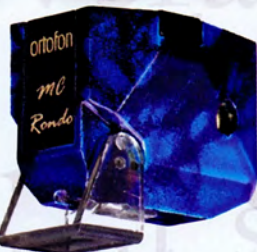


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EQUIPMENT REPORT



Bryston B-135 SST² Integrated Amplifier

Immediate and Powerful

Kirk Midtskog

Not many high-end audio marques have survived to observe their 50th anniversary. Bryston, a Canadian company with product lines in both the professional and consumer markets, celebrated fifty years of existence in 2012. With an impressive client list, including concert halls, production studios, educational institutions, and, of course, many private consumers, Bryston has a solid foundation in the specialty audio industry.

The new B-135 SST² integrated amplifier handles basic pre- and power amplification duties for \$4695, and if you add the optional on-board DAC (\$1395) and moving-magnet phono section (\$600), you have a single-box solution that will cover many different input, conversion, and amplification requirements. (The DAC supports up to 96/24 resolution files through two S/PDIF and two TosLink inputs, no USB.) The B-135, without either the DAC or phono section (as reviewed), has seven single-ended line-level inputs, a preamp output and power amp input, a 1/4" headphone jack, and a tape loop. Some of the line-level input pairs are commandeered for the add-on phono or digital inputs if you buy those options. One line-level input can be assigned as a "pass-through" for use with a home-theater processor. The hefty, full-featured, programmable, remote handset is also optional (\$375). The B-135 has a balance control, which allows users to attenuate a channel up to 6dB, as well as a nifty channel-

muting function—sometimes useful for troubleshooting. There are additional inputs for an external infrared remote-control relay unit and a 12-Volt remote trigger connector for convenient turn-on and turn-off of all devices connected to the B-135. In versatility and features, the B-135 pretty much covers all the bases.

Micah Sheveloff, Bryston's U.S. media representative, assured me that the B-135 is not merely a beefed-up version of its predecessor, the B-100. Bryston took two years to develop the B-135, and it incorporates some technology from the SP-3 processor as well as elements from its latest SST² power amplifier line. The volume control uses a computer-controlled, motorized analog potentiometer, which allows remote-controlled operation while still employing only fully discrete analog circuitry throughout the preamp section. Bryston claims that most solid-state Class AB power amps have lower distortion in the top two thirds of their power-output ranges as well as better distortion figures in the lower frequencies, thereby leaving the first few watts and the upper frequencies to be relatively distortion-laden. According to Bryston, their SST² technology cleans up distortion in those problem areas, as well as addresses much of the crossover notch distortion (common in Class AB operation amplifiers), where the signal is "handed off" between the positive-going phase and the negative-going phase. Bryston apparently employs very fast

EQUIPMENT REPORT - Bryston B-135 SST²

drivers and a method called "Quad Complimentary Output," which is said to reduce the capacitance seen by the drivers, and this, in turn, reportedly significantly reduces distortion-inducing "storage delay" in the output transistors right in the crossover region. Other aspects of SST² topology include the following: no point-to-point wiring in the power-supply circuitry which Bryston found reduces noise, new output chokes to help lower distortion in the upper frequencies, a soft-start circuit to reduce wear and tear, and finally, simplification of several circuit assemblies to bring down the number of signal-smearing contact points.

The overall fit and finish of the casework and the sense I get from interacting with the B-135 point to a well-made product. The tactile elements, such as using the buttons, volume control, and connectors, all engender a feeling of confidence. Even the speaker-cable binding posts, custom-made for Bryston, require less fiddling than usual to get large spades to seat—at least compared to the slotted WBT binding posts I have come across. Inputs are selected directly by pressing the corresponding button on the either the front faceplate or the remote. You do not have to cycle through input selections until you reach the one you want. Bryston's attention to detail shows. Output power is listed as 135Wpc into eight ohms and 180Wpc into four. I do not have headphones, so I did not try that feature. I added about 200 hours of additional break-in time after I received the review sample, which presumably also had its standard 100-hour burn-in at the factory.

My first impression of the B-135's sound can be summed as "immediate and powerful"—powerful for its physical size and output rating, that is. Bass extension and dynamic snap were commendable, suggestive of a power supply capable of delivering ample power reserves on demand. The B-135 had little trouble driving my somewhat difficult to drive Dynaudio C1 II speakers (4 ohms, 85dB sensitivity), except on very demanding music. Individual images appeared to be a bit larger—especially in the center of the soundstage—and closer than I am used to, thereby contributing to a feeling of immediate presence. The front of the soundstage also tended to hang in space in a plane a little more forward than usual, which also added to my perception of being nearer to the musicians. Using terms like "forward" often means a tendency towards brightness, but this really isn't the case here. In fact, if I consider its overall tonal balance, the B-135 comes across as essentially neutral, with only a hint of extra energy in the 2–4kHz zone. It is a near perfect tonal match with the Dynaudio C1 II speakers and will most likely partner very well with the majority of speakers it dances with.

