

The Cairn 4808 has an active preamp section. Headphones, however, connect to the power-amp stage—suitably stepped down in power. I thought the sound was superb with my Sennheiser HD600 headphones, which are what Gilles uses. If you buy the Cairn, you probably won't be in the market for an outboard headphone amp.

There are five line-level RCA inputs, a tape loop, and a single balanced input. An optional, internal phono stage will be offered later, and will take the place of one of the line-level inputs. A single pair of speaker output terminals is provided. Interestingly, there are *two* pairs of RCA preamplifier outputs. Biamping, anyone? Triamping? There are no tone controls, of course. *Quel horreur!*

For a compact unit—17" wide by 3" high by 12" deep—the Cairn 4808 is fairly heavy: 27 lbs. The main reason is its dual-mono design, with two 200VA toroidal transformers; in other words, a separate power supply for each channel. Gilles said that such beefy transformers would normally be used in a higher-wattage design. A third 10VA transformer handles everything that's not audio-related, including the digital display and switching functions.

The 4808 breezed in before the Cairn Fog CD player, which I reviewed last month. That gave me plenty of time to use the amp in my two systems with different loudspeakers. CD players included the Musical Fidelity A3.2 (see below) and Rega Jupiter. Speakers included the aforementioned Triangle

Celius, the Quad ESL-989, and the JMLab Electra 926. The Cairn 4808 got on famously with the Quads.

As you'd expect, the Cairn 4808 and Cairn Fog clicked as a combo—they were made for each other, after all, with styling to match. I noted a small but significant improvement in the sound of the combination when I substituted a balanced cable, supplied by Cairn, for a single-ended RCA run. The Fog is a

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fully balanced design, while the 4808 is not. Still, you reap the benefits of noise-cancellation at the amplifier's inputs. Compared to an unbalanced connection, I heard wider dynamics and a quieter noise floor—not a dramatic difference, but definitely worthwhile. Run balanced, if you can.

Overall, the 4808's sound complemented the Fog's: clear, clean, quick, perhaps slightly lean (the French don't like fat sound), but never austere. The upper midrange and treble were superbly delineated—delicate and sweet, without the slightest hint of hardness or grain.

I especially liked the Cairn combination *avec la musique de chambre*—string quartets in particular. Unless a recording was poor, violins were exquisitely rendered, never turning thin, wiry, or edgy. I credit some of the sound to the Fog's upsampling to 24 bits/192kHz. But the 4808 was clearly doing its part.

The Cairn gear is not just made for string quartets. It had, with jazz, the kind of toe-tapping, let-go-of-the-notes sound that might appeal to the beer-drinking Brits. But the Cairn didn't deliver beer sound. It offered champagne. Soissons is close to the Champagne region.

I visited Soissons last spring, and yes, they do drink a lot of Champagne. For breakfast, on weekends. Lunch. Before dinner. (Break out the bubbly, then move on to a serious wine.) They don't wait until New Year's Eve. Patrice, at the local hi-fi shop, even serves Champagne to his customers, many of whom drive up from Paris. (If you visit,

say Hi from Sam.) All this imbibing. Not Gilles, of course—he has to stay in shape for his fifth ascent of Mont Blanc.

The 4808 didn't sound overly warm, sluggish, or slow. It achieved smoothness in the midrange and treble without robbing music of its life, sparkle, or energy. Many times, I was reminded of a SET tube amp. Class-A operation up to 10W may cut the overall power to 30W, but the tradeoff was worth it, I thought.

Bass was tight and well-defined, but here is where I could have wished for more than 30W, at least in our living room with the JMLab Electra 926 speakers (the combo would probably have worked fine in my smaller listening room). If I cranked the volume, I ran out of power; the sound congested and compressed. The amp—now probably running into class-A/B—lost some of its midrange and treble magic.

Cairn does make more powerful amplifiers, including the Mea mono-blocks. At \$1590/pair, the Mea is no budget-breaker. And remember, the 4808 has two pair of preamp outputs—you could use a 4808 on top and two Meas on the bottom, and your bill for amplification would come to just over \$3000. Very reasonable, considering the sound and build quality. (I heard the Meas last year in Soissons.)

But maybe you should consider the purist, minimalist, European approach and "make do" with 30W. If you have a smallish listening room and reasonably sensitive speakers, the Cairn 4808 alone is likely to do the trick, and you can spend the rest of your money where you should: at the restaurant, with your wine merchant. I'm not sure you'll find a better-sounding integrated amp, overall, for under \$2k.

Which is not to say there aren't other contenders.

The Creek 5350SE probably packs more power, more punch. If you get a chance to compare the Creek with the Cairn at a dealer, by all means do so. Musical Fidelity has a new integrated amplifier for under \$2k—the A3.2, successor to their A3. I should receive a review sample soon.

One of my favorite integrations remains the LFD Mistral SE, for \$1495. It lacks a remote, and it may not have quite the resolution of the Creek or the Cairn, but it has a beguiling harmonic presentation. (French hi-fi critics flipped over it.) The Mistral SE might be listed in Class B of this rag's "Recommended Components," but it's Class A in my book.

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Meanwhile, the Cairn 4808 is Class A in more ways than one. Within its power capabilities, this is among the finest solid-state integrated amplifiers I've heard, regardless of price. And it doesn't make you feel like a second-class dork because you cannot—or, like me, *will not*—spend a silly amount of money on hi-fi.

Gilles hasn't forgotten build quality, styling, and ergonomics—all of which contribute to that intangible thing known as "pride of ownership." He probably considers his 4808 the Mont Blanc of integrated amps. I prefer to call it the Champagne of integrated amplifiers. It's bracing, it's bubbly, it's French.

Cheers.