

BRYSTON

A Lifetime of Music

MEMO: To All Bryston Customers

SUBJECT: Bryston B135 SST2 Review in Germany

fairaudio
klare worte. guter ton.

Bryston B-135 SST2 Integrated Amplifier Fantastic Classic ?

September 2015 / Frank Hakopians



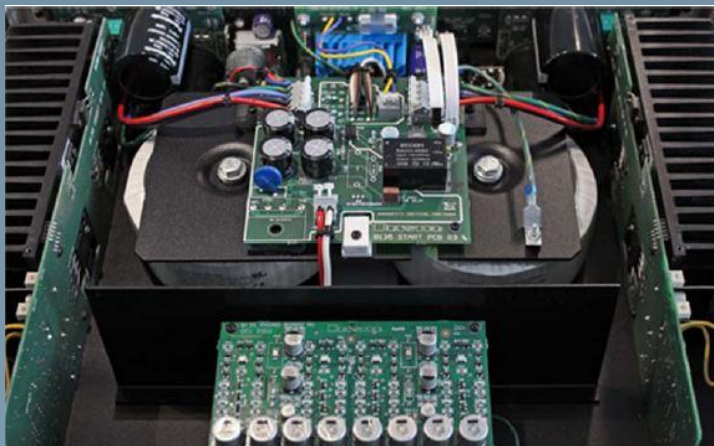
When you think about Canada don't endless forests, gigantic lakes, and red clad Mounties, or even delectable maple syrup immediately come to mind? Or HiFi ? Really, quite seriously. Indeed the second largest country of the world in area has quite a bit to offer in this field. Fine loudspeaker creations from Verity Audio and Totem Acoustic, Oracle with the legendary, now in its sixth incarnation in the marketplace, Delphi Premium Power Trains or Tenor Audio, a manufacturer of likewise costly as well as uncompromising amplifier technology, in order to just name a few flagships of an unexpectedly active HiFi scene.



But naturally also Bryston (Distributor: www.avitech.at) may not be left out here. After all this company with its founding date of 1962 belongs so to speak to the primeval bedrock of Canadian High End. The company, at home in Peterborough in the Province of Ontario, has transformed itself over the years into an almost full line supplier.

However it was especially the amplifiers which justified its good name in reference to longevity and tonal excellence. Therefore the B-135 SST2 integrated amplifier is consequently the subject of our test. It is the larger of the two integrated amplifiers from Bryston and shows up with 14 unpretentious Kilograms on the scale. Not really a heavyweight, however one does not have to deviate from the almost proverbial high solidity and dependability inasmuch as the Bryston B-135 SS2T comes with a twenty year warranty promise, including transferability to subsequent owners.

Our test amplifier not only has an MM phono stage on board, but also a high end D/A converter. With these – however extra charge – options, the B-135 becomes the central building block of the HiFi chain,



one with proper energy because the prospect promises 2 x 135 lively watts into 8 ohms. Naturally this has its price: 5,671 Euros for the basic integrated amplifier plus 488 Euros for the remote control, 996 Euros for the MM phono stage, as well as 1,631 Euros for the D/A option, so that ultimately we do arrive at quite a substantial sum.

In order to compensate for this expense the B-135 SST2 amplifier gleams with a substantial final stage, which obtains its current from two separate channel toroidal transformers which operate in closed loop Class AB operation. A truly classical amplifier design conceptually almost as far away from the not always tonally satisfactory Class D operation with switching power supply, as the earth is from Mars. The preamplifier section sits directly behind the inputs, and this section also contains the DAC and the MM Phono PC boards. Each toroidal transformer supplies 400 VA, while Panasonic capacitors with a total capacity of 60000 mfd assure stable operating conditions. A third, small size, potted transformer takes care exclusively of the requirements of the preamplifier section. Obviously the professional Canadians know exactly where doing things in a big way is worthwhile.

Finally two power transistors per channel in half wave operation suffice in order to provide the promised 135 watts output. For optimal heat dissipation these Motorola transistors are mounted directly on the heat sinks located on the sides of the cabinet. A practice-oriented solution because in continuous use the amplifier becomes lukewarm but never uncomfortably hot. Exotic materials or components cannot be found inside,



but that the components are selected according to the strictest military specifications not only for matters of defense, has something very calming about it.

