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AUDIO REVIEWS

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As an integrated amplifier the Cayin 88T is an outstanding value. As long as it's got the juice to power your speakers without running out of gas, it's just a beautiful amplifier. As compared to my reference preamp and power amplifiers, any combination of which will cost between four and five times as much, the Cayin 88T comes very close but misses in one -- and only one -- area. In my review of the Bel Canto e.One REF 1000 monoblocks, I talked about how its sense of density and presence was such a turn on. It's that singular sense of presence and density that was the only thing I missed as I inserted the Cayin into my system.

A fatal flaw then? Absolutely not. My original intent was to write about the Cayin 88T before I wrote up the Bel Cantos but I was so struck by the difference between these amplifiers in this one respect that I wrestled with how best to be fair to the Cayin. I decided to write up the Bel Cantos and give them credit where due and then, as best as I could, not to hold it against the Cayin. So I don't. I couldn't possibly. I only bring it up in order to maintain a degree of continuity to my reviews.



I have to hastily add, however, that once connected to the Bel Canto Pre2p via the 88T's preamplifier inputs, that gap closed appreciably. As great as the Cayin 88T sounds as an integrated amplifier, it sounds even better -- more organic, more solid and more sophisticated -- when used as a straight ahead power amplifier. That's significant. If you're using a receiver or solid-state electronics and want to upgrade to tubes and/or separates, the Cayin 88T is an excellent place to start. Replace what you've got with the Cayin as an integrated and I'll bet you'll be pleased with what you purchased. Later, you can upgrade with a first-class preamplifier. That's one efficient upgrade path. It's also very cool.

Another cool feature is the ultralinear/triode option. This doesn't make the Cayin completely unique. However, being switchable on the fly via the remote control nearly does [the Eastern Electric M-520 offers the same between ultralinear and true pentode but it is a rather rare provision - *Ed.*]. Switching to triode significantly reduces output level so for fair comparisons, you need to compensate with the volume control. As most triode aficionados will testify, single-ended triode requires a degree of compatibility between amplifier and speakers that ultralinear fans won't be bothered with. Before one pronounces sentence on a triode amplifier, one must always consider the possibility of a less than copasetic mating with the speakers. That said, I found that into each of the speakers I used, I preferred ultralinear. Ultra-linear produced more highly saturated tonal colors, better and more solidly defined images and a better impression of muscle - three very important criteria as far as I'm concerned. Once again, the Cayin wasn't unusual in this regard. While I do hold that there are possible speakers that may produce absolute magic with the Cayin in triode, my experience has been that pentode amplifiers with a triode-strapped feature sound better in ultralinear. While it's nice to have options, I'd consider the Cayin A-88T first and foremost a 45-watt pentode amplifier.

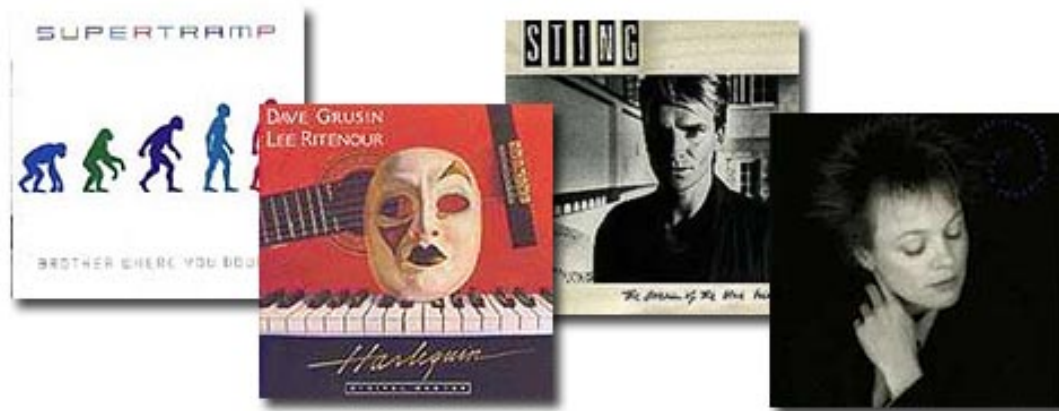


The Genesis 7.1 Signature/ Servosub 4/8 speaker/subwoofer combination and my upgraded Ohm Acoustics Walsh 4s were the speakers most often paired with the Cayin. With its powered subwoofer, the Genesis system was a natural with the Cayin's 45 ultralinear watts and produced some real magic. Some may balk at the thought of pairing almost ten thousand dollars of speaker system with a <\$2,000 amplifier but Dave Wilson has been promoting that concept for years now and the Cayin/Genesis pairing would indicate a great deal of rationality to that approach. Yet a speaker without a powered woofer section was needed to evaluate the Cayin's top-to-bottom performance. As I judged the Ohms a speaker with an easy enough load though liking current, they got the nod.

