

## Bryston B135

EXCLUSIVE: Integrated amp  
from Canadian powerhouse **p16**



## Head music

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Sennheiser back on track



# Hi-Fi Choice

**PASSION FOR SOUND**

Issue No. **372**

June 2013

# Needle talk

Six affordable vinyl spinners to get you back in the groove

**DEALER  
VISIT:**  
three hi-fi  
setups of  
desire!

## RETRO:

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# 38

products on test  
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Cyrus through to  
Pro-Ject and Rega...

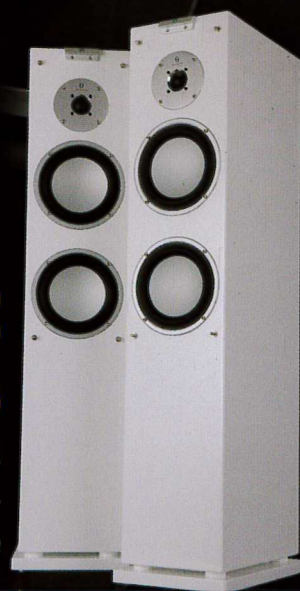


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style, sound and price



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06  
US\$6.00

# Simply the best?

**Malcolm Steward** listens to the Bryston B135 SST<sup>2</sup> to assess the validity of the claim that it's the ultimate integrated amplifier



## DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Bryston B135 SST<sup>2</sup>  
**ORIGIN**  
Canada  
**TYPE**  
Integrated stereo amplifier  
**WEIGHT**  
13.6kg  
**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
300 x 95 x 210mm  
**FEATURES**  
• Optional integral DAC or internal MM phono stage  
• Three low-noise power transformers: two for the analogue circuits, one for digital  
• Separate ground paths for digital and analogue  
• Pre-out/main in connections  
**DISTRIBUTOR**  
PMC Ltd  
**TELEPHONE**  
0870 4441044  
**WEBSITE**  
bryston.co.uk

**T**ake a look at Bryston's website and you'll see the B135 SST<sup>2</sup> boldly described as "without question one of the most sonically transparent and reliable audio products available." That is a very brave claim by a copywriter who is obviously supremely confident, or who has not heard of the competition.

The B135 (as we'll call it from here on) has the options of having a "broadcast-quality moving magnet phono stage" and an on-board DAC with 8x over-sampling performance fitted. I can't imagine many people paying £4,900 and then wanting to use it with a moving magnet cartridge. The integral DAC add-on, however, might be a more popular option, especially with audiophiles keen to de-clutter their homes. The amplifier, as standard, also proffers a dedicated output to feed a set of headphones through the front panel 6.35mm headphone jack and digitally controlled analogue volume dial.

The Bryston has an impressive appearance and certainly looks built to last a lifetime or two. It has a decidedly muscular façade, enviable

## The Bryston's sound is unexpectedly warm despite its incisive detailing

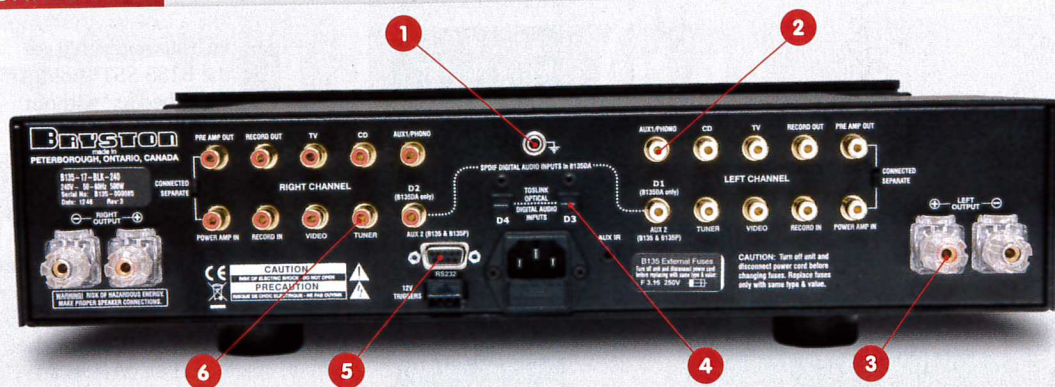
constructional quality, and comes with the company's reassuring 20-year guarantee. It is, in fact, quite reserved in its appearance. The loudspeaker terminals, for example, will easily accommodate 4mm thick strands of cable, but do not look like the cleats which one would attach hawsers from a ship to a quayside.

