Okay all you Cheap Bastards, here’s another review of a component well under $1,000 that might be right up your cheap bastard alley! Meet the Dayens Ampino. The name alone suggests a small size…maybe a bit of a weakling - don’t let the name fool you.

Should mention that I purchased this product at full retail – it was not manufacturer supplied, so I put my money where my mouth is.

The Ampino ($699) is an integrated amplifier from Serbia that delivers 25W per channel (into 8ohms). The design of the Ampino stands in stark contrast to the current trend of massive, half empty boxes that weigh enough to require a two man lift. No, the Ampino
is packed with high quality components that are not intended to impress aesthetically, but rather provide the best possible reproduction of sound into any relatively efficient speakers.

About the Ampino

The design is classified as dual-mono, with two clearly separated power modules, which share a toroidal output transformer made to Dayens specs by the highly respected Trafomatic. This is not a Class D amp, but operates in class A/B (push/pull) mode, with the input and amp sections powered by a huge linear power supply – very important in overall sound quality.

The selection of input from either of its two sources is controlled by a high quality relay and the potentiometer for volume control is sourced from Alps. The device actually uses a passive preamplifier: the incoming source signal goes to the relay, and then through the potentiometer and after that directly to output power amplifier.

I was very pleasantly surprised with the high overall quality of system components, which include (upgraded version) Mundorf capacitors in a unit with a claimed frequency response from 1Hz to 200 kHz, with a S/N of better than 100dB.

The size is pretty small: about 6” x 11” x 3.5”, but it weighs about 8 pounds.

The Ampino arrives in adequate packaging with no real documentation and no cables of any type, including power. As you will see, this amp is worth using a better-than-standard computer power cable. In my installation, the cabling consists of a Pangea AC-9 power cable ($100 / 5m) and a pair of Dayens InVivo Silver RCA interconnects ($200 / m) with 14AWG speaker wire running to Axiom W22 speakers. The input data delivered to the Ampino is produced from a Mac Mini with Pure Music running on top of iTunes with digital/analog conversion duties handled by the quite good HRT Music Streamer II. See, not all Steremojo reviewers have super-ultra systems! Publisher’s note: most of us don’t - by design. Higher-end reviews go to the guys with higher-end systems and vice versa in an attempt to keep things as much real world as possible. It’s my job to match the review samples to the appropriate reviewer.
How Does It Sound?

First things first – power up the Ampino and what do you hear? Nothing, zilch. Total and complete blackness with not even a hint of hiss. Very promising indeed.

Like a true champ, the Ampino comes alive at whisper levels - to a clearly superior extent than any other amplifier I’ve heard in its price range. As the volume rises and the complexity of the material increases, the Ampino distinguishes itself further and pulls ahead by retaining more clarity and less distortion. Take anything speedy and sharp -- rapidly plucked strings, blatty brass, drum kit workouts -- and the Ampino is clear and incisive without ever becoming brutal or hard.

The Ampino offers excellent transparency to the source and to the music therein. Transparency is a wonderful thing, however in some cases this it can be a mixed blessing that reveals the strengths and weaknesses of a performance,
including the recording techniques and production values.

Within a given album one quickly appreciates that some cuts are more equal than others. The Ampino does not gloss over harsh or compressed recordings to provide a more palatable sound. The fact is, Ampino delivers the recording as is, warts and all for lossy MP3 files, and with perfect porcelain skinned beauty on properly recorded albums. On familiar tunes there may be a previously unheard gentle tapping of the foot or a jazz bassist’s humming. With an Ampino in place driving your system that is otherwise capable, you’ll hear all of this.

The treble is extended and sweet. On good recordings there’s little evidence of any grain or dryness introduced by the amplifier. Cymbals sound like tiny gongs as they should; pin-point bursts of metallic richness rather than fuzzy spots of white noise as they might on lesser am[s]. With regards to bass, per its specifications the Ampino readily goes right down to palpable but inaudible levels below 20Hz, and depending on the quality of your subwoofer or full range floor standing speakers, can convey surprising subtlety. Bass texture and weight is evenly painted to exacting standards by the Ampino, opening a window on the lower registers of the recording and leading one to wonder how such marvelous quality could be packed into such a small component – and for such a reasonable price!

