

Category Winner: Compact Disc Player

CAYIN CDT-17A



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Having reviewed the excellent Cayin A-88T integrated valve amplifier in *Audio & Video Lifestyle* issue AVL-170, I couldn't wait to get my hands on another product from the Cayin stable. The Cayin A-88T was absolutely superb, so much so that it picked up the major 'gong' in last year's *Audio & Video Lifestyle* magazine's Best Buy Awards, also being named Editor's Choice 'Product Of The Year'. Well, Cayin's done it again grabbing the CD Player AVL Best Buy Award for 2008.

The Cayin company with its Aerospace/Avionic background, skillfully manufactures hi-fi components of exceptional quality from German design, at a very modest price utilising its equally modern manufacturing facility in China.

Speaking with Cayin's local distributor, Final Link Audio Pty Ltd's managing director Shane Lewis, he informed me that on a recent visit to the Cayin factory in China, that the five storey facility was more like a laboratory

than a manufacturing plant, with people wearing white coats, hairnets and slippers, hand assembling components into the company's products to exacting standards.

This CDT-17A CD player arrived in a very substantial double carton with foam packing and as we've mentioned many times before on these pages, 'packaging is a good indication of the pride taken by the manufacturer in the equipment that they produce' it inspires confidence in the product right from the start.

The unit looks quite smart, 14mm solid satin brushed aluminium fascia, chrome overlay with a circular display/function window highlighted with a blue halo, solid 2mm thick steel chassis sitting on machined feet with rubber pads and not surprisingly it is heavy, weighing in at 16kg. Styling is what I would call refined oriental, not in your face, but not understated either. Front panel controls are the basic essentials, cleanly grouped within the circular

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display window, power on/off switch and obligatory blue LED. The rear panel supports twin machined gold plated RCA unbalanced analogue outputs, a pair of gold pin XLR balanced analogue outputs, an XLR AES/EBU digital output, a coaxial digital output, optical Toslink digital output, fuse and detachable IEC mains lead.

Lifting up the ‘bonnet’ revealed a very tidy ‘engine bay’ and now you get to appreciate the quality of the Cayin product, excellent design, premium quality components and wonderful execution of manufacture. A Philips CD711 pro transport mechanism is employed in a semi sealed chamber which the manufacturer claims in the specification to be ‘hermetically sealed.’ Although I have always taken the term hermetically sealed to mean completely sealed from the atmosphere, of which this is not. The implication being that the chamber is airtight, therefore to a degree soundproof, reducing airborne vibration to the mechanism and disc, which this chamber can not do. I am sure this anomaly in the specification is a result of an interpretation error in the translation. However the chamber does provide isolation from magnetic, electromagnetic and electrostatic forces, light and dust and has the natty feature of the CD drawer closing automatically after one minute if left in the open position.

All of the electronic circuitry is laid out neatly on one single multi-layered printed circuit board, sensibly engineered and utilising quality components with attention to detail. There has been quite a lot of attention paid to the area of the power supply in this player, with twin potted toroidal power transformers, one for the digital circuits and one for the analogue circuits, 17-odd voltage regulators on individual heatsinks with lots of decoupling and filtering at the critical points of the circuit. Digital decoding is achieved with two dual channel Burr Brown PCM1792, 24bit/192kHz digital

to analogue converters. Two are necessary to provide, true, fully balanced operation from the D/A conversion to output sockets without degradation or interference. The signal is then amplified and filtered by two Burr Brown drivers, six Burr Brown OPA604 precision buffers, followed by four Russian 6922 Electro Harmonix twin triode output valves. Expensive, audio selected, Nichicon electrolytic capacitors dot the circuitry in abundance, output coupling capacitors are the well respected Wima types bypassed with smaller value Realcaps. More Realcaps are scattered about the circuit in critical areas, together with generously rated precision resistors and the mute function is attended to by relays at the output.

An exceptionally rugged remote control handpiece, machined out of a solid billet of aluminium is supplied with the unit, covering the three stage display dimming, plus all the normal control functions of a CD player except power on/off. The buttons have a nice tactile feel to them and this unit is built to more of a robust professional specification, being streets ahead of those cheap, plastic, rubbery remotes dished out by some manufacturers.

A considerable amount of effort has gone into the design of this player to give state-of-the-art performance without talking silly money, and all of this engineering is much more than you would normally find at this price point. So far very impressive indeed.

