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An advertisement for Siltech Classic Legend cables. It features a blue cable with silver connectors and a black braided cable with silver connectors. The Siltech logo is prominently displayed in the center. A red diagonal banner in the top right corner says "NEW". The text "A NEW LEGEND IS BORN" is in yellow, and "CLASSIC LEGEND" is in large white letters. A blue button at the bottom right says "AVAILABLE NOW".

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Bryston B1 35 SST2 Integrated Amplifier

Details



Philip Beaudette Full-Length Equipment Reviews 01 September 2013



Most audiophiles, I think, recall the moment we first heard a sound so incredible that it elevated our expectation of how good music could sound on a home

stereo. Generally, such moments happen more frequently in the earlier days of the hobby, when everything is still novel; as time passes and one listens to more equipment, it becomes increasingly difficult to be amazed because one has already experienced great sound.



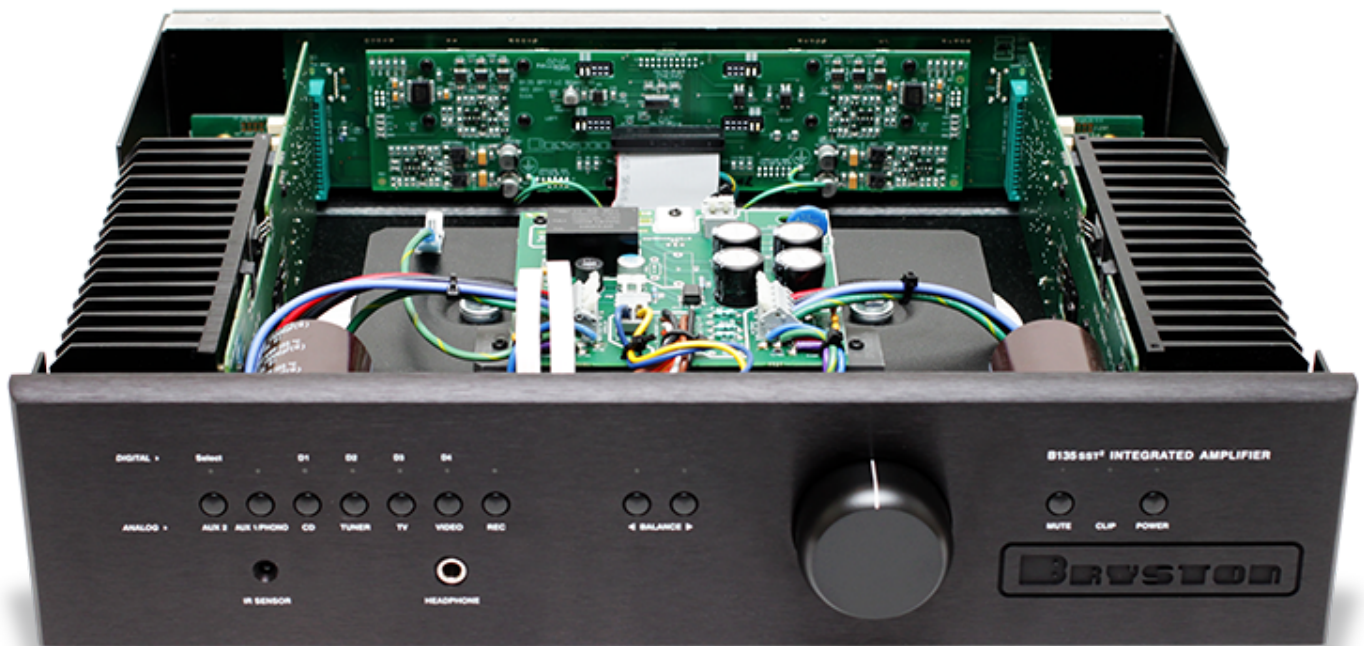
For me, one of these moments came some years ago, while I was living in Peterborough, Ontario, in Canada. I'd received an integrated amplifier, the B100 SST, to review from high-end electronics manufacturer Bryston Ltd., also based in Peterborough. When it arrived, I quickly swapped out my NAD C 372 integrated to see what the Bryston could do to justify a price nearly four times as great. That moment was, interestingly enough, most revelatory for what I *didn't* hear; the sense of transparency, of a dead-quiet background and crystalline clarity, was of a caliber I'd never heard from my system before. Although I didn't realize it that night, a new standard had been set for every integrated amplifier I would review from then on.

