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## **Bryston BDP-3 digital player: The honest truth**



*The latest Bryston BDP-3 digital player is exactly that: a device that plays back almost any digital music format from any source: NAS, USB hard drive, flash disc or streaming service. But does that versatility include remaining true to the music?*

Many music lovers have transformed their music collections into digital libraries residing on network servers, thus obviating the need for traditional CD/SACD players. The benefits include ease of access and the availability of content-rich metadata.

Accessing and playing back these libraries can be done in several ways. One of the most popular is using third-party software such as Audirvana 3 Plus, JRiver Media Player or Roon to access, manage and play back those digital music files.

The downside is that this route involves the use of a computer linked to the network on which the music server resides. And as we all know, computers aren't typically audio-friendly: they're noisy and vulnerable to interference, among many other problems.

There are workarounds, of course: using a network bridge to manage the music data stream, for instance. Or, locating the offending computer in another room, and using remote software.

But not everyone is comfortable with these solutions, or the networking know-how that it presupposes.

## **AT FACE VALUE**

The Bryston BDP-3 represents another option: a dedicated digital music player with the sole task of acting as a high-quality, intuitive interface between a digital library (and other devices containing music files) and an audio system.

It still needs to be connected to a dedicated DAC, which makes sense, since most potential BDP-3 buyers are likely to already own one. But while it's a digital playback powerhouse, with a raft of features, its application can be as simple or as complex as the user chooses.

It's true that there's something reassuring about a device that looks the high-end audio part, and the BDP-3 matches the appearance and feel of Bryston's product family. The slim all-metal enclosure, thick alloy faceplate and function-driven styling aptly illustrate the Canadian marque's DNA.

A central display is flanked by two USB inputs on the left, while transport controls, menu navigation buttons and a power switch are located to the right.

At the rear, the input array includes a further three USB 2.0 and three USB 3.0 sockets. Two of the latter are located on a separate bus, which allows compatibility with the Streamlength protocol required by some DACs.

The USB sockets are bi-directional, which means they can act as inputs to accommodate USB drives and memory sticks/flash drives, but also as outputs to link the BDP-3 to a USB-capable DAC.

The BDP-3 also provides an Ethernet socket for network connectivity, as well as a RSR232 serial port and 12V triggers for custom installation environments. As the Bryston doesn't include an internal DAC, its outputs are purely digital, and comprise a choice of HDMI, BNC coaxial, and AES/EBU, in addition to the USB ports.

It's important to note that the highest resolutions are only available via USB: SPDIF and AES/EBU are limited to 192 kHz/24-bit resolution, and not compatible with DSD at all. USB can cope with resolutions of up to 384 kHz/32-bit, as well as DSD64 and DSD128.

The HDMI output is audio-only and is compatible with 192 kHz/24-bit PCM files and DSD64, but as far as I could tell it will only work with some DACs, such as Bryston's BDA-3. It does not appear to be

I2S-compatible, as my I2S-equipped PS Audio DirectStream DAC would not recognise it.



## UNDER THE COVERS

The BDP-3's high-end pedigree is underscored by its internals, which feature a Celeron-powered motherboard with 8GB of RAM, a high-current linear power supply and a proprietary, low-jitter Integrated Audio Device (IAD) to host the digital outputs.

You can order the BDA-3 with a 2.5-inch internal drive, which allows a relatively large library of music to be stored on board. As the player is UPnP and DLNA compliant, it will also recognise and access files from network-attached server (NAS) devices, and you can populate the internal drive (if present) via the network or directly from attached USB devices.

Control is either via a conventional (but optional) remote handset, or via the BDA-3's own web-based control interface. The interface can be accessed using the web browser on any computer, tablet or smart device on the same network.

For those who couldn't be bothered with the extra cabling of an Ethernet connection, or don't have access to an existing home network, Bryston also offers a Wi-Fi adapter that establishes a dedicated Wi-Fi connection to allow use of the control interface.

The interface is intuitive and works like an app. It incorporates system set-up, a full-featured digital music player, access to Internet radio, and Tidal streaming.

It's also worth noting that the BDP-3 can be operated as a Roon endpoint, which brings all of the benefits of rich metadata, ease of content access and DSP-based tweaking – if you're a Roon subscriber.

