

Make Canada great again...

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Fear not dear readers, this article will not be an editorial on US politics! In the spirit of the times, though, if we were to adopt a more protectionist attitude towards audio products, we could easily build a seriously good system using only Canadian components, as we shall see here.

Initially, the mandate for this review was to focus on an all-Bryston system including the new and highly sought-after BCD-3 CD player, the new version of the B135 integrated amplifier, the B153³ and the Mini T speakers that my colleague Jan-Erik Nordoen reviewed in issue 6, volume 14 of our magazine. Cabling for this review was from the Quebecois firm, DR Acoustics, including speaker cables, interconnect cables, power cables and a power bar, all from the White Moon range.

During the review - and to add to my pleasure - **Bryston** also sent us a production version of their first record player, the BLP-1, equipped with the MC-1 Alpha cartridge from the Canadian firm Charisma Audio. An earlier version of this cartridge has been reviewed by my colleague Michel Bérard in issue 2, volume 16. For good measure, Bryston also sent us their BP2 MM/MC phono preamplifier along with its external power supply.

DESCRIPTION

Bryston

This Ontario company, who have designed and built high-fidelity components for over 35 years, needs little introduction. The brand is highly regarded not only among audiophiles but also music professionals. Amongst other clients, you'll find Bryston gear at the famous Abbey Road Studios and RAK. Most of Bryston's products (speakers and amps) are covered by a 20-year warranty, a testament to their confidence in their products.

While the brand has garnered considerable acclaim for its powerful amplifiers, it has also branched out with great success into digital sources (CD player, network players and digital to analogue converters). More recently, Bryston expanded into a range of loudspeakers that have received unanimous praise. And now we have their first turntable... no one saw that coming! There weren't even any hints of it at the 2016 edition of the Montreal Audio Fest.

BCD-3 CD player

Where to begin with this abundance of riches? Let's start at the source with the new BCD-3 CD player. After having ceased production of its BCD-1 a few years ago, it is good to see Bryston once again supporting CD playback, in addition to its highly regarded line of digital players and converters. The buzz around this new player has been building on audiophile forums for quite some time, and with reason, as the BCD-3 is a complete upgrade. Available in black or silver anodized aluminium livery matching other Bryston products, the player features symmetrical and asymmetrical outputs, and relies on a dual-balanced digital-to-analogue converter inspired by the BDA-3, Bryston's high-end DAC. The player is equipped with two digital outputs (AES/EBU and S/PDIF) if the user wants to increase the level of performance by marrying it with an external converter, such as the BDA-3. Control is via the front panel, or via a web-based user interface, or with a home automation system. The unit is also controllable via IR with the optional Bryston BR-2 remote control.



BLP-1 and BTP-1

Staying with sources, let's look at the BLP-1. While Bryston hasn't reinvented the turntable, they've taken the approach of developing a refined high-performance product, in the same way that they approached speaker building, designing them for symbiosis with other products of the brand. For the turntable, Bryston partnered with the Italian company Gold Note who developed and designed the deck to Bryston's specifications. The



tone arm is derived from Gold Note's B-7 Ceramic model, but without any anti-skating system. The deck's plinth is made of MDF supported on a tripod base which makes leveling straightforward. Installation of the ball-bearing system was simple and the bearing worked perfectly when I tried it without a motor, which, in itself, is a good indicator of quality. The 35 mm (1.5 inch) Delrin platter with its integrated record mat that resembles a vinyl record provides a good level of vibration damping. A record weight is included to maximize disc stability when playing. The power supply is external, entirely designed by Bryston, and continues the aesthetic signature of the phono preamplifier. Speed selection (33 1/3 or 45 rpm) is via push buttons on the power supply and speed can be adjusted using the controls on the external power supply. I found it easy to use.



I checked speed stability on several occasions using Analogue Productions "Ultimate Analogue Test LP" and the similar system from Dr. Feickert. Platter speed is crucial to proper playback and here, it was exceedingly stable. There were two small operational issues: motor noise and the turntable cover. The motor generates about 40 dBA when in operation, but fortunately, it does not show up in the music. I would have expected a slightly quieter motor though, around 30 to 35 dBA. As for the cover, the only reproach is that it is fixed to the plinth and so cannot be removed during long listening sessions. On the other hand, in the open position it remains stable.

BP2 MM/MC phono preamplifier and PS3 power supply

Recall that a phono preamplifier's role is to amplify and prepare the very low-level signal generated by the cartridge, whether moving magnet (MM) or moving coil (MC). The preamp must raise this low signal significantly without introducing distortion. The BP2 MM/MC adds 60 dB of gain to the signal per the RIAA curve, which is sufficient for the cartridge in use here. Moving-coil users can select the appropriate load capacity for their cartridge using the internal adjustments. The phono preamplifier is available



in a moving magnet and moving coil version (MM/MC) or in a moving magnet only version (MM). Note that the BP2 preamp can be purchased separately or with its partnering PS3 external power supply. While it might seem odd at first glance that the two components are sold separately, Bryston prefers to provide the option. For customers who already have the BP-26 preamplifier with its MPS-2 external power supply, the latter replaces the PS3 power supply while also powering the BP-26 preamp. Either way, it is always a good idea to separate power supplies from preamplifiers, whether phono or line, as this avoids any electromagnetic or vibrational contamination from an internal power supply.

