

Bryston BP26 Preamplifier and 7B3 Power Amplifier

REVIEW

by Kirk Midtskog | Feb 09th, 2017



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Bryston LTD is known for making well-engineered, high-value audio gear. Its famous 20-year warranty and successful 35-year track record in both the pro- and home-audio worlds have helped solidify the company's reputation for producing reliable, high-performing products at fair prices. The BP26 preamp and 7B3 mono amplifiers exemplify this approach.

The quality of the casework is good. Everything fits well, and there are no rough edges. The controls are intuitive. There are no configuration set-up menu selections to make and no operating firmware updates to download. You connect your sources and speakers to the combo, and you're ready to go—all sort of reassuringly "traditional." The Brystons functioned without any problems throughout the five months I used them regularly. This is all fine and good, but would be disappointing if the components did not also sound good. I can happily report the BP26/7B3 combo was a pleasure to listen to. To be honest, I expected the sonic performance to be more along the lines of competent than inspiring, which has sort been my impression of Bryston gear in the past, despite my long-standing admiration for the company's history of delivering solid engineering, reliability, and value—not to mention its reputation for treating its employees well.

The BP26 preamp and its MPS2 external power supply list for \$5160. (Bryston also offers an alternative, compact PS-3 power supply for \$1000, but I believe most users get the standard MPS2 power supply [\$1865].) The MPS2 can also power three other Bryston devices, such as a separate crossover, phono stage, or digital music player. The remote control unit costs an extra \$375, and I recommend it. The robust metal handset controls a variety of Bryston equipment and has nifty user-set sensors, which illuminate the buttons in low light when a button is pressed or when the remote is merely moved. I grew to like the convenience of seeing the buttons in low ambient light simply by picking up the remote. Bryston offers other on-board options: a DAC (\$1595), a moving-magnet phono section (\$750), and a moving-coil phono section (\$1500). You have to opt for either the DAC or one of the phono options but not both. Bryston's PR rep Micah Sheveloff told me most customers choose one of the phono sections and use an external DAC because digital technology changes more rapidly than phono technology. To sum up, as reviewed as a linestage only, the BP26, MPS2 power supply, and BR2 remote retail for \$5535.

The BP26 is fully featured. It has a tape loop, a mono/stereo toggle, a mute toggle, a channel balance control, a motorized volume pot, an input selector, and a feature one does not find very often anymore—a phase inversion toggle (also activated on the remote control). Some recordings sound better with the absolute polarity inverted (like Alison Krauss' *Forget About It* [Rounder]), so I liked this feature. Only tone controls are missing, but I presume Bryston reasoned they would cause more harm than good or would push the cost higher than the design brief. The BP26 has both balanced/XLR and unbalanced/RCA inputs and outputs and a 1/4" headphone jack. The matching external MPS2 power supply is connected to the unit via a detachable umbilical cord with six-pin connectors. I separated the MPS2 from the main unit on another shelf, but the instruction manual mentions that users may stack the main chassis on top of the power supply chassis unless excessive system noise is present through the optional

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The 7B³ mono amplifiers retail for \$11,390 per pair and deliver 600 watts into 8 ohms (900 into 4). Each amp has balanced/XLR and unbalanced/RCA inputs, an input gain selector (23dB or 29dB), and one pair of multi-way speaker binding posts. Thankfully, the binding posts' spade slots face upwards for easy speaker cable connection from above and for routing speaker cables away from the floor. The 7B³ was released earlier this year, so it has some of Bryston's latest technology, whereas the BP26 has been in production since 2009. The previous series of power amps, labeled SST², made advances in reducing distortions typically found in the output sections of Class AB amplifiers through technology Bryston calls "Quad Complementary" output. The new Cubed Series retains that technology and also addresses lowering noise in the input stage. The updates were co-designed by a Bryston team led by Christopher Russell with some further advances to the work of the late physicist and computer scientist, Dr. Ioan Alexandru Salomie. (Salomie apparently held patents in fields such as circuit-design software, 3D computer-animation, medi-cal applications, as well as in audio design through his work with Bryston.) The Cubed series amps reportedly have better common-mode noise rejection and improved EMI/RFI noise rejection.

