

Sam Tellig

How About a Title for this Column

At 15.4 lbs (7kg), Cayin's HA-1A may be the world's heaviest headphone amp. Sorry, you can't use it on a plane, train, or bus, and you can't run it on batteries: its power consumption is specified as 60W.

As its model name suggests, the HA-1A is, first and foremost, a headphone amplifier. But that's not all. It can serve as a line-stage preamp with a single pair of inputs, or as a flea-watt integrated tube amp. Of course, it sounds better in 1.2Wpc single-ended triode (SET) mode than in 2.2W ultralinear operation.

The Cayin HA-1A is from Zhuhai Spark, in China, recently liberated from the CATIC Group. It retails for an "introductory price" of \$695, and will cost \$749 at some unspecified point in the future. A local dealer may be hard to find, but Chad Kassem, of Acoustic Sounds, tries to keep it in stock. This Cayin is flyin' out the door, Chad told me. He phoned to chat about it, in his inimitable New Orleans drawl:

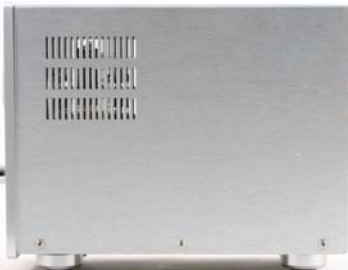
"Hey, Sam, m'man, you gotta hear this thing. It's fantastic. It's gonna mess with your mind, dude. I'd send you one from stock, if I had one. Maybe you should contact the distributor, Steve Leung, at VAS Audio, for a review sample."

Steve's first name is really Sze—pronounced *sezz*. Neat name, but *Steve* is easier. He was an audiophile long before he got into the audio business. When Sze *sezz* something is good, it is. Did I mention that our Wezz is a friend of Sezz?

I ran my Sony XA-777ES SACD player directly into the Cayin HA-1A and used my two reference headphones: Sennheiser's HD 600 and Grado's RS-1. I also yanked out my 30-year-old Yamaha HP-1 'phones. I think that the best headphones have gotten only incrementally better, which is why I've stopped chasing after each new model.

The HA-1A is described as "all vacuum tube, all handmade." The casework is exquisite, the look retro. Two EL84 tubes (from Electro-Harmonix, in Russia) show through a circular window on

the front. The two other tubes are a 12AX7 and a 12AU7; half of each of these looks after the left channel, the other half handles the right. When using the HA-1A for its main intended



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purpose of driving headphones, you can vary the output impedance via a knob on the back. I used the lowest setting (6–32 ohms) for my Grados, the highest (121–300 ohms) for my Sennheisers.

If you've been driving a pair of quality headphones from the headphone jack of a preamp or integrated amp—or even if you already own a standalone headphone amp—the HA-1A may come as a revelation. How good can your present headphones sound? Probably very good indeed. So good that you might stop listening to your loudspeakers.

Reserve the ultralinear mode for using the HA-1A as an integrated amplifier, when you'll *need* that 2.2Wpc. Take care when switching between modes: there's an unwelcome but probably not damaging *pop*. Ouch, that was my eardrum.

As a line stage, the HA-1A sounded clean and very clear: open, transparent, dynamic—and sweet, thanks to the tubes. That single pair of line-level inputs is a limitation, but you could always rig up a switching box.

More intriguing, perhaps, is the idea of using the HA-1A as a part-time integrated amplifier—for the bedroom, office, dorm room, vacation condo, or prison cell (nah, it wouldn't last long there). You need high-sensitivity speakers—maybe something using a

Fostex full-range driver. But for background listening? For more serious listening at louder levels, you can always use your favorite 'phones.

The HA-1A provided the SET experience without the expense of hideously expensive or nearly unobtainable output tubes. New EL84 tubes are cheap, readily available from several sources, and generally reliable. The fine-sounding EL84—a favorite of the French reviewer Jean Hiraga, I'm told—is smooth, delicate, crystalline,



and free of tube glare. Free, too, of the fuzzy, phasey quality that can characterize the larger EL34. Of course, the EL84 doesn't put out the power of an EL34 or a 6550—more proof that power corrupts. Manley Labs' Stingray integrated amplifier (\$2250) is based on the EL34.

The HA-1A breathes life and light into music in a way that transistors—and many tube amps—simply cannot. It makes musicians sound *here*, not there. This is what SET can do: not transport you to the recording venue, but transport the performers to your living room. Immediacy, intimacy—nothing can top tubed SET. Those experts who opine that all hi-fi sounds "electronic" haven't spent much time around SET tube amps.

I doubt that the HA-1A works its magic by fooling with phase relationships or blending channels. What it does, it does naturally: expand the soundstage so that it floats outside, not inside, one's cranium. The effect is not as natural as listening to a good pair of loudspeakers, but the experience is enjoyable on its own terms. The HA-1A has a way of making headphones sound

less like cans (British slang for headphones) that is downright...uncanny.

