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Test: Bryston Mini A Bookshelf | Compact speaker

Mini or non-mini?

by JÖRG DAMES | OCTOBER 13, 2020

There are listeners who consciously opt for compact loudspeakers with limited deep bass capability and level stability without spatial or monetary restrictions being decisive. A decision that I can understand, especially since some modern “little ones” are able to play so big in terms of bass and level that it surprises one. Sure, this is especially true for active solutions, but valuable passive compact boxes don't let even rock or dance floor fans gnaw on their hunger when the amplifier is playing.

And above all: good compacts often convey their own flair, a special catchiness and coherence, by which even (or especially) expensive, complex floorstanding loudspeakers have to be measured. Last but not least, this clearly applies to those compact speakers that have recently been playing in my listening room: The Sehring M901 (from 6,800 euros, test to follow) and B&W 705 Signature (3,000 euros) are already back at the manufacturer, but I had ample opportunity to compare them with each other and, of course, with the Bryston Mini A Bookshelf (2,196 euros | <https://www.avitech.at/de/>) to be tested here .

Bryston and Boxing?



Bryston has been building amplifiers since 1973 and has a legendary reputation, not least for power amplifiers. In addition to suitable pre-amps and integrated amplifiers, the Canadians have launched other electronic components such as DA converters, headphone amplifiers, CD players, power conditioners and even pure streaming bridges over the years. So far, so unsurprisingly for an electronics company. Although the

subject of “Bryston and Boxing” is now eight years old - the Model T came onto the market in 2012 - many fans of the brand still consider it a rather unusual combination. Not entirely wrong. Machines for driver and housing production, measuring equipment, anechoic rooms and, of course, recruiting qualified specialists are associated with large additional investments. Anyway then

So happy if you have neighbors like the loudspeaker specialist Axiom Audio, which is not only based in the north of the province of Ontario like Bryston, but also has the production and development resources just mentioned - plus even special listening rooms for blind tests, as can be heard. In addition, as a privately owned company with 40 years of market experience in terms of company tradition, Axiom is very similar to Bryston, including the weakness for a high degree of vertical integration: Even the production of the drivers has not been in its own factory in China for some time, but in Canada, so Axiom, which also produces the housing for the Bryston loudspeakers.



Nomen est omen: The Mini A are the smallest loudspeakers within the Bryston family

According to Bryston, all the best conditions for a particularly close and fruitful cooperation, in which your own ideas and quality requirements can be implemented perfectly. The housings as well as the crossovers and drivers of the ten basic Bryston loudspeaker models (activation variants and subs not included) have been developed from scratch. By the way: With the [Bryston Middle T](#), colleague Martin Mertens tested a floorstanding loudspeaker a year and a half ago.

All good things come in threes



With the Bryston Mini A Bookshelf, three paths should lead to the goal: The midrange speaker plays between 500 and 2300 Hertz

The Bryston Mini A Bookshelf are the smallest loudspeakers in the Bryston family. Just under 40 centimeters high, they are designed to be three-way. The use of a dedicated 70 mm midrange driver promises a more homogeneous omni-directional behavior, which receives additional support from the comparatively

low (2.3 kHz) transition to the tweeter. In my experience, good three-way systems often show their advantages over two-way solutions with their bass-midrange speakers when the mids are fundamentally transparent. Drivers that are used from deep down to the high frequency range are, in case of doubt, a more significant bottleneck than a more complex crossover network, especially with very substantial broadband signal loads. But there are quite different opinions about it. What is clear, however, is that the voice coils of the tweeters on the Mini A Bookshelf, which set in early, are exposed to increased stress, which is one of the main reasons for Bryston to use titanium dome: the metal automatically acts as a heat sink.

The bass driver of the Bryston Mini A Bookshelf

The third in the group, the 15 centimeter diameter bass cone, starts its work around the top at around 500 Hz and is supported towards the south by a bass reflex system with a tuning frequency of 55 Hz. The surface structure of the bass reflex tube on the back of the Bryston Mini A Bookshelf is striking: the plastic looks like a heavily ruffled cloth. An alternative to the more common golf ball pattern, which is supposed to enlarge the surface and thus help to reduce flow noise.



