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BRYSTON B135³ Integrated Amplifier

By Marc Phillips



“That’s what I think about when I think of Bryston. Big, powerful, reliable, Bob-approved.”

I have an audiophile buddy named Bob, and he’s really into heavy metal. I’m not talking about the cool stuff I like (Tool, System of a Down), but really heavy stuff like Napalm Death, Carcass and a few other bands with names that probably shouldn’t be printed here. He used to go to CES every year and he’d bring his demo CD and he’d clear rooms like an old pro. He was proud of his music, too, and he’d get angry and acutely dismissive if you complained. Since he’s a pretty large and scary-looking fellow, he didn’t get a lot of complaints from exhibitors.

Anyway, Bob always had a pretty decent system back home. He was very fond of JBL. One day he told me he had \$20,000 to spend on a new pair of speakers to replace his classic L100s. I made the usual recommendations; he shot them all down. Not enough bass. Not enough volume. Not enough cajones. When he pulled the trigger, it was on a new pair of \$20,000 JBLs. Other than the Everest, which was Bob’s real first choice, I didn’t know JBL had a model in that range. But they did, and it played Cannibal Corpse really loud. Bob was happy because he knew he’d found his final pair of speakers.

Here’s the thing. Bob wound up playing with a lot of different speakers over the years, but he always stuck with one amplifier brand—Bryston. He loved the fact that Bryston had a 20-year warranty since he had a habit of blowing up both speakers and amps. He loved the power. He loved the industrial looks. He loved the big, big sound.

That’s what I think about when I think of Bryston. Big, powerful, reliable, Bob-approved. Other than the fact that I once considered the classic (and still available) B60 integrated amplifier for my own system many years ago, my seat time with this Canadian manufacturer has been limited. So when I walked into the Bryston room at the 2019 RMAF, I had no idea what to expect—other than loud. Bob loud.

After hearing an all-Bryston system including their new-ish line of loudspeakers, I was truly impressed. Even though I made them play the title track from Tool’s *Fear Inoculum*, this didn’t sound like Bob’s system. It had finesse and clarity and plenty of texture. Bob would have been happy with the deep bass response of the system, but I was happy with the entire package. Before I knew it, I had agreed to review the new B135³ integrated amplifier.

B135³ Integrated Amplifier

For some reason I thought the B135³ was an entry-level integrated, much in the same spirit as that B60 that caught my attention many years ago. That misapprehension continued when I unpacked it—it was compact and not terribly heavy. It looks even smaller when viewed from overhead since the heat sinks are cut out of the sides of the chassis.

Then I learned it was \$6695, with inboard MM phono stage and DAC available as options for \$750 each. (These can be installed by the factory, or added later by your Bryston dealer.) I wasn’t concerned about value yet. In fact, I was pleased because I wouldn’t be reviewing an entry-level integrated but a more ambitious product that had the potential for high performance. But the B135³ is small, and it’s loaded with features, and it offers 135wpc into 8 ohms. The DAC and the phono pre definitely take up some room inside the B135³, but there’s also a headphone amp, one that I really liked.



.And there's more. A lot more. The B135³ offers seven analog inputs (the DAC module removes one of these and adds two RCA digital inputs and two Toslink optical inputs). It offers a home theater bypass input and uses separate power supplies for the two channels and the preamp. You can separate the preamp and the power amp. The only thing the B135³ lacks is balanced XLR inputs—perhaps that was the point where everything was packed so tight that the whole chassis exploded. That's not a big deal, especially considering that this amp is so compact that it's probably intended for audiophiles who are tight for space and won't be needing long runs of XLRs.

My review sample featured the DAC, but not the MM phono stage. (The latter is the same one found in Bryston's BP-2MM outboard phono stage.) The DAC, according to Bryston's Gary Dayton, is "derived from our BDA-3—it uses the same digital chipset and only lacks USB (and therefore DSD) and balanced output. But it is startlingly close in sound quality." I would have liked a USB connection but was able to evaluate the DAC with Toslink cables provided by AudioQuest.

Compact dimensions aside, that's a lot of integrated amp for \$6695.

