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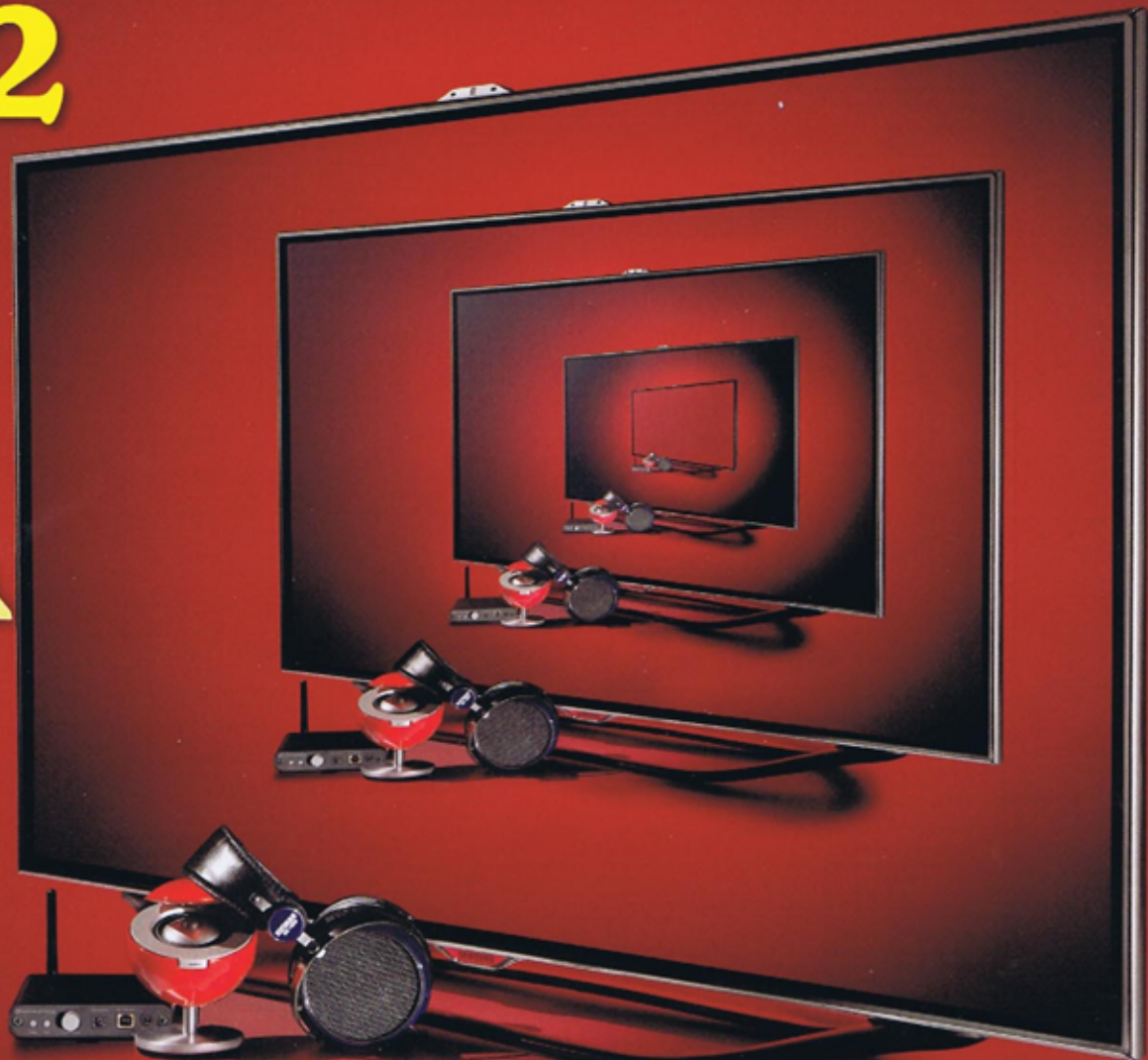
**HDTV**

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# BRYSTON

**SP-3** PREAMPLIFIER/PROCESSOR  
AND **9BSST2 PRO** FIVE-CHANNEL  
AMPLIFIER **\$17,500** BY DANIEL KUMIN



**Serious construction, and  
seriously good sound.**



**IT'S A FACT OF MODERN LIFE.** The higher you climb in the high end of anything, the less, at least in one sense, you will get. You will find, I believe, few gargoyles on buildings designed by I.M. Pei, and even fewer rear-seat DVD screens in Paganis.