That was in 2006. Last fall, Bryston finally replaced the long-running B100 SST with its newest incarnation, the B1 35 SST² (\$4695 USD). As I had seven years before, I wasted no time hooking it up to hear if the bar could again be raised.

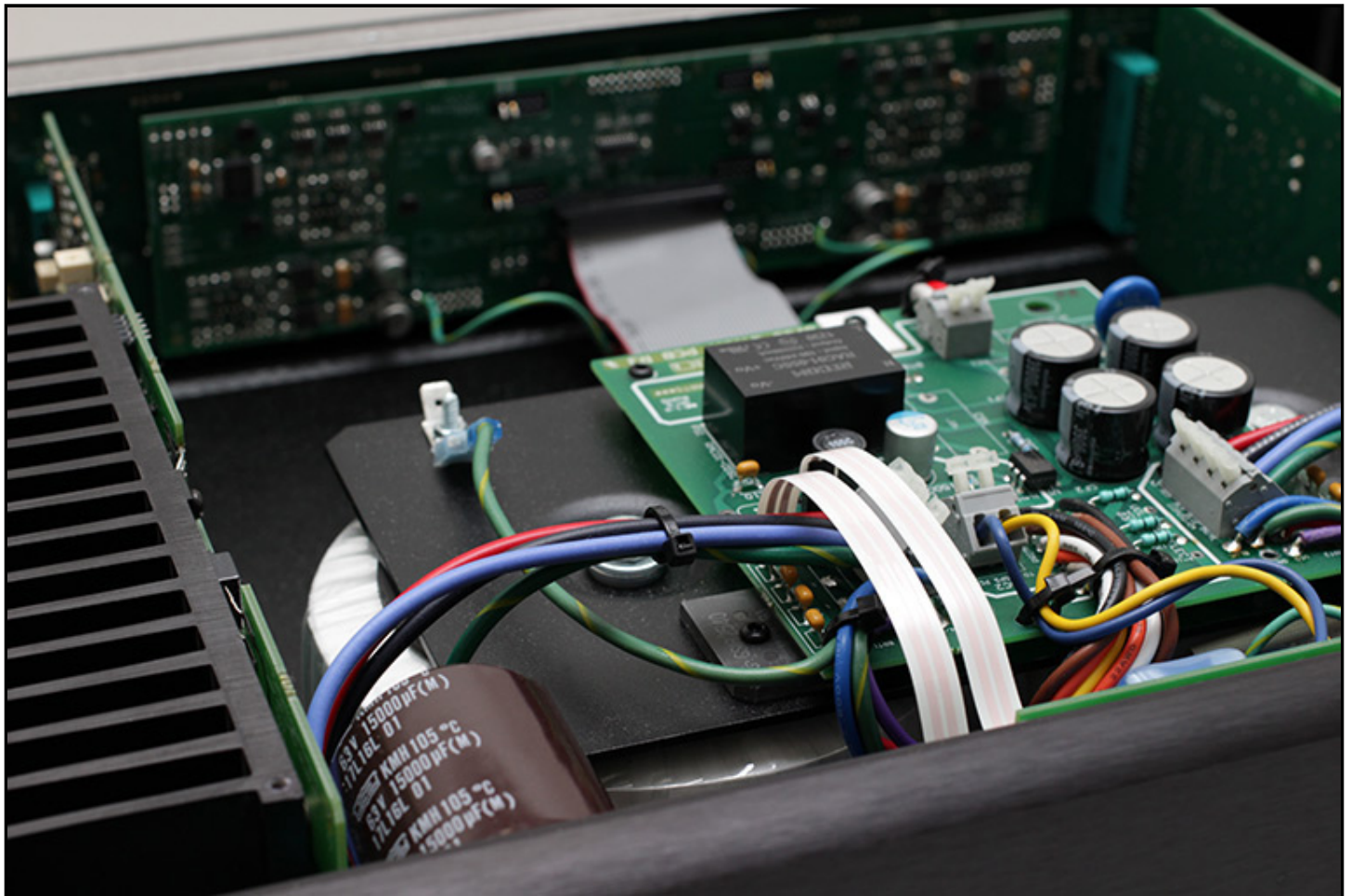
Description

Bryston's promotional brochure includes few specifics about what changes are included in the B1 35 SST², so I contacted James Tanner, the company's VP of sales and marketing. As he usually does, Tanner replied to my e-mail within minutes, but this time passed me along to Bryston's CEO, Chris Russell.