The circuitry distribution of the preamp and final stage can be clearly recognized, and it is fitting that both sections, according to need, can be separately operated, consequently there is a *Preamp Output* as well as a

Poweramp Input interface. Beyond this the Bryston amp offers seven further inputs, of which however for our test amp because of the integrated Phono-MM and DAC add-on options two are reserved for these. The Aux1 pair of RCA sockets mutate to Phono, and Aux2 is converted into two electrical S/PDIF inputs which from now on only accept digital signals with a sampling rate of 96 kHz. Likewise via Toslink the Bryston also offers two times digital input. However that the B-135 SST2 denies itself an USB input I find somewhat sad.

Since the Bryston B135 SST2 is conceptualized unbalanced, there are no XLR inputs. That is logical since in general this says very little about the tonal potential of a circuit. However such an XLR input, even when it is an “unreal” one, has the unquestionable advantage of being capable of accommodating available balanced cables, and to be able to forego tonally doubtful adapter solutions. The admittedly angular loudspeaker connections, yet reminiscent of WBT types, turn out in daily usage all the more capable of good contact, they accept without question banana plugs as well as the lugs of my speaker cables, and hold these steady as a rock without a grumble.



In the listening room with the Bryston B-135 SST2

In the listening room the Bryston B-135 SST2 is assigned a nice little place on the upper of the two shelves of an Audio-Lignum rack. Playmates for the Canadian integrated amp on the speaker side are Progressive Audio's passive Extreme 1, which quasi in the aftermath of the test of the active Extreme 2, could let off some steam in my listening room. Also price technically viewed a pairing that appears to be practice-oriented.

Naturally two days of break-in time are granted to the B-135, then the amp has to show what's in it, or rather what comes out of it. My colleague Martin Mertens wholly intentionally started his detailed test of the Progressive Audio Extreme 1 with not too bass heavy music material. Well that now goes quite differently with me.

Consequently for the first round in the CD transport the Ensemble Dirondo takes on *Sister Drum of Dadawa*. At first the D to A conversion is provided by the converter of a Bladelius Gondul M CD player. A push on the little button of the remote control, and already synth basses provide a good workout through the diaphragm of the Extreme 1 speakers.



Some concern about the compact low/middle range drivers of the Progressive Audio speakers does creep over me in light of the visible vigorous membrane excursions caused by Dadawas cult disc. Unfounded I hope, after all the Extreme 1 speakers are rated down to a cutoff frequency near 35 Hz and can tolerate quite a workout. The recently mentioned Extreme 2 Aktiv speakers, which incorporate the same coaxial system,

uncomplainingly withstood the bass escapades of the Chinese artist and her cohorts, and this gave me the courage to raise the volume control still further. Actually now the Bryston should start to sweat, however it does not, but instead sends still more powerful rumbling bass thunder through the listening room.

This is certainly not shapeless blowing of smoke, which I happily noted. The bass attacks really sound correctly fat, sometimes a bit more slender, just as they are present on the CD, and blackness is also there in impeccable measure. What is possible with monitor loudspeakers like the Extreme 1 in this regard, the Bryston B-135 SST2 appears to want to arouse. Surprisingly there are only a few differences perceivable in what I hear when the nominally 2 x 250 Watt stronger Audionet AMP 1 serves as the output stage.



If one goes into a cool analysis, it merely must be noted that the Canadian in direct comparison to the Bochum (a town in Germany) output stage holds the reigns in the lower ranges somewhat looser, and because of this is a tinge less defined. Also the Dervialet D-Premier amp can, at high volume, put forward a firmer bass fundament. However despite the fact that it may play a tick softer and

rounder at the bottom than the expensive competition, the Bryston always keeps total control over the very low tones. In view of the price and performance differences to both my other amps, there is surely no reason to complain.

