

1000 WATTS OF REFINEMENT

BRYSTON'S NEW 28B-SST MONOBLOCKS REVEAL DELICATE NUANCES IN THE MUSIC

BY ERNIE FISHER | PHOTOGRAPHY BY VINCENT PRESS



Tremendous power is coupled with incredible weight: nearly 100 pounds per monoblock.

FACTS

MODEL
28B-SST
monoblock
amplifier

MANUFACTURER
Bryston Limited

DIMENSIONS
8 (h) 19 (w) 19 (d)
(rack mountable)

8 (h) 17 (w) 19 (d)
(C-series face plate)

WEIGHT
95 lbs per
monoblock

FASCIA OPTIONS
silver; black

RATING
♪♪♪♪

PRICE (US)
\$7,000 each

CONTACT
Bryston Limited
705.742.5325
800.334.1202
bryston.com

I SUSPECT THAT MOST audiophiles know of Bryston Limited as do those beyond the audiophile camp. Around for more than 40 years, Bryston is one of the few equipment companies catering to both the audiophile community and the professional audio industry, including film and recording studios. *The Inner Ear* has reviewed most of Bryston's gear and, over the years, I have noticed that the company has gradually but consistently upgraded its designs—raising the sonic bar at each stage.

With the introduction of the 28B-SST monoblocks, a powerful pair of amps indeed, Bryston has approached what I consider to be a benchmark for the design of high-end, high-performance audio. More about this later; first let's look at some of the details.

Appearance

ONCE YOU'VE SEEN one Bryston amp, you've seen them all. Though different in weight and dimensions, Bryston amplifiers have retained a signature appearance through various iterations. Unlike others I do not find such consistency offensive... it matters not to me, as I am focused on performance.

At 95 pounds, each of these monoblock amplifiers is heavy enough to cause an inguinal hernia, so I recommend the help of a friend to move them into position—preferably close to the loudspeakers. Part of the incredible weight can be attributed to the balanced configuration (two amps in each monoblock) and the massive heat sinks on both sides of each amp.

The Sound

AS THEY ARRIVED at the same time, I first connected these amplifiers to the WLM Diva loudspeakers (reviewed in this issue). Once connected to these very efficient speakers, I fired up the 28B-SSTs and both Bryston's James Tanner (who helped me move these monster monoblocks around) and I did an instant double take. The sound of this system combination was not just good, it was outstanding. Both the monoblocks and loudspeakers had been burned in and our astonishment related to the extent of "musicality" obviously unexpected by either one of us. This was but an indication of what was to follow.

When Tanner left, I began my customary testing routine. I had three preamps on hand, our in-house Wyetech Labs Opal (reviewed in Vol. 10, No. 2), the Sim Audio P-8 and the ModWright Instruments SWL 9.0SE (both reviewed in this issue). I rotated them in and out of the system and each preamplifier allowed a clear insight into the Bryston's performance.

The Opal/Bryston and P-8/Bryston combinations proved to be more revealing, to be sure, than the ModWright/Bryston pairing, but I'd have to admit that the sound of the latter combo was a touch more musically pleasing. I don't mean that it was better, just different, and very pleasing to the ears.

With the Opal, bass was 100% resolute, right

down to pedal-note territory, while with the ModWright, bass was less firm, but still defined enough to reveal the Brystons' control. Both preamps confirmed the 28B-SST's midbass veracity—that's the region from about 40Hz to 90Hz. Plucked or strummed bass, electric or upright, sounded wonderfully real; the combination readily conveyed, for example, the size and body of a traditional upright bass.

The 28B-SST's midrange reproduction—from about 170Hz to 1300Hz—has to be an industry first among powerful solid-state designs. Instruments performing in this region did not sound even remotely close to what a typical solid-state design produces. With the Bryston, the smoothness and bloom reminded me of what I hear from a good single-ended vacuum tube amp. This may not be to everyone's liking, but I enjoyed the Bryston's brawn at the bass seamlessly coupling with the smoothness in the midrange, the region where male and female voices and many instruments perform.

