

Mighty Mini

By Daniel Kumin

Bryston Mini T Speaker System

PRICE \$8,881
(as tested)

BRYSTON'S NEW MINI T loudspeakers spoke to me early, even before I'd fully wrestled them out of their imposing, oversized packaging. And what they said was, "We were designed by guys who don't give a hamster's hindquarters for new-age cosmetics, 'break-through' transducers, or 21st-century styling: We're old school!"

For the record, Bryston Ltd.—based in the small Canadian city of Peterborough, an hour or so east of Toronto—has for decades produced some of the world's preeminent power amplifiers (also preamps, surround processors, and even the odd integrated amp), impeccable performers built to a standard of brick-house quality seldom bettered, and warrantied accordingly. If you wanted vast reserves of current, bulletproof design, road-ready ruggedness, and genuine

AT A GLANCE

+ Plus

- Outstanding sonics and dynamic ability
- Impressive bass extension from Mini-T alone
- Made in Canada, not overseas

— Minus

- Requires substantial amplifier power for best performance
- Classic boxy designs won't thrill everyone

craftsmanship, Bryston fit the bill.

Now, for reasons best known to themselves, the folks at Bryston have elected to join the circus that is the high-end loudspeaker business, with a tone-matched family of 10 models, including towers, centers, and powered subwoofers. The system under review here is formed around the Mini T, a big, boxy, heavy, and utterly conventional three-way from Bryston's "Compact" group. Compact perhaps, but the Mini T nevertheless

stretches the definition of "book-shelf" twanging-taut: Each is some 22.5 inches tall and weighs a substantial 42 pounds. And Bryston's assigned supporting-cast members for surround (Mini A), center channel (AC1 Mini), and sub (Mini T Subwoofer) are no less imposing.

All four models employ drivers with ceramic-coated aluminum cones and titanium-dome tweeters, with every transducer custom to Bryston. The story goes that development of the T series began with Bryston's James Tanner approaching his industry colleagues at nearby Axiom Audio to help him build his own personal reference loudspeaker; they were never intended to be sold. From this association grew the Model T tower, which Bryston was convinced to begin selling. He and Axiom then expanded the line to include additional models. They're manufactured in Canada by Axiom to Bryston's standards; even the A-series models, which are said to be more derivative of existing Axiom designs, are in beefier cabinets with additional cross-bracing, among other changes.

Naturally, they're all expensive speakers by everyday (though not über-high-end) standards: The full suite reviewed here comes to nearly \$9,000. So you don't select Bryston speakers for slimness, sexiness, or price. (You do get the choice of

RATING

Bryston Mini T Speaker System

Performance ★★★★★

Build Quality ★★★★★

Value ★★★★★

high-quality vinyl or optional lovely wood veneers, as reflected by the range of pricing shown for each.)

This leaves performance, clearly Bryston's only ambition in entering the madness of loudspeaker marketing for the first time. (Of course, you're also paying for made-in-Canada-not-China craftsmanship.) The Mini T is the next smallest in a range that Bryston states has been designed throughout for a classical balance of flat on-axis response and smoothly declining (off-axis) power response. These are goals that are nailed absolutely, if the manufacturer's supplied curves are to be believed—and considering the source, I certainly believe them.

My setup entailed no particular challenges beyond some heavy lifting: I placed the Mini Ts on my 28-inch stands, to which they happily fit perfectly. The surprisingly heavy AC1 Mini perched on my usual low stand, just below my 52-inch screen's bottom edge, while the Mini T Subwoofer occupied my usual woofer location just behind and outside of the right-front speaker. The Mini A surrounds, a pair of somewhat smaller 6.5-inch three-way speakers that Bryston selected to complete the suite, went on the high shelves that flank my studio's listening area. All five main speakers come with heavy, multiway binding posts.

Musical Realism

With everything in place, I forgot about the Brystons for a week of break-in by way of casual everyday playback. When I did settle down to some serious listening, I



THE VERDICT

They're big, boxy, and expensive, but these speakers are world-class performers, top to bottom.

began as always with the Mini Ts alone, running full-range without subwoofer support. Since these hefty speakers extend quite far into the true bass region, the first order of business was to find the location for the smoothest lows. Not very surprisingly, this turned out to be rather more than 7 feet out into the room; any closer to the wall, bass emphasis tended to be problematic, a phenomenon I've noticed before in my room when using stand-mounted speakers with extended low end. (The Mini Ts sounded great directly on the floor, quite near the wall but well in from the corners—thus minimizing the floor-bounce-induced dip—but this was totally impractical for a home theater layout. Maybe in a music-only system with floor-cushion seating...)

With final placement settled, what I encountered was exceptionally neutral, uncolored reproduction, with as complete an absence of discrete response anomalies as I've ever heard. The Mini Ts sounded very similar indeed to my everyday Energy Veritas speakers, also a Canadian design but much older. (This shouldn't be surprising, since virtually all Canadian speaker designers exploit the world-class speaker-measurement and test resources of Canada's National Resource Council in Ottawa, and Axiom's own anechoic chamber is

modeled after this storied facility.) If anything, the Brystons' male-vocal midrange was marginally more open and organic (which is saying something) and their top-octave reproduction a couple shades more transparent.

