

The Raysonic SP-120 Integrated Amplifier

Anthony Kershaw

We all knew a time when Chinese goods were the butt of jokes and the bane of consumers. Times are changing. From the mainland's goods and chattels I've experienced over the past couple of years, it would seem the conferring of Favored Nation status has had a most beneficial effect. There is other good news. Tarantino is making Chinese movies, the numbers of the middle class are exploding, Hong Kong didn't fall into the sea upon secession, and the Chinese are ready to export a cheap and cheerful car under 10Gs to the most favored continent.

It was at the Montreal Audio Show a couple of years ago where I first heard some good Chinese gear. Kits abounded, Jolida swooned, tubes glowed, and newcomer Shanling was ready to mount an offensive with stunningly-styled, inexpensive tube gear. As of 2005, Shanling still holds a firm place for cool eye candy that sounds quite good. Hold everything, though. Enter stage right, Raysonic. Manufacturer of striking tube integrated amplifiers, the SP-100 and the SP-120.



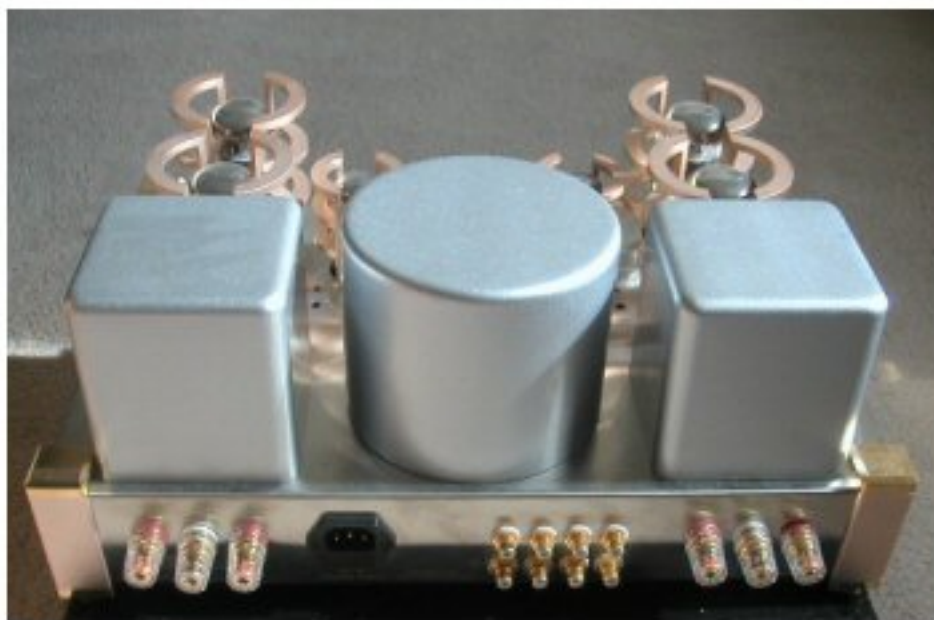
I requested an SP-120 for review. The distributor kindly delivered and set up the Raysonic for me. The amp was already broken in (over one hundred hours) and the tubes had been biased. Thus, setup was plug and play. I placed the amp on a BBC

board and powered it up via the side-mounted toggle switch. Simple.

While the distributor and I munched chocolate digestives and drank coffee, the amp played Mozart quietly in the background. After half an hour of tube warm up, we gave it a go - orchestral Rachmaninov unalloyed and Pletnev at his piano hammering best. This integrated sounded very, very pleasant, with a refulgent midrange, clearly defined treble and excellent bass. It sounded as intriguing as it was stylish. I was looking forward to a longer warm up and some evening quietude.

After my guest departed, I listened for a while -- I gathered quickly that the amp sounded best after a couple of hours heating up. As twilight fell into darkness, the subtleties of the music began to emerge from a clearer soundstage, the instruments and voices having more body and weight. Images were better defined, too.

The Raysonic is feature-rich with a Class AB, ultra-linear design using two pairs of KT-88 output tubes (50 watts each). It has minimal negative feedback with precision RC circuitry for optimal linear performance. The beautifully wrapped output transformers are said to have an extended frequency. The SP-120's power tubes are biased individually and a simple remote control (output switch and volume control) is supplied. The chassis is stainless steel and houses the tubes and transformers in splendid fashion -- the ergonomics of this fairly inexpensive amp are superb!



