



BRYSTON BCD-1 PLAYER

So here we are at the end of 2007, with everyone predicting the death of the Compact Disc. And here's Bryston, which has been building audiophile and professional electronics since at least the 1970's, finally bringing out its *first* digital player. What's up with that?

We don't mean to suggest that Bryston is new at the digital game. It has long offered other digital products, including digital-to-analog converter circuits, preamplifiers with digital inputs, and home theatre audio processors. No, this is more of a marketing question: is this the right time to be getting into the CD player business?

Bryston believes it is, that the proliferation of music in harsh, unmusical MP3, WMA and AAC compressed formats has awakened a thirst for something better among more discerning music lovers. The same thirst, it could be said, is at the origin of a modest but notable revival of analog.

The transport of the BCD-1 is from Philips, supplier to almost everyone, and the Crystal CS4398 converter chip is a hybrid device, using both multibit and Delta-Sigma processing and 128-time oversampling. What Bryston brings to the table, however, is its long experience in analog design. The operational amplifiers treating the analog signal use

discrete transistors, not chips. Great care has been taken in the design of power supplies for both analog and digital circuits, and proper grounding techniques (a mystery for too many designers, alas) have been used.

We like the green fluorescent display, and the fact that its two lines show somewhat more information than most (we still wish it were bigger, and thus readable from across the room). We also like the brushed metal remote control, whose legends light up in what looks like Indiglo green when light is low. Unique! You need a screwdriver to change the (pre-installed) batteries, but we're happy to say they're alkalines, not the leak-prone "super heavy duty" cells we see too often.

In contrast to the remote, the player itself is by no means flashy. The front panel is nicely finished but not truly distinctive, and the rest of the player is a plain black box. The disc drawer opens instantly when the appropriate button is pushed, and we were disappointed to see

that the drawer is of particularly flimsy plastic. We can understand why Bryston wanted to hold the price down, but the drawer is something you touch each time you change a CD.

The rear panel has both RCA and XLR connections for everything, as you would expect from a company that has one foot in the professional sound world. The RCA jacks are so-so.

Though Bryston runs all of its products in for a number of hours, we gave it three more days of continuous duty before we installed it in our Alpha system, and pitted it against our Linn Unidisk reference player.

We began the evaluation with a recording that had just arrived, a set of Mozart violin concertos on Norway's 2L label. This two-disc set includes an SACD, but of course we selected the Red Book CD for this session. We listened to the *Rondeau* from the *Concerto No. 4 in D Major*.

It was obvious from the first measures that the Bryston offers a broad and well-balanced spectral range. We had however some difficulty finding a volume level that seemed right, though we had had no such problem with our own player.

A bit of experimentation revealed the reason. There is a lot of high frequency content in the strings on this record-

Just in time for the CD's silver jubilee, Bryston's very first CD player

ing, and a hint of asperity made some passages sound a little louder than they really were. It was *no more* than a hint in fact, and we didn't initially notice the effect because the sound was by no means shrill. Once we had found a comfortable volume, we admired the beauty of Marianne Thorsen's violin tone, and the virtuosity with which she interprets this familiar concerto.

Indeed, we quickly concentrated on the player's many qualities. The rhythm was lively, the music full of joy. The stereo image was precise, letting us hear where each instrument was placed, something you would hear only if you had bought top tier concert tickets. We had a good sense of the hall's acoustics too. The conclusion? "It's got energy," said Reine, "and *that* is Mozart."

How would the player do with a female voice, always a potential trap for any CD player? We pulled out soprano Isabel Bayrakdarian's superb recording of songs by Pauline Viardot-Garcia (Analekta AN 2 9903), selecting the song *Hai Luli*. Would there be a problem? Not a bit.

True, the tone of Bayrakdarian's voice was altered a little, and Albert thought her singing was not quite as effortless, but it wasn't possible to be sure whether the alteration was for better or for worse. The words of the song were clear as spring water, and the notes of Serouj Kradjian's piano flowed like a mountain stream. The considerable space audible on this recording remained vast. We pronounced ourselves more than pleased with what we had heard.

Our next recording was a different sort of challenge. It's a wind band piece composed by Stephen McNeff, titled *Ghosts*. That is indeed the title of the album (Klavier K11150), featuring the redundantly-named Philharmonia à Vent Wind Orchestra, conducted by John Boyd.

