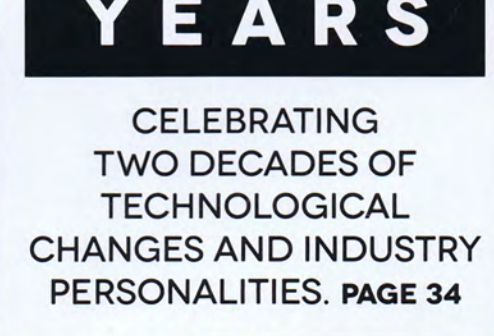


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CE PRODUCTS

FIELD TEST ■ EDITOR'S PICKS

Bold Statement for the Digital Age BY ARLEN SCHWEIGER

I'M A BIG VINYL enthusiast, but even I can admit that there's more mainstream interest in digital audio. The problem with traditional playback of such files, whether compressed MP3s or higher-res FLAC and AIFF formats, is that the playback system usually revolves around a computer. Macs and PCs can offer serviceable interfaces for cataloging and selecting music, with programs such as iTunes or MediaMonkey, but they can also introduce adverse factors, like clocking, soundcard and physical computer noise issues. Plus, depending on your setup you could be juggling the equalization of the PC's sound card, the music aggregator software and whatever A/V receiver you may have connected with a digital-to-analog converter (DAC).

Canadian manufacturer Bryston has seen the future of music playback, and it's basically a CD player without the disc. The company simply calls it a digital player, which it boldly introduced as the BDP-1 (Bryston recently rolled out the second-gen BDP-2), and it removes the computer

from the equation of an audiophile-grade digital system.

Features

What's great about the BDP-1 is that it strips down the potentially daunting world of a computer-based audio system and rebuilds it as a more familiar component-based system. The silver chassis (also available in black) fits right in with other pieces from the company. It's sleek and slim, but at 12 pounds you know there's also plenty under the hood. However, the company notes that the BDP-1 does not have moving parts or a hard drive, which also makes it a nice, silent option over a computer's fan noise.

Bryston says the inside features "a fan-less motherboard with an integrated processor and flash drive memory," running essentially a Linux-lite operating system. The Bryston-modified soundcard can play native resolutions up to 24-bit/192kHz, and the company adds that the BDP-1 boots in read-only mode to avoid system crashes.

How do you play files? Two USB ports on

SPECS

Bryston BDP-1

- ▶ 4x USB 2.0 inputs
- ▶ SPDIF (BNC), AES/EBU (XLR) outputs
- ▶ Ethernet (RJ-45), RS-232 (DB9) control
- ▶ AIFF, FLAC, WAV, MP3, M4A, OGG formats
- ▶ External DAC required
- ▶ Silver or black faceplate
- ▶ 12 pounds

MSRP is \$2,150
bryston.com

the left side of the front panel let you connect thumb drives or larger USB hard drives, presumably brimming with content (that you've loaded via a computer). There's a small onscreen display, and the right side of the front includes conventional navigation buttons (previous, next, stop, play, pause) to complement up/down/right/left arrows.

The rear panel includes S/PDIF and dedicated AES/EBU XLR balanced outputs, plus Ethernet and RS-232 control ports, and two more USB 2.0 ports. Bryston's BR-2 can be used, as well as iOS and Android devices (with proper apps), for remote controls.



The Bryston BDP-1 brings a new level of detail in playback of digital recordings.



Setup

The BDP-1 was easy to integrate into my system. Although it can be connected directly to some Bryston integrated amplifiers and preamps via their optional DAC modules, the BDP-1 otherwise requires an external DAC so Bryston shipped it to me with its BDA-1 (which also got a recent next-gen release, BDA-2).

I connected the BDP-1 to the BDA-1 via the AES/EBU using the included cable, and kept the balanced XLR chain going by using a pair of balanced Clarus Aqua cables to hook into the 2-channel inputs of my Anthem D2v preamplifier. The rest of my setup includes a balanced connection to Anthem's P5 amplifier and Clarus Aqua speaker cables running bi-wired to Paradigm Studio 20 bookshelf speakers.

I also ran an Ethernet cable from the BDP-1 to my home network router, and used the Bryston "Mini" browser interface of my iPod touch to select tracks. All I had to do was plug the BDP-1's IP address into the Safari browser to get the Mini interface working, and its basic functions were simple to command.

Performance

I've never heard music in my home system more dramatic or detailed. The combination of Bryston's digital player and DAC gave the entire system, which already had very good pieces, more dimension and airiness that made listening to all kinds of digital files truly exhilarating — even on low-res MP3s that I'd heard tons of times through my PC.

The BDP-1 is seemingly effortless in its playback, and I had to dial down the volume because it was inherently louder than other sources I use. But at the lower levels the detail and dynamics still came through loud and clear. I listened to everything from 128kbps MP3 and AAC files to 24/192 FLAC, and was awed by how full and vibrant they sounded even without implementing the up-sampling feature on the BDA-1 when I played

low-res tracks. Doing some A/B comparison of "You're a Big Girl Now" from Bob Dylan's *Blood on the Tracks*, for example, the quality gap between the 128 AAC and a 16/44.1 FLAC remaster were not nearly as apparent as I expected with the acoustic guitar work and imaging sounded highly realistic on both.

The Bryston BDP-1 brings a new level of detail in playback of digital recordings.

Depth and imaging are the strong suits of the BDP-1. As I began concentrating on high-resolution 24-bit files — an area that Bryston really designed this product for — I found the playback superior to my PC setup. The company says the BDP-1 produces low distortion, and that was evident as I cranked up high-res files to near-reference levels and the utter cleanliness of the music further revealed itself.

Several high-res files from HDtracks exemplified the BDP-1's authoritative low end, including Elton John's "Tiny Dancer" when the drums and bass line are introduced — light years from how it sounds on the radio or CD, plus you hear subtle detail like Elton's lips smacking as he opens his mouth to sing. On Bob Marley's "Could You Be Loved," in 24/192, the well-defined drums come hammering in and every instrument's crisp notes help create an incredible overall soundscape, including the right-channel clavinet that is far more impactful in high-res.

Finally, I'm not a huge Rolling Stones fan, but playing some of their high-res tracks through the BDP-1 showed just how commanding their music can be, especially during the rich, carefully assembled preambles to "Sympathy for the Devil" and "Gimme Shelter" for instance. The clarity

and instrumental detail, plus the enhanced vocal definition of the latter, were effectively spine tingling to hear.

Value

For clients looking for audiophile playback of digital music, the Bryston combination can't be beat. In a quality system, it delivers breathtaking, lifelike sound. The only knock I had was that as a computer-like machine it does take about a minute to boot up. But integrators can surely sell clients on the overall merits of this component-based system as opposed to a more convoluted computer-based alternative.

Conclusions

With its prowess in delivering both low- and high-res digital files from storage devices, the BDP-1 is a player that will be able to satisfy customers' music demands for years. It's a great path toward re-discovering one's music collection and getting excited about hearing old songs in a new light. 🎧



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CE PRO VERDICT

KUDOS: Stunning clarity and detail, precise image, great depth, easy setup

CONCERNS: Lengthy bootup, occasionally confusing navigation

FEATURES ① ② ③ ④ ⑤

SETUP ① ② ③ ④ ⑤

PERFORMANCE ① ② ③ ④ ⑤

VALUE ① ② ③ ④ ⑤

OVERALL ① ② ③ ④ ⑤