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In which **CAMP**, do you place yourself ?

By GEORGE DE SA

In March of 2023, **Bryston** launched its latest product...their *BP-19* preamplifier. Over the past weeks have had some intimate time with it but before I *kiss and tell*, let me provide some context. Purity in music playback is an ideal that some music enthusiasts value but most audiophiles strive for. Such goals for purity tend to fall into two main camps: on one side is the absolute sound – audio playback manifested in a manner that is virtually indistinguishable from the live unamplified experience; while, on the other side is absolute fidelity in playback of music

recordings with nothing added and nothing taken away. Of course, given these are absolutes, they are in practical terms impossible to achieve, yet that doesn't stop the passionate from pursuing. **Bryston Limited (Bryston)** is a Canadian audio product manufacturer with a long heritage in professional audio. **Bryston** has built a reputation of producing audio products that fall into the second camp, that of seeking to deliver solutions that offer the highest possible fidelity to the source recording, as possible.

Bryston, with the new *BP-19*, is focused on taking yet another step closer to absolute fidelity. Though the *BP-19* is a new preamplifier product, it isn't a whole new concept, rather it is born out of the company's own highly successful and acclaimed *BR-20* preamplifier (launched in 2020). Where the *BR-20* is a Swiss Army knife of a preamplifier, with a digital streamer and *DAC*, the *BP-19* eschews digital functionality—remaining 100% focused on handling the analog music signal.

The new *BP-19* joins the *BR-20* in **Bryston's** line-up of two-channel stereo preamplifiers, and effectively replaces the now discontinued *BP-17³* and the very long-lived *BP-26* preamplifier models. Over the years, I've owned a **Bryston** *BP-6* preamplifier that was replaced by a *BP-26* before I moved to a *BP-17³* that preceded my current reference preamplifier, the *BR-20*. The *BP-19* is the fifth **Bryston** preamplifier I've had a chance to evaluate. My hope was the *BP-19* would help me to experience something new, if not also to take me closer than ever before towards the unachievable—absolute fidelity.

Product Description & Technical Specifications

The *BP-19* is utilitarian in form much like **Bryston's** other product offerings. Bryston produces products that are neat and tidy in appearance and the *BP-19* has an unmistakable family resemblance. The face of the *BP-19* has a half dozen of buttons,

which makes its face much less busy than the *BR-20* with three times the buttons. In addition, the *BP-19* sports **Bryston's** all-new faceplate finishes, introduced in March 2023. These new faceplates come in five standard choices: Champagne, Silver, Gun Metal Grey, Black and White; replacing the former traditional black and silver micro-bead blasted anodized finishes. With these new finishes there come new benefits: in-house daily production; consistent batch-to-batch colour matching, anti-fade, improved scuff & scratch resistance and, more environmentally friendly. There is also now an option to order custom colours, for **NO FEE**. The *BP-19* review sample was faced in the new Silver finish. As my own *BR-20* is in the traditional anodized silver, I was able to compare the *BP-19* with it side-by-side. The new silver has a whiter hue with less sheen, yet it's the feel of the finishes that differ most. The new finish is more textured and rougher under the fingertip, similar to unfinished concrete, while the traditional anodized finish has an ultra-smooth, satin-like feel. In addition, the **Bryston** logo on the faceplate of the *BP-19* is now silk-screened on, in a pencil line format, with the traditional deep engraved company logo now gone the wayside. I find the new finish simple and attractive; however, I'm partial to their traditional but now defunct anodized finish with engraved, which to me offered an extra level of panache. The *BP-19* weighs in at just 12-pounds, yet the casework feels solid. The faceplate remains as a ¼" thick aluminum plate,

available in 17" or 19" widths (as well as a *Pro 19* rackmount). The five previously mentioned colours are standard, but **Bryston** also offers optional custom colours at **NO FEE**.

The faceplate hosts a **Bryston** well sized volume control knob, as well as a ¼" headphone jack, black & white *OLED* display and, 10 direct control selection buttons for inputs, R/L balance, mute and power. The operation *LED's* can be switched from green to blue using control menu that can be quickly accessed with just a push of the volume knob. Like its older *BR-20* sibling, the *BP-19* incorporates **Bryston's** most powerful onboard, *Low Z*, headphone amplifier.

Moving to the back of the *BP-19*, we find a plethora of analog audio connections: 2 pairs of balanced (*XLR*) inputs and 2 pairs of balanced (*XLR*) outputs (preamp and fixed); 4 pairs of un-balanced (*RCA*) inputs and 2 pairs of un-balanced (*RCA*) outputs (preamp and fixed). In addition, there is an *IEC* power inlet, 1 *Ethernet* control port, 1 *USB* control port, 1 *RS232* jack, 2 trigger-in and 1 trigger-out jack. A ground connection is also on the back, for use with the optional (*MM* and *MC*) phono-stage that was absent from the review sample. A full function, black metal jacket *IR* remote is also included.