The peculiar shape of the bass reflex tube of the Bryston Mini A Bookshelf is intended to minimize flow noise

Processing & practice

The workmanship and the look of the 19 millimeter thick case of the Mini A Bookshelf are quite typical of Bryston: reliably high-quality and functional. The Mini A is acoustically optimized by means of the case width tapering towards the rear (minimizing standing waves inside the case) and flattened vertical edges (avoidance of annoying reflections or "phantom sound sources") - but otherwise free of design frills and glamor. Where other manufacturers hide the chassis screws, Bryston uses exposed Allen screws with their heads protruding upwards. Which at the latest is an advantage when after a few years you come up with the (sound-enhancing) idea to quickly check their firm hold. I myself think so that loudspeakers are allowed to look quite technical and see easily accessible and handy screws as a clear practical advantage. The fact that the Allen screws are automatically accompanied by machine threads and therefore threaded sleeves embedded in the housing is a further plus point - even with significantly more expensive loudspeakers there are often only "Spax screws" that drill directly into the wood.

The pre-assembled sheet metal bridges on the bi-wiring terminal of the Bryston Mini A Bookshelf should ideally be replaced with higher-quality cable solutions or bi-wiring speaker cables before the first preview



Unfortunately, "easily accessible" is no longer an issue when speaker cables assembled with cable lugs are to be brought to the terminal of the Bryston Mini A Bookshelf:

The individual terminals are so close together that you either have strong, elf-like fingers or the

plastic key included to help - which, however, allows the screw terminals to be tightened firmly. And while we're at the terminal: The pre-assembled bi-wiring bridges are more reminiscent of the metal strips of loose-leaf binders than of trustworthy audiophile solutions. And that is pretty much noticeable acoustically: The difference between "accessory bridges" and my not so complex cable bridges has rarely been as audible as with the Bryston Mini A Bookshelf: It is essential to replace it before the first preview or use bi-wiring cables, otherwise the Mini A will sell well below value. And that would be a shame, as we will hear in a moment ...

Bryston Mini A Bookshelf: Sound test and comparisons



Marvelous: the middle

Set theory, stochastics, game theory - anyone who asks such “muses” for help with composing is not looking for easy-listening music. And that was exactly what the Greek composer *Iannis Xenakis*, who died in 2001, was not. The seemingly freestylike piece "Morsima-Amorsima" (album: *Works with Piano*, with Aki Takahashi) is inaudible to my taste via the car radio, but can trigger curiosity and concentration that shift from note to note through high-quality audio components - fascinating, when you are in the right mood.

Well-ordered, chaotic - this is exactly the contradiction the piece plays with - the piano, violin, cello and bass demand the attention they deserve, which the Bryston Mini A Bookshelf is only too happy to give them. Whether eruptive or gliding piano strokes, suddenly bursting in and just as quickly vanishing into thin air again, woody, creaky bass tones or the violin that is sometimes reminiscent of frosting, sometimes of fingernails scratching on chalkboard: both in terms of richness of color and transparency the mid-range playback from the small candy to the big cinema: the Mini A sound highly informative and at the same time extremely pleasant - the implementation of Iannis Xenakis' ideas appears as abstract as it is organic. Such music can hardly be transported better.



“Sensual” would almost be too big a word for such music, but it is exactly the term that Bryston loudspeakers come across with their midrange reproduction. And not only with acoustic instruments, but also with voices that inspire you to indulge in the Mini A Bookshelf in such a way that you involuntarily think of my bygone Sendor SP100R2 .

Sure, the Sehring M901 and my 903 also represent vocals in a highly authentic and involving way: With voices like Conor O'Brien, who tends to hear the emotionally haunting “Becoming a Jackal” (*Villagers* , album: *Becoming a Jackal*; listen on Amazon) Throat sings, the colors, the finely balanced tonal balance and the dynamic maneuverability of the minis

actually remind you of the midrange reproduction of the Berlin monitors. It goes vocally deeper into the chest area - wonderfully simple and yet poignant, like Matt Berninger the track "Sorrow" (*The National* , album: *High Violet* ; listen on Amazon) buzzes into the microphone - but you can hear that the Bryston are applying a little more color than the studio monitor (itself) allows. Yes, starting from the upper bass, the Mini A Bookshelf gives the lower middle area a little heat treatment, which, in combination with the qualities of the middle area described above, gives rise to English boxing classic flair à la Sendor. Great.