System Configurations

I used the Bryston B135³ integrated with three very different systems during its stay. First, I placed it in the ever-growing reference system in the main listening room with the Von Schweikert Audio ESE speakers—this was a configuration that would show me the Bryston's ultimate potential. While it had to follow the proverbial tough act—the McIntosh MC2152 power amplifier and the Pass Labs XP12 preamp—the resulting sound was anything but a let-down. It turned out to be a different flavor, less warmth and lushness and more detail, sort of like using a little vinegar in the recipe to cut through the fat

and the unctuousness. (You can tell that Colleen and I watch a lot of programs on The Food Network.)

The second system was for dedicated headphone listening. I paired the B135³ with my trusty ol' Unison Research CDE CD player and my AudioQuest NightOwl Carbon headphones and finished many music reviews for my Vinyl Anachronist column with this combination. I'm becoming more and more impressed with some of the inboard headphone amps of some of the integrated amps I've been reviewing, such as the Luxman LX-380 I reviewed for the Summer Issue of *The Occasional*. I'm not sure what's so special about the headphone amp in the Bryston, but I found it exceptionally clean and clear for evaluating recordings. Transients, in particular, were tight and fast and realistic.

Gary Dayton also gave me some insight into the headphone amp: "This is a separate pure class A output that's all discrete. It doesn't have the same kind of output power as our dedicated BHA-1 headphone amp, but for those with compatible headphones, it should indeed sound amazing. Output impedance is about 50 ohms. This is one of those features we're never sure people use, but we designed it assuming everyone who wants to use the headphone out has great cans and needs all the detail they can get."

The final system was sort of a lark. I've been buried in gear lately, and I decided that a second "break-in" system in my office was required. The first system was comprised of the Bryston, the Unison CD player, the Martin Logan 35XTi 2-way monitors with a loom of the new cables from Raven Audio. I had just added the AudioQuest Niagara 1200 power conditioner with an AudioQuest power cord going into the wall outlet. I was modestly surprised that my break-in system sounded so good in what's basically a spare bedroom, and the flexibility and features of the B135³ were key to the success of this project.



Sound

As I've mentioned, the Bryston isn't a particularly warm amplifier—other than the fact that it physically runs a little hot for solid state. It possesses a neutral sonic signature, in other words, one that doesn't editorialize. With each of the three systems I could hear an extraordinary amount of detail in recordings. As I mentioned in the review of the Pass Labs XP12 preamp and XP17 phono preamp, neutrality can be welcome to a reviewer when you're trying to figure out what the other components in the chain are doing. The little Martin Logan monitors really opened up with the Bryston at the helm.

Initially I heard a leanness to the sound, one that might have been categorized as a minor shortcoming to a fan of euphonic colorations like me, but after a few weeks as a workhorse the Bryston started to open up and reveal a more confident manner. Deep bass was strong and steady and dependable with the small two-ways which made me instantly think of Bob and whether or not he'd like this sound. I know everyone is getting sick of me talking about Tool's *Fear Inoculum* all the time, but the Bryston seemed like a perfect match for the thunder and the space and the sheer dynamics of this brand of thoughtful and sophisticated prog metal. My positive experience at RMAF was now easily duplicated in my listening room.

Conclusion

I didn't answer the question I just proposed. What about Bob? I think Bob was enamored with his four large Bryston monoblocks pumping out blood and fire through his big JBLs. He'd take one look at the relatively petite B135³ and say the he needed more to truly rawk.

Bob's opinions would probably fold under strict blind tests, however. It's strange to see such a compact piece of gear deliver such a powerful sound, one undeterred by inefficient speakers with challenging impedances. It's fun to have something so reasonably priced and sized that can alarm your neighbors, but that's not what I want or need from an integrated.

I want detail and dynamics, but I also want balance and finesse and clarity. The Bryston B135³ integrated amplifier certainly met and even surpassed my standards for these elusive qualities. If I needed a compact music-making machine that didn't take over my living space, the B135³ would be among my first choices. It thrived in a number of configurations, always doing what it was meant to do. What more do you need?

—Photos in article by Marc Phillips