This is not the usual wind band bravura piece, nor is it a march. It opens with a rattling of chains in the distance, and there is the uncanny illusion that all is happening well out beyond the walls of the listening room. This somewhat worrisome manifestation is followed by a dramatic rumble of horns and tubas, announcing a powerful cataclysm by

THE CD PLAYER'S MISSING JACK

It's a serious problem, and it isn't confined to any one brand. Pretty much any player we've seen has an important jack missing.

Which one? Any player will have a digital output for use with an outboard digital-to-analog converter, even players so expensive that using one as a mere transports seems like insanity. But where's the digital *input*?

Think about it. More and more, the computer and its associated network will become an important music source, and a high quality source at that. Modern computers have *analog* outputs, but you don't expect hi-fi from that. Some computers, however, also have digital outputs, as do some wireless peripherals. You can run that output into your standalone converter...*if you have one*.

If you own a quality CD player, a good deal of attention has been given to its converter and its associated analog circuitry. Indeed, the converter may account for much of the player's cost, since few companies make their own transports. So here you are, with a good player, and a top-grade converter that could also be used with external digital sources...except that *there's no friggin' digital input!*

We would like to see a digital input on every player costing more than maybe \$500. And while we're at it, we'd like to see a USB input too. That would make a good CD player not only more valuable, but also future-proof.

So who does this now? Hardly anyone. It's time that changed.

the whole band. It is tense, evocative music.

The player did wonderfully well with it. In the opening, the depth was about as good as it gets, another indication that this player has little difficulty with the subtle cues that depth is built upon. The lateral image was exemplary as well.

But depth and image are one thing, musical values are another. The low-pitched brass was as dramatic as we had hoped, with power that added a sense of foreboding. Clarinets leapt out like little phantoms, with malicious woodiness. The tutti that followed wasn't quite as coherent as with our own player, but the experience was so seamless that we could find little fault with it. Reine particularly

praised the impact of the drums and the shimmer of the cymbals. This is a difficult piece to do justice to, but it all worked.

We had two more female voices waiting in the wings.

The first was that of Joan Baez, in a European re-release of the Robbie Robertson song, *The Night They Drove Old Dixie Down* (Vanguard VPCD7104). Her soaring voice was clear, her usual characteristics perhaps more emphasized, the lyrics easy to follow. The guitar, which provides the beat, seemed more prominent, and thus less warm.

There was also a change in the background choral voices that sing the chorus, but not at the expense of clarity. Indeed, it was now easier to distinguish among those singers, and that added to the bittersweet tone of the song.

The second, and final, female voice was that of Margie Gibson. We often end a session with her, because her songs are especially revealing of finesse of performance, and also because we can think of no better way to wind up the day. So... Margie, with the song *The Best Thing For You*.

Even small flaws in a player's performance will pop up like a jack-in-the-box with this recording. We were happy to

SUMMING IT UP...

Brand/model: Bryston BCD-1

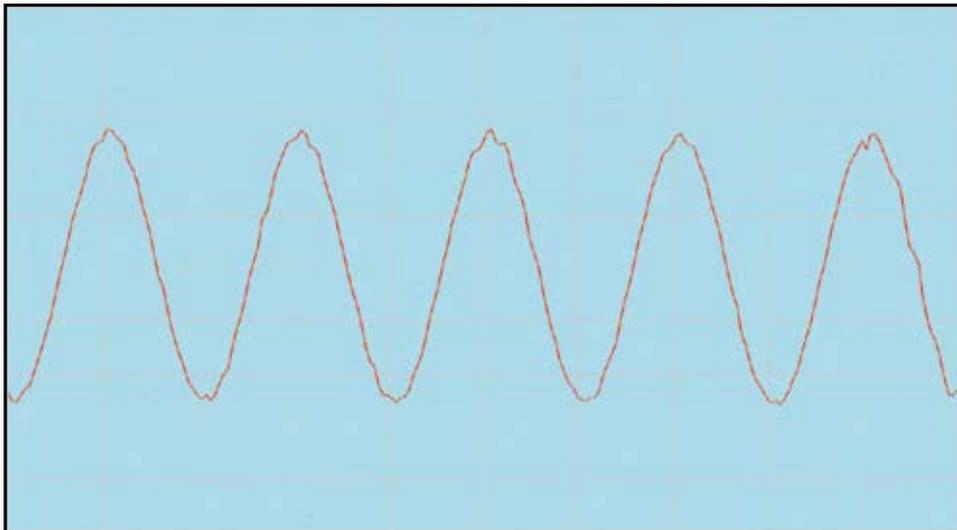
Price: C\$2395

Size (WDH): 43.2 x 28 x 8.5 cm

Most liked: Very good clarity, fine tonal balance, strong rhythm

Least liked: Minor asperity at the top end, can't read some signals (see text)

Verdict: Bryston aims for the sweet spot, nails it



which is the way things should work.