And the HA-1A did bass—rich, full, tuneful, tight bass. I've always thought my Sennheiser HD 600s sounded a little thin and bass-shy. Such is not the case.

The HA-1A may be the best thing that's ever happened to headphones. Of course, you'll need a good CD source to reap the maximum benefits, but the sound quality I heard was extraordinary. You can have more than a taste of high-end bliss for relatively little money—champagne sound for beer-budget bucks.

Chad was right on the money. M'man, you gotta hear it.

Memorex Black CD-R

"Hey, Dad, I saw these strange CD-Rs. And they were...they were *black*. Black as vinyl. What's doin', dude—er, Dad?"

Black CD-Rs are available from different sources. The easiest to find are from Memorex. I purchase them at Best Buy (50 for \$19.95) or at Wal-Mart. This is what the high end needs: Low prices. Rollbacks.

I contacted a press person for Memorex. I wanted to know, what is the difference between black CD-Rs and regular ones?

CONTACTS

Alera Technologies, 9140 Jordan Avenue, Chatsworth, CA 91311. Tel: (866) 882-5372. Fax: (818) 475-5200. Web: www.aleratec.com.

Cayin Audio US distributor: VAS Industries, 1 Bethany Road, Building 1, Suite 16, Hazlet, NJ 07730. Tel: (732) 888-3288. Fax: (732) 888-2988. Web: www.vasaudio.com.

Cool Copy, Ily Enterprise, Inc., 11861 East Telegraph Road, Santa Fe Springs, CA 90670. Tel: (562) 801-2888. Web: www.ily.com.

Digital Systems and Solutions, 1573 Kimberly Woods Drive, El Cajon, CA 92020. Tel: (888) 588-9542. Fax: (619) 588-5524. No website. E-mail: gslouis@gslouis.com.

Six Star DJ, Inc., 1113 East 11th Street, Los Angeles, CA 90021. Tel: (888) 678-2735. Fax: (213) 488-5187. Web: www.sixstardj.com.



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"The difference is not technical," she explained. "Black CD-Rs have a dyed polycarbonate that makes them black. It's a design preference."

Memorex will probably have no idea what to make of this, but black CD-Rs might be a listening preference,

bits. But I heard what I heard. My Harman/Kardon CDR 26 copies at 1, 2, or 4x. I heard no differences among the three copy speeds.

For more than a year now, I've also had a CD Copy Cruiser, from Alera Technologies. It can copy as fast as 52x,

ONCE THE **CRUISER** IS SET UP, COPYING COULDN'T BE **EASIER**.

too. The sound appears to come from a black background. (I'm not being facetious.) Black CD-Rs are quiet. Unfortunately, I can't use them in my Harman/Kardon CDR 26 dual-deck recorder-player; it requires the use of "audio" CD-Rs, which sell at a premium because of the royalties payable to composing and performing artists that are included in the price. I used the H/K to make copies of my own CDs for the car, and I still use it to make compilations of my favorite CDs of 1920s and '30s music.

I was expecting the CD-R copies to sound marginally inferior to my original source CDs. Lo and behold, I thought I heard just the opposite: the copies sounded better than the originals. Not only that, different audio CD-Rs sounded...well, different. I had—and still have—a preference for Sony audio CD-Rs. Look at the discs and you'll see that the background is green.

I mentioned this phenomenon to two of our Rusky friends, Lev and Pavel, both of whom are engineers: one in optics, the other in computer software. Of course, they dismissed as wacko the notion that CD-R copies could improve on the originals. Bits is

but I make my copies at 4x. Slower speeds do make better-sounding copies. Lev and Pavel found that hard to swallow, too. After all, a bit's a bit. Maybe *how* a bit is burned makes a difference.

You can buy a CD Copy Cruiser (Part No. 260123) directly from Alera Technologies for \$269. Less costly CD duplicators are available, but the Copy Cruiser is built like a tank headed for Iraq and it has worked flawlessly for me. The thing weighs 10.1 lbs (4.6kg).

Once the Cruiser is set up, copying couldn't be easier. Place a source disc in the upstairs drawer, a blank downstairs. Push a button. Minutes later, the bottom drawer pops open with a freshly toasted CD-R. You can also program the machine to copy particular tracks, leaving the disc's table of contents (ToC) to be written later, when you finalize, or close, the CD-R.

I compared copies of a single source CD burned to a standard Sony data

1 A couple of years back I fitted my PC with a Plextor Premium CD burner (recently discontinued, according to <http://www.plextor.com/ENGLISH/products/Premium.html>, which allows Plextor's PlexTools program to test burned discs for C1+C2 errors, reflectivity, and jitter. The lowest error rates I have found were on Verbatim's "vinyl" CD-Rs, which also don't appear to be available anymore. —John Atkinson