So it's not surprising that the latest surround-sound processor from Bryston Ltd., the Canadian high-end audio icon, is about as simple a preamp/processor as could be imagined. Bryston has been quietly making splendidly solid, uncompromisingly excellent audio components since the golden age of the LP record (it celebrates its 50th anniversary this year), and its reputation as a sort of cognoscenti's brand of exceptional technical rigor and brick-outhouse build has never varied. Both the new SP-3 pre-pro and the 9BSST2 Pro five-channel power amplifier that the company also sent along are straight from this mold: obsessively engineered, massively built, and simply but meticulously finished.

## SETUP

And it's heavy. The 9BSST2 amp alone weighs some 72 pounds; by comparison, the 22-pound SP-3 pre-pro is a feather. So while hefting the pre-pro onto my rack was no great feat, I wisely left the 9BSST2 Pro on the floor beside my center speaker and routed all five speaker cables to it. The amp's large, heavy-duty binding posts made connecting these easy.

Both Brystons are crafted in unadorned steel and aluminum, and both present simplified pushbutton or knob controls. Both also feature balanced-line outputs and inputs on all channels (as well as "normal" unbalanced RCA jacks). I'm not convinced that a balanced connection's noise-rejection abilities are really necessary except for long runs of low-level signals (microphones), but since they were there, I dug out three high-grade mike cables and used them on left, center, and right channels.

Both Canadians are also "modular" designs. In the amp's case, this means that individual channels can be removed and replaced (or sent for service); for the pre-pro, it means that updates of DSP or other hardware can be installed if and when new formats or standards arise.

The Bryston SP-3 has no auto-setup or EQ system onboard, so installation was a mere matter of cabling, powering, and manually stepping through the unit's setup menu.

But this was no mere "mere": Bryston's pre-pro provides no onscreen menus — indeed, no onscreen displays whatsoever. (Remember what I said about high-end features...) So tasks such as balancing channel levels mean standing close enough to the preamp to be able to read its front-panel, dot-matrix readout (which is nice and clear), running back to the SPL meter at the listening position, and then going back to the equipment rack to adjust or to select the next channel. Rinse and repeat for each of 6 or 8 channels (including sub) and again for each input you'll be us-



## VERDICT

Bryston's pricey, state-of-the-art electronics sound great — just bring your own control system.

### FEATURES 5



### PERFORMANCE 10



### VALUE 6



### OVERALL 7



## BRYSTON PRE-PRO & AMP

ing (they require and maintain individual channel and crossover settings), and you've gotten your aerobic workout for the day. To be fair, the Bryston remote's directional cursor keys can navigate the setup functions perfectly well, but the need for visual feedback remains.

## PERFORMANCE

Bluntly put, this Bryston duo's high-endedness is not about its user interface, video manipulations (the SP-3 performs no video processing at all), or even — al-

## Key Features

### SP-3 (\$9,500)

- + 8 HDMI (video-pass-through) inputs, 2 (parallel) outputs
- + 4/3 S/PDIF coax/Toslink optical digital inputs; 0/1 digital output
- + Digital audio available from HDMI and/or S/PDIF/Toslink inputs; 24/192 D/A, A/D conversion
- + Decodes Dolby TrueHD, DTS-HD Master Audio; Dolby PLIIx, DTS Neo:6 surround, 4 proprietary modes
- + Dolby Volume
- + Full-bypass mode for audiophile analog playback
- + 7.1-channel analog input/output with balanced-XLR and unbalanced RCA connections; balanced-XLR stereo input
- + USB 2.0 input available for digital audio, control signals
- + 4-line dot-matrix front-panel display with auto-timeout dimming
- + Source-independent second-zone stereo audio output (unbalanced)
- + Dedicated 30-key remote controller
- + 12-v trigger in, assignable out (3); IR input; RS-232 serial port; RJ-45 (Ethernet) port for control
- + 17 x 6 x 16 in; 22 lb

### 9BSST2 Pro (\$8,000)

- + 5 x 140/200 watts (all channels driven, 8/4 ohms, 20Hz-20 kHz, <0.005% THD)
- + Balanced-XLR/unbalanced RCA inputs
- + Gain selectable per channel (17/23/29 dB)
- + Auto-on via 4-12v DC/AC trigger
- + Fully modular construction, per channel
- + Bridgeable by channel pairs
- + 17 x 6 x 17 in; 72 lb

[bryston.com](http://bryston.com)