B135³

The B135³ is the new version of Bryston's high-performance integrated amplifier. Robust looking and well finished, the amp is user-friendly, with clearly laid out front and rear panels. Connectors are logically placed, with the rights on the right side and vice versa. The amp is equipped with six asymmetrical inputs. A phono input (moving magnet) is optional, as is a digital-to-analogue converter module. Here again, the remote control is optional. This amp is not short on power, providing 135W into 8 ohms and 180W into 4 ohms. As it will be used with Mini T speakers with a nominal impedance of 4 ohms, the speakers will be getting a good workout.

Mini T & Target

Despite their name, the Mini T speakers are an imposing three-way design standing nearly two feet high. As these have been described in detail previously in this magazine, I won't go into depth here. Given their eight-inch bass driver, they should provide a strong sense of presence. The Mini T benefits from a rigid and stable stand, and here Bryston has provided us with the Target MR (for Maximum Rigidity). Note that Bryston is now the distributor for Target speaker stands and audio cabinets.

DR Acoustics

This Quebecois company, new to the high-end audio market, offers several ranges of cables and power distribution bars at different budget levels. For this evaluation, DR Acoustics provided us with a power cable, RCA interconnects, speaker cables and a power bar from the entry-level White Moon range. The looks and assembly qual-





ity of these cables and power bar are anything but entry level though. The power bar comprises a solid aluminium chassis fitted with three rhodium-plated Furutech GTX-D NCF duplex sockets, while the internal 10 AWG cabling is cryogenically treated.

Charisma Audio MC-1

Charisma audio is probably one of the only Canadian firms to have a range of cartridges in its product lineup. Obviously, designing a product so fragile can be a challenge so Charisma worked with an external manufacturer to carry out this project. The result is a moving-coil cartridge set in an aluminium housing, with an output of 0.4 mV and an internal impedance of 13 ohms. The recommended tracking force is 2 grams and a loading of 100 to 1,000 ohms. On paper, it should form a good combination with the tone arm and the phono preamplifier. There is a recommended break-in period of fifty hours when the cartridge is new, which ours was.



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LISTENING

Being in a very “Canadian” atmosphere, it felt only natural to listen to some homegrown recordings and compare CD vs vinyl playback. “Of course,” I hear you say, “the difference between the two sources can arise from mastering differences between vinyl and CD”. Right you are, as we shall see a little further on.

The evaluation began with the B135³ integrated amplifier and the Mini T speakers, as the sources were delivered to us later. This was useful, as I could familiarize myself with these two components using my own sources, whose strengths and weaknesses I know well. The first observation with the Mini T speakers is how they easily produce a room-filling sound. The advantages of the three-way design are obvious here, with the bass, midrange and high frequencies well separated yet combining into a beautiful, open sound.

BLP-1 turntable

The cartridge being new, I subjected it to the fifty-hour break-in period recommended by the manufacturer. I must say though that on first listen, I wondered about the need for run-in, considering how good the playback already sounded. The run-in did, however, stabilize the presentation while adding depth. My earlier concerns about motor noise and vibration proved unfounded, as I couldn’t notice any effect during playback.

Listening began with Montreal’s post-rock collective Godspeed You Black Emperor! and their first album *F#A#∞*, on the Constellation label. The ominous soundscape that opens the record is terrifying in the positive sense of the term, if there is one. Indeed, this album’s motif is “film noir” and the overall effect is to project us directly into the middle of an apocalypse. Odd sound collages (rumbling noises, locomotives) are woven into the strings and guitar section with perfection, their images filtered yet not disembodied. Captivating and enthralling? Very much, and I didn’t notice the 34 minutes of this album slip by.

The next two recordings will also be assessed on the CD player for comparison. The first is the late and great Leonard Cohen, with his album *I’m Your Man* (MusicOn-Vinyl edition) that has no secrets for me. Some say this is not the best of Cohen, but for me it is very significant as it was my first exposure to his work, as a teenager. This album is marked by the sound of the ‘80s, yet on first listen the keyboards and beat boxes seem somehow more timeless than before. There is a softness to the presentation, rendering the saxophone in “Ain’t No Cure For Love” a touch more natural.