Internally, the **Bryston** *BR-19* is a fully analog preamplifier, its analog section identical to that of the *BR-20*. The *BR-19's* power supply uses the same oversized toroidal transformer and filter capacitance as the *BR-20*. The toroid has two windings, one



BRYSTON BP-19 ANALOG PREAMPLIFIER



being dedicated to the control circuitry. As is the case in the *BR-20*, the *BR-19* employs tightly matched components and compact circuit design that is aided by surface mount construction, which achieves the lowest noise and common mode rejection. The *BR-19*'s advanced volume control chipset allows for optimal execution of its fully balanced signal path.

The *BR-19* has vanishingly low distortion with a rated *THD + Noise* of just 0.0006% from 20 Hz – 20 KHz, and an *IMD* of < 0.0003%. The rated signal-to-noise is -110 dB; however, **Bryston** says this is a conservative figure and that the *BR-19* has a noise floor that is a couple dB lower than their *BR-20*. Power consumption is 0.5 W (standby) and 12 W (idle/in-play), with a maximum output voltage of 12V (*XLR/RCA*), making it very versatile in pairing with amplifiers.

Setup

For evaluation, I set the *BR-19* atop my **Quadraspire SV3T** rack and hooked it up to my own **Bryston 7B³** amplifiers. Listening was done using my **Dynaudio C2 Signature** loudspeakers; **Focal Electra 1008 Be** standmount loudspeakers and my **Grado 325e** headphones. I was intent on getting a good sense of the **Bryston BR-19** in its own right, as well as evaluating its relative performance to its sibling, my own *BR-20*, also a fully balanced analog preamplifier from input to output but incorporating a digital section (*DAC/streamer*). For back-to-back comparisons, I used

« Dès que la voix de **Guy Garvey** s'est fait entendre, il était évident que non seulement le *BP-19* était capable de présenter de la netteté et des détails fins, mais il était également un communicateur efficace de l'émotion que le lyrisme de **Garvey** transmettait. Les subtilités et les intonations dans le phrasé de **Guy** étaient presque trop faciles à entendre, y compris les textures de la voix humaine. »

three sources: 1. **Rega Apollo CD** player as digital source via unbalanced *RCA*; 2. **VPI Scout** with **Dynavector 10x5** and **Gold Note PH-10/PSU-10** via balanced *XLR*; and 3. *BR-20* as streamer & *DAC* (at unity gain) via balanced *XLR*, streaming from **Tidal HiFi** and **Qobuz**.

Listening Sessions

I began listening to the *BR-19* with the *BR-20* as the digital source. First up was one of my old favourite reference tracks, *Lippy Kids* by the band **Elbow**. This track opens with a repeating keyboard key, which through the *BR-19* was very clean sounding yet revealed the glow I noted. The background hum of the synth was distinct. Tight and tuneful bass notes ensued, the snap and body of the string sounding honest to the instrument. From the instant **Guy Garvey's** vocals began, it was evident that not only was the *BR-19* able to present focus and fine details but it also was an effective communicator of the emotion that **Garvey's** lyricism conveyed.

The subtleties and intonations in **Guy's** phrasing were almost too easy to hear, including the textures in the human voice. The *BR-19* produced a generous soundstage, framed by the background vocals that spanned across the back wall from one side to the other, drifting off into the corners. Though tonally, the *BR-19* seemed truthful and neutral, I did get just a hint of coolness in the presentation; however, I attribute this not to a deviation from linearity but rather the outcome of the *BR-19's* superb focus, grip and precision in the handling of the audio signal. Images were very well defined in space, distinct from the background, with nothing less than clarity in imaging. Putting on the track *Against The Wind* by the artist, **Victory Boyd**, I was shocked with the tightness of the opening kick drum hits despite their hefty wallop. There was tremendous tautness in strikes, each thud relaying the tension of the drumskin. Her voice was high in the soundstage, as if sung from a raised pedestal, coming

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from a place higher than the instrumentation. **Victory's** voice was lucidly conveyed, her wispy sonorous yet strong vocal character exposed; clean, crisp, and pure. The massed background vocals came across with a gentle quality, the individual voices clearly distinguishable both audibly and in space, across the soundstage. The soundstage laid out by the choral elements stretched wide, and at the left and right edges seemed to begin to wrap around me, placing me amid the imagery. Listening to this same track with my own **Bryston BR-20** conveyed additional top-to-bottom warmth; the mids slightly fuller, yet the treble somewhat less airy and open with the vocals, than the **BR-19**. The drum dynamics seemed blunter with the **BR-20**, slightly less tension... as if relaxing the grip on the notes. Through the **BR-20**, the guitar body seemed more evident, while the strings were less forward in their attack, less sharp. The slightly fuller midrange of the **BR-20** did produce a more lifelike presence to voices, making them more corporeal, yet there was less delineated in the voices of the choir than the **BR-19**.

