

Sam Tellig

Sam Tellig Warms to the Cayin HA-80A integrated amplifier, and Gives a Listen to HD Radio

How long before Chinese hi-fi rules the world? Some say ten years. Others say five.

A few say never—that high-quality hi-fi products made in North America or Europe will always rule. (Ironically, a number of Western hi-fi firms survive mainly on sales to Asia, including mainland China.)

Five years ago, Chinese hi-fi was nowhere on the map in terms of fit, finish, and reliability. Consider where it is today: on the cusp of becoming some of the best in the world. Indeed, some Chinese-made hi-fi is already the best on the planet—Quad ESL-2805 or ESL-2905 electrostatic speakers, for instance. Is anyone nostalgic for when they were shoddily made in the UK? My colleague, Ken Kessler, and I concur that the quality of the latest Quad electrostatic speakers, the 2805 and 2905 ESL models, surpasses that of any Quad models ever made in England. In part, it's the machining. In another part, it's the aspiration to build beyond Western—or at least British—production standards. Quad: Brilliant in design, crappy in execution. Owners of British-made cars will know what I mean.

A lot of "British" hi-fi is now made in China. Quad. Wharfedale. Mordaunt-Short. Cambridge Audio. Mission. Epos. Audiolab.

Cambridge Audio hit on a plan. (Cambridge Audio and Mordaunt-Short are owned by the Audio Partnership, Ltd.) They design stuff in London (as I saw for myself when I visited this beehive of activity two years ago), and it's made in AP's own factories in China, under close supervision. Fit and finish have improved steadily—to the point where the quality may now surpass that which could be attained in Britain.

Quad, Wharfedale, and Mission are owned by the International Audio Group (IAG), whose owners, the brothers Chang, hail from Hong Kong. The factories are in Shenzhen. Models are designed in the UK (Quad has an R&D facility in Huntingdon, Cambridgeshire, not far from the former Quad factory, which now houses a company producing toys) and built in

Shenzhen to Western standards.

Antony Michaelson, of Musical Fidelity, saw what was coming nearly five years ago, when he told me he was moving most of his company's production to Taiwan. Arguably, manufacturing standards are still higher in Taiwan than in mainland China.

Meanwhile, Linn Products has laid off an unspecified but sizable chunk of its Scottish workforce—they've been canned, so to speak. Ivor Tiefenbrun, Linn's founder, thundered that the Labour government had "done more damage to British industry than the Luftwaffe." Regulations, red tape, taxes, an overvalued pound—yeah, that's a formula for success. Linn's own incompetence might have contributed.

US manufacturers have enjoyed a reprieve because of the sorry dollar. Sales of US hi-fi products have been surging, like Bush in Iraq, from Stuttgart to Singapore. The French, Italians, rich Russians (ie, thugs) are all buying. But for how long? The dollar, like the country, will not remain forever bushed.

Until now, the best Chinese hi-fi has come from companies like Quad, Cambridge Audio, Vincent (designed, or at least specified, in Germany), and Melody Audio (Australia)—in other words, stuff made under watchful Western eyes, some of them Chinese (see below). You'll hear about Cambridge, Vincent, and Melody in future columns. (I hope to catch up with some hi-fi made in South Korea and India, too.)

Ken Kessler sized up the situation in May, at the Stereophile "Ask the Editors" panel at Home Entertainment 2007 (see <http://blog.stereophile.com/he2007/051507roast>). According to Ken, Chinese workers lack the decades-long tradition of making goods to Western standards. It's not that they aren't good workers; they're just new to the game.

Such a diplomat. Others have expressed things differently. As one importer of Chinese equipment told me just today, off the record: when the Chinese can skimp, they do. One can hardly blame Chinese manufacturers for crumbling under pressure to cut

costs to the bone. As another importer told me, the Chinese are agreeable to a fault—sometimes too much so for their own good. If you really want it at such a price, we'll give it to you at that price.

All of this is changing fast, as Chinese workers catch on and catch up to Western manufacturing standards, and Chinese manufacturers learn to how to say no: too cheap is too cheap, and benefits no one.

