

The Quest Continues

By Mark Fleischmann

Bryston Mini A Speaker System

PRICE \$4,785

SO MANY AUDIO PRODUCTS start as marketing necessities. But how many start as personal quests? When Bryston's James Tanner wanted to design a one-off "ultimate loudspeaker" for his own reference system, the resulting [Mini T monitor](#) impressed his colleagues so much that it squirreled its way into the upper-echelon marketing channels usually reserved for Bryston's formidable preamps and amps (which, incidentally, include surround-friendly three- and five-channel models). This left turn was hardly a surprise coming from Bryston, a company whose early movers and shakers were involved in medical equipment and NASA before moving into high-end audio.

AT A GLANCE

+ Plus

- Coordinated on- and off-axis response
- Custom drivers
- Strong dual-10-inch sub

- Minus

- Center not fully timbre-matched
- Not much to look at
- Sub crossover limited to two settings

Daniel Kumin reviewed a \$9,000 system based on the Mini T, using the Mini A as surround speakers, in October 2014 (available at

soundandvision.com). The more affordable system reviewed here gives a more prominent role to the Mini A in all four corners of the room, and it adds the new AC-1 Micro center and the weighty Model A dual side-firing subwoofer.

Maple Leaf Rag

In addition to the Mini A monitor (\$1,200/pair), the Bryston A series includes the floorstanding A1 (\$3,490/pair), A2 (\$2,790/pair), and A3 (\$2,390/pair) as well as two centers, the big AC-1 Mini (\$1,250) and smaller AC-1 Micro (\$490). They are all made in Canada by Axiom, whose VP100 v4 center bears a passing resemblance to the AC-1 Micro, though the AC-1 drivers are custom designed for Bryston. Finish options include black ash, natural cherry, darker Boston cherry, and (at additional cost) various custom veneers.

At first glance, these speakers don't look especially fancy. Look closer, and you may notice their trapezoidal footprint, which eliminates parallel side walls and therefore minimizes internal sound-bloating standing waves. Inside the well-braced fiberboard enclosures are custom drivers utilizing die-cast aluminum baskets with what Bryston calls "substantial" magnets.

The Mini A is a three-way design with a 1-inch titanium-dome tweeter, 3-inch midrange, and 6.5-inch woofer, the latter two employing aluminum cones. The tweeter's subtle waveguide is one visible manifestation of Bryston's institutional goal of coordinating on- and off-axis sound and minimizing the speaker's interaction with the room. The bass extension is rated down to 60 hertz (-3 decibels); see our Test Bench measurements for more information. Although our review of the Mini T remarked on its hunger for power, rated sensitivity for the Mini A, at 87 dB, is merely on the low side of average. I found the output level to be acceptable in my listening room with a midpriced receiver. Magnetically attached grilles are on the front, and plastic-nut binding posts are on the back.

The AC-1 Micro center is a two-way design in an asymmetrical trapezoidal enclosure, which helps



THE VERDICT

The **Bryston Mini A** offers refined performance and—though it's not obvious to the naked eye—serious build quality at a moderate price.

BRYSTON MINI A SPEAKER SYSTEM

PRICE: \$4,785 (Mini A, \$1,200 pr; AC-1 Micro, \$490; Model A, \$1,895)

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SPEAKER SYSTEM

with positioning. Place the side with the square corners down, it aims straight ahead; flip it over, it aims upward. Clever! Drivers include two 5.25-inch woofers flanking the tweeter. The monitor and sub have fluted ports designed to minimize port turbulence, while the center's enclosure is sealed.

The Model A sub has two side-firing 10-inch aluminum-cone woofers in a 48-pound enclosure (which is pretty heavy for a sub this size), backed by a substantial 400-watt RMS amp. In lieu of the typical continuous crossover dial, a toggle switch selects 80- or 150-Hz crossovers; I used the former, but the latter would be better for smaller satellite speakers. Unfortunately you can't always bypass this internal low pass crossover and there is no LFE input. The usual on/off/standby switch gives way to 12-volt trigger in and out jacks. I've lost track of the number of times I've rated a sub lower than the rest of an otherwise fine speaker system, but Bryston takes their subs seriously. This one accounts for nearly 40 percent of the system price. To develop it, Bryston lugged it to the top of a 90-foot measuring tower that uses the great outdoors as an anechoic (non-echoing) measurement environment. Why go to all that trouble? Because, according to Bryston, the accuracy of indoor anechoic chambers is limited below 85 Hz. These people will stop at nothing.