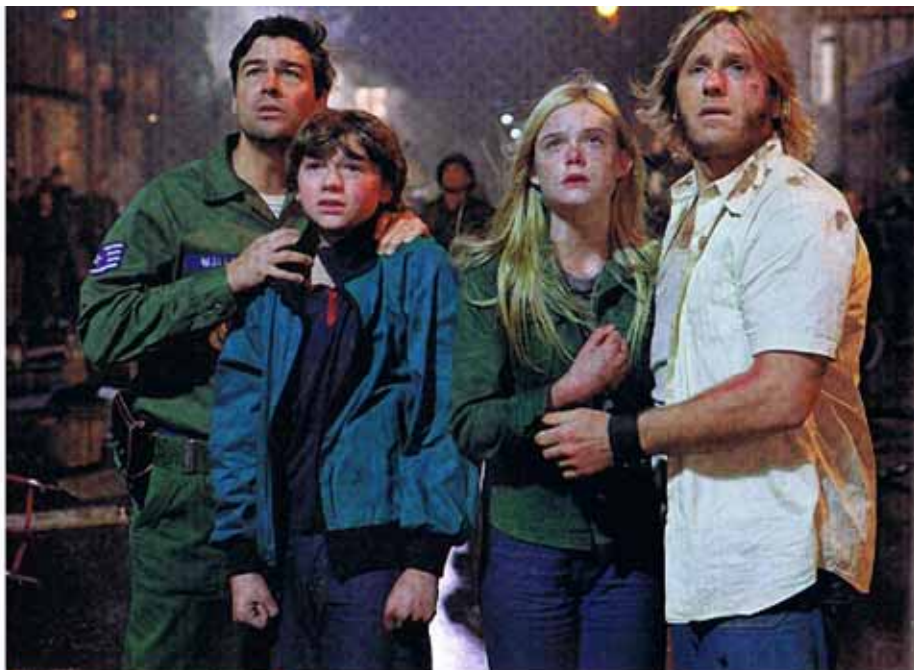
## BRYSTON PRE-PRO & AMP

though all Bystons are exceedingly well made, from top-shelf materials — look'n'feel. It's about the sound, and on that score I propose that it would be difficult or impossible to do better.

First, consider the power Q: The Byston 9BSST2 Pro may specify "only" 140/200 watts per channel (all channels driven at 8/4 ohms), but it weighs three times as much as many an A/V receiver making similar on-paper claims. What's different is the amount of copper deployed in power-supply inductance (for current storage) and silicon in output-device current capacity ("safe-operating area") — differences that I'd expect to hear.

And I did. I know of few all-channel acid tests better than the battle sequences of *Master and Commander* on Blu-ray, and the Byston system had no problem matching my expectations, formed from many auditions via numerous amps, including my everyday, 6 x 150-watts component, a unit of similar heft (but only 40% the cost). In fact, the 9BSST2 Pro may actually have exceeded my expectations. The snap/boom of cannon shots I've heard scores of times caused me to nonetheless jump again in my chair as the pressure wave struck my chest.

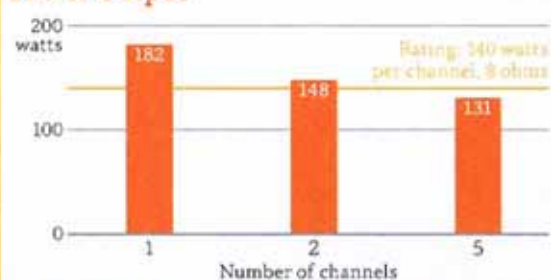
Dense, high-level scenes like the many action sequences from the charming *E.T.* alternate-version *Super 8* reproduced with an effortless dynamism and



**SUPER AMPLIFIER**  
Bryston's amp enabled *Super 8*'s action sequences to come through with zero clipping or limiting. Crashes and grindings sounded bright and spotlight-detailed.

## Test Bench

### Power Output



The SP-3 and 9BSST2 Pro pairing produced varying results on the test bench. Amplifier output was impressive: it easily beat its 140-WPC rating in two-channel tests, and even came close with all five channels driven. Frequency response tests uniformly reflected a gentle rolloff (about 3 dB/octave) over the ultrasonic octaves, beginning as a 0.4-dB deficit at 20 kHz. Noise performance was uniformly good: in digital-signal tests, about 1 dB short of the theoretical limits using S+V's real-world dithered signals.

Two head-scratchers: First, while the SP-3's digital-to-analog linearity with dithered tones was essentially perfect to -80 dBFS, at -90 dBFS its output went vastly negative (-120 dBFS or below), suggesting that its D/A system was muting, or making a many-decibel calculation error, on this particular tone. Second, the SP-3 could not pass our subwoofer-output torture test (full-scale 31-Hz signal present in all channels) without digi-clipping it quite severely. Yet output with "normal" signals (-20 dBFS-ish) was beautiful (0.02% THD), and certainly ample enough to drive any subwoofer. But ultimately I would class both of these as test-bench anomalies, as opposed to real-world problems. —D.K.