## SETTING UP

The BDP-3 was used in two distinct systems. In the first, it was partnered by Bryston's BDA-3 (see review here <http://www.avsa.co.za/bryston-bda-3-da-converter/>), together with a Primare PRE32/MM30 pre-amp/streamer and our regular Parasound Halo A21 power amp, with KEF R500s on speaker duty.

The player was also used in conjunction with a PS Audio DirectStream DAC, partnered by a Naim Uniti2 operating in a pre-amp role, with a PS Audio Stellar S300 power amp providing the muscle. Speakers were Vivid Audio Oval V1.5s.

In both instances, the BDP-3 was hooked up to an pre-existing network using its Ethernet wired connectivity. The supplied Wi-Fi dongle was used as an alternative, specifically in the dedicated network role.

This option will be particularly attractive to users who will only use the wi-Fi connection from a control perspective, and have no inclination to access streaming services or NAS devices. That said, I'd consider wired network and Internet connectivity a must to fully exploit the BDP-3's considerable capabilities.

The review unit was supplied with a 1 TB internal drive already populated with a substantial library of music, but in both systems, it was also used to access a Synology NAS with a further selection of music in various resolutions. Tidal access was also enabled.

I also connected up a Western Digital My Passport 2TB 2,5-inch USB3.0 drive to one of the USB 3.0 ports. In addition, the BDP-3 was configured as a Roon endpoint and used in that role in the PS Audio/Naim/Vivid system.

I tried both the USB and the SPDIF interfaces in both systems to hook up the player to a DAC, with AES/EBU the preferred interface in the case of the latter. XLO Reference digital cabling was used for the SPDIF signal transfer, while the USB connection was made via a Furutech GT2 Pro cable.

As the unit had been used before being submitted for review, no running in was required. Set-up was quick and seamless, with the BDP-3 recognised by our LAN. Using a web browser to access the control and media player interface was an equally simple affair.

I used my MacBook Pro for much of the initial set-up and playback, as the larger screen estate made understanding and using the player more convenient. However, once everything was up and running, the player worked as well on my iPhone 5S, despite the much smaller display.

Using the media player was easy enough. It recognised both directly connected USB drives and the NAS, and adding music to the playlist was a matter of selecting albums or individual tracks, which would then be displayed in the play queue.

That queue can be edited at will, and then saved as a playlist for later recall.



### SOUNDS LIKE ...

I tend to consider the sonic impact of the D/A converter in the digital playback chain more meaningful than that of the originating source. Much of the final result has to do with signal integrity, jitter control and clock timing – all elements usually under the DAC's control.

The BDP-3's role in a system is a little different, though, in that it provides a central, convenient gateway for an array of connected and on-line sources, before relaying the selected data stream to the DAC. It also ensures the integrity of the source signal before it's transferred to the DAC.

Its ability to centralise and direct the data from the various sources in an environment specifically designed for high-grade sonic applications should have a meaningful and positive impact on sound quality.

In the absence of another, similar device to compare it to, the BDP-3 was judged on its ability to retain or even enhance the sonic characteristics of the original recordings under its auspices.

In broad terms, the BDP-3 delivered a sound that was smooth, clean and musically truthful. There was an overriding sense of unconstrained clarity and air, ensuring that both the rhythm and dimension of the performance were retained.

At the same time, the accompanying ambient information, as well as the music's dynamic shifts, were portrayed with authority and realism, adding to the overall credibility and enjoyment of the Bryston's performance.

USB might be preferred by many because of its broader resolution scope, but while there seemed to be a slightly stronger emphasis on detail retrieval, the overall treatment was starker and slightly more aloof.

That's obviously subjective, and I'm sure there will be BDP-3 owners who prefer the keener focus and cleaner detailing delivered via USB, as well as the compatibility with DSD files that the SPDIF connection is unable to offer.

However, to my ears, using the AES/EBU digital interface resulted in a more accessible, more enjoyable and more emotive listening experience. The same level of detail was available, but perhaps slightly less focussed, while the sound was more cohesive, and more emotively gripping.

Tonal depth seemed more incisive when relying on SPDIF, but tonal balance was a smidgen more linear in USB mode. And the latter also delivered a greater sense of precision.

