCable Red & Black Lightning, JPS Power AC, Analog AC, Digital AC and Kaptovator power cords

Powerline Conditioning: Balanced Power Technology 3.5 Signature Plus with ZCable Heavy Power Cord

Sundry Accessories: Vibrapod Isolators and Cones, Ultra & ZCable Extra Heavy ZSleeves, Viablue QTC spikes under speakers, Auric Illuminator

Room Size: 12' by 16' with 9' ceiling

Review Component Retail: \$1,895



"The Cayin 88T is the first integrated amp I've ever had in my system that sounds so good, I have absolutely no desire to go back to the big mono block amps and the preamp. In fact, in many ways, the Cayin sounds better!"

No, I didn't decide to start this review with my summation. That wasn't me talking. That's a famous American manufacturer speaking. If you've ever gone to a manufacturer for recommendations on what else to use in your system, you probably found out that a lot of them are reluctant on the subject. Recommending some brands at the expense of others is not always politically advisable. As it happens, a Cayin rep tells me that the reason he investigated the line in the first place is because as a representative of the US manufacturer, he was approached by the latter about the amp.

One need not be a savvy industry insider to take one look at the Cayin and observe its market-friendly aesthetics. It's one *great* looking piece of amp. I suppose one thing that sets it apart from the influx of born-and-bred-in-China components is that it's actually bred in Germany. It's only manufactured in China. I'll leave it to the reader to decide if that's a notable distinction. I only mention it because one slam I'm hearing on Chinese products is that thus far, the Chinese have succeeded only in cloning equipment but have yet to begin to design their own good stuff. I have no idea how true that is but it would seem that Cayin would *want* you to know of its Germanic roots. While on the subject of cloning, there's something else that I find interesting about Cayin. They claim that they design certain pieces to sound like other classic components. In the case of the A-88T, they claim it to deliver the sound of the classic McIntosh MC-275, which I've never had the pleasure of hearing and upon which I'll thus not be able to comment.



Build quality here is absolutely beautiful. Hand-built and point-to-point wired, the Cayin is said to be built the way components were back in the 1950s and '60s when cost was not the primary objective. I guess there's a certain amount of truth to that. But once you see, as I have, how a manufacturer sweats the details as he tries to move a point-to-point wired prototype to production featuring well-designed circuit boards, point-to-point wiring loses some of its distinction. You see, most prototypes are indeed hand-wired. And that's fine unless you manufacture where labor rates are high. In which case the next step is to design a circuit board that sounds the same as the hard-wired prototype. That's not always easy. I've seen projects delayed or cancelled when a no-compromise designer couldn't make that transition and maintain the integrity of his original design. Of course, the reason for going circuit board is to reduce assembly cost and thereby final pricing to reach a wider audience while maintaining consistency of manufacture. So I have a different take on a manufacturer who builds by hand and then charges exorbitant prices for a "point-to-point" wired product that is sometimes less well-built than a mid-80s vintage MG. True talent and true care for the customer would force this designer to take his product to the next step, to not only make a product more affordable but more *reliable*. I do digress, though, don't I?

That's because little of the above pertains to the Cayin A-88T. It's built better than hand-built products from other areas of the world selling for multiples of its price *and* then it sells for a fraction thereof. I just burn a little about the disingenuous

marketing hype propagated by some who would make excuses for extremely poorly built products based on the fact that it sounds good and how their designer is supposedly a genius. Give me a break. End of rant. It is true, though, that point-to-point can sound better than a poorly executed circuit board. If Cayin can pull it off with a solidly built *and* affordable product, good for them. And you.



The A-88T utilizes four KT88s for 45 ultralinear watts per channel though the manual suggests that 6550s can be substituted. I had none of those in house. It's also switchable from the remote control to produce 22 watts in triode, a neat touch. The rest of the tube compliment includes a pair each of 6SL7 and 6SN7 tubes. Frequency response is stated as 18Hz to 35kHz, no tolerance given. THD is listed as 1% and the signal to noise ratio is said to be 90dB. Input sensitivity is 260mV (integrated) and 600mV (pre-in). The Cayin A-88T weighs a solid 55 pounds and consumes 280 watts at the wall socket. Premium parts are said to include chassis-mounted ceramic tube sockets, an ALS volume control, Nichicon and Realcap capacitors, WBT style speaker terminals and gold-plated input jacks. Warranty is three years parts and labor, 90 days on tubes.

Around back of the A-88T the user will find the aforementioned WBT style shrouded binding posts, four of them per channel. Unlike some amplifiers that tap the output transformer at one fixed impedance, the Cayin allows you to connect for a 4, 8 or 16-ohm load. No more guessing if your amplifier is optimized for your speaker load. The A-88T allows for three different line level component connections and also features a pair of preamp inputs that bypass the A-88T's passive linestage, transforming this integrated into a basic power amplifier in the process. Inputs are labeled CD, Aux and Tape. Does anybody listen to tape these days? Of course the A-88T also features a fuse-protected IEC power inlet.



Working our way around to the front, we'll stop at the remote control. It's a solid if little remote, milled of one piece of aluminum. The only thing strange is the fact that there is neither a little door providing access to the batteries nor any visible screws with which to remove the remote's rear panel. I suspect that removing the 4 rubber pads on the remote's bottom panel will provide access to said screws. Utilizing only 8 buttons, the SP05B remote allows selection of the source as well as control over volume, including a full mute.

As I indicated before, it also allows on-the-fly switching between ultralinear and triode modes, each indicated via a differently colored LED on the amp's face (upon power-up, the amp always defaults to triode). Should the remote control ever be misplaced, little is lost. All of the remote's functions are duplicated on the face of the A-88T - with the exception of mute, which would be silly as the volume control is right there.

The pictures tell just about everything else there is to say about the front of the A-88T proper. It's highly finished with many touches that indicate attention to detail. The A-88T features a 30-second soft-start circuit that gently eases into powered status. Given that, I was a little surprised that power down as well as source selection caused an ever-so-gentle transient. Not so much that you'd ever worry about the amp or your speakers but it just came as a little out of character. That was the single rough edge on a very smooth design.



In the listening room, the Cayin 88T has a big beautiful open sound that could best be described as *glorious*. Or perhaps *striking* is a more appropriate description. Ah, I've got it. Call it *strikingly glorious*. Yeah, that's it. Nope, that's not quite right either. The 88T sounds impressive and the characterization is certainly accurate. But it doesn't hint at the amazing sense of transparency that projects forth from the 88T. Of course that big and open sound is largely due to that marvelous degree of transparency. So maybe I've made that point already. The Cayin 88T is as transparent and strikingly glorious an amplifier as one is likely to find at its relatively meager asking price. Or well beyond. Okay, I can live with that characterization now.

Why so much to-do trying to sum up the Cayin 88T in one line so early on in the review? Well, truly, upon firing up the Cayin, you immediately notice that there's something different about it. It doesn't require extended listening or acclimation in order to unearth the magical qualities of this amplifier. It's immediately obvious. It's different, it's musical as hell and it's flat-out enjoyable. Within minutes of hearing it, most listeners will likely have already come to the same summation. You won't have to think about it. You don't have to analyze it. It'll just hit you. You can't miss the added sense of life that the Cayin brings to the music. (As you can tell from the next picture, this little amp quite inspired me to have fun in Photoshop.)



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