The 7B³ is more refined sounding and more musically rewarding than previous Bryston amps I have heard. Even though I didn't have a pair of the previous generation 7BSST² on hand to directly compare to the new 7B³, I am willing to give some credit to what I perceive to be a "new Bryston sound" to the updates in the Cubed Series.

Evaluation

I listened to the Brystons with some of my reference gear, including the very revealing YG Sonja 1.2 speakers and a set of nicely transparent Shunyata Anaconda cables. I did several A/B/A comparisons with two other pre/power combos (discussed later). I also mixed and matched each combo's preamp with the other combos' power amps to cross-reference my sonic impressions and to get a better idea of the BP26's and 7B³'s respective individual characteristics. Because I used a higher-resolution evaluation platform than a typical listener might, given the Bryston combo's price, the observations and distinctions I make may not be as readily apparent in other systems to the degree I describe below. I ran the Brystons for at least 300 hours before I did any serious listening.

To summarize my overall impressions upfront, the Bryston BP26/7B³ combo sounds musical and engaging with fabulous rhythmic drive and momentum. It is tonally neutral with an open quality that does not veer toward edgy or forced. It imparts a sure-footed foundation with good bass extension and control. The soundstage is wide, tall, and reasonably deep.

The sort of musicality I hear in the Brystons is more along the lines of a winning, agile tunefulness than a beguiling, silky lusciousness. I kept listening to cut after cut not necessarily because every nuance was brought forth, but because the Brystons seemed to convey a feeling of unfettered directness and immediacy. I remained engaged with the music during long listening sessions, my feet tapping to the beat and my head leaning with the phrases, because the Brystons' readily transmitted the central "musical core"—if you will.

Nothing seemed out of balance tonally or rhythmically. All too often, some other gear at this price level tends to focus your attention on a particular aspect of the music, such as leading edges, punchy dynamics, or a pervasive silkiness, any of which can register as affectations after a while. The Bryston combo just gets the "musical gestalt" right and doesn't otherwise draw much attention to itself. Could it be more revealing of fine detail?

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Calling solid-state electronics at this price level “neutral” is sometimes understood to mean, “leans towards the clinical.” I don’t mean that at all. The Brystons’ tonal spectrum is basically correct but there is nothing sterile or pedantic about it. From top to bottom, the combo sounds tonally and dynamically coherent. The Brystons have a rich and weighty quality while simultaneously sounding open and airy, somewhat like live orchestral music in this regard. The bass is deep reaching and tuneful, and conveys a reassuring feeling of stability and ease. Dynamic power reserves are very good, too. I never had the sense that the 7B³ was running out of juice on even the most demanding musical passages, and I presume it will easily drive a wide variety of loudspeakers.

Soundstage width is a particular strong suit. I think some of this good width performance stems from separating each channel into its own power amp chassis as well as having sufficient power on tap to really control the speakers, and easily move a lot of air when called upon. When paired with other power amplifiers, the BP26 preamp demonstrated that it also presents a fairly wide soundstage, so it, too, contributes to the combo’s performance in this area. Soundstage height is also notably good. Soundstage depth is good, but not exceptional. If you must have a very deep soundstage, you are probably already aware that depth portrayal is not a typical strong suit of solid-state gear at this price level. Mind you, the Bryston combo does render depth fairly well, but tube gear and some other solid-state electronics—usually more expensive ones, like those from GamuT and Hegel—will portray depth more readily. The Brystons revealed plenty of hall and distance cues, but those cues were a bit foreshortened. Still, for solid-state at this price level, the Brystons acquitted themselves nicely.