Part of the magic of the Ampino is the way it allows the music to flow along in tempo in such a liquid and utterly natural way, such that it seems to take full advantage of the positive traits of solid state amplification while imbuing some “tube-like” attributes into the proceedings where necessary, though it would not be mistaken for tubes by a veteran tube guru. I think that aspect of its performance plays a large role in what makes the Ampino so absolutely captivating in its ability to draw me deeply into the feeling of the music. Once heard and felt, this emotional connection to the music is very, very, addictive, and the Ampino possesses the ability to provide it in spades.

The broad frequency range of the Ampino really delivers on the sonic side of recordings as well, projecting a huge billowing sound stage that will fill a small to moderate room from top to bottom, side to side, and front to back, dependent only on the quality of your speakers.

**Back Down to Earth**

Reviewers often say, “There is no perfect component”. That is true of the Ampino as well, due to a few small nits I have to pick with it. First off, some Ampino users may be slightly put off by the relative “looseness” of the volume dial. It feels like the securing screw could use at least another ¼ turn because the user is able to jiggle it slightly up and down. I contacted the manufacturer about this issue and quickly got this response: Regarding usability, there are some people who will balk at the lack of a remote. While the volume pot is large and easy to use, those who require an integrated amplifier to have a remote control will need to look elsewhere. At the price point of the Dayens Ampino, a remote control is certainly not expected to be included, but offering one as an upcharge option is something that Dayens might want to explore in the future.
Another potential negative for some prospective buyers is the inability to try before you buy. The Dayens distribution channel is not especially wide, with only a handful of internet-only resellers operating in the US. However, most of those resellers have a decent return policy and quite frankly, the chances of you wanting to return this amplifier at this price are exceeding slim once you experience its performance.

The 25 watt per channel power rating may sound minimal, especially if you are used to reading about amplifiers with power capabilities in the hundreds of watts per channel. Despite its seemingly frugal power delivery, the Ampino has never struggled to pressurize my medium sized room with distortion free sound at high SPLs through my 89db efficient speakers, a reflection of its large power supply. The amp sounds like it has more guts than a typical 25 wpc solid state amp. Obviously, higher speaker sensitivity will yield even greater results, especially if the size of the listening room is on the larger side.

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The Dayens Ampino is an excellent, high value choice for those wanting to upgrade the sound of their computer system. There are many “packages” out there by JBL, Wadia and even the computer sound card makers that cost well over Cheap Bastard limits. While the price is more than reasonable, the sound quality you will get will easily surpass those you’ll find in big-box stores or over the internet. This is custom, hand built stuff here! Nothing cheap about the sound at all.
Its size (6” x 11” x 3.5”) lends itself to small places like computer desks, offices, bedrooms, motor homes or other 2nd systems. Great gift for college students, too.

But what if you’re looking for an amp for your main system in this price range or even up to twice the $699 price? Within reason (room size and speaker sensitivity), you’re pretty golden. While the Ampino may not be appropriate for those with $20,000 speakers and $10,000 sources with the highest expectations of refinement and transparency, I can imagine the Dayens Ampino would be comfortable hanging out with speakers and other system components that cost two or three times its modest price.

This is not a “chip amp” or a Class D, it is a tried and true A/B push/pull solid state. The beautiful, lifelike sound that this amplifier is capable of producing ensures that it will spark some conversations regarding the ever elusive point of diminishing audio returns.

The Ampino only has two inputs, so if you have more than two sources, that could be problematic if you don’t like switching cables. Another potential deal breaker is that there is no remote control available.

For those wanting an initial tempting taste of high-end quality, the Ampino is a very affordable way to cross that unmarked boundary in audio, the other side of which is realism. The Ampino will transport you to where you can sit back and listen for hours to music rather than an audio system. And it does so without conspicuous shortcomings. With respect to the fundamentals of dynamics, tonal balance, transparency, soundstage and timbre, you’ll be over that invisible line of realism by a considerable distance and may well find that you’ve just permanently cured your case of audiophile upgrade-itis.