As I spoke with Russell, it became evident that designing a new Bryston integrated amplifier is no simple matter of upgrading a few parts and slapping a new model number on the faceplate. The process was a far more elaborate one that took some three years to complete, and included making changes to both the amplifier and preamplifier sections.



Like all SST² models in Bryston's current lineup, the B135 has a new amplifier section characterized by larger, more powerful transformers. The transformer design is the same as in the SST amps, but the SST²'s larger transformers produce more voltage and thus more current to drive a pair of speakers. The B135 has three of these ultra-low-noise transformers: two for the analog section, one for the digital section.



With the SST² models, Bryston also began to use surface-mount technology (SMT) to build their printed circuit boards. With SMT, all components are affixed directly to the surface of a board, as opposed to securing them with wire leads inserted into holes in the board. According to Russell, SMT has improved

product reliability and decreased manufacturing time, and the latter has helped lower production costs. Like all Bryston products, the B135 has fully discrete rather than integrated circuits (ICs), to avoid the phase shifts and other nonlinearities Bryston claims result from using ICs.



In the preamplifier section, the power-supply, signal, and chassis grounding schemes have all been redesigned to lower distortion. The B135 also has a new, digitally controlled, analog volume control that, unlike its predecessor, employs a balanced throughput that uses two signals of opposing polarity to eliminate the second-order harmonic distortion that can be introduced by the resistors. The B100's volume control had a single-ended rather than a balanced circuit, and therefore was susceptible to these distortion artifacts. Russell told me that the new volume control lowers distortion by a factor of ten, while keeping channel matching to within 0.1dB over the full range of the dial.

Claimed to output 135Wpc into 8 ohms or 180Wpc into 4 ohms, the B135 is more powerful than the B100, which delivered 100Wpc into 8 ohms. These are conservative ratings; the actual power output of each B135 is provided on a detailed specification sheet that's shipped with the unit. Not only does Bryston put every amplifier through a rigorous 100-hour burn-in process to ensure that it works properly before going out the door, they also measure it on a test bench so that things such as power output and intermodulation distortion can be recorded, for their internal records as well as for the customer. My review sample actually produced 154W into both channels before clipping.



The B135 offers the same suite of inputs and outputs as the B100. This includes six line-level inputs, a stereo tape loop, and the ability to separately use the amplifier and preamplifier sections, for those who want to try the B135 with a different preamp or amp. Around back are: an RS-232 port, for receiving software updates; an auxiliary infrared input, so the Bryston can be connected to components with an IR output and operated using those devices' remotes; and a pair of 12V trigger outputs, for turning on any of those connected components.

As with the B100, an onboard moving-magnet phono stage (\$600) or digital-to-analog converter (\$1395) can be added to the B135 at the time of purchase. The DAC has four digital inputs: two optical and two S/PDIF. The S/PDIF inputs replace one of the line-level inputs, reducing the total to five. The DAC has its own separate power supply, and is directly connected to a pair of proprietary, class-A, discrete operational amplifiers, which Bryston claims improves resolution and dynamic headroom. The review sample lacked the phono-stage or DAC options.

A remote control doesn't come standard with the B135, but can be added for a not-so-paltry \$375. Called the BR-2, it can also operate any Bryston DAC, CD player, or preamp. To say that \$375 is a lot of money for a remote is a bit of an understatement -- until you've held and used a BR-2. Milled from a piece of solid aluminum, the BR-2 is ridiculously well built and fits nicely in the hand. Combined with its touch- and light-sensitive backlighting feature, which works wonderfully in a dark room, it's also very functional. Visitors here have often been more interested in the BR-1 remote that I bought to operate my Bryston B100 than in any other component in the system.

