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Bryston 9B SST² C-Series Monoblock Power Amplifiers

Quite simply in a class by itself.

Review By Brett Rudolph



Unlike many amplifier companies that seem to come and go, one of the most notable and definitely most consistent is Bryston Ltd. The Canadian company has been designing and producing what has been touted as exceptional audio equipment for over 35 years. Unfortunately while it's been my privilege to review a number of companies over the years, Bryston has never been one of them. Luckily Micah Sheveloff of WIRC Media offered me an opportunity to finally satisfy my curiosity and review one of their newest models the 9B SST² C-Series. Micah and I have worked together on a number of reviews over the last several years, so when he said you will not be disappointed; I had high hopes for the arrival of this particular piece of equipment.

The Bryston 9B SST² C-Series Amplifier

The C-Series has been around for many years and the Squared Series version is what they consider their latest and greatest incarnation. The series itself consists of eight different models ranging from massive mono blocks to multi-channel. The 9B is unique within the series because unlike its siblings, it offers the customer the ability to purchase the unit with between three and five channels of amplification and then add the remaining ones later if they desire.



All of the SST² class amplifiers are built with the idea that each amplification channel is indeed its own amplifier, thus they have their own power supplies. They are built in a somewhat modular design to allow each channel the separation it requires to perform to its fullest. The 9B takes this modular design one step further. Since it can be configured in different ways, each channel is indeed its own amplifier. In fact, should something go wrong with one of the channel, it can be easily removed and either fixed or replaced with another module. One of the company's most impressive features is a 20-year warranty, so you need not worry about service for quite some time.

In addition to the modularity of the 9B the amplifier sports a number of other impressive features. It can be used in either balanced or unbalanced configuration. In fact, it can be used with a combination of both since each channel has its own input and unlike some amplifiers each channel has the same input choices. In addition to the two connection types per channel, it also offers a 3 position input sensitivity switch and polarity switch on each channel to tailor each channel to your system's particular configuration.

If you were to take just the specifications of the amplifier alone, you would be hard pressed to find another model as equally flexible. In fact, not only does it sport an impressive 140 Watts into 8 Ohms and 200 Watts into 4 Ohms, but it can even be fitted with either a 17-inch or 19-inch faceplate depending on where it's used.

Moving Past The Specifications

Well, aside from the unit's extraordinary specifications, it also fairly heavy. At 72 pounds its one of the heavier amplifiers that this reviewer has word with in some time. Luckily the weight was not the only first impression the amplifier made. The quality of its build is amazing. It is put together like a work of art. From the front panel to the back which is built to provide real estate for as many as five channels everything was perfectly fitted and precisely laid out for optimal function and stunning appearance. The design made connecting the amplifier into my system a breeze. The five-ways binding posts make it possible to utilize virtually any speaker connection type and the balanced and unbalanced connections are located far enough apart that you can use either without having to be a contortionist. You might laugh, but there have been times when greater personal flexibility would have been a serious blessing setting up some equipment.



One particularly nice thing about the amplifier is that it came already broken in partially due I'm certain to the company's efforts to break in the amplifier and partially because it was a sample and had been used before I received it. Therefore, while I left the unit alone to warm up and break in on my system, it did not take as long "normal" for the unit to reach its fullest potential. In less than two days, it was ready for evaluation.

First Impressions

Although my sample came with equipped with a full complement of 5 channels, the majority of my review was done with stereo recordings. The first of these was Spyro Gyra's *A Night Before Christmas* on the Heads Up record label. The album itself is a nice compilation of seasonal music which like most jazz music can often give amplifiers a real work out. After listening to the entire album through once, it became readily apparent that the amplifier was capable of really capturing the spirit of not only the music, but the artists themselves. On track 3, "Winter Wonderland", the instruments seemed not only extremely detailed, but had a lifelike quality that made the music even more enjoyable. The Piano and Saxophone in particular caught my attention. You could hear the attack and decay of the instruments so perfectly that they seemed to be directly in front of you at exactly the correct distance.