Meanwhile, the Chinese may no longer need to be colonized by the Audio Partnership or even IAG. They'll design and manufacture world-class hi-fi gear on their own initiative, with their own passions and talents. This is already starting to happen. One company in the forefront is Cayin (officially known as Zhuhai Spark).

Cayin's official US importer is VAS Industries, Inc., which also has Cayin make some products, in China, under the VAS marque. VAS is Steve Leung, a native of China and now a resident of Hazlet, New Jersey, where he and his wife are raising their family. Steve tells me the kids are growing up American and don't want to talk Chinese. I tell him that the same is true with my wife, Marina's, nieces and nephews: they're 100% Amyer-EE-kann and don't want to speak Russian whenever possible.

Steve's first name is actually Sze, pronounced (roughly) Sezz, which I like rather more than Steve. Sezz is a friend of Wezz (Wes Phillips). I can just imagine the phone calls. Sezz, this is Wezz (which is what The Chief, John Atkinson, calls WP).

You can call Steve and talk with him—he's in Jersey, not Shenzhen. He offers factory-authorized warranty service. (Some gray-goods Cayin products have found their way to the US through unauthorized channels, including New York City's Chinatown. Don't expect Steve to fix 'em.)

Cayin HA-80A integrated amplifier As you probably know from the December 2005 and June 2006 installments of this column, Cayin was spun off from China's government-owned CATIC group, which mainly produces military goods—airplanes, missiles, and the like—which they sell to Libya,

Burma, etc. (You don't think the Russians are doing this?) I've been assured that Cayin has been completely independent of CATIC for about two years. I received some documents said to establish this fact. Unfortunately, I don't read Mandarin.

The CATIC connection is worth mentioning, not to give Cayin a hard time (it's neat when swords are beaten into plowshares—or power amps), but to emphasize that the people at Cayin are accustomed to manufacturing to military rather than cottage-industry standards. They don't mess around.

All Cayin gear that I've seen has been a cut above most other Chinese-made hi-fi, and made to a world-class standard. The casework, knobs, and faceplates have been nothing short of fabulous. (Is it true that certain US hi-fi manufacturers have some of their knobs and faceplates made in China?)

The HA-80A integrated amplifier strikes me as a landmark Cayin product—one that will more firmly imprint the company's name on the map of the world's premier hi-fi manufacturers. Not only that, it will raise the bar for other China-based manufacturers.

Don't tell your friends, who might think you spent \$5000 or \$6000 for this thing, but the HA-80A retails for \$2995. That's how much Art Dudley says is cool to pay for a 1m pair of interconnects. (Really, Artie, would you pay that?) And you don't need a pair of interconnects anywhere between the preamp and power amp. Remember, this is an integrated amplifier; the connection is internal. There. I just saved you \$3000.

The Cayin HA-80A is BIG. This is

no itty-bitty British or fancy-schmancy European integrated with small build and no balls. It measures 17" wide by 8" high by 19" deep and weighs 80 lbs. It's difficult, almost impossible, for one person to lift. In other words, the HA-80A is about twice as big and weighs about twice as much as your typical \$3000 integrated amp.

This is exactly the kind of product that will prove devastating to North American and European hi-fi electronics manufacturers. (Speaker manufacturers may have a little more time before the noose tightens.) JA won't print any of this. Meanwhile, I can hardly contain my glee as I write, and laugh my evil laugh.

The HA-80A's styling is quasi-retro, tasteful and exquisite, reminiscent of some of the finest hi-fi gear of 20 or 30 years ago. Think high-end Denon, Onkyo, Luxman, or Accuphase. The twin VU meters are backlit blue on black, and drop-dead beautiful in the dark. The fit and finish of the casework are impeccable, surpassing that offered by most manufacturers in the West, who may be getting their casework from China anyway (from Cayin?). Most of the chassis functions as a heatsink.

There's one pair of XLR balanced inputs, and four pairs of gold-plated RCA inputs. Plus a tape loop. No pre-amp out. No home-theater bypass. But there is a way to connect a preamp or line stage and use the HA-80A as a power amp. This is a product for a two-channel perfectionist. There's a remote control, of course—machined from aluminum, no plastic crap. (This is not British hi-fi.) The height of each foot can be adjusted independently. No need for expensive aftermarket foot-sies or isolation devices.

