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Bryston B135 SST²

Bryston's update to the B135 integrated amplifier allows you to tailor it to modern needs – is this the ideal marriage of analogue and digital in one main unit?

Review: **Ken Kessler** Lab: **Paul Miller**

Bryston's longevity and professional affinities make it a default purchase for a certain type of audiophile: one who eschews the fashion and politics which so infect audio. Bryston chugs along, having celebrated its 50th anniversary last year, and it behaves with a controlled conservatism such as denotes the character of McIntosh and Quad. But that is not to say it ignores progress.

To give this its full name, the B135 SST² C-Series Integrated Amplifier shows Bryston's mettle for embracing the modern world beyond two-channel, purist, analogue pursuits. While the unit reviewed here is two-channel, purist and analogue, it can be fitted with a DAC module for £1575 that adds two coaxial and two Toslink inputs (the ingress and egress hardware is already fitted whether you purchase the module or not).

Other options (not provided with the review sample) include a £500 universal remote and an MM-only phono stage for £650. It is curious that Bryston chose to forgo an MC facility, while I am staggered that anyone can leave out USB circa 2013 – the only omission about which I am forgiving is streaming options and the like.

AMPLE FACILITIES

Since Bryston rates the B135 at 135W/ch into 8ohm [see Lab Report, p69], I had no qualms using it with the Wilson Sophia 3s, while also feeding it to LS3/5As and even the ridiculously good \$129-per-pair Pioneer SP-BS22-LR bookshelf speakers. Nothing challenged the B135, and I was delighted to find that its rotary volume control provides a long, gradual level climb up to the 12 o'clock point, allowing for a precise setting with every speaker, before kicking in with real wallop. Balance (via buttons) works in 1dB steps, too, for fine-tuning.

Even without any options, the B135 is so comprehensively equipped that it will

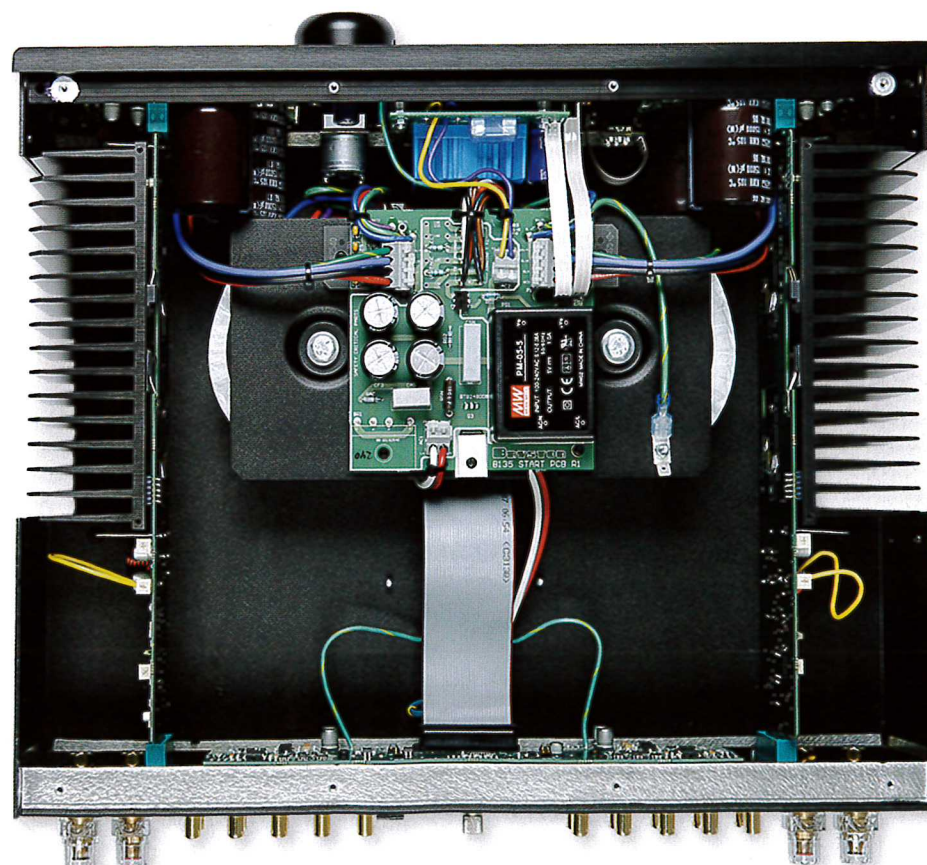
challenge you to find omissions. Minus the digital option, you still have a half-dozen line inputs at the back, a tape loop and pre-out facility. The latter reminds you that this is a single-box alternative to the BP6 or, more likely, the BP17 preamp and 2.5B stereo power amp whose rating is shared by the B135 and falls somewhere between the older 2B and 3B models. The five-way, gilded speaker terminals are among the nicest I've seen, multi-way, robust and able to accept fat cables with aplomb.

