

● REVIEW PRODUCT OF THE MONTH

Bryston BDP-2 and BDA-2

A different approach to digital music playback, now with added flexibility



SPECIFICATION

BRYSTON BDP-2 & BDA-2

Bryston BDP-2

Type Digital music player

Price £2500

Inputs Six USB 2.0 (future upgradable to give two additional USB 3.0 inputs), eSATA (plus internal SATA drive option), two Gigabit Ethernet

File formats accepted Up to 192kHz/24 bit, with gapless playback

Outputs S/PDIF and AES/EBU digital

Control Via optional handset, network based web-browser or app control; two RS232 ports for wired control

Other connections Two 12V trigger

Dimensions (WxHxD) 43x7x28cm

Bryston BDA-2

Type Digital-to-analogue converter

Price £2500

Inputs Five electrical (two phono, two BNC, AES/EBU), two optical, USB

Outputs stereo analogue, on phonos and balanced XLRs, electrical digital

Digital-to-analogue conversion 192kHz/24-bit

Dimensions (WxHxD) 43x7x28cm

bryston.co.uk

How many ways are there to play music stored on a computer? More than you might think, so the meaning of terms such as 'streaming' are having to be tightened to clarify exactly what is meant. You can connect your computer straight into a hi-fi system; connect it wirelessly or through a USB digital-to-analogue converter; take the music to your system on a USB memory device; or store the music on a network-attached storage device plugged into your home router, and then access it via all manner of network players. With so

many choices on offer, it's hardly surprising that many find this whole thing totally confusing: various devices out there will do one thing but not another, and I've lost count of the number of emails I've had from readers saying 'I think I understand this product, but will it...?' So is there anything able to do it all in one box?

In terms of products that weren't quite what they'd been hoped to be, the Bryston BDP-1 was something of a classic. Once you got past the fact that BDP didn't signify a Blu-ray Disc

Player but rather a Bryston Digital Player, you discovered that not only did it only have a digital output – so it needed to be connected to one of the Canadian company's amplifiers or preamps with a digital input section, or via an external DAC – and then that its principal task was to play music from USB memory sticks.

Now we have the £2500 BDP-2, building on its abilities. As well as the USB inputs – now increased to six and compatible with the faster USB 3.0 standard – it has two Gigabit Ethernet ports, through which it can play music from a

SUGGESTED PARTNERS

Here are some components to help you get the best out of the Bryston BDP-2 and BDA-2

BRYSTON B60R

Bryston's B60R integrated amplifier has slimline styling to match the player and DAC, and a sound combining excellent dynamics with control and subtlety



PMC TWENTY.24

Keeping it in the family (PMC distributes Bryston in the UK) pays dividends: the PMC twenty.24 floorstanders are a fine match for the Bryston electronics



network using the UPnP/DLNA standards. In other words, it's become not just a digital music player but a network music player, too, and can now handle files at up to 24-bit/192kHz, rather than the 24-bit/96kHz of the BDP-1.

It also has a much faster and more powerful processor at its heart – it runs on an Intel Atom platform and has eight times more system memory than the BDP-1 – and can be supplied fitted with an internal eSATA drive for music storage, or connect to an external drive of the same kind using a socket on the rear panel. Such drives are fairly readily available online, even though arguably the increased speed of USB 3.0 over the USB 2.0 standard means external eSATA drives are losing some of their advantage.

'The Bryston BDP-2 may look like a very "technical" approach to playing music but the sound is anything but mechanical'

As with the BDP-1, the BDP-2 has only digital audio outputs, so launched alongside it is the company's latest standalone digital-to-analogue converter, the BDA-2. Also selling for £2500, it has electrical digital inputs – two on RCA phonos, two on BNC and one on a three-pin AES/EBU socket – two optical inputs and an asynchronous USB input for direct connection to a computer. Lesser resolutions can be upsampled, up to 176.4kHz or 192kHz, and the digital-to-analogue conversion is handled by twin 32-bit DAC chips.