The HA-80A is rated to deliver 80Wpc into 8 ohms or 150Wpc into 4 ohms. Not so much power, it seems, from so massive an amplifier, but the HA-80A is claimed to operate in pure class-A. The claim might be contentious—the amplifier runs very cool. Is it biased all the way to 80W in class-A or just some of the way? Sze sez all the way, and that the HA-80A runs cool because of its massive heatsinks and the fact that the output transistors are used to only 25% of their capacity.

I dunno. I remember, years ago, having a Krell KSA-80 power amp that was class-A and ran hotter than Hades. A swell-sounding Krell it was, too. If the HA-80A is class-A all the

way, why didn't it raise the temperature in my listening room, in summer, any more than a few degrees? You gotta give off the heat somehow.

None of this matters—it's the sound that counts. I'm not sure I'd want a space heater like the KSA-80 in my listening room, anyway.

The HA-80A is a hybrid amp. The initial gain stage includes two 12AU7 input tubes. The output stage employs six pairs of NPN MOSFET transistors per channel—carefully tested and matched, sez Sze. Needless to say, there was no trace of MOSFET mist, so infamous in years of yore. There was no bipolar disorder, either, because there are no bipolar transistors. No switching-amp sterility, either—this is not a switching amp. This could be the recipe for sonic success: tubes for their ace voltage-amplification abilities, MOSFETs heavily biased (if not all the way) into class-A for their current drive, and a massive power supply of 120,000µF per channel.

The HA-80A's power consumption is given as 280W, which again leaves me wondering about that class-A claim all the way up to full rated power. Steve sez the HA-80A is fully balanced from input to speaker outputs, assuming you use its single pair of balanced inputs.

I hooked up the HA-80A to Cayin's CDT-23 tubed CD player (read on). The results were so gratifying that I felt little need to substitute anything else, regardless of price (evil laugh, encore). For speakers, I used the Harbeth Compact 7 ES3, Triangle Comete Anniversaire, and BC Acoustique AC 3 floor-stander. Most of my listening was with the BC Acoustiques.

In terms of making sounds that sound like real music, flea-watt, single-ended-triode amplifiers (Cayin makes some) can do things that no other kinds of amps can do. That caveat aside, the HA-80A fulfilled its promise of delivering the best of tubes and the best of solid-state. The sound was sweet, smooth, and exquisitely extended in the treble, with nary a trace of hardness or harshness. Nor was there any lopping-off of the top end; it sparkled. (Bipolar output devices may sparkle a little more—for a price.)

Most impressive was the HA-80A's harmonic presentation—what the French hi-fi scribes call *la restitution sonore*. With classical or with jazz, it was right on. Richard Eggar's fortepiano on his Mozart recital disc, *Fantasias and Rondos* (CD, Harmonia Mundi

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HMU 907387), was ravishing—just the right side of clangy. The Cayin nailed it.

The HA-80A wasn't sterile or thin; there was meat on its bones. Its sound was plump, tender, and juicy. I could almost go around to the rear and, like a Russian male, squeeze or even bite its ass. Figuratively speaking.

The HA-80A was especially good at resolving ambiances preserved on recordings—the air that's there, the space between performers. It was stunning in this regard, and the opposite of the sterility I've heard so far from so-called digital switching amplifiers.

For a \$3000 integrated amplifier, this kind of performance is phenomenal. If you'd blindfolded me and asked how much the HA-80A cost, I'd have guessed at least \$6000. I wonder what would happen if you blindfolded JA. Or Mikey.

But MOSFETs aren't known for providing the ultimate testicular drive, and the HA-80A was a little lacking in balls-to-the-wall bass: that ability to grab a loudspeaker by the cojones and lift it into the air, to discipline it, to teach it how to obey. It could be MOSFETs, it could be the 80W limit.

I'm not suggesting that the bass was soft or poorly defined, but the HA-80A's real strengths were in the midrange and treble. Harmonic textures. Truth of timbre. Palpable presence—assisted by that phenomenal way of delivering ambient information. Air there meant there. These things made the HA-80A great—rather like a fine tube amp of the push-pull persuasion.

