



Cayin Audio A-88T Tube Integrated Amplifier and SCD-50T SACD Player

A trip down Memory Lane

Paul Seydor

I was tickled pink by Cayin Audio's A-88T all-tube integrated amplifier from the moment I began to unpack it. The inclusion of white gloves signaled an attention to detail in the presentation that puts to shame several super-expensive items I've seen. It was even more impressive out of the box—handsome in an unapologetically retro style; ruggedly built using high-quality parts and point-to-point wiring; hand-assembled, hand-numbered, and hand-signed by the QC inspector. All this plus remote operation for \$1900 indicates Cayin's determination to give buyers more than just a taste of truffles at mushroom prices.

Nor is the retro style merely faceplate deep. Go to the "About Us" page on the Web site of the importer, VAS Audio Industries, and you read: "We are a group of middle-aged die-hard audiophiles, looking for some old 'toys' from our younger audiophile days." VAS got in touch with a Chinese electronics manufacturer and designed a series of products deliberately voiced after the sonic characteristics of classic American tube-products. A Cayin preamp is said to mimic a Marantz 7; a VAS amplifier, a Harman-Kardon Citation II; the A-88T integrated under review, a McIntosh MC275. When I told a couple of TAS colleagues about this, one said, "How cool!" The other, rolling his eyes, countered, "How silly!"

Whatever your reaction, it certainly hands the reviewer a conundrum. Nobody buying this product is doing so for "the absolute sound," i.e., fidelity to some absolute standard of accuracy. It's being bought for nostalgic reasons, to reproduce what is itself a reproduction—making it in effect a reproduction of a reproduction—one that gains its legitimacy because it harks back to the so-called Golden Age of Audio, vinyl the primary source, vacuum tubes the only means of amplification with their glowing warmth, cozy intimacy, and distortions benign (relatively high second-order harmonic) as opposed to noxious (the crossover notch of early transistors).

This nostalgia also has its sociological aspect. Not only is a sonic aesthetic being called back into existence, but evoked as well is the era of what might be called Romantic Individualism in audio, where corporations were virtually nonexistent and both equipment and sound were the visions of pioneering individuals. Fire up one of these Cayin amplifiers, watch the tubes come softly to life, Ella dreamily spinning out a melody while Ben Webster's tenor encircles her in ribbons of smoke and whiskey...and before you know it the whole chaotic modern world of multichannel, home theater, format wars, iPods, and computers just fades away.

Of course, those early pioneers were trying to approach the original sound as closely as they knew how given the state-of-the-art as it existed back then, not someone else's idea of it. But how can I cast the first stone—a guy who's just bought Quad 57s for the fourth time



and an Acoustic Research XA turntable for the second?

For now, let me narrow my focus to the A-88T alone. The preamp section features a volume control, but no balance or mono circuits—odd omissions given the vintage inspiration—and three high-level inputs; a fourth, misleadingly labeled “Preamp In,” bypasses the volume control, allowing the amplifier section to be driven by external devices (no preamp-out jacks, however).

Power into 4, 8, and 16 ohms is 45Wpc in ultralinear mode, 22 in triode, conveniently switchable from the handset. Even by the standards of their time, triodes seem to me little more than coloration generators, their principal effect to push the presence region back even further than many tube units already do, providing phony “depth” and otherwise glamorizing the presentation.

I conducted most of my evaluations in ultralinear, beginning with a glorious recital of Beethoven's last three sonatas by Mitsuko Uchida on Philips. This was recorded in the famously reverberant Concert Hall at Snape Malting, where Uchida applied a lot of pedal to radiant effect—no one else in my experience suggests the other-worldly character of this music so transcendently. Driving Quad 988s, the A-88T opened a window upon the venue and revealed Uchida's ethereally delicate touch and exquisite tone with especially nuanced resolution of dynamics. Next up *Gloryland*, the new Anonymous Four recording from Harmonia Mundi, with which the A-88T spread the four singers out slightly behind the plane of the speakers in an ideal perspective that let me hear deep into the soundfield yet concentrate on the unique timbre of each voice if I cared to. No problems, then, with imaging and soundstaging, and a quite extraordinary immediacy.

Ray Brown's doublebass on *Soular Energy* [Groove Note SACD] is satisfyingly extended and well articulated, albeit perhaps plummier than is likely to be literally accurate. This is fine with my flat-through-the-midbass 988s, but less so with LS3/5as, which don't need bogus warmth. The A-88T handles orchestral

