



Computer Audiophile

SGB reviews the Cayin iDAC-1

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Wow, what a great sounding audio component! I could end this review here, and be satisfied that some readers might get the idea in their heads to give it a try, but for the majority of jaded audiophiles out there that adhere to the notion that something that costs more will always sound better, let me elaborate on why I think many seasoned audiophiles would find Cayin's iDAC-1 a final purchase.

First off, though, let me tell you that after I had decided that I wanted to give the Cayin a try, I found only one dealer in the whole USA that had this DAC in stock at the time I was looking; all of the others that responded to my inquiry told me that they would have to order it from the importer and then ship it on to me. That would normally send up a red flag for me, but I recall that I had experienced similar situations back in 1999 when I decided that I wanted to try SACD. My local Marantz dealer said that there just wasn't enough interest in the SACD format for him to carry their players, but that he would special order one for me.

If you are an avid audiophile, the Cayin name will be familiar to you, but if it's not, Cayin is one of the few Chinese-made brands that have made it to prestige status among the cognoscenti, primarily for their well-made and beautiful range of amplifiers and preamps. In fact, two of my long-time audio buddies have had Cayin products in their systems at one time or another, and this kind of endorsement was just what I needed to settle it for me. I ordered my iDAC-1 from the dealer who had it in stock and it arrived in just two days.

The unit itself looks like a miniature tower computer, its brushed aluminum case standing 10" tall, 4.5" wide and 8" deep and weighing just under 8 pounds.

There are two analog — one fixed, one variable — and two digital outputs on the back that would enable one to use the DAC in a variety of situations. The two analog outputs do not operate concurrently, you must choose one or the other from a button on the supplied remote control. As a result, the user could actually have the outputs serving two different audio systems without having to plug and unplug connectors when he wanted to make the switch; or, by switching to the variable outs he can listen to his headphones by using the minijack on the front of the unit. Note also that these two analog outs offer two entirely different DAC chips in their circuits. The TOSLINK and Coaxial digital outputs are fixed, and are intended for use on any variety of components that offer such inputs. A master on/off switch is also on the back of the iDAC-1; powering down from the button on the front of the unit puts the unit into a low current wait state. On the front of the unit, the user will find controls for adjusting volume levels and changing selections from your iTunes playlist. The USB input, infrared sensor, headphone jack and large round window for viewing the blue backlit 6N1 vacuum tubes complete the array of features on the front of the iDAC-1. There is also a little LED just to the left of the USB input that glows red when the fixed outputs are in use, and switches to a pale blue color when the volume controlled outputs are used.

Speaking of the tubes, the 6N1 is a Chinese variation of the Russian-designed 6N1-P which has become popular among current tube audio manufacturers. I read somewhere on the web that even Audio Research uses this tube in a few of its products. For us old-timers who love to roll tubes in our equipment in the hope that we will find the ones that produce the best sound, this tube is very similar, but not identical, to the 6DJ8 or 6922 designs of yesteryear. Replacement/alternative tubes are available from most of the usual online sources.

The Cayin produces sound fit for a king. That is not to say that it trounces my KingRex UDAC-1 in every way possible, but the Cayin does not pose the sort of low gain/impedance mismatch problems with my preamp that the KingRex did. In fact, there is enough gain through the fixed output that I need to paint a little red line with the caption, "turn back, you fool," about midway through the traversal of my preamp's volume control. That is to say that the iDAC-1 puts out a tremendous amount of volume, and that its sound is so pure that you may be tempted to surpass reasonable levels, putting your speakers (and your ears) at risk.

What does it do right? Just about everything; its overall sound almost completely belies the fact that there are a pair of tubes pushing out that analog sound, but it doesn't sound antiseptic or lifeless like transistors sometimes do.

Soundstage is big and wide, just like you'd hope for, and there isn't a single trace of hardness in the top end as you might expect. I guess you can thank those tubes for that. The midrange is gloriously open sounding with lots of blackness between those palpable images it produces. I confess to hearing woodwinds on my Nilsson *A Little Touch of Schmilsson in the Night* that I've never heard before, and a sense of ambiance to it that my extremely modified CD player only hinted at — and this after several hundreds of plays, no less. Over the course of several days, I sampled some of the great Classic Records CD reissues through the Cayin, along with that original CD release of *Getz/Gilberto* that has Astrud coming out of the left channel as originally engineered, and that marvelous sounding original release of Pat Metheny's *Off Ramp* that might have you asking yourself, "how did they do this?", and in each case, I was simply stunned at the level of resolution, the amount of texture and the sense of drop-dead transparency, pace and timing that these mere 44.1 recordings provide. Two of my closest audiophile buddies are reluctant to give computer audio a try, but I think that if they had a chance to hear what a Mac Mini and this little DAC can do they might be singing a different tune.

I had read in some online forum that the iDAC-1 will require about 100 hours of break-in before it starts to sound good, and I would be inclined to agree with that. In fact, I would probably recommend that you leave the main power switch on and the tubes in the wait/sleep mode so that you can minimize the amount of warm-up time it takes for this DAC to start sounding as I have described. For the first thirty minutes or so after I've powered up the system, it will sound just a little thin and threadbare before it comes into its own.

What does it do wrong? We all know that nothing in this world is perfect, so I would be remiss if I did not mention that the deepest bass coming from the iDAC-1 is a little lacking when compared to what I was getting with the KingRex. Being tubed, the bass isn't quite as taut as the absolute best you would get from the very best solid state devices out there, and it appears to be about 2 dB down in level from what the much cheaper KingRex offers (which I found to be pretty nigh perfect in this area). Since I use an electronic crossover in my system, I can compensate for this very minor deficiency by clicking the bass output up a notch, but if you get your jollies by playing nothing but deep bass — and, by that I mean the stuff that shakes the walls... you know, the lease buster stuff — then you should not be considering a tube DAC.

If, on the other hand, you want a USB DAC for less than \$800 that can rival those costing much more, you may find your Shangri-La right here.