The only frequency range in which reproduction wasn't as smooth as one would get from a really great single-ended amp, was between about 12kHz and 20kHz. While the 28B-SSTs provided just enough smoothness to make a noticeable difference (compared to the 7B-SST, for example), they didn't wrap up with tube-like "sweetness." However, most single-ended amps do not finish top and bottom frequencies entirely without imperfec-

**Our
astonishment
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result of
the level of
musicality we
experienced**

TECHNOLOGY

THE MOST IMPORTANT thing to know about the Bryston 28B-SST monoblock power amplifiers is that they are rated at 1000 watts (each), although they can provide up to about 1,200 watts per channel. Irrespective of the load of any speaker under the sun, these fully balanced amps will drive it to ear-bleeding levels. To

accomplish this feat, Bryston's head designer, Stuart Taylor, designed a new input circuit to work with 32 output devices and capacitance of more than 160,000 micro farads. The amps have no wiring in the audio (power) signal path and also have extremely low distortion—typically 0.005% from 20Hz to 20kHz at 8 ohms.

However, for me, the most impressive measurement is the signal-to-noise ratio—an astounding 118dB.

Other features include newly-designed input circuitry, extremely low noise—typically <-118dB—selectable gain (2V-23dB and 1V-29dB), a greatly improved common mode rejection ratio (which

reflects the cancellation in a balanced line of common mode signals induced into it), two sets of speaker outputs for bi-wire connection and a remote 12-volt power trigger input. The input impedance is rated at 50 kohms for single-ended and 60 kohms balanced operation.

I hadn't expected to hear a pair of 1000 watt amplifiers exhibit that kind of sonic finesse

tions. Those who want the aforementioned "sweetness" can attain it with the ModWright preamplifier, as I did during my listening tests. What you can expect from this combination is well-controlled bass, a blossoming midrange and sweet top-end frequencies.

You should also know that these Bryston monoblocks provide resolution with unwavering proficiency. This simply means that the sound reproduction permits listeners to discern and understand the musical lines and instruments making up a performance. Of course, most preamplifiers add their own individual "personality," and while the three I used clearly demonstrated the Brystons' sonic attributes, I'd personally opt for the more neutral-sounding Sim Audio P-8 or the Wyetech Opal, if money were no object.

Imaging can be best described as the accuracy with which an amplifier, or more precisely, a system, re-creates the original arrangement of instruments; their size and location on a sound stage. Clearly, the 28B-SST contributes to imaging, but so does the source/preamp and speaker combination. The loudspeakers I used for this evaluation come in at different price points, though it must be said that each of them is of top quality. I began with the WLM Divas, continued with the Monitor Audio GS60s and the Coincident Technology Total Victory IIIs (all reviewed in this issue) and finally, because they were on hand, I connected the WLM Gran Violas (reviewed in Vol. 16, No. 4). As revealed by the various preamp/speaker combinations I threw into the mix, an impressive sound stage with clearly defined borders can be attributed to the Bryston amps. All speakers sounded good with the Bryston amps, offering synergy and revealing the amplifiers' superb sonic imprint. To find out more about the sound of the loudspeakers themselves, please read the reviews, which will help you to make better decisions about each product.

Synopsis & Commentary

WHEN THE 28B-SSTS get hot—and they will after playing for a couple of hours—they sound hot (I mean that in a positive sense). They can sizzle, and I had them cooking up a lot of wonderful music. Some of my guest listeners could not accept that these monoblocks sounded closer to tube designs

than to solid state. Why, you ask? Here's the short answer. Generally, powerful amplifiers tend to generate loads of kinetic energy, yet they often fail to correctly deal with delicate tonal hues and timbres. The widespread opinion of most in the business—including this reviewer—is that low-powered amplifiers better convey such nuance and musicality. However, exceptions to the rule exist—and the Bryston 28B-SSTs are ideal examples.

I had expected to hear/see a really good amplifier, based on my earlier reviews of the Bryston 7B-SST and 14B-SST, but I hadn't expected to hear a pair of 1000 watt amplifiers exhibit the kind of sonic sophistication found chiefly among expensive low-powered amps. If you have a power-hungry pair of speakers, the 28B-SSTs will make them sing; but don't let that opinion hold you back if you prefer very efficient speakers. My tests clearly show that loads of power prevents amplifiers from labouring or clipping. The 28B-SST has enough power and, chances are, you will never use all of it—which can be a good thing indeed.

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