Associated equipment included a Pioneer Elite VSX-53 A/V receiver, which had enough headroom to run the Brystons, though it had to work just a little harder than usual. An Oppo BDP-83SE universal disc player

was the source component. All movies were on Blu-ray Disc.

Slowly the Veil Lifts

Some speakers make a first impression that proves unshakable. Others yield their mysteries more slowly, and the Brystons were in that category. Frankly, at first they left me disoriented. I liked their power handling, firm bottom end, and neat dovetailing at the sub crossover. I also appreciated the fatigue-free ease they gave to even the most aggressive movie soundtrack, and the way images seamlessly panned in any direction but up (since this wasn't a Dolby Atmos system). But I wondered if their top end was concealing the truth about the soundtracks of the various forgettable thrillers I used for break-in. It took a while to resolve the doubt that gnawed at me during the movie demos. Only when I moved on to music did I realize how, well, *musical* the Mini A's top end was, and how realistic its imaging was. Suddenly, I felt it was telling me a lot of what I needed to hear.

The Hobbit: The Battle of the Five Armies (DTS-HD Master Audio) unleashed a procession of loud quasi-medieval military clashes. A memorable early scene in which the dragon Smaug attacks a village like a flying flamethrower was remarkably smooth, allowing me to concentrate on thundering trajectories of destruction without flinching at the sheer volume of the onslaught. As solid and controlled as the bottom end was, the overall presentation wasn't a lively one. Voices seemed veiled. Everything fit together well, but there was "no sparkle," I

complained to my notebook. Only when Billy Boyd sang his lonesome tune over the end credits did I get an intimation of the human subtlety and tone color that the Brystons might be capable of.

Left Behind (DTS-HD Master Audio) is a Nicolas Cage airplane action-drama with more than its fair portion of weirdness. I should probably avoid serving up spoilers, so let's just say that at least two different kinds of vehicle succumb to the force of gravity. The sub accommodated these high-decibel low-frequency events with aplomb.

The Brystons' mix of punishing material culminated with *The Expendables 3* (Dolby Digital). Most movies with helicopter surround effects depict the copter as a monophonic image whirling around the soundfield. But here, the viewpoint shifted to in-copter surround effects—this movie's sonic highlight, and a sign of good power handling. As expected by now, the Brystons delivered gunfire and military explosions more palatably than most speaker systems. Still, something that had bugged me throughout all the movies—lackluster (albeit intelligible) vocal timbre—finally moved me to run the receiver's test tones again to check timbre matching between the AC-1 Micro center and Mini A monitor. Usually, a center that is poorly



timbre-matched to the satellites will have a different overall tonal balance than the left and right speakers, as I found to be the case with this system in my listening room. Speaking voices and other effects centered in the AC-1 Micro seemed a little bland compared with effects and singing voices carried by the Mini A monitors in the L/R front and surround positions.

There's the Sparkle

And so it was no surprise that two Mini A speakers delivering music showed the Bryston system in a different light. "There's the sparkle!" I wrote as *Kissin' Plays Liszt* rotated in the universal player. Evgeny Kissin's fluid playing brought out loads of tone color in what I'd erroneously pegged as veiled speakers. If that was the sauce, the rhythmic incisiveness of speakers and sub was the meat, bringing out all the small dynamic nuances. Moving on to the Brahms Serenade No. 1, with Michael Tilson Thomas leading the





kettledrums. And the overall feel was perfectly suitable for the rambunctious volumes the Fifth demands.

Robyn Hitchcock's *The Man Upstairs* hews to the spare instrumentation of stripped-down albums like *I Often Dream of Trains*, adding strategic cover versions of Bryan Ferry, the Doors, the Norwegian band I Was a King, and others.

