

## BILLBOARD



## HIFI TEST

Test: Bryston BP17<sup>3</sup> and Bryston 4B<sup>3</sup> | Before-end combination

# 17 and 4

by MARTIN MERTENS | MAY 16, 2018



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## IN THE TEST

Bryston BP17<sup>3</sup> and Bryston 4B<sup>3</sup> - pre / power amplifier combination

## EIA AT THE TIME OF TESTING

Bryston BP17<sup>3</sup> preliminary stage: 4487 euros  
Bryston 4B<sup>3</sup> final stage: 6547 euros

4th Test conclusion: Bryston BP17<sup>3</sup> and 4B<sup>3</sup>



Bryston - a name like Donnerhall! In my "HiFi youth" (over 30 years ago) the then young Canadian company was mentioned in the same breath as American heavyweights like Threshold or Mark Levinson. Now the brand-new Bryston BP17<sup>3</sup> preamp is standing in front of me and I am eager to show what a current Bryston combination (sales: [www.avitech.at](http://www.avitech.at) | BP17<sup>3</sup>: 4487 euros, 4B<sup>3</sup>: 6547 euros) has that on it.

This is how it can work: Threshold sank into insignificance after the departure of Nelson Pass, who founded his own company with Pass Labs. Mark Levinson drifted into - let's say - "very ambitious" realms in terms of price. With one foot firmly stuck in the professional sector, Bryston neither had to go along with the trends and fashions of the high-end nor take the path to pure cost-no-object hi-fi. Either would have annoyed the studio clientele. Bryston stayed down to earth. The price was that the Canadians lost their presence in the consumer sector and disappeared from the radar of many hi-fi enthusiasts, including mine.



Bryston BP17<sup>3</sup> and 4B<sup>3</sup> are each available in either black or silver

My first encounter with Bryston took place a few years ago. I was allowed to test loudspeakers for a print magazine. Among other things, a Bryston 4BSST<sup>2</sup> Pro power amplifier was available to me as a work device. And the more I worked with the rather inconspicuous power amplifier, the more different speakers I connected, the more I liked it. The thing refrained from any interference, played perfectly with every loudspeaker and tickled out the characteristics of the different boxes by the hair. I always had the impression that the respective loudspeakers were the tonal limiting factor, never the amplifier. And the Bryston forgave rough handling painlessly. A "short one" when changing the speaker cable? No problem. She wasn't offended by turning it on and off frequently (after finding the power switch). The 4BSST<sup>2</sup> remained in my fondest memories as a sonically outstanding, ultra-solid workhorse.

Then colleague Jörg Dames had the big [Bryston Monos 7B<sup>3</sup> in the test](#). At this point in time I made the decision to buy the successor to the 4BSST<sup>2</sup>, the Bryston 4B<sup>3</sup>, which I have been using for some time now. When it came to testing the new Bryston BP17<sup>3</sup> preamplifier together with the 4B<sup>3</sup>, nobody had to ask me for long.

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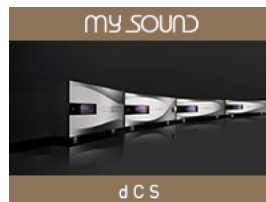
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CYRUS

I had a little controversy with my colleague Jörg Dames about whether Bryston devices look better in silver or black. He likes silver, I like black. The consequence is that my Bryston 4B<sup>3</sup> is black, while the test sample of the Bryston BP17<sup>3</sup> came with a silver front, which is reflected not least in the photos of this test.