I'll be listening to the Bryston through my reference two-way, the Neat Petite SX but then switch after an hour or two to my full-range reference speakers, the mighty, 88dB-sensitivity, Neat Ultimatum XL10s, which, with their isobaric bass loading, are a far more capable design but just as easy a load for an amplifier to drive, even though each of the XL10 enclosures houses nine drivers. Both the Neat designs have a nominal 6ohms impedance.

## Sound quality

Using my Naim HDX-SSD and Naim DAC/XPS2 source, playing Bill Frisell's *I Heard It Through The Grapevine* demonstrates the B135's smoothly balanced overall presentation and its capability for

## CONNECTIONS



- 1 Earth connection
- 2 Aux 1/phono input (left channel)
- 3 Loudspeaker terminals (left channel)
- 4 Optical input 3
- 5 RS232 port
- 6 Tuner (line) input (right channel)

frequently startling transients, evident on drum strikes and robustly plucked guitar, which also exploit the Bryston's deft leading edge attack and its crisp note-shape definition. Frisell's *Blues For Los Angeles* further showcases the B135's dexterity with tonal colour, displaying the wealth of character that can be extracted from a Fender Telecaster.

Call *Me Rose* and *Five Fifty-One* from Bruce Cockburn's *Small Source of Comfort* show the Bryston's sound to be unexpectedly generous and warm despite its incisive detailing. There is

## Ideal for listeners who want a taste of a muscular high-end amplifier system

no outstanding bass extension but the music lacks no sense of weight or tonal completeness, even when listening through the Neat Petite SXs.

Listening to the 24/96 rip of the Buena Vista Social Club, the band's involvement and joy in the music comes across powerfully in its angular approach to the timing and rhythms. The cerebral insight is still there, but it's presented with swagger and fun. On that subject, the Bryston is a remarkably clear-sounding amplifier, free from noise and low-level 'hash' that tend to mask and blur subtlety. It is equally informative in terms of stereo imagery. It creates a rock solid, truly three-dimensional soundstage on Cassandra Wilson's *You Gotta Move*, which is no easy task with speakers that like to be close to a rear wall as the Petite SX do. The stage stretches well outside the confines of the speaker enclosures.

Keith Jarrett and Jan Garbarek's *Luminence* ably demonstrates that the B135 is a genuine powerhouse, maintaining the tone and texture of the instrumentation regardless of the

playback level and shows no signs of strain, even when the saxophone explores its dynamic extremes. The amplifier doesn't muster its power in any obvious manner: it simply refuses to sound strained or under any sort of duress when playing complex, multi-layered music, and it continues to sound as though it contains an engine blessed with masses of torque. It handles delicacy and drama with equal aplomb, favouring neither and sounding as though it is in complete control, no matter how demanding or delicate the signal being fed to it.

Switching to the Neat Ultimatum XL10s, which are far superior to their junior stablemates – with far deeper bass and superior stereo imagery – my respect for the Bryston's sense of control grows even more. Its pace, rhythm and timing acuity seem to take a distinct leap forward playing Bill Frisell's fusion. It is especially notable on Frisell and Vinicius Cantuária's *Lágrimas Mexicanas*, where the percussion takes on a more forceful character and assumes a far more persuasive role in the music.

Switching to the far less subtle, 16/44 rip of Alicia Keys' *Girl On Fire*, the Bryston demonstrates its sheer power with the track's percussion reaching truly threatening levels underpinned by Stygian bass and Keys' full-tilt, processed vocals, which impress despite being far from natural.