Brilliantly stark production by the great Joe Boyd frames the voice candidly, rather than processing it into oblivion—and the Mini A's painstaking tonal and spatial realism stepped out of the way and delivered the music with what must have been the intended purity. Hitchcock has a slightly nasal and deeply resonant voice, which might trip up a speaker with nasal or chest emphasis. But the Mini A avoided these obvious tripwires and brought me closer to



London Symphony Orchestra, I heard a beautiful balance of frequencies and spatial information that approximated a good concert hall. Carlos Kleiber's Deutsche Grammophon recording of

Beethoven's

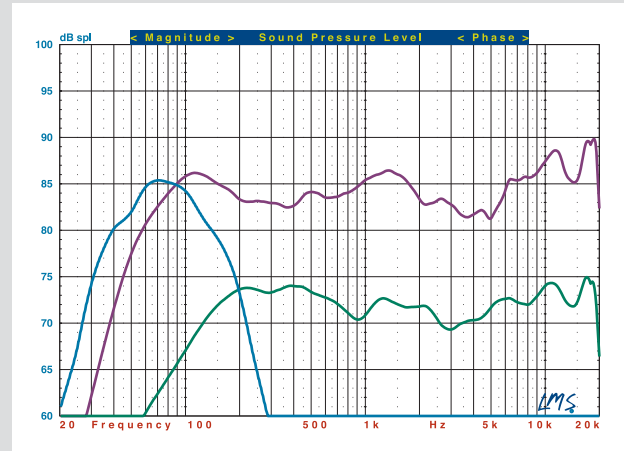
Symphony No. 5 with the Vienna Philharmonic—the first movement, fate knocking at the door—confirmed my assessment of the solid bottom end, with its sawing basses and pounding

the emotional heart of this album.

As I so often do, I turned to my first-generation CD of the Beatles' *Abbey Road* for a quick Ringo check on "Come Together" and "The End." (Have drums ever been better recorded on a rock record?) I liked the Bryston treatment so much, however, that I had to hear everything in between. Played full-range, the Mini A had enough bass to keep bass lines in one piece, capture the pitch and impact of toms, and even manage a decent bass-drum thunk. Switching the sub back on firmed up the bass drum and redistributed frequencies just below the crossover a tad differently. But the system was equally listenable either way, making the Mini A one of the few monitors I've reviewed that's musically complete unto itself. The system

Test Bench

Bryston Mini A Speaker System



MINI A (purple) +2.41/-3.68 dB, 200 Hz to 10 kHz; -3 dB @ 66 Hz, -6 dB @ 54 Hz; impedance minimum 6.24 ohms @ 4.0 kHz, phase angle -42.67° @ 114 Hz; sensitivity 85 dB, 500 Hz to 2 kHz.

AC-1 MICRO (green) +2.04/-2.67 dB, 200 Hz to 10 kHz; -3 dB @ 115 Hz, -6 dB @ 92 Hz; impedance minimum 75.1 ohms @ 263 Hz, phase angle -44.50° @ 139 Hz; sensitivity 86.5 dB, 500 Hz to 2 kHz.

MODEL A (blue) Close-miked response, normalized to level @ 80 Hz: lower -3 dB @ 45 Hz, -6 dB @ 35 Hz, upper -3 dB @ 118 Hz with crossover switch set to 150 Hz.—MJP

SPECS

Mini A: 6.5 in aluminum-cone woofer, 3 in aluminum-cone midrange, 1 in titanium-dome tweeter; 8.5 x 15.5 x 8.25 in (WxHxD); 11 lb • **AC-1 Micro:** 5.25 in aluminum-cone woofer (2), 1 in titanium-dome tweeter; 17 x 7.5 x 7.5 in (WxHxD); 14.1 lb • **Model A:** 10 in aluminum-cone woofer (2); 400 watts RMS; vented enclosure; line-level RCA in and out, speaker-level in, 12-volt trigger in and out; 17.75 x 17 x 15.25 in (WxHxD); 48 lb

benefits from addition of a sub for music playback, but only a little.

This Bryston system was a provocative one. The Mini A monitor rated alone is a five-star speaker, though the AC-1 Micro, if rated separately, would be at least a full notch below the very best I've heard. A fifth Mini A functioning as an upright center channel would have likely garnered the system a perfect five; something

for shoppers to consider. As for the subwoofer, the Model A was as good a 10-incher as I've ever heard, which it ought to be at that price. On the whole, while this Bryston setup is fine for movies, at heart it's truly a music lover's system. ♦

Audio editor Mark Fleischmann is also the author of the annually updated book *Practical Home Theater* (quietriver-press.com).