In addition, the holographic presentation was exceedingly inspiring. It drew you into the folds of the subtle nuances of the music without even realizing it. There was so much richness that it seemed hard to believe that a CD was able to produce this type of quality playback, even though it was on a fairly high quality recording. On track 5, "Baby Its Cold Outside", a particular favorite of mine, the instrumentals were once again extremely detailed and precise. The drums were clear and did not sound the least bit tinny or tauged. In fact, they sounded better than many live performances, which is extremely difficult to do. However, what was even more impressive to me was how well the music complimented the vocals. The amount of control was exquisite.

Speaking of vocals, the voices of Janis Siegel and Bonny B were reproduced with the same grace and poise as the instrumentals. Once again the presentation seemed holographic. The performers were placed in exactly the right place and their voices were reproduced precisely. The extension from low bass to upper treble was downright breathtaking.

Since the piano seemed to capture my particular attention and jazz seemed to be in the air, it seemed only right to more on to another selection which contained both Dave Brubeck's *Indian summer* on Telarc's label. The somewhat novel jazz approach to both traditional and jazz musical selections made it a great choice. The first track, "You'll Never Know", is not only a fantastic example of the novel approach a jazz musician such as Dave Brubeck can take with a traditional piece, but it also gave a another glimpse into the 9B's abilities. The piano was not only set in the perfect soundstage, but it had a visceral impact that was something to behold. Although I have auditioned this piece a multitude of times, it seemed to have a greater impact and a more lifelike feel than ever before. In fact, there were parts that seemed missing until heard with this particular amplifier in place.

Track 11, "Georgia Brown", is definitely a more traditional jazz selection than "You'll Never Know". This made it a great gauge because without the vocal accompaniment, it can sometimes be somewhat barren. In this particular case, that was not a problem. The piano itself was so perfectly reproduced and played, that it seemed to have a voice all of its own. Once again there appeared details that somehow were lost when I had heard it in the past, but they only served to make the music even richer and more fulfilling.

Slowing It Down?

It was already obvious that the Bryston 9B was particularly good at jazz reproduction, but how would it hold up against classical and operatic music? The first test was Puccini's *La Boheme*, performed by the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra and Chorus under the direction of Robert Spano on the Telarc label. Opera tends to be a test not only of the amplifier, but the entire system. It tends to be extremely difficult to control adequately and the highs and lows make the power requirements an issue at times. Track 1, *Act I - In A Garret: "Questo Mar Rosso"*, features some impressive male vocals. The depth of the performer's voices was certainly an experience. There appeared to be no floor or ceiling on the amplifier's ability. In fact, the vocals radiated a presence that was hard to miss, capturing one's attention in the same way a live performance of the same opera would by the player's motions.

On track 16, *Act II - In The Latin Quarter: "Viva, Pargnino!"*, the blend of male and female vocals were equally as exquisite. In fact the female vocals seemed to have even more majesty than the male vocal on this particular track, but that might be because it seemed more pronounced in the recording itself. In addition, the symphony also seemed to be extraordinarily well controlled and lifelike. Unlike many times where the requirements of the music seem to draw all the finesse from an amplifier it appeared that in this case the complexities only seemed to make it perform better.

Admittedly, there was an ulterior motive in my choice of this particular album; it is a hybrid SACD with both a two-channel and multi-channel version on it as well. The two-channel stereo version in particular seems to be one of the most difficult for most amplifiers' to handle. The increase in detail tends to become more of a burden on the overall performance. It seems to be a perfect example of the sin of omission being better than too much information. Once again, the Bryston 9B, did not suffer the fate and become overwhelmed by too much detail. Although perhaps with more power, the performance might have been a smidgeon better, it was nevertheless worthy of mention. The only places it appeared to lose the slightest bits of control were in reproducing the crescendos where the amount of ambient sound was particularly high. Especially with the Martin Logan speakers in my reference system, 200 Watts is not always enough.

However, while there was a slight loss of precision, detail and control on the stereo version of the SACD, the same could not be said for the multi-channel version. The performance was recorded from different angles and the sound emanates from more than only the two channels. It has different requirements. There was not only enough power within the 9B to give the performance a lifelike reproduction, but it was an experience to remember. Each channel performed so independently and yet so well together that the synergy was almost too good to be real.