The B-135 tended to accentuate the primary elements of the music, the main musical line, and the principal music-makers—such as the lead singer or most prevalent group of instruments—at any given moment in a recording. As a result, my initial response to the overall presentation was one of enjoying the clarity with which these primary musical constituents were represented. Patricia Barber's voice and Michael Arnpol's acoustic bass in "Winter" from Modern Cool [Premonition], for example, came across as "direct" with very little coloration of any kind intruding on the performance—despite rather odd recording values like too much reverb on Barber's vocals. I think some of the B-135's straightforward character comes from its somewhat forward soundstaging, as mentioned, and also through

its apparent dynamic agility. It is not hyper- or over-charged; it just comes across as clean and direct. As I already alluded to, the B-135 mated quite well with the Dynaudio C1 II, not only tonally but also because of the C1's less-forward soundstaging and its ability to unravel overlapping dynamic events quite well. This helped the B-135 sound more musically complete and less dimensionally restricted to two or three depth-levels, as was the case when it was paired with the Aerial 7T.

Whether you like the B-135's somewhat straightforward presentation is something you will have to determine for yourself. What else is available at a similar price? I still have the larger and heavier Hegel H200 that I reviewed in Issue 211. The H200 was awarded integrated amplifier Product of the Year in 2011 in Issue 219. It costs \$4400, puts out 200Wpc into 8 ohms, 350Wpc into 4 ohms, and has three line-level inputs (one is balanced/XLR), a record out, two preamp outputs, a power amp input, and two pairs of speaker binding posts per channel. No phono or internal DAC options are available for the H200, although Hegel offers two other integrated models with on-board DACs. The B-135 has more features and inputs, and has better casework, although the Hegel's slightly curved, smooth faceplate and understated aesthetics are certainly easy on the eyes. To my ear, the H200 simply offers a more complete musical experience

SPECS & PRICING

Power output: 135Wpc
Inputs: Seven line-level and one "amp-in" (RCA), 12V trigger port, auxiliary remote-relay jack
Outputs: Preamp (RCA), record (RCA), headphone jack, speaker terminals
Dimensions: 17" x 4.55" x 14"
Weight: 30 lbs.
Price: \$4695, optional BR2 remote adds \$375

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ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT
Analog Source: Basis Debut V turntable with Vector 4 tonearm, Benz-Micro LP-S cartridge
Digital Sources: Ayre C-5xeMP universal disc player, Sony VAIO VGN-FZ-490 running

JRiver MC 17, Hegel HD2 and HD20 DACs
Phono stage preamp: Ayre P-5xe
Line stage preamp: Ayre K-1xe
Integrated amplifier: Hegel H200
Power amplifiers: Gamut M-200, Gamut M250i
Speakers: Dynaudio Confidence C1 Signature, Aerial 7T, YG Kipod II Signature Passive
Cables: Shunyata Anaconda ZiTron signal cables, Analysis Plus Big Silver Oval speaker cables, AudioQuest Coffee USB and Hawk Eye S/PDIF, Shunyata Anaconda and Cobra ZiTron power cables
A/C Power: Two 20-amp dedicated lines, Shunyata Triton and Typhon power conditioners
Room Treatments: PrimeAcoustic Z-foam panels and DIY panels



overall. Through the H200, notes start just a bit sooner and continue longer before they dissolve into the noise floor. The H200 also supplies more ambient air, or interstitial space, around the musicians, and this enhances one's sense of the context in which the music-making took place. The B-135 throws about the same size soundstage from side to side (about one foot beyond the outer speaker panels), but the H200 has considerably more depth portrayal, both of individual images and of the greater soundstage envelope. The H200 tends to render individual images on a slightly smaller scale than the B-135 does, but the H200 uses its total available soundstage "frame" to include more of the surrounding spatial context, and so images within that frame are necessarily a bit smaller. Almost counterintuitively, the H200 sounds at once more relaxed and more revealing. One "sees" deeper into the performances. The H200's bass is also a little more robust, lending a feeling of greater solidity and foundation, especially on larger orchestral works.

As you can tell, I prefer the H200's sonic personality, but this does not mean it will shake out the same way for others. In other systems, some listeners may find the H200 to sound too laid-back or not as "quick" as the B-135. The Bryston will definitely work better for headphone users or those with a lot of source devices. There is also a price consideration. The Hegel H200 comes with a remote handset for \$4400; the Bryston B-135 costs \$4695, and its remote, which I consider mandatory, adds \$375 for a total of \$5070. These prices are close enough to make both

two amps viable options for listeners searching for an amplifier in this price bracket. That said, the cost advantage does go to the Hegel H200, with enough of a savings to leave some funds left over for a cable upgrade. There's also the issue of company longevity and warranty; Bryston offers a 20-year warranty vs. three years for Hegel, and Bryston's 51-year track record.

Speaking of cables, I did a cross check with cables (and speakers) I typically do not use for much of my listening these days as a way to "triangulate" on the Hegel's and Bryston's respective differences more thoroughly. In this instance, I used Analysis Plus Big Silver Oval speaker cables, Wegrzyn Copper Slam power cords, and Dynaudio C1 II loudspeakers. My impressions of both integrated amps were confirmed when I also listened though more revealing products like Shunyata Research Anaconda ZiTron speaker cables and power cords together with Aerial 7T speakers. The differences between the two amps were simply made more apparent through the more revealing (and more expensive) setup. I did not use any power conditioners for this review.

The Bryston B-135 certainly is a well made, versatile, and reasonably powerful integrated amp. It will meet some users' needs just right, sonically and in terms of connectivity and usefulness. Even if I would, personally, chose another integrated, I still appreciated the B-135's rhythmic snap and straightforward presentation. I think it will hit some people's sweet spot on the button. It is certainly worth your consideration. *tas*

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