The B135 SST² measures 19"W x 4.75"H x 16"D and weighs 30 pounds. A 17"W faceplate is also available, for those who prefer a slimmer profile. The faceplate is made from a thick piece of aluminum and is offered in silver or black. Although the B135's button layout is identical to the B100's, the buttons themselves are now rounded and smooth, giving the front a slightly softer appearance. With these you can select inputs, adjust channel balance, mute the amplifier, and power it on or off. A small light to the right of the volume dial will flash red if the amplifier is driven into clipping. A headphone jack is also provided.

Last but not least, the B135, its phono stage, and the BR-2 remote all come with a transferable 20-year warranty. (The DAC option is covered for “only” five years.) This exceptionally long guarantee says a great deal about the confidence Bryston places in the quality and longevity of their products. Most of their competitors don’t even come close.

System and sound

Having just finished my review of Bryston’s BDA-2 DAC when I began listening to the B135, I decided to keep the two of them together -- I’d had more than ample time to grow accustomed to the sound of the BDA-2 in my system. The DAC was linked to the B135 using Kimber Kable’s Tonik interconnect, and an NAD C 565BEE CD player was hooked up to the BDA-2 with an i2Digital X-60 digital coax. A MacBook computer running Audirvana software was also connected to the BDA-2 with an AudioQuest Forest USB cable. The speakers were Amphion Argon3L floorstanders, with AudioQuest Type 4 speaker cables terminated in banana plugs. All electronics were plugged into an ExactPower EP15A power conditioner/regenerator.

Bryston had already given the B135 SST² a thorough break-in, so I started listening right away. My first impression was that the B135 was even quieter than its predecessor. The B100 already had a low noise floor, so it wasn’t as if the B135 were removing some sort of background haze. Rather, I could hear things such as the decays of piano notes a bit more clearly, and found myself focused on more subtle details, such as the sound of a player’s hand moving along the fretboard of an acoustic guitar. Although it still had much in common with the sound of the B100, the B135’s sound was more transparent, which helped improve on some of the B100’s already impressive strengths.

One of these strengths was the B135’s ability to create the illusion of a live performance, as if the original musical event were unfolding across the front of my room. The Amphion-Bryston combination did a nice job of focusing Beth Gibbons’s voice between the Argon3Ls in “Deep Water,” from Portishead’s *Third* (CD, Mercury 0251766400), producing a sound that was neither forward nor recessed, but simply very natural. With only her voice and the precise, clear sound of the accompanying ukulele, this very minimal arrangement gave the B135 a chance to showcase its ability to produce a credible soundstage with a tangible sense of depth.





“Small,” also from *Third*, begins with a fairly sparse arrangement that eventually opens up to spread beyond the speakers’ outer edges, with the organ at the left and the drum kit on the right, to expand this track both spatially and musically. The acoustic guitar, the rich tone of the cello, and reverberating voices were all lucidly portrayed, each occupying a distinct space on the stage.

The B135 could quickly change color to reproduce the character of a given recording, whatever it might be. “Girl Called Alex,” from Kurt Vile’s latest gem, *Wakin on a Pretty Daze* (CD, Matador OLE-998-2), has an almost washed-out quality. Its soundstage was also a bit recessed, but what first drew my attention was the warm, soft punch of the kick drum. That drum is a bit buried in the mix, which lessens some of the kick in its tone -- this track is not rich in detail. Differences in recording styles, such as those on the Portishead and Vile albums, were very clear through the B135, whose neutrality was a great tool for evaluating what the engineers were trying to achieve. It’s no coincidence that Bryston products have been used in recording studios since the company’s inception.

Dirty Three and Low’s version of “Down by the River,” from the two bands’ *In the Fishtank 7* (CD, Konkurrent LC6110), is one of my favorite cover tracks, in no small part because their minimalist arrangement is about 180° apart from Neil Young’s rock-anthem original. Not only is the idea amazingly executed, it’s wonderfully captured on this recording -- the studio’s cavernous sense of space, the clear reverberation of the instruments, and the sorrowful singing are presented against a brilliant black backdrop that emphasizes the song’s mood. The B135 shone with this recording -- its outstanding transparency let me hear deep into the mix and easily picture the musicians as they slowly work to build the piece until, six minutes into this 9:37 track, Mimi Parker’s crooning voice finally enters. The “air” around the musicians was clearly audible, lending this recording a great sense of openness. I find this performance intoxicating; through the B135 SST², it was sublime. It doesn’t get much better than this.