*The front of the Bryston BP17<sup>3</sup> consists of a 6.2 mm thick aluminum profile*



Let's take a closer look at the preliminary stage first: The front of the Bryston BP17<sup>3</sup> consists of a 6.2 mm thick aluminum profile. This is enough to add a few elegant curves and bevels - mainly because it is a short U-profile, so that the upper and lower edges are larger and the front looks thicker than it really is. The rest of the case is the right color (black) and is made of sturdy sheet metal. This is very solid, looks absolutely high-quality, but is far from the - at least partially worthy of discussion - material battle of many other high-end devices. I like that. The fact that the Bryston BP17<sup>3</sup> still weighs a decent 5 kg is due to its intrinsic values and, above all, to the power supply unit. The **toroidal transformer**, which Bryston uses here, would look good on some power amplifiers. Otherwise there is a lot of air in the case. This is mainly due to the fact that the boards are equipped with an SMD design. This ensures the shortest possible signal paths and takes up little space. There is so much space left that Bryston optionally offers an MM phono pre-board and a DAC board for the BP17<sup>3</sup>. They are plugged into the main board if required. The labeling for the additional inputs or the re-assignment of the existing inputs that the boards bring with them is already printed on the front. This can be confusing at first.

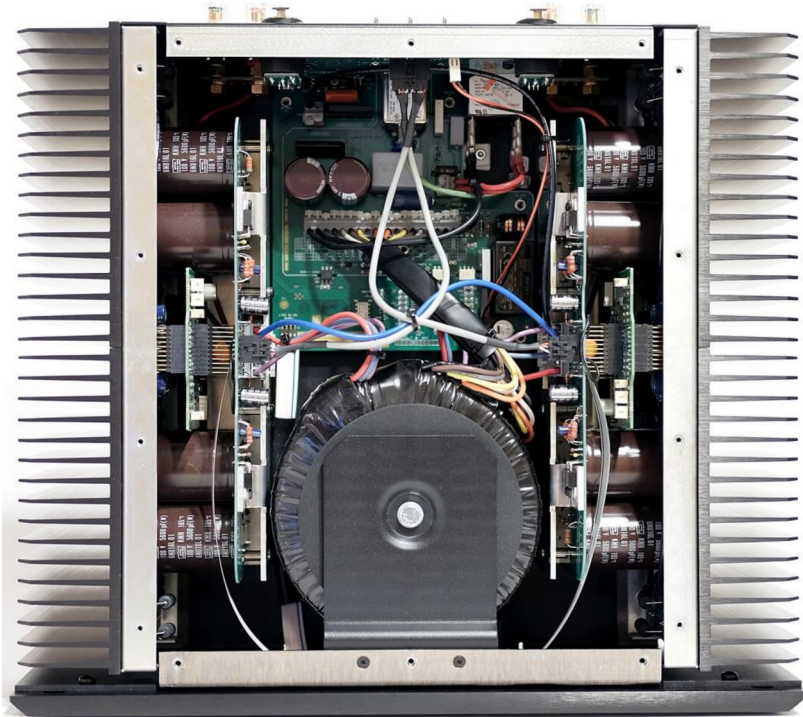
What else is there to report? That the Bryston BP17<sup>3</sup> has five unbalanced inputs as well as corresponding outputs in the form of a (regulated) preamplifier output and an (unregulated) Rec-Out output. And that it also offers two **balanced inputs** and two balanced pre-amplifier outputs. Sure, there is also a remote control (BR2: 485 euros). If necessary, it not only controls the prepress, but also other Bryston devices. That makes the giver a bit confusing. Especially since the labeling of the inputs does not match those on the front of the preamplifier.



*The Bryston 4B<sup>3</sup> power amplifier*

The Bryston 4B<sup>3</sup> power amplifier is a different caliber. The front is made of solid 12.7 mm thick aluminum. But the use of materials is not an end in itself, because the Bryston 4B<sup>3</sup> is also available in a Pro version with a wider front for installation in a 19 "rack. Since the front has to hold a large part of the 26 kg that the power amplifier weighs, the material thickness is quite justified. The power pack also makes a significant contribution to the total weight of the 4B<sup>3</sup>. Two huge toroidal transformers inside, which Bryston built on top of each other to save space, not only look impressive, they also weigh several kilos. Not only with the transformers, the 2 x 300 watts at 8 ohms output stage also shows a clean double mono structure. In contrast to the prepress, it is very cramped here. Between the mighty side heat sinks, transformers, lavish filter and buffer capacities and various circuit boards, some of which are conventionally equipped with components with connecting wires, and some with SMD components, crowd. In addition to the actual output stages, there is a power supply board with an elaborate current limiter so that the fuses do not blow out when switching on, as well as some boards with control and regulating circuits. As a professional device, the Bryston 4B<sup>3</sup> is designed for extremely high operational

