



## Sam's Space

Sam Tellig



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### Cairn Fog v2.0 CD player

The French *do* have a way of naming hi-fi products, *n'est-ce pas?* Gilles Belot, managing director of Cairn, has christened his new CD player the Fog. Why? Haven't the foggiest.

Actually, I have. Gilles is a dedicated mountain-climber and a serious builder of serious hi-fi gear. His company, Cairn, is not named after a breed of Scottish terrier. The word also means "a mound of rough stones built as a memorial or landmark" (*Concise Oxford Dictionary*, 10th ed.). A cairn can mark the trail up a mountainside.

But why "Fog"?

Gilles, apparently, *likes* fog. It's part of being up in the clouds, scraping the sky. As a sometime photographer, I like this weather condition, too. I'm just not sure I would name my CD player after it.

Can the Fog weather its name?

I sure hope so, because this is an outstanding CD player, beautifully built, reasonably priced, and sonically splendid.

Roy Hall visited the other day, bearing a CD player from China, the Shanling CD-T100. Naturally, he spied the Cairn Fog.

"What's that?"

"It's a nifty CD player from France that should give the Brits a run for the money. The Cairn Fog."

"The Cairn Frog?"

"No, Roy, the Cairn Fog."



The Cairn Fog v2.0 CD player.



Poor Gilles. Will he ever talk to me again?

Let's get serious. If I can. (My daughter said my writing lacks *gravitas*. She writes for *MAD* magazine.)

The Cairn Fog, which is distributed in North America by VMAX Services, comes in two versions, medium fog and dense fog, or with or without the magic bullet: upsampling.

Without upsampling, the basic Fog will set you back \$1095 on a sunny day (or rainy day, for that matter). With the magic bullet upsampling card installed, the player costs an extra \$500, which ups the ante to \$1595. (You can buy the basic version and add the upsampling card later with no price penalty.)

Upsampling is the cat's meow. It's the thingamajig that adds life, air, ambience, and dynamics to standard "Red Book" CD—making, for me, SACD irrelevant (until there's sufficient software). The Cairn Fog has upsampling, implements it well, and costs a mere \$1595.

The Cairn's build quality is superb. Just feel the faceplate and the chassis. Look inside. Cairn builds beautiful products and does so on a European scale, meaning they're not so much into overbuilding and overcharging. (Do take the silver finish over the black.)

I'll run out of *l'espace de Sam* soon, so à tout vitesse (at full speed): The Cairn Fog starts as a Sony CDM transport and a Crystal CS4392 converter chip. The upsampling card uses an Analog Devices AD1896 upsampling chip to bring the

signal to 24 bits/192kHz, which is also accepted by the Crystal CS4392. The converter is the same, with or without the upsampling card installed.

Note that the Crystal CS4392 converter chip operates in a fully balanced, or dual-differential, mode. Noise—digital artifacts—are summed and canceled, sending a very clean, clear signal to the player's analog output stage. In a word, no fog.

### The Cairn Fog had one of the most refined top ends of any CD player I've heard to date.

For the most part, I listened to the Fog with the matching Cairn 4808 class-A integrated amplifier (review next month) and the JMLab Electra 926 speakers. Yes, the Electra 926 could use more power than 30Wpc, at least in my living room. Still, the sound with the Cairn combination was magnificent. It was great, too, with the Cairn Fog into the Purest Sound Systems passive pre-amp and the Belles 350A or GW Labs 270 Stereo amplifier.

I heard the benefits of the magic bullet—a smooth, sweetly extended treble with no digital nasties (unless a recording was truly wretched). The Cairn Fog had one of the most refined top ends of any CD player I've heard to date: delicacy, definition, and detail.

I heard another thing I associate with upsampling—a wonderful sense of air and space. The music lived and breathed, as it does with analog. As a result, I never experienced any listening fatigue.

The sound improved still further when I used a balanced XLR cable (supplied by Cairn) from the Fog to the 4808 integrated. Less background hash? I don't know. I do know that I heard more detail and even stronger macro-dynamics. So go balanced from the Fog into your preamp or integrated amp, if you can.

The build quality of the player is exceptional, as I said before, while the styling is unusual. (This is a French company.) Cairn likes a simple faceplate. No dazzling array of bright lights. Even the LED at the center of the faceplate is

toned-down and goes dark after a while so as not to distract. There is no battery of superfluous buttons. I liked its uncluttered look and ergonomics, but you might find, as I did, that it takes some getting used to.

The Fog has one big button at right, as you can see from the photo. Push this button in to turn the player on and off. (Actually, the player sleeps in standby as long as it's plugged in. You arouse it from slumber with a push of the big knob or with the bottom of the three smaller buttons at left.) When you turn the big button to the right or the left, it advances or skips back a track.

As I just said, there are the three smaller buttons at left, discreetly recessed into the faceplate so you can hardly see them. The bottom one rouses the player from standby. The center one engages play. The top one opens and closes the drawer. You'll get the hang. I did. Further functions are available from the remote, but I received a provisional remote, so I can't comment—you'll get the real thing.

If I have one word to describe the Fog, it's *refined*. This was surely one of the most exquisitely detailed CD players I have heard, for any price. The mid-range and treble were exceptionally smooth, sweet, and extended—and yes, I did take the Fog upstairs to visit briefly with my Quad ESL-989 electrostatics.

You can pay a lot more for a CD player, and if you do, you might get what I missed (but only to a slight degree) with the Fog—namely, even better bass definition and more dynamic authority. But we're talking about a \$1595 CD player with upsampling, not something that sells for \$3000 or more. Would I buy this player at this price? *Absolutely!*

The Fog seemed rhythmically quick, too—a good thing with a speaker like the Electra 926. So much for the idea, bruited about in some quarters, that upsampling tends to compromise pace and rhythm. If anything, just the opposite.

I think Cairn has pulled off a neat trick with the Fog v2.0. They've given you delicacy, definition, and detail, along with the toe-tapping quality that some take to be the special domain of the Brits.

We'll meet the matching Cairn 4808 class-A integrated next month. Meanwhile, you might get the jump and see if you can find a Cairn dealer *tout de suite* (real fast). I have a suspicion that both of these pieces are going to be in very short supply. ☐

#### Contacts

**Cairn**, Z.I. Les Etomelles, 02200 Villeneuve-St-Germain, France. Tel: (33) 03 23 75 10 50. Fax: (33) 03 23 75 06 47. Web: [www.cairn-ezo.com](http://www.cairn-ezo.com).

**VMAX Services**, P.O. Box 570, Chazy, NY 12921. Tel: (800) 771-8279, (514) 932-7786. Fax: (514) 931-8891. In Canada: P.O. Box 8, 1217 Greene Avenue, Montreal, QC H3Z 2T1.