Because Bryston supports home integration and home cinema – two worlds that I accept have never collided meaningfully with my own – the unit is adaptable for all manner of automation. Maybe it remains a North American pursuit of some note. Regardless, this unit also features a pass-through facility, an RS232

port for control and software upgrades plus two 12V output triggers, one of which is programmable.

One of the first details you notice when removing the unit from its box – which is sensibly designed for easy unpacking – are the nicely integrated heatsinks in the side sections, the edges well protected and unlikely to catch you unawares. Across the fascia, the company has shown further restraint by providing a dual-purpose row of buttons to access the sources, sensing when digital inputs are in use. LEDs light up to indicate the source chosen, while the two balance buttons also have their functions indicated by green and red LEDs, the latter indicating that one channel is full on and the other silenced.

Next to the IR sensor – irrelevant if one is minus the optional remote – is a



RIGHT: An integrated combination of the BP17 pre and 2.5B SST² power amp, the dual mono B135 has output 'cards' with edge connectors directly attached to its 4mm binding posts



ABOVE: One row of dual-purpose buttons chooses analogue or digital sources; LEDs indicate choice. Note refreshingly retro rotary volume control and ¼in headphone socket

welcome sight: a ¼in headphone socket. I tried it with Grados, Sennheisers and other sets of cans and found it to be another area where Bryston has its ear to the ground: new-wave devotees of cans usage will nod with deep respect as the headphone amp is superbly controlled, quiet and detailed. Insertion of the jack automatically mutes the speaker outputs.

Lastly, a cluster of buttons and lights in the upper right-hand quadrant deals with power on, mute and clipping indication. Once switched in, the B135 takes a few seconds to stabilise. You then take it out of mute, exactly like the switch-on procedure employed by Audio Research and others who enable their users to avoid nasty switch-on thumps.

Features mean little if the underlying engineering is lacklustre, and Bryston ensures that it is anything but. Its B135 amplifier enjoys over 30,000µF of filter capacitance per channel, part of a power supply that contains three ultra-low-noise transformers: two for the analogue section and the third for the digital, with separate ground paths for both sections. You can see these in our inside shot, adjacent.

Ordinarily, one aspect of Bryston ownership would elicit a sarcastic, 'Yeah, right', but given that the brand has been

here for a half-century, I must praise the company's legendary 20-year guarantee. At a time when everything seems disposable, this is as confidence-inspiring a feature as any product can offer.

TRUE TO SCALE

Listening via the Sophia 3s, the immediate reaction was to succumb to a silky smoothness. I am loath to call it 'valve-like', and some might prefer a sharper sound, but the lack of aggression was doubly appreciated with music comprised of forceful brass sections, like the backing for Nancy Wilson's *Son Of A Preacher Man/Hurt So Bad* [SoulMusic Records SMCR25100].

Dating from 1969, the album's title track was uncharacteristic of Wilson, having become a signature song for Dusty Springfield. Wilson's approach is completely divorced from Springfield's swampy southern soul/funk, the former choosing instead to reinterpret it as a swinging Vegas nightclub dazzler. It enjoys a different kind of rhythm from that offered by the familiar version courtesy of Dusty, but the Bryston grabs the whole

'This amplifier is so smooth it should be called "The Nigel Havers"'

of the track and balances a multitude of textures, keeping the bass tight and fast. It underscores the slickest of horn sections, like of a sonic version of Fowler's Dictionary: a lesson in punctuation and usage. Best of all, Wilson's honeyed voice, notorious for its complex tapestry of tones, comes through unhindered.

It's heard to better effect on 'By The Time I Get To Phoenix', slowed down to the gait of a Peggy Lee ballad. Ordinarily, when jazz, pop or opera greats venture outside of their comfort zones, trying to 'get down with the kids', the

results embarrass. Even the astounding Mel Tormé, Dame Kiri and – repeatedly – Frank Sinatra fell into this humiliating trap. Not so Wilson, who remains one of the most versatile of all the singers who perfected their craft away from rock and soul.