reliability. so that the fuses do not blow out when switched on, as well as some circuit boards with control and regulating circuits. As a professional device, the Bryston 4B<sup>3</sup> is designed for extremely high operational reliability. so that the fuses do not blow out when switched on, as well as some circuit boards with control and regulating circuits. As a professional device, the Bryston 4B<sup>3</sup> is designed for extremely high operational reliability.



*The inner workings of the Bryston 4B<sup>3</sup>*

The professional claim also manifests itself on the back of the device. The Bryston power amplifier accepts unbalanced signals via two **cinch sockets** . A pair of combination sockets are available for symmetrical control, to which both **XLR plugs** and 6.35 mm jack plugs can be connected. Of course, the loudspeaker terminals and other connections are also found here, for example for a control voltage with which the output stage can be switched on remotely. Small toggle levers allow you to switch between the balanced or unbalanced inputs and choose the gain factor (26 **dB** for connection to a source with an active balanced output, 29 dB for connection to an unbalanced source or a source balanced by a transformer) or to let the output stage run in bridge mode. Then it has a mono output of 900 watts into 8 **ohms** .



*The back of the Bryston 4B<sup>3</sup>*

By the way, the big switch next to the left speaker terminal is not the power switch, but a "Master-Circuit-Breaker". It should be on "On" when you connect the power amplifier to the mains. Then she does a little self-test. Meanwhile, the LED on the back flashes

green. If it then turns red, the Bryston 4B<sup>3</sup> can be switched on with the power switch on the front.

## Sound impressions & comparisons: Bryston BP17<sup>3</sup> and Bryston 4B<sup>3</sup>



In my hi-fi rack, the Bryston BP17<sup>3</sup> takes the place of my EAR Yoshino 868 - by the way, also a preamplifier for a studio equipment manufacturer. Only here is not the latest semiconductor technology from 2017, but tube technology at the level of the 1970s. The Bryston 4B<sup>3</sup> already has its permanent place in the hi-fi rack. The first bars on the Bryston station wagon make it clear that the Canadians pursue very modern sound ideals. In terms of tone, the Bryston combination is absolutely neutral. I am sure that one cannot ascribe any character to her from this point of view. That is neither "warm" nor analytically "cool", rather it interferes as little in terms of tonality as one can hope for from studio equipment.

Apart from the tonality, however, the BP17<sup>3</sup> / 4B<sup>3</sup> combination already has some significant character traits - below I will also highlight the 4B<sup>3</sup> separately, which, as much as I can tell, is really exceptional.

### The Bryston BP17<sup>3</sup> / 4B<sup>3</sup> combination in the sound check



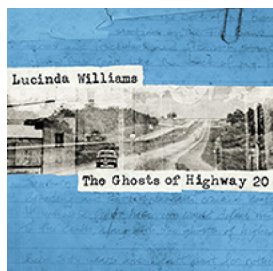
But first about the combination: I start my listening session with *Paula Morelenbaum's* album *Telecoteco* ([listen on Amazon](#)). The Bryston components convey the track "O Samba OE Tango" with an energy that simply inspires. I am particularly impressed by the speed and dynamics of the synthetic bass runs.

Synths? Then we have *Madonna, American Life* ([listen on Amazon](#)). The test track for crisp synth bass par excellence. The strange abrupt stops of the low notes that characterize some of the tracks collected here, such as "American Life" or "Die Another Day", are brilliantly implemented by the Canadian amplifier duo. It comes across as extremely crisp and controlled.