However, we're not talking massive differences here: the distinctions are subtle at best, and the nuances may also vary relative to the DAC partnering the BDP-3. Not surprisingly, I found the BDA-3 a better match for the BDP-3 than the PS Audio.

The latter was consistently more analytical and highlighted the differences between the interfaces more distinctly, while the BDP-3/BDA-3 partnership was slicker and easier on the ear, regardless of interface.

Even then, both set-ups were musically appealing. On Bettye Lavette's atmospheric 'Crazy' (from her hugely enjoyable *Thankful 'N Thoughtful* set) the sparse instrumentation layered across a wide soundstage was rendered with a richness of ambience that filled the room with sound.

While Lavette's husky vocals dominate the song, they're a perfect counterpoint to the relaxed riffs and tremolos of the electric guitars, the splashy keyboard, the laid-back but bone-thrumming bass and the almost dainty percussion.

The walk-in dimensionality of the recording made for enthralling, foot-tapping listening, with the sheer immediacy and realism of the performance making it impossible not to become thoroughly engaged by the music.

The Chick Corea and Steve Gadd Band's *Chinese Butterfly* is a much busier, more densely arranged set, with Gadd's intricate drumming and Corea's equally agile and inventive keyboards making for a mesmerising musical collaboration.

Opening the set, 'Chick's Chums' is as good an example as any, spotlighting drummer and keyboardist, as well as their almost intuitive, fusion-laden interplay, to compelling effect. But it also illustrates the tautly structured performance of the entire band, captured with admirable clarity – even in the more densely arranged sections.

Again, I enjoyed the honesty and accuracy of the BDP-3, coupled to an unerring talent for pace and impact, while never losing sight of the music's overall message. It reflected the substance and impact of the music, but never to the detriment of the finer shades and subtleties.



## THE BOTTOM LINE

Versatility, ease of use and an intuitive web-based interface are all highpoints of the Bryston BDP-3. And while its feature set may appear daunting, its application can be as straightforward or as complex as the owner demands.

While the player's network-related features are comprehensive, it can also be used as a pure and simple digital player focused specifically on direct access to music files on its hard drive and linked USB drives.

Regardless of source, the Bryston consistently treats the music with respect, delivering high levels of precision and exploiting the resolution on offer. But it never allows analysis to overcome musical cohesion, revealing the finer details and nuances in a way that always benefits the heart and soul of the music.



While I remain convinced that the impact of the associated DAC is more significant in the final delivery, it's also true that the sound can only be as good as the quality of the source – and the Bryston BDP-3's credentials in that respect are impeccable.

– **Deon Schoeman**

### PROS

Superbly constructed, highly versatile and sonically honest.

### CONS

All those features may be overwhelming- but don't be intimidated!

### VITAL STATS

**Operating system:** Custom Linux-based

**Motherboard:** Intel Celeron, 8GB RAM

**Control interface:** Web-based, smart device-compatible

**Playback:** Proprietary, integrated digital media player

**Inputs:** 3x USB 3.0, 5x USB 2.0,

**Outputs:** USB, BNC coaxial, AES/EBU XLR, HDMI

**Connectivity:** Gigabyte Ethernet, Wi-Fi (optional), RS232 for control systems

**Storage:** 2.5-inch HDD (optional)

**Dimensions (WxHxD):** 430 x 70 x 283 mm

**Weight:** 6,4 kg

### PRICE

R48 099

### SUPPLIED BY

**Aeolian**

### SOFTWARE

Bettye Lavette – *Thankful 'N Thoughtful* (Anti-/Epitaph 44/16 AIFF)

Chick Corea and Steve Gadd Band – *Chinese Butterfly* (Concord 96/24 FLAC)

Steven Wilson – *To The Bone* (Caroline 44/16 FLAC)

Hiromi – *Another Mind* (Telarc 176/24 FLAC)

### ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

PS Audio DirectStream/Bridge II and Bryston BDA-3 DACs

Naim Uniti2 and Primare PRE32/MM30 pre-amps

PS Audio Stellar S300 and Parasound Halo A21 power amps

Vivid Audio V1.5 and KEF R500 loudspeakers

Synology 213+ and 214se NAS

XLO Reference XLR and coaxial interlinks

Furutech GT2 Pro USB cable



HIGH-END

NETWORK PLAYERS



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