I received the first HA-80A to make it to the US—the very sample Sze/Steve had demonstrated at the Consumer Electronics Show in January. There were two early-production quirks that I assume the factory has since corrected. The first was that the unit would not stay turned on—until I'd turned it off, then on a second time. Turns out there's a built-in warmup period, to avoid tube-popping. Then the amp is supposed to click itself on. It took two tries, every time. And every time, the second try did the trick.

The other quirk was the motorized volume control. When I used the remote in cold weather, the volume control got stuck. In warm weather, no problem. I keep the house at about 55° in winter—even less overnight. I suspect that this is a matter of choosing the right lubricant. Or maybe it was a matter of machining.

Put the Cayin HA-80A up against anything. With any speakers.

Cayin CDT-23 CD player

The Cayin CDT-23 CD player is understated. It has one Electro Harmonix 6922 tube per channel, but the tubes reside inside the chassis. There's no blue light show. The Sony transport and laser mechanism is a conventional cutline front-loading model that operates with exceptional smoothness.

There are no balanced outputs—a pity, considering that the Cayin HA-80A integrated amp has balanced inputs. (Balanced outputs from dual-differential DACs might be more than you'd expect for \$1495.) There are coaxial and TosLink digital outputs, though I question why anyone would want to use an external DAC when the player's own performance is so exceptional. The CDT-23 uses a Burr-Brown PCM 1792 DAC and a Burr-Brown SRC 4192 upsampling chip to achieve 24 bits (some of them phantom) and 192kHz. The idea is to achieve something close to full 16-bit resolution, through whatever manipulation or digital prestidigitation. I would have had more information, but I'm illiterate when it comes to Mandarin.

For \$1495, this is a lovely CD player. I dragged it into the living room, hooked it up to my McIntosh MC275 Mk.3 amp and Verity Audio Rienze loudspeakers, and confirmed what I'd heard with the HA-80A amplifier and the BC Acoustique A3 speakers. The CDT-23 resolved low-level detail very well and preserved ambient information. Tubes make the harmonic presentation more natural. Is it possible that they actually filter out, or cancel, some digital nasties?

The Cayin CDT-23 does not cutline run balanced. When I tried the Cary CDP1 (\$1995), which does have balanced outputs, and also has the upsampling magic bullet, I noticed slightly more low-level rez and more ambient information, long with somewhat greater dynamic range.

But in its own right, the CDT-23 is a very fine CD player—the best I've heard to date for \$1495, and magnificently made for that reasonable price. Meanwhile, Cayin's HA-80A integrated is exceptional, and so resolving that it could use the best there is—something balanced, at least.

Cambridge SoundWorks Radio 820HD

With, at last count, some 1307 stations in



the US, HD Radio has finally arrived—if not the radios or the audiences.

HD Radio is a trademark of Ibiqity Digital Corporation (apparently, HD does not stand for high-definition). At least for the moment, Ibiqity is the only company making chips for such radios. The company also makes the equipment that HD broadcasters use to broadcast.

The situation is strange. More than 1300 stations broadcasting, yet almost no one is listening in HD, at home, office, or in the car. Something is askew. There should be scads of HD radios by now. Why not? Licensing fees? Or that the current Ibiqity chip draws so much current that battery power, and hence portable radios, aren't possible? Expect changes soon, and maybe chips from other sources.

Meanwhile, kudos to Ibiqity for kicking so many stations onto the air, so far—if not for kicking the asses of the



makers of radio receivers. According to my contacts at Ibiqity, it costs an FM station about \$100,000 and an AM station around \$50,000 to add HD. Stations are investing.

The question is, should you invest in a high-quality tabletop radio (or component FM tuner, for that matter) that doesn't decode HD signals? The broadcasts are there. You can go to www.Ibiqity.com and see what's on in your area. How about these genres? Tropical (whatever that is). Xtreme Hip-Hop (hip-hop isn't extreme enough?). Fusion Hispanic & Anglo Rock (mixed marriage?). Neo-Soul (beats neo-conservative!). As a former radio announcer, I have my own format, if anyone is inter-