I wanted to ensure that the difference I was hearing between the **BR-19** and **BR-20** were not the result of the **BR-20** acting as a source. So, next, I used my **Rega Apollo CDP** as a common analog source to both the **BR-19** and **BR-20**, in turn, connected via a set of **RCA** interconnects from **ADL** by **Furutech**. Using my dB meter, I found that the **BR-19** and **BR-20** produced the dB output when set to the same volume setting. I put on **Chris Botti's To Love Again CD** album, and the track *What Are You Doing with the Rest of Your Life?* The **BR-19** was stunningly tight and defined with the bass notes, sounding slightly tighter and quicker than my **BR-20**, when compared back-to-back. Bass notes through the **BR-19** were also more contained, the edges of images more apparent with a slightly smaller image size. The bell chimes on this track were very fine and delicately produced, having a crystalline quality via the **BR-19**, while in comparison the **BR-20** presented the bell chimes with slightly more warmth having a somewhat burnished and brassy quality. The trumpet notes via the **BR-19** were exacting, having a chiselled quality with a quick decay on the notes. In comparison, the **BR-20** portrayed **Botti's** trumpet with a little additional bloom, glow and with a somewhat larger size. I would attribute much of this difference in sonic presentation to the **BR-19's** propensity for focus and exactness... it seemed as though the **BR-19** had greater control over the elements, more grip on the notes, and a more exacting image placement. This impression carried over to the strings, which through the **BR-19** had superb focus and definition.

Moving to the vinyl source, I put on my copy of *Morning Phase* by **Beck**. The first track was *Heart Is A Drum*. Through the **Bryston BR-19** preamplifier, the sound was warm and rich with full bass notes. The guitar notes were very detailed, the string detail most apparent, while sounding very natural, while

the rattle of the guitar's fret made a surreal impression. **Beck's** vocals were portrayed across the soundstage with buoyancy, clearly demonstrating height, along with having definition and separation within the wraparound soundstage. The layering of elements within the soundstage was excellent; guitars left and right forefront, while bass guitar notes remained centred with a sustain that was resounding and nebulous. In comparison to the **BR-20**, the **BR-19** delivered consonants in a more incisive manner, with sibilants slightly more evident. The fabric of the soundstage, delivered with the **BR-19** was not black but rather, invisible, especially noticeable when compared to the **BR-20** with its velvet black soundstage quality. I can only presume this is the result of the vanishingly low noise of the **BR-19** but also its proficiency with image delineation. The soundstages produced by the **BR-19** were large; however, the **BR-20** did consistently deliver even larger soundstages with larger images and a softer edge to the elements within the soundstage. I spent some time listening to **Peter Gabriel's** track *Mercy Street* from his *Shaking the Tree* album, via the headphone output of the **Bryston BR-19**, using my **Grado 325e** headphones. **Gabriel's** voice sounded very distinct but also forward. The trailing backing vocals that shadowed **Peter's** own voice, was noticeably lower in tone. Listening to the bassline, there texture and spring of the strings demonstrated speed, definition, and rhythm. In comparison, via the **BR-20's** headphone output provided a somewhat warmer presentation **BR-19**—fuller, thicker, more rounded notes, chimes possessing a more brassy and less sharp nature, with a tangible sense of the space versus the more invisible background presented with the **BR-19**.

Final Thoughts

As I mentioned in my introduction, absolute fidelity to the source recording, is unachievable; however, after spending many hours of critical listening to the **BR-19**, I can confidently say that it is the most transparent preamplifier I've had chance to review. This is a preamplifier that truly stands out of the way of the music signal, revealing minute details in a well ordered and pristine manner. The **BR-19** delivers without concealment nor embellishment of the music signal. Its strengths are linearity, the absence of noise and distortion, as well as unwavering precision. When the recording and source chain are up to it, the **Bryston BR-19** can also bring you close to the absolute sound. If you value the truth, then the **Bryston BR-19** may just set you free.

GENERAL INFORMATION

Price: \$5,795 CAD, \$5,795 US

Warranty: 20 years, parts and labour

Manufacturer / Distributor: Bryston Ltd., T.: 1 800.632.8217 or 705.742.5323, <https://bryston.com/>