The second comparison album is the Sarah McLachlan’s *Surfacing*, a 1997 issue recorded in Morin-Heights. My version is from the Rock The House collection produced by Classic Records on 200 gram vinyl. The quality of the recording is not in doubt here, and represents an excellent choice for testing this set-up. The Bryston Mini T speakers reproduce Sarah MacLachlan’s voice with its purity and transparency intact. This well-recorded album has depths to the sound that are always a joy to explore and here I did just that, and at the appropriate sound level. The track “Sweet Surrender” is presented in an exemplary fashion, as I can fully explore the dynamics in this recording, a testament to the very high quality of the components on offer here.

BCD-3 CD player

The first impression of the new **Bryston** CD player was a little more analytical in the defined sense, but no less interesting presentation, when compared with the turntable. The BCD-3 gives slightly more prominence to high frequencies. Electronic music was particularly well served by this player, taking my listening to new heights. For example, I turned to *The Dragon Experience* album by Vancouver artist Cevin Key (Skinny Puppy, download), a compilation spanning recordings from 1984 to 2003. This ambient/experimental electronic music is made to measure for evaluating an audio system. The album covers the complete sound spectrum and requires that all components from source to speaker work as a coherent whole. Playback here was remarkable, with all the recording’s intricacies laid out before me.

Returning to Leonard Cohen’s and Sarah McLachlan’s albums with the BCD-3 player was an interesting exercise. Pricewise, the comparison between CD and vinyl playback is not exactly fair, as the phono preamplifier with its power supply alone approach the price of the CD player. It is only normal to expect a difference in these circumstances. The Cohen album on CD is a less eloquent experience than with

the turntable. Reproduction of cymbals rapidly led to listening fatigue and the sound of the album didn't cast me back to my first experience of this record, etched in my memory. However, this experience was the exception, and the blame can be clearly laid at the mastering of this CD. It's a useful reminder that the choice of recordings is paramount when evaluating audio components. If further confirmation were needed, listening to the CD version of Sarah McLachlan's *Surfacing* was almost as interesting as vinyl playback on the

BLP-1. The sound signature was different, slightly more defined. McLachlan's voice conserved its warmth, but there was a touch less harmony when compared to the turntable. Individual preference will also come into play here, as some listeners may prefer the CD presentation over vinyl, and vice-versa. Either way, both means of playback provide an enviable level of musicality.

CONCLUSION

From previous experience with Bryston's Mini T speakers, I knew what to expect. This was not the case for the other components, but getting to know them proceeded harmoniously. **Bryston's** reputation is legendary and their notoriety is not overrated. I had, in error, anticipated that the amplifier would be on the aggressive side. Whilst powerful, the B135³ revealed itself to be a perfect companion for the three-way Mini Ts, allowing them to unfold completely and deliver what they can offer, a just and captivating sound. Whether listening at high or low volume, the system always provided good presence and depth across the full sound spectrum. I've focused on sources in this review, which speaks well of the transparency of the B135³ and the Mini T speakers. Their outstanding performance allowed me to forget them and to focus on the turntable and the CD player. The same goes for the DR Acoustics products, that I found completely neutral, allowing me to better evaluate the system.

As ever in high fidelity, sources play a leading role in the final presentation, hence my focus on them here. The BLP-1 delivered musical content beautifully. While aesthetics could be improved by providing more robust feet and a removable lid, these are minor quibbles for an outstanding performer. The turntable provides phenomenal speed stability and ease of adjustment. The tone arm is quick in action since it has no damper, but is easily mastered.

Bryston's new BCD-3 CD player picks up where the firm left off with their BCD-1. The player renders CDs admirably and completely. As its presentation is more on the analytical side in the defined sense, I would suggest matching with warm sounding speakers to avoid any auditory fatigue. The Mini Ts were interesting, but to my ears may deliver a bit too much treble energy for some listeners. At any rate, the BCD-3 is a player to watch and one that I can recommend.

Interestingly, as I became more and more familiar with this all-Canadian system over the several weeks of this review, I completely put my own system aside. It's not every day that one can become completely absorbed in sound reproduction and the music during a review, and it's even rarer with components of this quality.

Bryston ensemble:

BLP-1 turntable: \$2,995 (3-year warranty)
BTP-1 external Power Supply: \$1,000 (3-year warranty)
BP2 MM/MC phono preamplifier: \$1,750 (20-year warranty)
PS3 external power supply: \$1,000 (20-year warranty)
BCD-3 CD player: \$3,495 (3-year warranty)
B135³ integrated amplifier: \$5,495 (20-year warranty)
Mini T speakers: \$3,370 per pair (20-year warranty)
Target MR speaker stands: \$549 per pair (1-year warranty)
Manufacturer/Distributor: Bryston
Tel: 705-742-5325 / 1-800-632-8217
www.bryston.com

DR Acoustics: White Moon series

Power cable 1.8m and interconnect 1m (pair): \$495 each
Speaker cables 2.4m: \$995
Power bar: \$495
www.dracoustics.com

Charisma Audio

MC-1 Alpha moving coil cartridge: \$1,700 (1-year warranty)
www.charismaaudio.com