Cayin Audio SCD-50T Two-Channel SACD player

Using a Sony transport and boasting the same high-quality fit and finish as the integrated, the SCD-50T has two features that set it apart from the crowd: two pairs of outputs, one transistor, the other tube; and, unique in my experience, a circuit that folds the back channels of multichannel discs into the stereo pair, the effects being to reduce level considerably and bathe everything in swimmy, confused reverberation, i.e., worse than useless. As for the outputs, when I first compared them, I thought, “Why'd they bother?” But after some break-in and a variety of sources, predictable differences emerged: the tubes warmer, softer, rounder; the transistors smarter, crisper, more articulate. The tubes also suggest a slightly more opulent tonal palette (especially paired with Cayin's integrated), and more dimensionality, the transistors better grip, control, and resolution of fine detail. But these differences were never, ever obvious and always highly source-dependent. Sonny Rollins' *Way Out West* [Contemporary] points them up, the Anonymous Four's *Gloryland* irons them out. As a 16/44 player, the SCD-50 is good—stronger on smoothness, color, and resolution than dynamics and tonal neutrality—but as an SACD player it's up there with some of the best I've heard. Disc after disc left me wondering anew at the indifference of the industry, the press, and the consumer to this superior medium. SACD reproduction here is outstanding enough to warrant acquiring the Benchmark DAC-1—a superlative D/A converter from the pro sector, costing a mere \$975—to kick the Cayin's Red Book performance up to equivalent level. Together the combination totals \$2875, still excellent value considering how vanishingly close the Benchmark brings the SCD-50T to state-of-the-art playback of 16/44. **PS**



Specs & Pricing

VAS AUDIO INDUSTRIES

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A-88T integrated amplifier

Power output: 45Wpc (ultralinear), 22Wpc (triode)

Inputs: Four line-level (but see text)

Tube complement: Two 6N9P/6SL7, two 6N8P/6SN7 (preamp), one Electro-Harmonix 6550EH/KT88 (power amp)

Dimension: 16" x 7.8" x 14.9"

Weight: 55 lbs.

Price: \$1900

SCD-50T SACD player

Formats: SACD and Red Book CD

Dimensions: 17.3" x 5.1" x 13.1"

Weight: 30 lbs.

Price: \$1800

Associated Equipment

SME Model 30 turntable; Sumiko Celebration and Dynavector 17D II cartridges; Phenomena phonostage; Sony XA777ES SACD player, McIntosh MDA1000 D/A converter, MCD 1000 transport, and 861 universal player; Pathos Classic One integrated amp; Quad 99 and 303 preamps; McIntosh MC-275 Series IV amplifier; Quad 988, ESL-57, Harbeth Compact 7, and Spendor SP3/5 speakers; Audio Physic Minos subwoofer; Kimber Select and 8VS interconnects and speaker cable

music impressively, the ample bottom-end actually an advantage in late-romantic symphonies; on recordings with plenty of ambience (many Telarc's), it conveys an altogether lovely bloom. Andrew Manze's new CD of symphonies by C.P.E. Bach (also from HM) is robust, vigorous, and close-up, with bracingly tart instrumental colors and textures that could easily become confused but for the A-88T's unruffled composure—everything clean, well-ventilated, and involving (note how the harpsichord cuts through without seeming to be spotlit).

Overall the A-88T is a little midrange dominant, albeit attractively so. But there is one tonal aberration I don't like: a tendency to emphasize sibilants (which triode mode worsens). On *Let No Man Write My Epitaph* [Verve], Ella Fitzgerald's sibilants sound almost free-floating. I can't explain this, but I was not alone in noticing it.

Owing to the A-88T's colorations—for the most part the euphonic sort adored by tube fanciers—the more neutral a speaker's tonal balance, the better I liked the amp, no doubt because mutual colorations aren't exacerbated. It formed beautiful synergies with my 988s and a pair of borrowed Harbeth Compact 7s. I know many audiophiles will love it with Quad 57s, but not I: this is another speaker that doesn't need any help in the warmth region.

Henry James once said that you must grant the artist his subject, a critical precept I've always held dear.

Substitute "designer" for "artist," "goal" for "subject," and I suppose it means I shouldn't mention Quad's 99/909 preamp/amp combination, which offers superior tonal neutrality (plus greater flexibility and three times the power for \$400 more). But surely it's fair to ask how the A-88T stacks up against the McIntosh MC275 it's voiced to resemble. I don't have a vintage sample around but I do have the Series IV, released a couple of years ago and reviewed in Issue 151. And? Well, maybe forty years ago an MC275 sounded like an A-88T now, but it sure doesn't in its Series IV reincarnation. They're about equal in transparency and tactile immediacy, but the IV's tonal balance is more neutral, which I prefer no matter the source or associated equipment.¹ "Maybe it's too neutral?" asked one of my group. "Perhaps the Cayin is a little . . . tastier?"

I've never understood the concept of "too neutral" as applied to audio reproduction, but I think I know what lies behind the suggestion. Many audiophiles don't want accurate, they want pretty or warm or lush or sweet. Fair enough: Cayin's philosophy values beauty above truth and designs its products by mixing memory with as much nostalgia as desire. No, the A-88T isn't an amp I'd settle down with, but it was certainly a big-hearted houseguest I'd always welcome back.

TAS

1. But bypassing the A-88T's preamp section brings its amp sonically closer to the MC275, though who'd buy it to use it that way?