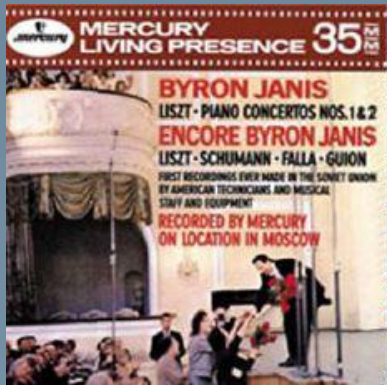
It is gratifying to note that the Bryston B-135 SST2 in the very sensitive midrange displays a really extensive pallet of acoustic color. This provides the Canadian on the one hand with something pleasurable, but at the same time does not distance it too far from the neutral calibration mark, because in contrast to many amplifiers often characterized as especially musical, it does not succumb to temptation to offer its tonal color realm with an especially thick brush.

So the Bryston 135 succeeds in reproducing the complex playing of the accordionist *Teodoro Anzellotti* (Leos Janacek/Music Edition Winter & Winter) multifaceted and timbrally well differentiated. With the same musical material a Trigon Energy integrated amplifier in the 3000 Euro price class cannot completely refute a fine gray veil in the mid/upper range. Also the Trigon amp has somewhat more difficulty separating the single tones of the swift catchy melodies of the accordion, and in comparison to the B-135 SST2 comes across almost a bit “mumbly.” With immaculate resolution in midrange the Canadian on the other hand prevents any streak of rustic accordion romance, and because of this undoubtedly becomes more responsive to the tonal richness of the instrument, rather than the Trigon amp with its energetic pullthrough and bass punch.



In the upper ranges the Bryston B-135 SST2 then withdraws a bit without thereby seeming to really appear to be opaque, and it lacks a bit of the sparkling high level energy of the Dervialet D-Premier amp. The high frequency cascades which Anzellotti piles up, glisten with the French amp like the surface of the sea in the midday sun, whereas with the Bryston it appears to be afternoon. However despite that the B-135 SST2 in no way withholds fine upper range details, but dips the in a subdued milder

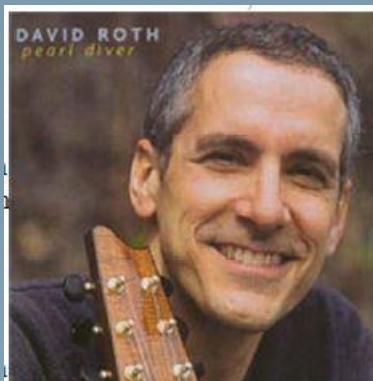
light which generally proves to be advantageous with harsh recordings and longtime listenability.



The young Austrian woman *Soe Tolloy* circulates in triple Rock, Pop, and Folk, and sounds a bit like Sophie Zelmani. However she makes an effort to provide a more optimistic stance than the not seldom leaning to melancholy Swedish singer. Unfortunately on her second album *Come on*, the person responsible for the recording had the idea to “pep up” Tolloy’s voice with artificial ambience. Naturally such bathroom atmosphere lowers the listening pleasure not insignificantly. Thanks to the tuning of the Bryston the dry hall now thankfully recedes more strongly into the background, while the voice gains in fullness and spirit. I

bet that you won’t take Soe Tolloy into your heart just because of her good looks, when you get to listen to my favorite title, the ballad “Don’t Give Up” in such a way.

The releases of the labels Dabringhaus und Grimm as a rule need no kind of support, no matter what kind, because their products stand out because of their extraordinary recording quality. *Arnold Schönberg’s Orchestral Works* is no exception here. The recording engineers of this label attach importance on accurate representation of the recording venue, in this case the Beethovenhalle in Bonn. The *Beethoven Orchester Bonn* assembles itself over the entire width of my listening room, but in return there are fewer seats available for the musicians at the bottom, consequently a spacious wide panorama is presented without excessive pronounced sonic depth.



In addition instruments and voices turn out decidedly three dimensional and concisely with the Bryston B-135 SST2. *Soe Tolloy* materializes more plastic between the two Progressive Audio loudspeakers than with the Trigon Energy amp. Furthermore *Manuela Uhl*, the soprano of the six songs of Schönberg, now does not just exist out of her mouth but thanks to the Bryston also receives the appropriate body contributed to it. Even Audionet’s Amp1 plus passive preamp Music First Audio in the Copper-Version must stretch here in order to at least achieve a standoff in this area, which in turn equals considerable praise for the integrated Bryston amp.