Because of the lush strings, the Bryston was able to reveal another facet of its abilities: scaling. The vocals are further forward, as if she's singing into your shoulder (*sigh....*). The strings are handled with subtlety, to prevent them from schmaltzy intrusion. They're almost laid-back, and the guitar and percussion provide an intimate, clubby feel. It's a deft trick, convincing the listener that the music consists of a close group, when it's actually an orchestra.

Tim Buckley [see p84] had a distinctive, love-it-or-hate-it nasal voice that marked his eponymous 1966 debut as a release of note. Part of a bargain box set, *Tim Buckley – Original Album Series* [Elektra 8122797538] is a terrific showcase for a small rock band of the non-raucous, ☺

TWO PROS IN A POD

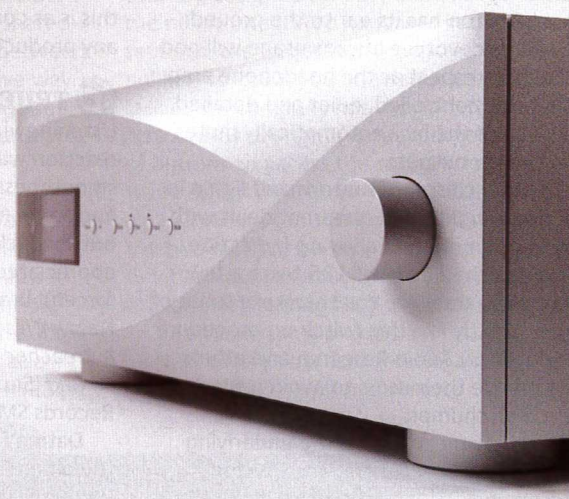
In 1993, PMC founders Peter Thomas and Adrian Loader learned of Canadian manufacturer Bryston when an audiophile demonstrated a 3B amplifier. They immediately felt it would be the ideal choice for both the professional and home hi-fi sectors, noting, according to Peter, 'its transparency, honesty and ability to drive all loads.' It seemed like the perfect fit, as the design philosophies of both companies were so similar. Like PMC, Bryston had no automated production, no robotics, no moving assembly lines and all products were hand-crafted. And like many speaker makers who would rather not indulge in amp design themselves, they became distributors for the UK and Eire, and are now celebrating a 20-year association. PMC's large active studio loudspeakers include electronics developed through the on-going collaboration between the two manufacturers. PMC/Bryston combinations are used in the recording industry by the BBC, Stevie Wonder, Prince, Brian May and numerous other high profile clients.

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INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER



ABOVE: A full complement of analogue inputs and home integration connections, digital inputs pre-fitted awaiting the optional DAC module. But no USB provision

coffeehouse variety. It's all stage right/stage left as far as the positioning of the instruments goes, but surprisingly revealing of a system's way with details. Indeed, tracks like 'She Is' turn out to be quite messy, when a hyperactive drummer swamps the other instruments to the left, while a lone guitar enjoys the speaker on the right channel.

Consistent, though, from track to track, was that hard-to-define voice – like Neil Young's only with tunefulness and minus the added hit of helium. The Bryston kept all the textures as they should be, and even made the extreme left/right spacing seem unobtrusive.

SO-OO SMOOTH

Buckley's antithesis is the astounding Tom Jones, and 'Delilah' – from a dirt-cheap 3CD collection *True Sixties Love* [Spectrum 984 272-7] – is almost laughable in its intensity. What a barrage of wonderful clichés! Tinkling bells, mariachi horns, Broadway-style backing vocals, country-style redneck bass... Never does the Bryston lose the plot. Admittedly, Jones was able to command the best of Decca's producers, musicians and engineers, so nothing he released once stardom was achieved was ever less than of audiophile-grade, but this is spectacular.

At the other end of the scale, from the same box set, is the consummately irritating 'Cinderella Rockefeller' by Esther and Abi Ofarim, with as odd an everything-but-the-kitchen-sink approach as 'Delilah', nonetheless enjoyable for its mix of ragtime piano, banjo, tuba and other 'comical' instruments, with a vaudeville feel provided by the vocals. Again, the Bryston kept the balls in the air, excelling for the attack and the tone of both the melodic and abrasive instruments. It was a piece of unparalleled kitsch

from this delightful box of guilty pleasures, however, that both taught me a lesson about musical snobbery and late 1950s recording genius. No, I am not about to start a campaign for the reassessment of Pat Boone, but damn, could he sing.