The ambience heard on the Low/Dirty Three track was also present on another Young tune, “Cowgirl in the Sand,” this time sung by the man himself, on *Massey Hall 1971* (CD, Reprise CDW 43327). The legendary Toronto venue sounds pretty grand here; the excellent recording captured not only its spaciousness but sounds from the audience as well, handclaps and coughs alike, which gives the album a sense of intimacy that helps transport me to the event while breathing life into Young’s performance. Again, the B135’s natural, neutral sound got out of the way of the music, letting it come through unedited.

Two other important facets of the B135’s sound were its powerful bass and effortless dynamics. Having owned a B100 for several years, I’ve come to expect these qualities from Bryston gear, but if you haven’t heard them before, you’ll be impressed with the B135’s sheer authority. With the title track of Killer Mike’s *R.A.P. Music* (CD, Williams Street 384-460-018-2), the B135 delivered tight, potent, pounding synthesized bass that, propelled by the beats of Brooklyn-based producer El-P, sounded upfront and unapologetic -- an aural assault from one of my favorite hip-hop albums of last year.

What the Bryston didn’t produce was sloppy, flatulent bass that veiled the sound in a warm, homogenous drone; the B135 delighted in bass articulation, and portrayed whatever quality of bass was on the recording without any additional weight or bloat. Its drier sound down low mightn’t be fat enough for some tastes, but again, this was because it neither added to nor detracted from the signals it received. I only wish the sound systems I hear at concerts leaned more in this direction.



The B135's low noise floor accentuated its dynamic range: the differences between the quietest and loudest moments in a recording were vibrantly illustrated. Subjected to a favorite test track of mine, one that challenges a component's ability to reproduce a wide dynamic range -- Eiji Oue and the Minnesota Symphony's recording of *War Dance*, from Respighi's *Belkis, Queen of Sheba: Suite* (CD, Reference RR-95 CD) -- the B135 effortlessly captured the still calm before the ensuing chaotic storm in this wonderfully theatrical work. The intensity of this music is heart pounding, and with the B135, it always sounded as if there was still plenty of power in reserve.

Conclusion

At the beginning of this review, I wondered whether Bryston's newest integrated amplifier would be able to raise the bar over its already accomplished predecessor. It has, but, as anticipated, the B135 SST² didn't make the drastic leap in performance that I experienced when I first heard the B100 SST, itself already an exceptional product. What the B135 has done is retain the B100's virtues and elevate them in certain areas, most notably its even greater transparency. With this come other improvements, such as the greater detail and clarity, making the B135 the proverbial clear window on your music.

When I first heard the B100 SST, in 2006, I considered it a benchmark product: the one any other would have to beat. With the B135 SST², Bryston has succeeded in setting a new standard for the level of performance that can be expected at this price. You'll have to spend significantly more to improve on the B135's sound, and even so, those improvements are likely to be small. On these grounds -- and because it sounds so darn good -- Bryston's B135 SST² gets my highest recommendation.

. . . *Philip Beaudette*

philipb@soundstagenetwork.com

Associated Equipment

- **Speakers** -- Amphion Argon3L
- **Integrated amplifier** -- Bryston B100 SST
- **Sources** -- NAD C 565BEE CD player; Thorens TD-160HD turntable, Rega RB250 tonearm, Dynavector DV-10X5 high-output moving-coil cartridge; Apple MacBook computer running Audirvana, Apple AirPort Extreme, Apple AirPort Express
- **Speaker cables** -- AudioQuest Type 4
- **Interconnects** -- AMX Optimum AVC 31 coaxial, AudioQuest Copperhead, Kimber Kable Tonik, XtremeMac XtremeHD TosLink, i2Digital X-60 digital coax
- **Power conditioner** -- ExactPower EP15A

Bryston B135 SST² Integrated Amplifier

Price: \$4695 USD.

Warranty: 20 years parts and labor.

Bryston Ltd.

677 Neal Drive

Peterborough, Ontario K9J 6X7

Canada

Phone: (705) 742-5325, (800) 632-8217

Fax: (705) 742-0882

Website: www.bryston.com

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To contact us, please e-mail info@soundstagenetwork.com