The Cayin 88T is a spirited amplifier with sprightly microdynamics and an agile personality that makes it very quick on its feet, something that synergized well with the Ohms. Laurie Anderson's *Strange Angels* [Warner 9 25900-2] was great fun over the combination largely due to the fact that the Cayin/Ohm system matched Anderson's musical character note for note. The CD features lots of unusual percussion of varying textures and flavors that eschew the usual bass drum boom for lithe quickness and rhythm. This worked very nicely with the system and maintained the light air of the music. Speaking of air, it's also a very light and airy recording with a big reverberant sound field, another thing at which the Cayin excels. Only the worst recordings prevent the Cayin from absolutely blooming. That's one of its most endearing attributes.

"Coolsville" features a reverberant field that expands like rings on a pond, something which was excitingly and accurately mapped out by the Cayin. It also features a powerful bass line that was satisfyingly produced through the Ohms. This came as a little bit of a surprise. The Ohms can produce astounding bass - *if* the amplifier is up to the task. Not all amps

are but within the context of my non-exorbitant listening levels, it was very nicely handled by the Cayin's 45 watts. The Cayin's transparent midrange literally allowed Anderson's vocals to gleam with intimacy and presence while steeped in real space within my room. "The Day The Devil" will more than please any imaging and soundstaging freak as the stage explodes with brisk percussion, varying instrumentation and backing vocals, all of which seem well grounded and present. The Cayin keeps it all in order and allows the listener to close her eyes and easily navigate the stage. In short, the CD was as fun and involving as always.



Supertramp's *Brother Where You Bound* [A&M 5014] trades Laurie Anderson's whimsy for a very strong bass line and a densely layered instrumental collage that allowed the 88T to impress me while proving its low-frequency chops. Particularly when used as a straight ahead power amplifier, the 88T just impressed the hell out of me considering everything it does for so little money. As an integrated amplifier, you just can't argue with all the quality on tap but

when you bypass its line stage, what you are left with is an almost unbelievably good little amplifier. Again and again I was reminded that 45 quality watts are not to be underestimated. With one hand, the Cayin nicely preserved the CD's pulsating beat throughout the disc while never seeming to break a sweat. With its other hand, it produced John Helliwel's saxophone renditions and Rick Davies' vocal styling with what was by now expected aplomb. The title cut features that wall-to-wall soundstage that by now had become an 88T trademark and the image focus was excellent. The juxtaposition between the solidly earth-bound piano and the soaring saxophone on "No In-between" was positively arresting in its beauty as was the sharply defined and incisive yet non-aggressive percussion on "Better Days". This is one amplifier you can listen to all day.



While not quite as solid and detailed as what the solid-state and twice-the-price Bel Canto REF1000s can provide, the cacophony of bass was satisfyingly presented. I have to say that if I were going to trade off anything to the more expensive amplifier, that's exactly what I'd trade. While the Cayin's bass couldn't match the prowess of the 1000-watt Bel Cantos, it was still very nicely done. Much more important in the scheme of things is how well the Cayin produced the rest of the spectrum. And that was beautiful indeed. Because the 88T is my first exposure to the KT88 valve, I have to conclude that I greatly prefer it to the 6550 as executed in, say, the ARC VT55 for example. Though the VT55 did probably offer a hair more solidity in the bass, at the other end of the spectrum it couldn't hope to compete with the coherence, linearity and sweetness of the Cayin's upper midrange and treble. Between the two, it's no contest. I'd take the Cayin as the more musical and enjoyable amplifier any day of the week.