**HOW IT COMPARES**  
The Bryston cries out to be compared with the ultra-capable, 85WPC, £2,825, Naim Supernait and the £1,195 Hi-Cap power supply. Using the analogue inputs, the Supernait has a more persuasive groove. Voices sound more human, organic and expressive, as well. They seem to gel with the guitars and band more fluidly, too. The whole presentation seems more natural and evocative and the playing more spirited. However, the Bryston is clearly ahead in terms of stereo imagery precision and instrument separation. While being the clear winner in hi-fi terms it doesn't rival the Naim at capturing the music's timing and more emotional elements.

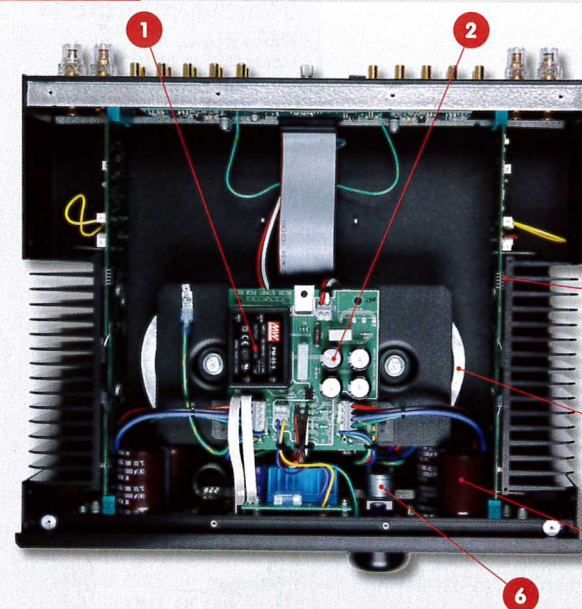
**Built to last, the Bryston looks as muscular as it sounds**

The B135 demonstrates similar control, subtlety and restraint with the dramatic mix of Anna Calvi's *Suzanne And I* ably conveying Calvi's intense vocalising and her unique Telecaster stylings along with the forceful percussion interjections. The propulsive drive of the music is hard to ignore: moving one's feet appears to be obligatory. Somehow, though, the illusion is not 100 percent convincing. This is not an academic judgement but far more a guttural decision: the music has drive but it doesn't feel wholeheartedly like the Edwards/Rodger's groove...

The Bryston certainly comes from the American high-end camp – even though it hails from Canada – and can generate highly credible images of instruments and performers in an acoustic – or electronic – space. It casts these images in a truly believable arc that extends behind and laterally beyond the physical locations of the loudspeakers, which can be an alluring capability, even though I consider staging to be an academic rather than an emotional consideration. The problem with this approach is that real music is far more than notes appearing one after another in space. There needs to be a sense of the accord between the musicians playing, and their individual timing and phrasing to generate the emotional impact the composer intended. Listen, for example, to guitarist Leo Kottke play *A Virtuoso Is His Own Reward* to



## IN SIGHT



- 1 Standby AC/DC converter
- 2 AC mains filter components
- 3 Power transistors bolted to heatsink
- 4 Toroidal power transformer
- 5 Main PSU filter capacitors
- 6 Motorised volume control

## ON TEST

Don't be misled by the B135's slim bodywork, as this is a very capable amp. Rated at a nominal 135W/8ohm, it actually delivers 2x170W/8ohm and 2x275W/4ohm at 1% THD (clipping). The big power supply also has plenty of headroom, allowing the B135 to support 220W, 410W and 665W into 8, 4 and low 2ohm loads under dynamic, music-like conditions. Bryston has put a ceiling on the B135's maximum current of 21.1A (or

