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MEMO: To All Bryston Customers

SUBJECT: Bryston Headphone Review from Germany

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TEST

BRYSTON BHA-1

August 2015 // Dirk Sommer



Bryston's smallest stereo power amplifier 2B LP PRO has for years been the reliable power source for my monitors with recordings that I mix using loudspeakers. However its multifold connection possibilities also make it interesting for the enjoyment of music of the highest quality within the home environment.

Since I am the proud owner of a pair of Audeze LCD-X headphones, I have been waiting for an



opportunity to try them out in balanced mode. With the Bryston BHA-1 headphone amplifier that is no problem because it offers beside the usual 6.3 mm. (1/4 inch) jack for unbalanced operation, as well as one four pole XLR jack and two classical three pole XLR jacks for the channel separated balanced connection.

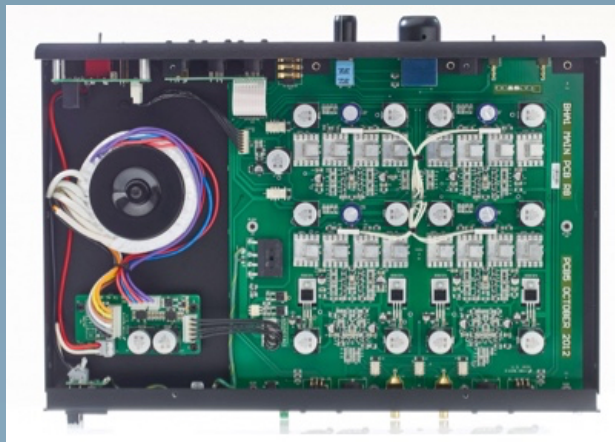


Also on the input side the BHA-1 shows itself to be quite flexible: There is a balanced XLR input, and for unbalanced sources there are a pair of RCA jacks and a 3.5 mm. jack available which can be selected via a small switch on the front side

A switch of the same type permits the choice between two amplification gain choices, i.e. 14 or 20 decibels can be chosen. Thereby it is ensured that on one hand enough reserves are available, on the other hand that the volume control is operating within an optimal range. Incidentally the volume control is made by the renowned ALPS Company. Furthermore Bryston is supplying a balance control with a center detent. On the backside besides the inputs there is also a balanced output for connection to active speakers or amplifiers. Therefore the signal is not merely just passed through, but it is amplified by the Bryston BHA-1 and adjustable for volume, which also allows it to be used as a purist preamp. Two miniature screw terminals for small diameter wires with a trigger voltage for remotely controlling the BHA-1 complete the configuration.



Amplification is provided by an aggregate of six completely discrete built-up Bryston Class A op amps, of which one each serves as the input stage for each of the two stereo channels. Two more work as bridged outputs for each channel, assuming that balanced headphones are connected. The unbalanced input is only supplied by one each of these special op amps per channel. Even though the BHA-1 amp can accommodate several headphones in parallel, their total impedance may not be lower than 32 ohms, and an unbalanced headphone may not be used with an adapter in the balanced outputs.



merely passed through.

For this purpose an RCA Y cable should be used. But listening to music with headphones is mostly an individual pleasure, and the parallel use of several headsets I can at most envision in a studio, and even there everyone will want to control their own volume level. In any case, I do not miss a second or third RCA output jack. In my opinion the BHA-1 only leaves one wish open, namely it could be used even more flexibly if one could choose, by means of a switch, whether the XLR output signal is volume controlled or

For test purposes I connected the Bryston BHA-1 by means of a balanced cable directly with the outputs of the M2Tech Young DSD D/A converter. Since the Melco clearly outclassed the iMac as a data source, it was to show its qualities in connection with a streamer in a chain of my colleague Roland Dietl, I had no choice but to once again use my computer including an Amarra music player as a source. For a first comparison between balanced and unbalanced operating mode of the Audeze LCD-X headphones, I chose songs from Jonas Hellborg's bass-spectacle The Silent Life: Down to the very lowest bass region the differences between both amplifying modes are quite minimal. But when one wants to show how bass frequencies in – an imaginary? – room expand, then the bridged operation of the special Bryston op amps provide more solid fundamentals with clearly more information. While enjoying music through loudspeakers I would describe this frequency spectrum as one where one does not only hear sound, but where one also feels it.

Here the balanced mode offers clear advantages. While testing the SPL Phonitor 2 headphone amplifier, I unfortunately used no disc, but which I will now quickly catch up on. Although the SPL headphone amp only provides unbalanced input, it also provides almost subsonic frequencies, however its reproduction in comparison to the Bryston sounds minimally veiled. But as soon as I have activated the loudspeaker matrix of the Phonitor, it sounds more airy and spatial. Despite this, with Hellborgs low frequency debauchery I like the BHA-1 minimally better.