The next selection used was *Great Handel* on EMI Classics label. Although it is certainly not as difficult to reproduce as the previous selection, it has its own difficulties. The lighter and more airy sounds of such instruments as the oboe, bassoon, harpsichord and flute combined with merely a male and female vocal make accurate reproduction of the entire midrange a must. The extension into the treble and bass is no less important. The track that seemed of particular interest in this particular review was number 16 "Samson - Total Eclipse!" The instrumentals were almost ethereal in nature; they seemed to possess the ability to transcend both into the heaven and earth. The midrange was so clear that the weight of the words weighed heavy even though the music itself was fairly light. The vocals were clear and entirely understandable, another problem many amplifiers tend to suffer from with this particular selection.

Rock The Halls

Although the majority of this review was done with reference quality material, it would not have been fair to use all reference material. The vast majority of music is not recorded or purchased that way, particularly where rock is concerned. Therefore the first album selected was Tia Carrere's *Dream*. The album was recorded in 1993 and is a perfect example of something mixed for the masses. Track 2, "I Wanna Come Home With You Tonight", is a great example of this particular popular trait from the early 90s. Yet, although the mix might have left a bit to be desired, Tia voice is still one of my favorites. The treble was a bit overstated for my tastes, but the amplifier did a beautiful job of reproducing it correctly nevertheless. It also did the same with the bass, but what caught my attention was how great the midrange sounded. In fact, there was some depth that somehow seemed to slip my notice until this review.

Track 7, "Love is a Cannibal", began with a bit of a drum solo. Once again while the mixing leaves a bit to be desired, the amplifier did a flawless job of reproducing even the slightly treble tinged drums. It also did a beautiful job of reproducing Tia's voice which is a bit of a challenge since it seems to dwell nearly entirely in the upper midrange and treble. However, the soundstage it effectively produced seemed to tame some of its wildness.

The final album chosen for this particular review was John Lennon's *Imagine* on the Mobile Fidelity record Label. It is always such a great album to hear when it's reproduced correctly and unlike Tia's album this one was mixed with as much care as possible. Of course the first track, "Imagine", was my first choice to evaluate the amplifier's ability. It is probably one of the few tracks that are often heard playing in my listening room, yet it can still surprise me, and this was one of those occasions. The amplifier seemed to bring to life details that I had not heard before. In fact, the breath and air was stunning and much more than expected. Track 6, "Give Me Some Truth", was the second track chosen from this album. John's voice seems particularly hard edged and the instrumentals seem to back that up. Once again, the amplifier did exceptionally well at rendering the detail almost visible. The soundstage came alive with synergy between instrument and voice.

The End Or The Beginning....

It is not often that it seems that the end of a review comes far too quickly, but alas this was one of those cases. One of the conditions of the review was that it be done as quickly as possible because there were not many review units available, so I did my best. However, it was not without a sense of remorse that the amplifier made it way to the shipping depot. The Bryston 9B SST² class C is quite simply in a class by itself. Its ability to yield precise, uncompromised music is something that is rarely ever seen and almost never in an amplifier in its price level. Of course the Bryston 9B is in no way inexpensive, for the 5 channel configuration costs \$6695. Yet, while that might not seem a bargain, take it from someone who knows, it is. In fact, it might even be considered a bargain at an ever higher price point.

In short, if you are in the market for an amplifier, especially a multi-channel amplifier, you owe it to yourself to give the Bryston 9B SST² class C a chance. It is likely to give you a performance you are not likely to forget. Personally this is one of the only amplifiers I have ever dreaded sending away and wished it could have stayed longer.

Specifications

Type: Solid-state monoblock amplifier
Total Output: 140 wpc @ 8 Ohms, 200 wpc @ 4 Ohm
Distortion: < 0.005% from 20Hz to 20kHz @ full output into 8 Ohms
IM or THD+Noise: < 0.007% from 20Hz to 20kHz
Damping Factor: Over 300 at 20 Hz, ref. 8 Ohms
Input Impedance: 50k Ohms single ended, 40k Ohms balanced
Size: 19 x 5.25 x 19 (WxHxD in inches)
Weight: 72 lbs
Price: \$6695

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