445W/1ohm), but the amp remains very tolerant of difficult loudspeakers. Distortion is low and admirably independent of power output, hovering between 0.001-0.002% from 1-135W through midrange frequencies. There's an almost inevitable increase in THD at higher frequencies, but more so on the left than right channel in our sample (0.028% versus 0.0035% L/R at 20kHz). The left and right channels

are otherwise very well matched, offering the same 0.025-0.095ohm output impedance (20Hz-20kHz) and extended response from 5Hz-20kHz ( $\pm 0.1$ dB), rolling off thereafter to -4.1dB/100kHz. So far, so Bryston. All except the S/N ratio which, at 77dB (re. 0dBW) is 10-20dB 'noisier' than the brand average. As this is a white noise, and not hum, the subjective impact is likely to be a far smoother sound. **PM**

appreciate the importance of phrasing and to realise how secondary hi-fi considerations are to enjoying, understanding and appreciating music. The Bryston tries hard to cover the requirements of both camps – the hi-fi and the musical, and while it's consistent in the first respect, it doesn't always succeed in forging an emotional link between listener and music.

On Los Lobos' *Angels With Dirty Faces* the amplifier perfectly captures the dynamics and rhythm, but doesn't quite grasp the timing – in particular the subtle relationship between the drums, bass guitar and accordion.

However, with the LSO playing Ravel's *Pavane Pour Une Infante Défunte*, where demonstrative timing is not as crucial to the music's impact, the B135 gives a significantly better account of itself. And with Mahler's *Symphony Number 8*, where the listener wants to appreciate the magnificent sound of the choir and the accompanying orchestra, it fares well and conveys both the choral and orchestral might with authority. Its ability to create a convincing acoustic environment is also remarkable.

## Conclusion

The B135 SST<sup>2</sup> is, without doubt, a fine integrated amplifier, but it is certainly not the ultimate amplifier for everyone – it might be ideal for listeners who want an integrated taste of a muscular high-end amplifier system. It's versatile in providing digital inputs, although there's no Asynchronous USB input. Given its outstanding stereo performance, I think it's probably better suited to classical and audiophile material where the cosmetics of the music assume far greater importance.

## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

#### SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

#### VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

#### BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

#### FEATURES

★★★★★

#### OVERALL

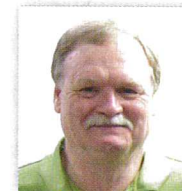
★★★★★

**LIKE:** Vivid stereo performance coupled to great sense of power  
**DISLIKE:** Not assertive enough in timing or conveying tonal colour and expression  
**WE SAY:** A muscular but refined sound from this high-end amp with great stereo imagery

## Q&A

James Tanner

Bryston VP sales and marketing



**MS:** Why does the add-on DAC not offer USB connectivity, given its popularity in North America?

**JT:** The B135 does not have the USB input as we offer it in the BDA-2 DAC. Asynchronous USB seems to provide the best performance and we felt it was better to offer it in our much more versatile Bryston BDA-2 DAC as opposed to offering it as an add-on option in the B135.

**Isn't that contrary to your fewer boxes philosophy of getting people to buy integrals rather than pre/powers?**

The Bryston B135 integrated is a no-compromise design in that it is not built to a price point. The preamp section is the same as our separate BP-17 preamp and the power amplifier section is the same as our 2.5B-SST<sup>2</sup> power amp. So you're not giving up performance with the B135 – it's more a matter of packaging, features and cosmetics.

**Given that, why not offer a USB connection on the B135?**

The B135 internal DAC is limited to 96/24-bit resolution and has 2 Optical and 2 Coaxial digital inputs available. Most digital sources provide for one of these two digital outputs. Many of our customers these days have multiple digital sources so for those requiring higher resolution (192/32-bit) and/or more choices for their digital sources we offer a separate product called the Bryston BDA-2. This is a very versatile 8-input DAC with 192/24-bit capability. We may consider the addition of an internal USB module for the B135 going forward as we are developing a separate USB product now, which could be fitted to our new SP-3 surround processor as well as the B135, but we have found that our market segment typically wants multiple high-resolution inputs – a configuration commonly found on outboard DAC solutions such as our flagship BDA-2.