As my dotage ramps up my lachrymosity to daily tear-fests of nostalgia, I find schmaltz more appetising than I should, and his version of 'I'll See You In My Dreams' is a strings-drenched epic of blubbery excess... saccharine strings, 1950s Bar Mitzvah band rhythm guitar, a one-beat drummer and a gorgeously rich voice. The trumpet solo will make you think of Guy Lombardo or Lawrence Welk, even if you've never heard of them. This amp is so smooth, it should be called 'The Nigel Havers'.

While I did indulge in rock, and wallowed in the technoid, percussive bliss of Wang Chung's 'Dance Hall Days' on *Tazer Up!* [Digitally Sound Records 1055], the B135 invites a more considered listening session: it errs toward the genteel. Still, I was sucked right into Wang Chung's scarily futuristic, hard-edged soundscape, despite it being a remake of a song first heard in 1984. The Bryston loved it. ☺

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

Though trying this in basic mode, free of all options, I am truly impressed by the experience. Competition is fierce, however, with every high-end maker offering a circa-£5k integrated; Perreaux and Krell in particular raised the bar to loftier heights grunt-wise. But the B135 has sonic finesse, clever ergonomics and a form that lets you buy only what you need. That may be enough to simplify your choice.

Sound Quality: 84%
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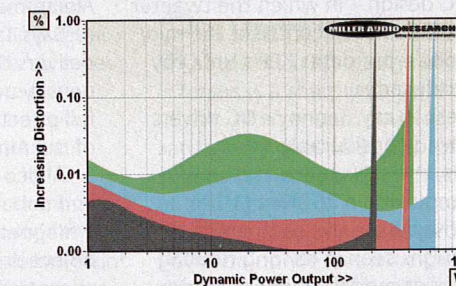
LAB REPORT

BRYSTON B135 SST²

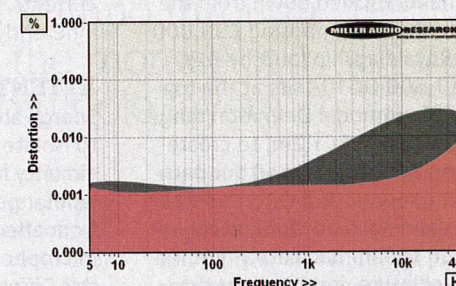
With its power amp stage based around Bryston's 2.5B SST², this integrated version remains a very capable amplifier indeed. Rated at a nominal 135W/8ohm, it delivers rather closer to 2x170W/8ohm and 2x275W/4ohm (<1% THD) while its big power supply has the headroom to accommodate peaks of 220W, 410W and 665W into 8, 4 and low 2ohm loads under dynamic, music-like conditions [see Graph 1, below]. Bryston has evidently 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 impressively independent of power output, hovering between 0.001-0.002% from 1-135W through midrange frequencies. There's an 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 – see Graph 2]. The left and right channels are otherwise very well matched, offering the same 0.023-0.095ohm output impedance (20Hz-20kHz), a low 0.0007% intermodulation distortion (19/20kHz, 10W/8ohm) and extended response from 1Hz-20kHz (±0.1dB), rolling off thereafter to -4.1dB/100kHz.

While this general performance is typical of previous Bryston amps, the lower-than-expected 77dB A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBV) is 10-20dB 'noisier' than the brand average. As this is a white noise, and not hum which is <-85dBV, the subjective impact will likely be to encourage a smoother sound rather than the brighter, in-your-face presentation the marque has been criticised for in the past. Readers may view an in-depth QC Suite report for Bryston's B135 SST² amplifier by navigating to www.hifinews.co.uk and clicking on the red 'download' button. PM



ABOVE: Dynamic power versus distortion into 8ohm (black trace), 4ohm (red), 2ohm (cyan) and 1ohm (green) speaker loads. Maximum current is 21A



ABOVE: Distortion vs. frequency from 5Hz-40kHz at 10W/8ohm (left = black; right = red)

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Power output (<1% THD, 8/4ohm)	170W / 275W
Dynamic power (<1% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)	220W / 410W / 665W / 445W
Output impedance (20Hz-20kHz)	0.023-0.095ohm
Frequency response (20Hz-100kHz)	+0.04dB to -4.05dB
Input sensitivity (for 0dBW/135W)	25mV / 292mV
A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBW/135W)	76.8dB / 98.1dB
Distortion (20Hz-20kHz re. 10W/8ohm)	0.0012-0.003% (0.028%, left)
Power consumption (idle/Rated o/p)	61W/497W
Dimensions (WHD) / Weight	433x116x353mm / 13.6kg