After the delivery, a week went by with nary a note heard. Finally, I had a three day window in which to submerge myself with some serious tube play. The Raysonic had a fantastic workout over that long weekend, in which time I got a good feel for the sound. I chose some great CDs for the session: piano, soprano voice, session jazz, synthesized bass,

French horn, densely scored orchestral music, the lot! All had a crack at cracking the tubes. Happily, the tubes won. The Rachmaninov *Orchestral Dances* (Reference Recordings) I used when listening with the distributor was front and center, mainly because of the fantastic recording and also because I use the ambiance of Minneapolis' Orchestra Hall as an amplifier test for front/back and side to side soundstage. The SP-120 did a good job of replicating the hall and the air surrounding the instruments, especially the excellent violins. The hefty thwacks of the timps and bass drum during the opening movement's intro, a favourite test among audiophiles, were resolute and

resonant. The power needed at the levels I was playing was significant -- the amp had no problems relaying the most demanding information. Later, Stevie Wonder's *That Girl* and *Do I Do* (Dizzy Gillespie is still flat!) had the amp rocking -- the somewhat overdubbed recording and Wonder's genius was heard clearly.

Over the month-long review period, my initial reactions were confirmed. The highs were clear but not quite as sweet as other tube amps heard in house (think some early Audio Research gear as reference), the midrange was rich, detailed and was balanced with very good bass. In fact, the bass lacked the bloat and bloom of some more expensive tube amps I've auditioned. The control was there; the SP-120 stamped its authority on the most difficult bass lines -- *Last Train Home* from Pat Metheny's *The Road to You* (Geffen) was one particular test. The cut starts with some clapping (ambient nicely done by the Raysonic) followed by a very fast, thumbed electric bass line. It maintained the staccato nicely. A verse later, the bass drops an octave -- the amp didn't miss a beat. The chugging train thundered through my reference fabaudio Model 1speakers (97dB efficiency) and was also fine on the Model 1s smaller sibling, the Brats (94dB). As such, only speakers with the chubbiest efficiency need not apply.

The amp was quite sensitive to cable changes: the mids and bass sounded fine via all I tried (Audioquest and XLO among them), but the treble was sweetest through Cardas Golden Cross and English newcomer, Microphonic Audio and its 500 interconnects (they look great, are cheap as chips and available through the [website](#)). If you purchase the Raysonic, be sure to have a cable fest -- beg or borrow all you can, and then have fun.

I would suggest that the SP-120 is the perfect amp for those audiophiles wishing for style and value, and especially for tube noobs. It didn't stumble once during the audition period; the amp was on at least 12 hours a day. Even the transformers stayed fairly cool under their brushed silver covers. Your cats should be okay. Although the amplifier is designed in Canada, the factory is located in metropolitan Taishan, in Guangdong province. There are Raysonic technicians in Toronto to perform all the necessary servicing. The amplifier is backed by a one-year parts and labour warranty; the tubes have a 90-day warranty. The SP-120 was a pleasant surprise with its sophisticated sound and cool style. Recommended.

Specifications

Output Power: 2 x 50W channels
Input Sensitivity: 450mV
Input Impedance: 100k
Harmonic Distortion: <1%
Frequency Response: 20Hz - 40kHz
S/N Ratio: 88dB
Input: 4 sets
Speaker Output Terminals: 4 or 8 ohms
Vacuum Tubes: 4 x KT-88, 2 x 6SN7, 2 x 12AX7
Dimensions (L x W x H): 44cm x 33cm x 19.5cm
Voltage: 120V (AC)

Associated Components

Speakers: fabaudio Model 1s and Brats
Amplifier: K&R 340 integrated amplifier, Audio Research VT100 Mk. II
Preamp: Audio Research SP9 Mk. III
CD: Accoustic Arts CD Player
Interconnects: XLO, Audioquest, Cardas Golden Cross, Microphonic Audio
Speaker Cable: Cardas
AC Cords: Sphinx
Accessories: Equitech Son of Q balanced power conditioner

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Manufactured by Raysonic, Inc.
2250 Midland Ave, Unit 18 Toronto ON
M1P 4R9 CANADA
Phone:416 332 8928 Fax:416 332 8869 Toll Free 1 866 255 6888
email: sales@raysonicaudio.com
web: www.raysonicaudio.com
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