PERFORMANCE

Setting up the two proved simple, with one caveat: if you're going to use the BDP-2 with large-capacity USB or eSATA drives – ie larger hard drives rather than just USB 'memory keys' or 'thumb drives' – then it's best to use self-powered drives, as there's insufficient oomph on the USB connection to power them. That aside, the BDP-2 accesses tracks or entire albums very quickly, be they on USB/eSATA media or the internal drive, and – when used with the BDA-2 – plays them to a very high standard, too.

Coming to the Brystons from more conventional network music player/NAS combinations required a little familiarisation

but the clear network control applications helped no end in finding my way around things. It took me a little while to work out how to access my NAS storage and even longer for the unit to load all of the music on my storage devices, but we got there in the end, and it's something you'd only have to do once.

With the Bryston up and running, what looks at first like a slightly awkward alternative to a conventional streaming player rapidly makes a lot of sense. It's flexible – there's even bRadio (Bryston's internet radio service) in there, and while it's described as a 'beta version' it works very well indeed – and all makes perfect sense once you've got used to the way it does things.

The sound quality of the pair is every bit as impressive as one has come to expect from Bryston: the balance here is fresh and wide-open, making it highly revealing of detail in high-resolution recordings, while at the same time good power and definition in the bass enables the duo to play anything from 320kbps internet radio streams to hi-res content from an external (or indeed internal) drive with equal weight, warmth and conviction. Playing some Bach streaming from the Audiophile Baroque internet station, the Bryston made a perfectly good background source while I read the various manuals and got everything running as I wanted; switching to solo piano and then orchestral recordings at 24-bit/192kHz showed just what the Brystons could do when it comes to creating beautifully credible, totally unforced sound stage pictures before the listener.

With its multiple drive connections and computer control interface, the Bryston BDP-2 may look like a very 'technical' approach to playing music but the sound is anything but mechanical. Instead there's a presentation you can relax into if you want, but which at the same time is perfectly capable of pinning you back in your seat with its sheer power or holding your attention completely with the fine detail of a recording.

That all this comes in two ultra-slim boxes, and with all the expansion capability even the most fanatical digital music enthusiast could want, makes this an unusual and fascinating alternative to some of the more conventional network music devices on the market. All credit is due to Bryston, not just for thinking differently in this emerging market but for producing a playing solution that's a convincing argument for its chosen path. **G**

DESIGN NOTES

James Tanner

Bryston's VP, Sales & Marketing
On moving the iPod generation into quality listening, and thwarting ambitions of jazz greatness



James Tanner says he came to music and audio 'biologically' – my father was an avid audiophile and back in those days very much a hobbyist, always trying different speakers and electronics in search of the holy grail.

I took trumpet in my first year of high school, but when I failed my final exam by not being able to play 'Twinkle, twinkle, little star' adequately, I realised my dream of being the next Louis Armstrong was over and I'd better concentrate on the reproduction side of the music business.

He counts among his most memorable musical experiences 'sitting in and helping with a recording in Toronto at Eastern Sound with Jack Renner of Telarc Records, in 1996. We sat and discussed audio and music in the same room as Oscar Moore, Ray Brown, Roy Hargrove, Ralph Moore and Henning Pederson. I even got credit on the album for hanging around! Oscar was quite the audiophile, by the way.'

Tanner says his hope is that 'we can move the iPod generation into quality audio, as most of what I see today is young people "collecting" music rather than "listening" to music. Music has become a commodity rather than something to move the soul or stir the emotions.'

'I recently did an audio show in Montreal and I was very pleasantly surprised to see that 50 per cent of the people coming through appeared to be under 40 years old.' And he's hopeful that products such as the BDP-2 and BDA-2 will play their part in that move. 'The other important thing I see is we produce a very high quality headphone amplifier, the BHA-1, and that's selling very well indeed. So the fact that iPod headphone listeners are gravitating to quality headphones and quality headphone amplifiers might be the crack in the door.'

'What I see is young people "collecting" music rather than "listening" to music'

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