Full Test Bench data at [soundandvisionmag.com/bryston-sp-3-and-9bst2-pro](http://soundandvisionmag.com/bryston-sp-3-and-9bst2-pro)

clarity of detail I associate with an amplifier operating with absolutely zero clipping, limiting, or exhaustion of current reserves. The many crashes and grindings were bright and spotlight-detailed but never harsh — bright enough, in fact, to make me wish for a THX-type equalization setting to roll off the top octaves just a decibel or two on the front channels. (Of course, the fault here lies with the audio mix for home video, not the playback hardware — which THX originator Tom Holman would say is exactly the point of home THX's Re-EQ feature.)

This was the kind of pristine, "through an open doorway" listening that simply begged for the challenge of high-quality multichannel music playback. I obliged with numerous examples, including Chesky Records' meticulously recorded multichannel jazz-trio SACD *Personal Favorites* from New York pianist Fred Hersch. On a good system, this disc is as close to a transporter beam as you'll find, and indeed via the Bryston gear it relocated me to the large studio space in which it was captured.

*Personal Favorites* is a recording that shades on the bright side of neutral, yet the system never sounded anything but open, easy, and crystal-clear. Ride-cymbal washes, bass articulations, and lush piano chords were all suitably gorgeous, but it was mostly the remarkable array of Steinway tonalities that captured my ear. Hersch's playing features a lot of spare, single-note lines, lovingly articulated and given plenty of "air." With the Bystons in control, my system's ability to convey the subtle yet stunning variety of tone colors Hersch teases out of the concert grand on ballads like "For All We Know" and the arresting purity of long, exposed, sustained decays, was as good as — and possibly better than — any my system has presented to me.

Dynamic ability was a non-issue: Even at front-table levels, the Hersch trio's occasional, surprising accents and brief fortissimos were utterly unrestricted, and the same held true for full-orchestra recordings such as a Telarc SACD of Mahler's *Symphony No. 1*.



No question — the Bryston SP-3's high-purity digital audio abilities and the 9BSST2 Pro's faultless amplification combine to deliver audio performance of the very highest order.

## ERGONOMICS

Next, however, I'm going to say a bunch of negative-sounding things, so let me preface them with this: Anyone buying nearly 20 G's worth of A/V electronics will certainly be planning to integrate them into a media or whole-house system commanded by a dedicated third-party user interface — touch-screen, tabletop, iPad, or some other solution, to which the Bryston gear offers serial as well as IP (via wired Ethernet) connectivity for control. So the complaints you're about to hear would, in real-world use, likely be mitigated to a substantial extent.

Still, the SP-3's lack of onscreen displays limits its everyday usability in ways that certainly are not critical, but to which I've become thoroughly habituated. For example, there's simply no way to make temporary adjustments of channel level for a movie or program, so if dialogue is too loud or too soft, you cannot easily just offset center-channel level a decibel or two. (Doing so requires a trip to the setup screen, and that means getting up and walking over to peer at the front-panel display.) Selecting surround modes is tricky, too. You of course assign, at setup time, a default mode to be active whenever you load each input, and this will cover most daily eventualities, but otherwise your only option is to step through the available Dolby Digital/PLIIx and DTS/Neo:6 modes in sequence — and the lack of visual feedback makes identifying what mode you've actually settled upon a bit iffy without bright lighting and a pair of low-power binoculars.

Bryston's SP-3 remote control is a work of metal-crafting art: a solid, heavy, billet-aluminum block with tiny black buttons and tinier white lettering. Lovely, but no ergonomic paragon — though, as I've already noted, few if any SP-3 owners will likely handle it in their day-to-day operations. Ergonomically, that's no great loss, but the handset does boast the coolest key-/motion-activated backlighting ever.

## BOTTOM LINE

I am deliberately stating the obvious when I observe that for what you'd pay for an SP-3/9BSST2 Pro combo, you might well purchase a modest, foreclosed-and-abandoned

home in certain neighborhoods in, say, Florida or Las Vegas. But that's hardly the point — nor is the news that a buyer even mildly curious about the price would not be shopping in these environs in the first place.

For the 1 percent left standing (more like 0.1 percent, I'll warrant), there's no argument: Bryston's surround electronics are state-of-the-art. They are as well made as any consumer electronics you can buy, and in a system designed, installed, and programmed for "just press play" operability, with loudspeakers and room acoustics of concomitant quality, audio playback simply ain't gonna get any better. Which is what that oft-abused phrase "state of the art" is supposed to mean. **SV**

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