An opulently dimensioned power supply is the basic prerequisite for good sound.

Furthermore when one listens to the London Symphony Orchestra under Malcolm Arnold performing the conductor's English Dances instead of a single instrument, the balanced operating mode of the BHA-1 compared to the up until a few years ago common unbalanced mode offers distinct advantages: Groups of instruments are more readily spatially differentiated, the recording environment seems more expansive and airy, and kettledrums and contra basses sound with more contour. For the Audeze headphones the investment in the Bryston balanced output stage really pays off, whereas in unbalanced mode they do not completely reach their tonal potential. To my surprise the acoustic pattern of the Phonitor 2 headphone amplifier is similar to the Bryston BHA-1 in balanced mode. However in low frequency range the SPL of the Phonitor 2 does not quite reach the precision of the BHA-1, which also cannot be improved by activating the Matrix switching. This activation imposes much less on large scale orchestral music than on pop or respective rock songs.

Van Morrison's "Whatever Happened To PJ Proby" from the Album Down The Road through the Matrix circuitry of the Phonitor 2 puts the icing on the cake for its reproduction. However I must admit that the Matrix circuitry mostly corrected otherwise unavoidable expansion of the stereo basis when listening through headphones, which bothers me less the more time I spend listening through the Audeze headsets. I do not miss the

The well-known blue ALPS control is also in the BHA-1.



absence of a BHA-1 Matrix circuit because of the more colorful, airier, and more spacious presentation of the imaginary stage of the Bryston BHA-1. In balanced mode the BHA-1 amplifier spoils with so much openness and fascinating fine dynamics that I can even savor rock music unreservedly. For completeness sake I also listen to Van Morrison's song in unbalanced mode with the Audeze LCD-X head set: The distinction declines, the sound picture is indeed less open and spatial, but rather "sticks" on the converters and seems to be unnaturally widely spread. Whoever uses the Bryston BHA-1 with unbalanced wired headphones does not by far reach the enjoyment of its tonal capabilities.

Instead of testing the BHA-1 as an extremely puristic preamp – most home audio systems will have more sources than can be connected to the Bryston headphone amplifier, usage in a studio is more probable – I simply listened to some music using the combination of the Audeze headphones and the Bryston BHA-1 amplifier, and I was astonished again and again how dead-on for example in Keith Jarrett's Köln Concert the difficult balance between detailed openness and tonal balance is established. The grand piano is not a major instrument here, and it also was not melodiously and sonorously recorded, but the Bryston BHA-1 and the Audeze LCD-X earphones succeeded in heaving a large amount of public noises over the threshold of perception without letting the piano clatter unpleasantly. OK, the Audeze headphones leave the path of virtue in this low frequency range, but I have never before so clearly heard the entry of the damper pedal. I could continue the enumeration of newly discovered details virtually at random, because I have rarely heard so much music with a combination of this excellence. At the moment with the prevailing temperatures in my office this is clearly more pleasant than turning on my tube amplifier.

STATEMENT

The BHA-1 headphone amplifier is sensibly equipped as is no differently to be expected from Bryston, superbly built, and really sounds great. With a balanced headset of Audeze class it is a tonal revelation. The Bryston amplifier and headphones in this mode of operation again and again show their amazing potential.

LISTENED WITH

Computer	iMac 27", 3.06 GHz Intel Core 2 Duo, OS X Version 10.10.2
Audio Player	Amarra Symphony 2.6, Audirvana, Pure Music
CD Drive	Wadia WT3200
D/A Converter	M2Tech Young DSD and Van der Graaf
Preamp	Einstein The Preamp
Power Amplifier	Ayon Epsilon with KT150
Loudspeakers	LumenWhite Diamondlight Monitors
Headphone Amp	SPL Phonitor 2
Headphones	Audeze LCD-X and EL-8 Closed Back, PSB M4U, Ergo 2
Cables	Precision Interface Technology, HMS Gran Finale Jubilee, Audioquest, Swiss Cables Reference, Goebel High End Lacorde
Accessories	PS Audio Power P5, Clearaudio Matrix, Sun Rail, Audioplan Powerstar HMS-Wall Socket, Acapella Bases, Acoustic System Feet and Resonators, Artesania Exoteric Rack, Harmonix Real Focus, Audio Exclusiv Silent Plug.

Translated from the German by Peter Ullman