

BRYSTON

A Lifetime of Music

MEMO: To All Bryston Customers

June 2012

SUBJECT: Bryston Headphone Amp Comparison

Hi Folks,

I compared the \$1295 Bryston BHA-1 Headphone amp to the \$3250 hybrid tube/chip Cavalli Liquid Fire last Sunday at a meet.

Bryston BHA-1 vs Liquid Fire (with HD800 off the Calyx DAC, Bryston using balanced, Liquid Fire on unbalanced, 800s on Bryston using balanced output.

The main attraction for me, seeing just where this Bryston stood among the Head-fi elite. What does a speaker amp maker know about headphones? Apparently plenty. Coming into this comparison I knew my tastes lately have been for more neutral, slightly biting/attacking, crisp, clean sound, and with Bryston's reputation for these attributes in the speaker world, I thought this BHA-1 was a sure thing.



After roughly volume matching the two, I started paying attention with the Bryston going first. I've had this pairing of HD800 and amp for a couple weeks, but the DAC was new in the chain so I wanted to get my bearings. Oddly the sound didn't seem all that much different than what I remembered from the Bifrost, but we didn't compare the DACs side by side so I can't be sure. I picked up the expected bite and extreme

resolution from this pairing and readied myself for the Liquid Fire change off. Right away the Liquid Fire was a completely different sound. People who say amps make no difference in sound have no clue what they are talking about. The Liquid Fire impressed right away with it's smooth flowing sound that luls you in and relaxes you. At first, coming from the Bryston, I panicked, thinking.. the Liquid Fire is way better(!), but as I listened more, I could tell the accuracy is not what I'm used to. Things like birds flying across the stage sounded like a recording not as if they were really there like I hear with the Bryston. Detail was slightly smeared, and on the whole I started feeling less in the music/sounds, and more bored. The Liquid Fire was playing music at me, not taking me along for the ride.

Back on the Bryston, I hear the detail pushing the edge almost to harshness, but not quite. Exactly as I want it. Travis commented that certain passages with the Bryston were just too energetic and he couldn't accept that for his enjoyment. I can certainly see where he is coming from, but that rawness, when paired with an ultra clean headphone like the HD800 is really majestic, IMO. Bass seemed rather similar between the amps, no difference in volume I could detect, perhaps a slight warming from the Liquid Fire, but it was negligible.

Soundstage and imaging edge goes to the Bryston easily. A marble (or something like it) effect used on a BT recording tracked left to right and right to left precisely on the Bryston, where there was some slight gap in the middle on the Liquid Fire. I think the Fire did better with meshing images in front of the listener, though, and with it's smaller soundstage brings sound sources together and blends them nicely with it's creamier presentation. Large wide tracked effects were a delight with the Bryston. Massive, but precise soundstage with the HD800 paired along with it put everything in place from very intimately near to very distant and all in between.

Orchestral music is as best as I've heard, short of playing in the orchestra myself, with this pairing.

I have no desire to buy anything else, which is shocking.

Scott