The low-level wave, recorded 60 dB below the CD's full level, is shown at left. It is very good, with little contamination by noise. It doesn't always look this pretty.

What we *can't* show you is the 100 Hz square wave we like to run. We had so much trouble with the reading we were convinced our equipment was misbehaving, and we actually downloaded a software update. It didn't help.

The Bryston, it turns out, doesn't like square waves. Each time we tried to read one, the player thought it was seeing a data disc (the word *data* actually appeared on the screen), and it muted its output. But we were relieved to find it wasn't our fault!

Our conclusion is that, if Bryston has taken its own sweet time finally bringing out a digital player, it hasn't been wasting the years. The BCD-1 is a thoroughly modern Compact Disc player with excellent musical performance.

By the way, as the BCD-1 finds its way into stores worldwide, Bryston has announced a new standalone converter. It may be one to watch.



see that none did. Margie's voice was clear and natural, with "S" sounds that were normal. There was the smallest of differences compared to our reference player, but the expressiveness of her voice was so delightful it scarcely mattered. The accompanying instruments — piano, bass, cello and drums — were delightful. Musically, and in every other way, the song worked.

Indeed, we could and did say the same thing about all of the recordings used in

this session. The music worked on every piece we listened to.

We took the Bryston into the lab and proceeded to run some of our usual batch of instrument tests. The jitter was so low we actually couldn't read it. And even playing tracks deliberately sliced through by a laser had little effect on jitter. Amazing! With a wide (2 mm) laser cut across the track, the BCD-1 began letting through uncorrected noise bursts. On the tracks that followed the player simply muted,

CROSSTALK

This player, at several levels and across a variety of musical types, offers all of the qualities of a true audiophile product. It projects a satisfying image, with a sumptuous bottom end, a very good spectral balance, exemplary clarity for a multitude of details, and the fidelity needed to reproduce virtuosity and move the emotions. In general musical timbres are gorgeous, and rhythm is involving.

I do have a small reservation concerning a singer whose voice is naturally nasal and was even more so with the Bryston. But I was won over by those dazzling cymbals, tubas and horns that combined their weight in superb fashion. And amid all that joyful noise, a melody continued, easy to follow.

This is, in short, an excellent product that merits your consideration.

—Reine Lessard

An excellent player. Ready to play anything you choose. No questions asked,

no worries. Feed it a lively piece and your listening room will light up with bursts of fireworks. Ask it to sing for you, and you'll hear a voice you love as you've never heard it before, but wished you had.

This player has a straightforward style of performance, with little need to smooth out the wrinkles. If one of your recordings appears really close-miked on your existing player, prepare to dive right into it with this one.

And yet it also has a wonderful way with large spaces, offering no place to hide for the slightest sound, whether a barely brushed cymbal or a faint rattle. Hey, you'll probably catch the crinkle of a candy wrapper in a live performance — being slowly unwrapped on the first balcony.

—Albert Simon

It seems obvious that Bryston has worked to hold the price down on its first player, but then it usually does that. The Bryston

philosophy — and I think that one has emerged over the years — leaves little room for eye candy, esoterism, and irrelevant gewgaws. The result is that a lot of Bryston products don't look as flashy as those of the best-known high end manufacturers, but they don't cost like it either.

The BCD-1 is squarely in line with that philosophy. It looks downright austere, but there's nothing austere about the way it reproduces music. The range of frequencies is broad — and that includes the bottom end, which some players all but lop off — and it is in balance. Rhythm is excellent (we've heard a lot of players get that wrong, wrong, wrong). And the high end can fairly be called musical.

This is no entry-level player, not unless you're a lot richer than most of us, but it hits the sweet spot: the price is one you can at least eventually aspire to, and so is the sound.

—Gerard Rejskind