Not rock hard: the bass

Not that my former English charm bolts are still flashing something like lovesickness with me - so quickly switch to the bass range. Because I attested that the SP100R2 had "only" satisfactory dynamic and timing behavior in the test at the time. And as if something like a deep kinship existed between the English and the Canadians, the same can be said about the bass range of the Bryston Mini A Bookshelf. The 1979 debut album, *Entertainment!* the post-punk *gang of four*'s already hung up a lot, but cult - and above all one of the rhythmically "driest" records I know: bass guitar, vocals, but especially the guitars and drums are dynamic, so jagged, so angular and at the same time groovy, you could breathe music so that the sound would really make you cough. In terms of recording, it doesn't go down particularly deep, but *entertainment* is good for tapping out the timing and the contouring / firmness of the bass reproduction of audio components ! pretty good.



At first, when listening to the Bryston Mini A Bookshelf, I noticed again how well the mid-range reproduction succeeds: the Canadians deliver guitars and vocals with a real tonal and dynamic tone. Yes, the heart of the Bryston Mini A Bookshelf beats in the middle! Further down, the electric bass and kick drum are less clearly defined: neither in terms of resolution nor in terms of dynamic behavior, the bass range can completely keep up with the superb mid-range quality.



The Mini A do their duty here by properly informing the listener about the essential events in the lower registers and taking them along - the most important - emotionally. However, they do not bump into pronounced analytical listeners who are into hard-defined structures in the southern frequency fields.

Physically present & level stable

Regarding the keyword “emotional take with you”: The level increase typical for compact speakers in the upper bass range is well solved. Whether acoustic or electronic music: The small tonal extra pound helps that volume, coarse dynamics and warmth unfold despite the compact size, but do not apply excessively. As a result, the Bryston Mini A Bookshelf convey music less monitoresk objectively as the sound engineer waving his index finger strictly, but with a pleasant, full-bodied physique. The word "sensual" fits here again.

And a few more words on “do not apply excessively”: In this context, I would recommend room sizes from 20 square meters upwards and a free arrangement as possible - or an amplifier with a fat-free, wiry drawing. The Mini A Bookshelf is able to “flood” my approximately 30 square meter, bass-critical listening room with a ceiling height of 3.60 meters with a wall distance of 85 centimeters. In terms of level stability, they are not bad parents either and can easily let it get louder than the not so music-loving neighbors or upright caretakers tolerate in apartment buildings.

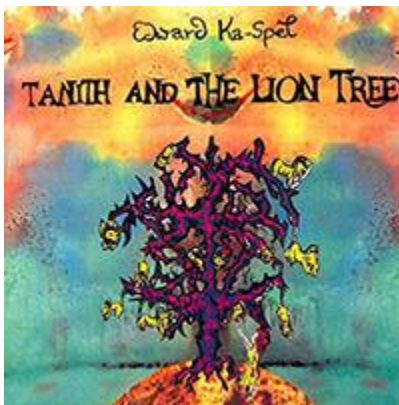


Listening pleasure in the heights



The tweeter also goes well with the sensual listening pleasure that the Bryston delivers. As an inserted, small interim conclusion: The Bryston Mini A Bookshelf follow a very consistent sound and development philosophy, which leaves room for objective criticism at individual points, but "heard about everything" is extremely conclusive and anything but "coincidental" works. The Canadian compact speakers work towards a clear listening ideal. And so the treble is also more suitable for the long term, organic and by no

means brilliant or emphatically analytical. Tonally, following an almost nerdy neutral doctrine (with one or two homeopathic balls removed from the middle), the strength of the high-frequency reproduction lies above all in the fact that it is completely free of hardness



The Mini A remain open in the direction of the super high frequency, which I really appreciate. High-tone details including fine dynamic contours are nonetheless traced more like with a somewhat softer than exaggerated hard pencil - the last crystalline note, the very finest metallic sheen, the Bryston do not fully accentuate the openness. Nevertheless, the textures and timbres of a bell ring ("The Bakersman" by *Edward Ka-Spel* on *Tanith and the Lion Tree*; [listen on Amazon](#)) or a hi-hat ("A Loop so nice", *The Battles*, Juice B Crypts) so authentic that you inevitably stretch your thumbs up. At least if you just want to have music credibly served to enjoy it - and not analyze it. With a sideways glance at the

price tag and the overall sound concept, I would not "screw" the smallest bit of the Bryston's skilfully balanced treble if I were a developer.