As already mentioned, the Mini Ts go impressively low on their own. I've recently gone over to the Dark Side, exploiting some public-domain dubstep tracks for ease in exercising subwoofers and other deep-bass denizens, and the amount of output around 30 hertz (and even a good deal lower) that the "compact" Brystons could hurl into the room was truly astonishing. When they're deployed as a full-range stereo pair, I'd expect the Mini Ts to be up for almost anything, except the kind of music (like dub!) that absolutely insists on full power from the lowest octave. Even in my 2,800-ish-cubic-foot studio, stereo playback of most full-orchestra music at realistic levels was child's play to the Mini Ts, which cheerfully absorbed all of my 150-watt power amp's output with no hint of distress or dynamic compression. Given suitable power—which Bryston can of course supply in spades—they likely could do so even in larger

BRYSTON MINI T SPEAKER SYSTEM

PRICE: \$8,881 as tested (Mini T, \$2,876–\$3,695 pr; AC1 Mini, \$1,250–\$1,750; Mini A, \$1,200–\$1,620 pr; Mini T Subwoofer, \$3,236–\$3,995)
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rooms, though any of Bryston's several larger tower models would doubtless do even better.

Overall, the Mini T's sound was remarkably neutral. Rich high-frequency content like brushed cymbals was persuasively present without the "ting" or "tizz" that high-frequency peaks can impart, and the vocal octaves, to which our ears are most attuned, were virtually perfect. The Brystons passed the James Taylor/Jackson Browne/Joan Baez test by declining to make the first sound any bassier, the second any honkier, and the third any flutier than each should. (It's a rare speaker that doesn't add a touch to one or another.) The soundstage on natural-acoustic recordings was quite good: The Mini Ts conjured at least an extra speaker's width beyond their physical placement and a modest but quite audible sense of depth, while left-to-right localization and stability were superb.

Stereo listening whetted my appetite for multichannel, sharply. The Mini T Subwoofer turned out to be an easy setup. It's a vertical dual-8-inch, 600-watt (since it's from Bryston, presumably honestly rated watts!) design that looks like the Mini T's well-fed big brother (though the sub is the only sealed-enclosure member of the suite). It's not particularly compact in cubic-volume terms, but its comparatively tall and slim layout



● The Mini T (top) and Mini A both sport magnetically attached, removable grilles.

might just raise its livability quotient in many cases. The sub provides the usual crossover and control complement, with both balanced-line and high-level inputs (the latter somewhat unusual in a high-end subwoofer), along with conventional RCA line inputs and a defeatable subsonic filter. As always, though, I used my pre/pro's crossover, settling on 50 Hz (even though the Mini Ts go considerably lower.) This frequency was chosen in an attempt to tame the last bit of midbass buildup in the room. I really couldn't pull the speakers any further out from the wall! (The Mini T Sub has no auto-on/off feature but does include a 12-volt trigger facility. It also proffers a USB port that isn't mentioned in any of Bryston's literature and didn't seem to be live, so is likely to only be useful in the event of future software updates.)

The result was outstanding subwoofer-satellite integration with



TEST REPORT



● **The Mini T Subwoofer** features speaker-level inputs.

very little fuss, so with the 5.1 layout fully balanced up, I played a favored SACD of Mahler's Third Symphony, and the hackles of my neck rose immediately. These

Brystons are immensely transparent speakers: I could hear the full depth and breadth of the huge orchestra, and the powerful brass statements and restatements of the opening theme were chillingly lifelike. I had no difficulty reproducing this ultra-large-scale recording at an actual concert level, but doing so demanded a volume setting on my preamp just 1 decibel below THX reference level—no shock there, as none of these are rated a particularly high-sensitivity loudspeaker. (The Mini T is specified at 86 dB SPL at 1 watt/meter, about 2 to 3 dB less sensitive than many a similar-size speaker.) So in a substantially larger room, even more amplifier power would by no means be out of order. [Ed. Note: Indeed, our lab tests came up with 82 dB sensitivity, even louder than the stated spec, and confirmed the rated 4-ohm impedance. A tough load, are these.—RS]

Nor were the Mini T and its mates impressive only on the big stuff. A Channel Classics SACD of Franck's Sonata in A (the cello version) was truly mesmerizing: Violoncello tonality and expression, from the lowest C to the highest harmonics, were as convincing as I've ever heard from reproduced sound. A couple of favorite Tower of Power tracks streamed from my library also enthralled: The Mini T delivered sharply lifelike edges to brass transients, and the "puff" of a Hammond B3 stabbed with mighty realism.

High-Impact Movies

Given the Brystons' music performance, I had little fear that movie sound would reproduce just as effectively. When I dipped into my Blu-ray stash more or less at random—the 'copter scenes from *Black Hawk Down*, the storm sequence from *Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World*, pretty much any random



chapter from *Avatar*—my impression was confirmed.