I didn’t have a balanced input preamplifier at hand to plug the player into, which is a bit of a pity as Cayin has gone to a lot of trouble to incorporate this facility, but outside of the professional world, balanced line input preamps are rare. My power amplifier’s input is balanced, my preamplifier’s output is balanced, my disc input is balanced but sadly no balanced line input. But not to worry, the unbalanced output is no slouch and I would take it that this output would be the one that the majority of people would be using.

First sounds from out of the box were favorable, very smooth, with good bass extension and plenty of depth to the soundstage, but we must wait, burn it in for 80-100 hours or so to see what it can really do.

First serious track from the disc in the tray was *Summertime* from the Patricia Barber's album *A Distortion Of Love*. It starts off slow, with just bass, gong and shakers and Patricia singing only notes for the first four minutes. You become mesmerised by the metronomic beat of the shakers and marvel at detail and realism in the bass, then as the song starts, the solid imaging of Patricia's voice and the depth of the soundstage capture your attention. The sound was very organic, real and engaging, begging you to listen deep into the recording and not go unrewarded. The next track *Subway Station*, an explosive nine and a half minute percussive instrumental with Patricia on piano, you are stuck by the wide dynamic contrasts that this player provides, hard hit instruments hit you in the face with precise imaging and detail and shows you how good this 1991 album really is with regard to the recording quality.

Plugging in my Perpetual Technologies P3a DAC revealed that the combination of DAC and valve output stage in the CDT-17A was quite a successful marriage. The Cayin does have a character, but the character is 'all good' and I would say this is due to the inclusion of the valves into the equation. They dial in just a hint of romance without subtracting anything, just more tonal colour from the musical palette. Timing, imaging, transparency and dynamic range performance were spot on and kept me listening without fatigue, with transient attack suffering slightly compared to the analytical solid state P3a DAC but that was to be expected.

All musical material tried through the CDT-17A sailed though with flying

colours including some rough (could not be bothered listening to anymore) stuff, always providing an engaging performance.

In conclusion, this CDT-17A player is well conceived and extremely well executed. It provides a very real musical presentation and loads of detail from the Red Book CD format. Is it the last word? Undoubtedly not! It represents a state-of-the-art CD player, utilising commercially available chipsets combined with valves and it does this beautifully, but there are other better players out there. Oh, but I forgot to mention, they are probably at least five to 10 thousand dollars more. This CD player's performance probably represents the last stepping-stone before leaping into the rarified air of custom proprietary decoding. Here research and development costs coupled with low volume mean you pay a premium price to go that extra yard and to justify the price, the manufacturers tend to make their products from exotic materials pushing the price up even further.

With the Cayin CDT-17A you get a superb product with a high standard of finish that will satisfy you for years to come and will stand its ground with some products that are four times the price.

Okay, so the Cayin isn't going to be within everybody's budget, but this really is champagne at beer prices, so to speak. With a recommended retail price of \$2,599, this player represents the performance level and build quality that would satisfy me. It represents great value against its direct competitors and, of course, as such we can highly recommend it to you as this year as Best Buy Awards winning CD player.

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Ancillary Equipment: ME1400 power amplifier, Electrocompaniet EC3 preamp, Marantz CD-94II CD player, Perpetual Technologies P3a DAC, Magneplanar MG1 panel loudspeakers

Distributor:

Final Link Audio Pty Ltd
34 Gamelite Drive
Melton, VIC 3337
Tel: (03) 9746 0394
Email: info@finallink.com.au
Website:

www.finallink.com.au

Specifications:

Product Type:

Hybrid Valve CD Player

Valve Type:

4 x 6922 Electro Harmonix

Output Level:

2.3 volts \pm 3dB

D/A Conversion:

2 x Burr-Brown PCM1792,
24-bit/192kHz

Frequency Response:

20Hz-20kHz

Signal To Noise Ratio:

92dB

Dynamic Range:

120dB

Channel Separation:

100dB

Laser Assembly:

Philips CD711 in hermetical
dust proof chamber

Digital Output:

Coaxial, optical, balanced

Dimensions:

440 x 130 x 390mm

Weight:

16kg

Price:

\$2,599

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Reviewer:

Rober Smith

All specifications and recommended retail prices were supplied by the distributor at the time of original review, and may now be subject to change