But there is not only synthetic bass. Why not (light) classical music again? The music for the ballet *Le Sacre Du Printemps* offers a wide range of instruments. I use the recording by *Pierre Boulez* with the *Cleveland Orchestra* ([listen to it on Amazon](#)) back. Plucked double basses celebrate an intoxicating, ecstatic hustle and bustle, which the kettledrum powerfully put a stop to and call to order. The Brystons once again convey the dynamism of the whole in an impressive way. Ok, I've heard the whole thing a little more powerfully, more forcefully. From a sober, pragmatic point of view, however, this



is absolutely correct: The Bryston station wagon neither "artificially" pushes in, nor do I have the impression that it is withholding something.



The next discipline is the **mids**. In my experience, the most critical aspect here is the reproduction of the most natural of all "musical instruments", the voice. Despite the

onset of spring, I feel a little like the end of the day. *Lucinda Williams* fits in very well. Incidentally, it is increasingly withdrawing from the influence of the music industry with its profit maximization measures that are becoming increasingly unbearable for artists and consumers and has released its last albums under its own label. Lo and behold: For a bearable price, it is possible to offer excellently produced vinyl, which is also accompanied by a code for downloading the music as high-resolution wav files. Since the Bryston BP17<sup>3</sup> came here without the phono option, mine comes from here [Linnenberg Teleman DAC](#) and takes the digital data of the album *The Ghosts of Highway 20* ([listen on Amazon](#)) at. The subtle fragile voice of Ms. Williams comes close, intense, rough and melancholy. That gets under your skin. E-guitars and drums accompany the vocals - on this album a bit too smooth for my taste, but the amplifier combo cannot help. Rather, everything can be heard through extremely well - from the details of the voice to the playing of the electric guitars to the drums; the Bryston station wagon is also convincing here across the board. In combination with my EAR-Yoshino 868, the Bryston 4B<sup>3</sup> reproduces the voice of Ms. Williams in parts even more emphatically, but the tube preamp is tuned a little warmer and therefore has a pronounced "weakness" for voices. But it can be described as not quite as neutral as the Bryston BP17<sup>3</sup>.



Front & back: the Bryston BP17<sup>3</sup>

At both "edges" of the frequency spectrum, the pure Bryston combination acts more clearly than with the EAR-Yoshino 868 in front. Even at the top, in the heights. Here the character of the Canadians is similar to that in the bass: very clear, controlled and precise. At the same time, they also make a point after every note. Where brooms meet cymbals, i.e. steel meets bronze alloy, a Bryston BP17<sup>3</sup> and Bryston 4B<sup>3</sup> do not in the least leave you in the dark about what is happening here, on the other hand do not delve into following the finest fading of every beat.