Let’s raise the bar for the Bryston B135 SST2 still somewhat higher in reference to its dynamic competency, and deliver a few bars of the Liszt piano concertos which were recorded by Robert Fine for the cult label Mercury for the purpose of special lifelike dynamic expansion on 35 mm magnetic film. Moreover the American pianist *Byron Janis* and the *Moscow Philharmonic Orchestra* conducted by *Kyryl Kondrashin*, really buckled down especially energetically here, because after all it was in 1962 when the concerts in Moscow were recorded by a team from the American label in the middle of

the Cold War. Conceivably the involved musicians reached their artistic limits in order to let the up-to-date system appear especially favorable, but perhaps they also did it in order to just overcome these systems. In any case the Moscow public rewarded Byron Janis, after some initial skepticism, with long and extremely heartfelt applause.

Anyhow on CD a large portion of the unrestrained joy of playing, which was captured on the original LP, could be preserved, and that now presents us a tour de force through both of the Liszt piano concertos, which I can hardly find again in my collection. As a rule so-so electronics already weed themselves out with the introductory accords of the first concerto. The Bryston B-135 SST2 does it better, it lets one feel the force of the first tones, and it does not buckle when the orchestra enters. Oh yes, the Bryston can really play with its muscles!



But also quieter tones should be lovingly cared for. Because of their enormous varied means of expression, concert grands offer the amplifying electronics ample opportunity to demonstrate their shortcomings. However the Canadian knows how to evade this pitfall, for even when Janis, in the quasi adagio of the first concerto, appears to touch the keys only very lightly, the Bryston reports nuancedly with exactly how much pressure that is just happening. Even in the slow leisure section of the concerto the nurtured tension remains completely intact. Splitting of

hairs? Certainly, but even with such criteria an amplifier in the 6,000 Euro league must be measurable, but with the Bryston B-135 SST2 one may safely forget these points.

The Optional Phonostage

Now comes the time to carefully examine the add-on options which are built-in into our amplifier under test. First of all the MM phono stage must offer proof that the almost 1,000 Euros which one must lay out for it, are a good investment. Naturally I am aware that there is definitely a fan community for MM systems, but I have never felt the urge to exchange my MCs against representatives with moving magnets. So what should I do in order to scrutinize the circuit board discretely assembled with SMD parts? For several months now my tonearm from the specialty company Analog-Tools incorporated a modified Denon DL-103R MC phono cartridge. A pairing that does its job so well that even cartridges for a few thousand Euros must be patient whether and when my Denon MC cartridge will finally give up its place in my tonearm's head shell. So it stands to reason to connect the trusted combination through an appropriate step-up transformer to the phono input of the Bryston B-135 SST2.

The step-up transformer is contributed by the English manufacturer Music First Audio. Using the highly reputed step-up transformers from Stevens & Billington in a classic MC setup, familiar discs like *David Roths Pearldiver* or *Satchmo plays King Oliver* by *Louis Armstrong*, selections I usually hear via the Turntable Choice by Einstein, do not ignore

the bouquet of fine acoustic color. In comparison to TTC and to the fantastic, and still more expensive Clearaudio Absolute Phono Inside, one can notice losses in dynamic aspects and with the spatial representation. Naturally it is somewhat unfair when an MM phono input has to submit to being measured against MC cartridges as well as transformers of the highest class, and when all is said and done it is really not difficult to recommend the Bryston phono board costing 996 Euros, and also because this phono board abstains from the annoying “gray veil” with which many phono stages frequently envelop the sound happenings.

So whoever is sure to only want to “drive” MM systems or moving irons, can confidently purchase the Bryston phono board, because otherwise one would have much difficulty finding a solution which can compete in matters of acoustic color purity in this price range. The MC devotee will not raise this question because good MC transformers as a rule have their price (Music First Audio about 2,500 Euro) as well as comparable external phono solutions which presumably offer superior performance. Is one already privately thinking at Bryston whether to equip the phono board with its own MC transformer in order thereby to enable MC operation? That is indeed an exciting question.