Alas, even the lively and light-hearted nature of the Cayin couldn't rescue my copy of Dave Grusin and Lee Ritenour's *Harlequin* LP [GRP-A 1015] which is lacking in air and sparkle quite uncharacteristic for GRP recordings. Sting's *The Dream Of The Blue Turtles* LP [A&M SP-3750] fared a little better. Not the greatest of recordings either, it nonetheless has more upper midrange energy than the *Harlequin* disc but is unbalanced by greater bass energy down low. As exciting as the 88T is, it's no tone control. It couldn't transform the

opening cut "If You Love Something Set It Free" into something that was enjoyable, sonically speaking. "Love Is The Seventh Wave" and "Russians" fared better but the sonics of this record *are* a bit lackluster. While my listening note session may seem to have ended on a down note, in reality this was not the case. As fun as the 88T was throughout my time with it, it was important to try a few less successful recordings to ascertain that the Cayin A 88T is indeed an accurate amplifier that will only go so far in its embellishments. Indeed, it knows its bounds and allows its feisty personality to only go so far in the editorial process. This is exactly how it should be. No component should be so heavy-handed.



As compared to my own Canary CA-160 EL34 mono amps, the Cayin fared well but sounded different. Like the Bel Canto REF1000s, the Canaries have that in-front-of-you solidity that the Cayin lacks. The Cayin favors transparency and air, which some listeners may prefer because it always sounds big and dimensional. I wasn't sure what to expect of the KT88's treble going in but I'm quite impressed now. The Cayin was subjectively just a little better extended than the EL34 as executed in the Canary amplifiers. Perhaps. It's sometimes hard to subjectively separate the overall treble performance from the upper-midrange/treble transition. The Cayin's ultra-transparent upper midrange certainly gives it the impression of limitless treble performance that is always well behaved. Particularly when paired with the outstanding ribbon tweeter of the Genesis 7.1 Signature, treble performance was outstanding. But even as I switched between amplifiers for comparison, within minutes I'd find myself completely acclimated to the Cayin and seduced by its charms. In short, I find its compromises extremely well chosen and the amplifier extraordinarily voiced and unfailingly musical.

Conclusion

I have a few operational quibbles with the A-88T. My preference for ultralinear mode means that I wished the amplifier would either default to that mode upon power on or at least remember my chosen mode when I last powered it down. Equally frustrating was the fact that the amp always powers up defaulting to the CD input. Given my preference for using the preamp inputs, I once again wish that the 88T would remember my last selection. The amplifier's 30-second soft-start both mutes the output as well as prevents a change of source selection and operational mode. Not a problem if you've got the remote by your side. Yet if you've misplaced it, you'll have to stand by during the power-up cycle before you can select mode and source. None of these are deal-breaking quibbles but I have to wonder why they have to exist at all.

A major reason for my accepting the Cayin review assignment was that I too have read all the reviews of the newest generation of Chinese amplifiers, most of them absolutely glowing. What I haven't been able to glean from any of them is just *how* good they are. Yes, they offer excellent value but just how good are they compared to home-grown stars? If this one's indicative, they are very, *very* good. The Cayin A 88T is an exciting product. Does it sound like the classic McIntosh MC-275? I can't say but I sure hope so - for the sake of McIntosh MC-275 users!



More importantly is that it sounds thoroughly modern. Such comparisons to classic tube sound may mistakenly lead one to think sweet and rounded highs and/or loose bass. Nothing could be further from the truth. The Cayin is delightfully extended at both ends and only in comparison to excellent and more costly amplifiers will any aspect of the Cayin suffer at all. In most cases, it will indeed compare very favorably. You can buy better but few products will beat it across the board. In its class, if you look elsewhere, what you'll get is something that may be preferable in this aspect or that but mostly, it'll just be different at best.

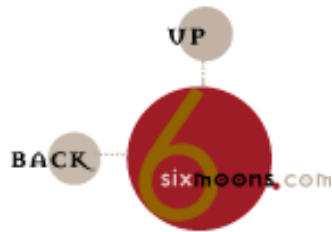
When evaluating the overall success of the 88T's performance, it's extremely important to consider its duality of purpose. For those contemplating the ascension of the upgrade path, it's a great choice. Use it as an integrated amplifier and enjoy its immutable qualities that when taken as a whole, will be very difficult to duplicate elsewhere. When the next upgrade bug strikes, the purchase of a first-rate preamplifier will take the system to the next level and the 88T will be right there with you. As good as it is as an integrated amplifier, it's an even better amplifier.

I think the Cayin A 88T's greatest charm is its big, lively and spacious personality. Not only does the amp play music but it infuses the music with a delightfully addictive air of frivolity and merriment that makes it great fun to listen to. And in its class, if that's all it did, it would be a great little amplifier. In the end, I have to concur with the famous US manufacturer's quote. As I sit here listening to the Cayin A 88T, I feel no need move it out of my system in search of something better. It

is a great little amplifier!



John Potis



US distributor's [website](#)

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