Considerable stage qualities

In terms of space, the Bryston Mini A Bookshelf adheres to what its compact design promises: the sound pattern is so well-ordered from the speakers that they become "invisible" and only the instruments and the voices, which can be nicely located in the center of the stereo, take over have the stage. The sound image opens up to the front, towards the listener, instead of just offering a factual top view of what is happening. But many other compacts in the class and also below can often do that well.



The best in my opinion and determined not least by the tonally full-bodied coordination and excellent mid-range quality of the Mini A: the physique of what is offered.

Many other loudspeakers come up with even sharper lines and draw individual instruments in a spatially more focused, "graphically exact" manner (such as the B&W 705 SE, which really excels in this matter), the Bryston illusion a tangible physicality that is regularly what is striking with acoustic instruments and voices A feeling of "authenticity", yes of "flesh and blood" can arise.

Bryston Mini A Bookshelf: Compare with other speakers

It's high time to let other speakers have their say in more detail: The recently tested B&W 705 Signature score points over the Bryston Mini A Bookshelf with better resolution in the bass and treble range (the B&W are really exceptionally transparent on top), more jagged fine dynamics and with a slightly more extensive bass draft. In addition, the English sound more restrained and therefore more neutral in the bass.

At the other end of the transmission range, however, the Canadians then have a more extensive reproduction up to the super high frequency range and thus sound a little more airy, which is probably one of the reasons for their somewhat higher stage image. While the B&W act a bit more cautiously in the upper mids or in the presence area, the Bryston are more neutral at this point: Voices appear a bit more direct and luminous via the Mini A. Due to the - albeit "tricky" - supply of heat from the layers below, the centers of the Mini A also appear more colorful.

The Sehring M901 basically combine the strengths of the other two compacts. In addition, they go deeper into the bass cellar, make even larger parties dance legs when it comes to level stability and, thanks to their over-all neutrality and special low distortion, offer the bottom line the most coherent, purest sound image. Only in terms of spatial focus and high-frequency resolution do they not quite come close to the B&W and, due to their tonal neutrality, of course also do not offer the warm timbres of the Bryston Mini A Bookshelf.

The drivers of the Bryston Mini A Bookshelf are held in place by machine-threaded screws and threaded sleeves embedded in the housing



The special talents of the Bryston Mini A Bookshelf, which are anything but everyday for their price range, aim first and foremost at the mids that are so colorful, well-balanced, audible and therefore organic that fans of classic British studio monitors in particular will not be able to help themselves now falling in love with modern Canadians too. The warm upper bass range, which comfortably supports the mids, and the long-term suitable, but by no means unduly tamed highs, which integrate themselves conclusively into the action, do the rest when conquering emotions. The minis are not everybody's darling: listeners who like it transparent and differentiated above all will appreciate the mids in particular, but will not give the bass range a triple A for "crazy analytical mapping". Yes,



The Bryston Mini A Bookshelf are characterized by ...

- an excellent midrange reproduction that would look good even on loudspeakers with significantly wider price tags: brightly colored, organic, transparent, warm - in a word: sensual!
- a coherent, well-balanced, open high-frequency reproduction with price-class resolution and fine dynamics, but also very organic look.
- a tonally slightly accentuated bass with robust, coarse dynamics and a coherent connection to the mids, which gives the Mini A Bookshelf authority and volume, even in larger listening rooms (> 20 square meters), despite the small housing dimensions. In the bass, however, they are not trained for maximum differentiation and hard contouring.
- flawless spatial image, as one would expect from a high-quality compact monitor. The physicality that distinguishes individual voices and instruments should be emphasized.
- flawless workmanship, more "tooly" than luxurious design. Only the somewhat fiddly bi-wiring terminal and the sound-damaging sheet metal bridges would be criticized.

Facts:

- Model: Bryston Mini A Bookshelf
- Concept: passive 3-way bass reflex compact loudspeaker
- Price: 2,196 euros
- Dimensions & weight per piece: 39 x 22 x 21 mm (H x W x D), 5 kg
- Efficiency: 87 dB / W / m
- Nominal impedance: 8 ohms
- Colors: Walnut, Boston Cherry, Black Ash, other designs on request
- Other: Bi-wiring terminal with pre-assembled bridges
- Guarantee: 20 years