I listened briefly to the headphone output on the BP26. Since I don’t own any other headphone-capable preamps or dedicated headphone amplifiers against which I could directly compare it, all I can report is that the BP26’s headphone output sounded quite good, better than I expected—based on the ‘phone listening I have done in the past with the Oppo HA-1 and at industry trade shows. I have a hunch that Bryston engineered more performance into the BP26’s headphone section rather than merely including it as an additional marketing feature.



Comparisons

Switching between the Brystons and the Hegel P30 (\$7500) preamp and H30 stereo power amp (\$15,000, Issue 223) as respective combos pretty much mirrored what each component brought to bear individually. The Brystons sounded more rhythmically nimble and imparted a shade more upper-frequency openness. The Hegels sounded more continuous and a bit more revealing, and they rendered depth better, too—both of individual images and of the larger soundscape. The pairing of the Bryston BP26 preamp with the Hegel H30 power amp actually sounded quite good. The quick, punchy quality of the BP26 complemented the more tube-like liquidity and sonic sophistication of the H30. The Bryston 7B³ amp also sounded good with the Hegel P30 preamp driving it, but the Bryston BP26 preamp seemed to be just a bit “quicker” no matter which power amp it was paired with. The Hegel

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width a hair over the Hegel H30 amp. But, again, the H30 rendered depth better, sounded more continuous, and revealed subtle details a little better.

Comparing the Bryston and Hegel gear to my reference Ayre K-1xe preamp and GamuT 250i mono amplifiers proved instructive as well. In short, my roughly \$35,000 reference combo outplayed the Brystons in every way—particularly in overall resolution and almost tube-like image density and soundstage depth, but then they should as they cost a little over twice the price. In my system, the Hegel combo performed at a level between the Brystons and my reference Ayre/GamuT electronics, but it is quite possible that some listeners might prefer one of the Brystons to either of the Hegel units depending on system matching and their tastes. To summarize, the following qualities followed the Brystons no matter in what pairings they were placed: notable musical immediacy, good rhythmic drive, solid foundation through good dynamic and bass performance, open but non-fatiguing top end, honest tonal balance, and finally, depth portrayal and “liquidity” that can be bettered by other gear. A good showing, indeed.

Conclusion

The Brystons proved to be a real treat. The new 7B³ power amplifier and the already well-received BP26 preamp are a wonderfully musical combination. Together, they offer feature-rich, real-world practicality in the form of the BP26’s versatility and the 7B³’s high-output power delivery and ability to drive a wide range of speakers. Bryston’s 20-year, transferable warranty applies to both units, so you can buy with confidence knowing that you are purchasing well-engineered equipment that also sounds good. If you favor high-powered solid-state amplification and would rather not spend more on audio gear, the Bryston BP26/7B³ combination should be on your short list. I don’t know of a more powerful, versatile, and musically rewarding solid-state pre/power pair at its asking price.

Specs & Pricing

BP26 Preamplifier

Type: Solid-state linestage

Analog inputs: Two balanced (XLR), five unbalanced (RCA), 12V trigger port, auxiliary relay jack

Digital inputs: Two SPDIF (with optional DAC section, not reviewed)

Formats supported: 16kHz–108kHz sample rates and 16-, 18-, 20-, or 24-bit word lengths (with optional DAC section, not reviewed)

Phonostage: Moving magnet, input impedance 50k ohms, 5mV sensitivity; moving-coil, input impedance 180 ohms (with optional phono section, not reviewed)

Outputs: One balanced (XLR), two unbalanced (RCA)

Dimensions: 17" x 2.25" x 11"

Weight: 27.9 lbs. (main unit and MPS2 power supply)

Price: \$5535 (including MPS2 external power supply and BR2 remote)

7B³ Power Monoblock Amplifier

Type: Solid-state, Class AB

Output power: 600W into 8 ohms (900W into 4 ohms)

Inputs: One pair balanced (XLR), one pair unbalanced (RCA), one 12-V trigger port

Output impedance: Not listed

Dimensions: 17" x 6.3" x 16.2"

Weight: 42 lbs.

Price: \$11,390 per pair

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