

'EDITOR'S Product Of The Year



with four legendary KT88s producing the output. It's powerful too, producing 45 watts per channel in ultra linear mode and 22 very sweet-sounding watts in triode mode, all of which is switchable from a solid aluminium remote.

It may (but should not) come as a surprise to learn that Cayin is a Chinese-made hi-fi brand. Construction and finish are on par or better than equivalent European and American valve amplifiers and as we all know, Chinese manufacturing means lower costs and these are reflected in the product's price. Retailing for just \$2,699, this amplifier genuinely looks and sounds like it should cost three times as much. Here's a snip from the recent Audio & Video Lifestyle review in AVL-170 by self-confessed 2-channel devotee Robert Smith:

"... first disc in the drawer was The Pretenders' *Get Close*. I have had the master tape of this album in my hot little hand when I was working for a record company, so I know it pretty well and the presentation through the Cayin was no disappointment. On *My Baby* Chrissie Hynde's vocals, seductive as ever, are portrayed in a very deep soundstage; her guitar jangling away to the left and the bass drum at the end, very deep and reverberating. The last track on the album *Room Full Of Mirrors* renewed my 20-year-old love affair with Chrissie.

Absolutely fabulous.

That's what valve amps do to you, they wring the emotion out of the music, they don't hit you in the face like a big transistor amp can, they seduce you and that is why seasoned professional musicians always prefer a valve amp over a more powerful transistor amplifier. Switching between ultra linear and triode mode you notice the difference in the presentation between the two; the ultra linear operation providing more punch, more urgency to the sound, while triode operation gives a sweeter, cleaner

When it comes time to decide which product is to receive

the 'editor's choice' award there are a few things I consider. Performance (obviously) is a big factor, but so are design and engineering, build quality and value for money. So if a product excels at each and every one of these, the choice has to be simple - right? In this case, the decision was obvious.

However, all of the award winners in this year's Hi-Fi And Home Theatre Consumer Guide are a fine lot and to be honest there are half a dozen products that would be fully justified taking out this top 'gong' but in the end Cayin's truly gorgeous A-88T valve amplifier exemplifies everything that right's about this type of product. Firstly, it's been meticulously and thoroughly designed and engineered. With valve amps it's the transformers that matter - get them right and the rest follows. The A-88T is dominated by three large potted, custom-made audio output transformers which are low impedance and high bandwidth. They are flanked at the front by the valves

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sound and you can switch between the two all from the comfort of your armchair via the remote. What a way to go!

'Construction beyond criticism, sound approaching the legendary McIntosh MC275, facilities that never leave you wanting, all packed in a very substantial double carton, well written owner's manual, a suede chrome polishing cloth, a pair of white cotton gloves for handling the valves (no, I am not kidding), a two-year warranty and a bargain price of \$2,699. What are you waiting for? I might even go and buy one myself just to hand it down to the grandchildren to show them how it should be done.'

Having read through Robert's review before going to press, I knew I had to try it out in my system. My super-efficient (96dB) Ambience ribbons love a decent amplifier, especially a valve-based one and from the moment the soft start circuits clicked in I knew I had to have it. A couple of calls to Shane Lewis of Final Link Audio Pty Ltd (Cayin's Australian distributor) and the deal was done. The only other impulse buy I've ever made was a shiny, new fishing boat package, which landed me in scalding hot water with the wife. I thought I might be in trouble once more, but sat her down and popped on one of her favorites - Jeff Buckley's *Grace*. She was sold in an instant.

There are simply things that a good valve amplifier does with music that a solid-state transistor amp can't. In a word they are more musical and they don't come much more musical than this Cayin.

The valve amplifier isn't for every ear or system though and the same goes for the A-88T. It's powerful enough to drive speakers of average to high sensitivity and it will cope with impedance loads between 4 to 16 ohms, which makes it highly compatible, in this regard. The amp demands a good quality source and Cayin has another giant-price killer up its sleeve in the form of its CD-17A CD

player, which you can expect a review of in the not too distant future.

Partnered with the A-88T the combination makes a formidable music-making team.

This amplifier has already picked up a couple of awards from overseas

magazines, and now has a couple more to add to its tally. It thoroughly deserves them and the word is getting out that Cayin and its products are a force from China to be reckoned with.

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Nic Tatham - Editor

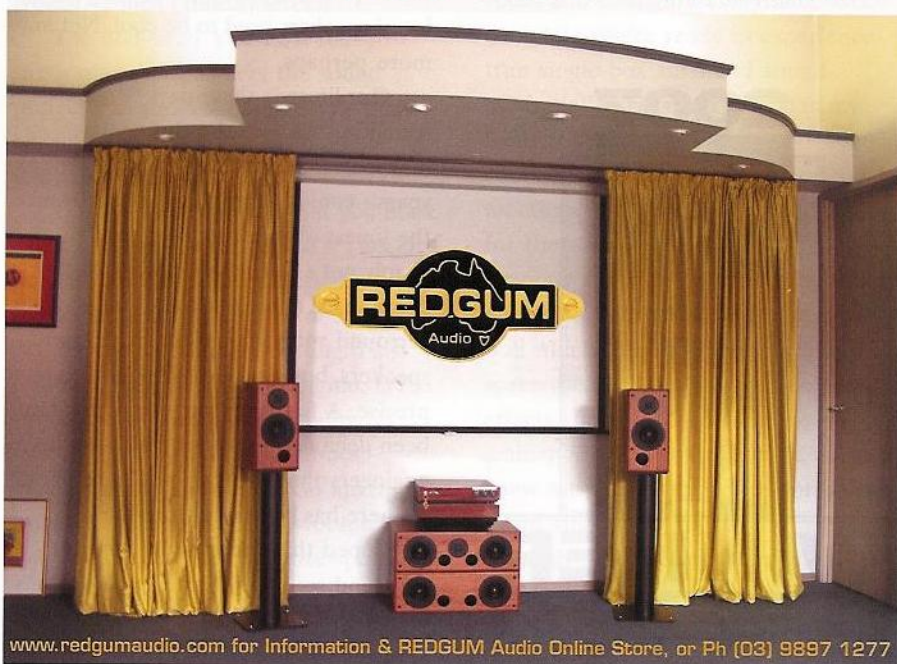
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