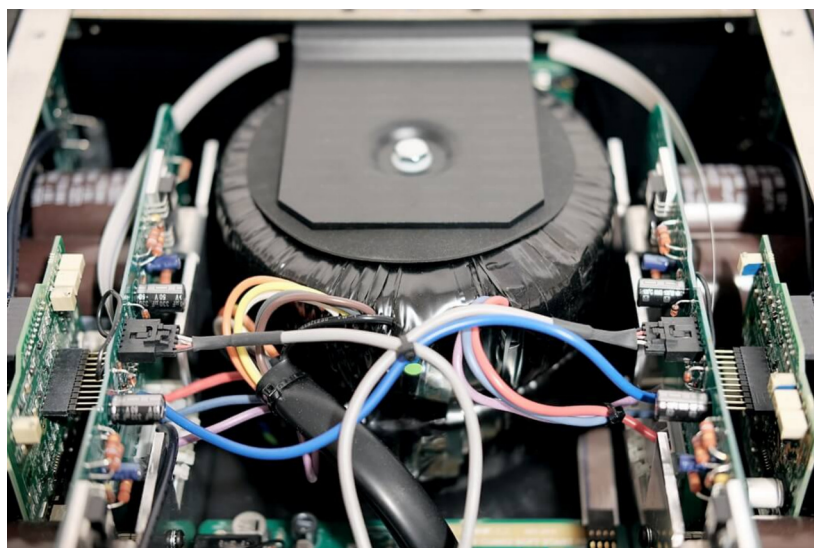


As far as the space is concerned, the combination of Bryston BP17<sup>3</sup> and 4B<sup>3</sup> moves the stage very close to the listener, you sit far in front. In doing so, they set up the stereo panorama relatively broadly and sort the events very neatly. Ms. Williams is standing right in front of me on the stage, her companions are standing with a little distance to the right and left of her. The drums are also only slightly set back. Generally speaking, the room is more wide than it is deep. The depth graduation also works and is clean, but overall the room doesn't go quite as far back.

### Primus inter pares: The Bryston 4B<sup>3</sup> power amplifier



The Bryston 4B<sup>3</sup> in conjunction with other game partners shows that the described character of the Bryston combination goes back to a large extent to the preliminary stage BP17<sup>3</sup>. For example, if the Linnenberg Teleman DAC, which has a high-quality volume control, directly controls the output stage, it becomes clear that the Bryston 4B<sup>3</sup> is the secret star of the station wagon. With the Linnenberg Teleman DAC, the bass maintains its exemplary control and precision compared to the BP17<sup>3</sup>, but gains in substance and pressure. Especially when it comes to the very deep registers, an increased authority is noticeable. The Bryston 4B<sup>3</sup> has the speakers absolutely under control. The heavy 300 mm woofer of the [Spendor Classic 100](#), which I connect on a test basis, it controls perfectly and manages to heave the synth basses, which are subjectively perceived as infrasound, into my listening room on *James Blake's* cover version of the Feist song "Limit to Your Love" (*James Blake* album) ([listen on Amazon](#)), without anything here seeming to begin with uncontrolled. The large chassis are already making visible strokes and I am waiting for my neighbors to run into the street screaming because they think the house is collapsing.



On the other hand, the Bryston 4B<sup>3</sup> can also handle light, horn-loaded broadband drivers such as the [Tune Audio Prime](#). That's unusual. Usually one likes to connect such boxes to [single-ended](#) 300B amplifiers, which offer hardly any [damping](#) factor, so that the already tightly clamped chassis have enough leeway to act "freely" in the bass and sound more substantial. The Bryston 4B<sup>3</sup> has mastered the art of handling woofers of all shapes and sizes. At the same time, it sounds neither forceful nor anemic, but simply always right.





This "correct" also applies to the other frequency ranges. In conjunction with my EAR Yoshino 868 tube preamplifier, the Bryston 4B<sup>3</sup> shows how fascinating voices can sound. She brings the finest details of the articulation across and convinces with the throaty voice of *Buika* (album *Niña De Fuego* ) as well as the rhythmically accented singing of *Ulita Kanus* ( *The Moon on My Doorstep* ) or with *Leonhard Cohen's* creaky

1 ). The Canadian power amplifier transports details, rhythm, voice training and articulation - simply everything that defines the respective voice - incredibly vividly and intensely. *Zaz* album With the opener "Les Passants", *Zaz* ( [listen to it on Amazon](#) ) makes it clear that the Bryston 4B<sup>3</sup> also does an incredible job in the high range. The glockenspiel at the beginning of the piece was recorded almost painfully high and loud - and is still bearable over the 4B<sup>3</sup>, as it sounds exceptionally clear and clean.

In terms of space, the Bryston 4B<sup>3</sup> also scales with the connected electronics or speakers. At the Linnenberg Telemann the image is less wide, but deeper and very three-dimensional, with even more air between the individual sound sources.

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TEST: BRYSTON BP17<sup>3</sup> AND BRYSTON 4B<sup>3</sup> | BEFORE-END COMBINATION

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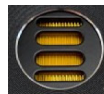
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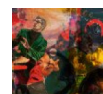
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