The Optional DAC

Now the Ensemble CD transport Dirondo is connected to one of the two SPDIF input jacks via a 75 ohm cable from Steinmusic. One listens attentively to Dadawas “Sister Drum”, and quickly it becomes clear that the Bryston DAC circuit board which incorporates an Asahi Kaseis 32 bit high performance chip AKM 4490, upstages the built-in D/A converter of my Bladelius Gondul M in matters of bass, as well as its absolute low frequency capabilities, and moreover in matters of precision and blackness it surpasses the Swedish D/A converter.



Similarly the same thing holds true when voices are announced. Soe Tolloy and Manuela Uhl project a somewhat more physical presentation, plus a grain of more suppleness in the songs of both of them, thereby once again pointing the pendulum in the Bryston DAC direction. Timbrally a standoff

prevails which does not surprise me considering the well-known high niveau of the Bladelius D/A converter. Moreover both D/A converters deliver a dynamic completely believable performance.

With spatial reproduction they appear to follow different preferences. Although drawing events a bit more compact, the Bryston D/A converter provides a still more raised vividness. With the Bladelius D/A converter the rooms are drawn a bit more liberally and airy, however the contents therein are defined less sharply.

Yes, without question the aural achievements of the Bryston D/A converter board are convincing. This applies especially to the downright organic appearing voice reproduction and the handling of lower frequencies. In any case for the rest of the testing time, the transport will remain connected to the S/PDIF input of the B-135 SST2 amp. It's only too bad that USB connectivity and the capability to reproduce data beyond the 96 KHz border are notable by their absence.

Test Results: Bryston B-135 SST2

It is clear that nowadays there are no virtually no upward limits such as high performance, weight, and price even for integrated amplifiers. Anyhow the completely equipped (DAC, Phono, Remote Control) Bryston is quite an investment for an integrated amp, since it comes very close to the 9,000 Euro margin. On the other hand, "alone" it is available already for 5,671 Euros.



The equivalent value? An extremely straight forward, no-nonsense designed product, which offers classical values such as carefully arranged construction, and especially tightly tolerance components inside.

Tonally the amp fulfills the high expectations in reference to its price point: Basically neutral, the integrated amp supplies a very substantial and deep bass, which is only a bit less so and less compliant at the very bottom of the frequency range than many a much larger amplifier. With a colorful, lively, and detailed midrange, the sweet side of our test subject, the B-135 SST2 also presents proper high points in order to show its long-term listenability despite its detailed accuracy.

With this orientation the Bryston Company makes clear that one pays less attention in their development department to short lived modes and effects, but instead to the wishes of its customers who simply want to hear music with their integrated amp for a long time without experiencing listening fatigue, as well as being able to trust its technical dependability coupled with its long warranty time, in case of doubt over decades.

The Profile of the Bryston B-135 SST2

- "Above everything else" the Bryston B-135 SST2 integrated amplifier sounds well-rounded and neutral.

- When necessary it has sufficient power reserves available. But more than mere muscle display the Canadian displays a harmonic, pleasurable gait.
- The amp embodies a deep reaching bass, which also omits nothing of substance.
- However all the way down in the frequency cellar it is tuned a hair softer and rounder, but without developing the vise-like “grip” of large power amps, it maintains sufficient control even when the going is more intense.
- The detailed and pleasantly colorful midrange, as well as the unobtrusive equally detailed upper range, without glare, predestines the B-135 SST2 for relaxed long-time listening.
- The Bryston reproduces rooms very spaciouly, but in return less so into the depth of the rooms. Large orchestral bodies are reproduced plastically, effectively, and three dimensionally, as they should be from an amplifier in a higher price class.
- The B-135 SST2 manages rough dynamic demands on quite a high niveau for an integrated amplifier. The amp wins even more ground by fine dynamically revealing the finest nuances.
- The additional options (DAC and Phono—MM) have their price, which they can justify with their good sound. The functionality (missing USB input as well as no MC connection option) leaves room for upgrading.
- The Bryston B-135 SST2 offers rock-solid workmanship, which could still stand a bit of fine-polishing here and there.
- The inside construction and the quality of the tightly tolerance components define very high quality.
- Equipped with a twenty year warranty, Bryston owners look completely unworried into the future.

Translated from the German by Peter Ullman