The AC1 Mini center makes an almost perfect tonal match to the Mini Ts, so the front stage was seamless and lateral pans buttery smooth. (Though the AC1 Mini sounded just marginally brighter than the Mini Ts, which may or may not have been a deliberate, dialogue-sharpening design choice.) At the surround positions, the Mini As suffer the liability, in my book, of not being a dipole or surround-dedicated bipole design, but they are very fine speakers nevertheless. (They're a very close tonal match to the Mini Ts above 50 Hz or so.) With judicious placement, washing along my side walls, they worked fine, providing quite decent envelopment and more than enough dynamic ability for this service.

Put all of that together, and the system's performance on material like the opening attack sequence from *Pearl Harbor* (the film's only 20 minutes worth mentioning) was as high-impact as I've ever experienced. Here, as elsewhere, the Mini T Subwoofer shone as a highly capable deep-bass provider. It proved fully able to keep up, dynamically, with the Mini Ts on the most challenging deep-bass episodes, even to well beyond my normal overall volume tolerance. But I felt that surround music was what really showed the Brystons to fullest advantage. The restrained credits music of *Saving Private Ryan* may not be Maestro John Williams' most stirring opus, but the Blu-ray's sonic presentation was a knockout: broad, deep, superbly detailed, totally spatially integrated, and tonally perfect.

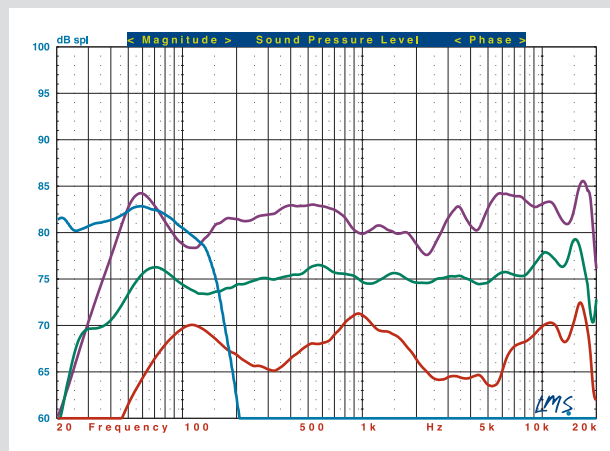
These are, in short, very, very well-executed loudspeakers, crafted

RATING

Bryston Mini T Subwoofer
Performance ★★★★★
Features ★★★★★
Build Quality ★★★★★
Value ★★★★★

Test Bench

Bryston Mini T Speaker System



Mini T (purple) +2.26/−4.37 dB, 200 Hz to 10 kHz; −3 dB @ 39 Hz, −6 dB @ 34 Hz; impedance minimum 4.65 ohms @ 38 Hz, phase angle +31.94° @ 52 Hz; sensitivity 82 dB from 500 Hz to 2 kHz.

AC1 Mini (green) +2.14/−1.09 dB, 200 Hz to 10 kHz; −3 dB @ 53 Hz, −6 dB @ 44 Hz; impedance minimum 4.22 ohms @ 1.5 kHz, phase angle +46.51° @ 2.0 kHz; sensitivity 85.5 dB, 500 Hz to 2 kHz.

Mini A (red) +2.26/−5.56 dB, 200 Hz to 10 kHz; −3 dB @ 68 Hz, −6 dB @ 55 Hz; impedance minimum 3.31 ohms @ 992 Hz, phase angle −47.12° @ 111 Hz; sensitivity 84 dB, 500 Hz to 2 kHz.

Mini T Subwoofer (blue) Close-miked response, normalized to level @ 80 Hz: lower −3 dB @ 18 Hz, −6 dB @ 16 Hz, upper −3 dB @ 125 Hz with Crossover control set to maximum.—MJP

SPECS

Mini T 8 in aluminum-cone woofer, 5.25 in aluminum-cone midrange, 1 in titanium-dome tweeter; 10.5 x 22.5 x 10 in (WxHxD); 42 lb • **AC1 Mini** 6.5 in aluminum-cone woofer (2), 5.25 in aluminum-cone midrange, 1 in titanium-dome tweeter; 30 x 11.5 x 13.9 in (WxHxD); 48 lb • **Mini A** 6.5 in aluminum-cone woofer, 3 in aluminum-cone midrange, 1 in titanium-dome tweeter; 8.5 x 15.5 x 8.25 in (WxHxD); 11 lb • **Mini T Subwoofer** 8 in aluminum-cone woofer (2); 600 watts RMS; sealed enclosure; 1-channel balanced (XLR) and unbalanced (RCA) line input and output, stereo speaker-level (5-way binding posts) input; defeatable subsonic filter; 12-volt trigger in/out; USB port; 10.5 x 25.5 x 19 in (WxHxD); 75 lb

and finished to Bryston's long-established high standards, speakers that will fully reveal what is on a recording for better or for worse. They are also big, heavy, and expensive, and (especially with the Mini T's

two-piece magnetic-stick grilles in place) they look more 1974 than 2014. But I'd wager that the potential owners Bryston has in mind—serious serious audiophiles—won't give a hamster's hindquarters either. ♦

I'd expect the Mini Ts to be up for almost anything.

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