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Monday November 14, 2011

The purer path

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So the end of CD is not quite imminent ... but that's no reason to avoid exploring new territories in music playback.

BRYSTON BDP-1 digital player

Price: RM9,400 (plus RM9,900 for BDA-1 DAC)

Distributor: AUDIO VISUAL DESIGNS SDN BHD (03-2171 2828)

AS I wrote some weeks ago, the wonderful thing about the new frontier of digital musical playback is the number of roads leading to Rome. The most popular route is hooking your computer to a USB-equipped DAC. This apart, you can opt for media players or network-attached storage (NAS).

Given the noticeable shift away from CD, some specialist hi-fi manufacturers have wasted little time getting into this new game, choosing different paths in their quest to elicit audiophile approval.



Simple, yet sound: The Bryston BDP-1 digital player sticks to the straight and gets it right.

The Bryston BDP-1, the Canadian veteran hi-fi/pro sound company is at pains to stress, is the first ever dedicated player for high-resolution digital files. It gets the computer out of the way while allowing music stored on a hard disk or thumb drive to be played back via USB, and with minimum fuss or set-up skills.

Straight ahead

The BDP-1 doesn't stream music from a network, nor does it have storage or a CD player on board. Its Ethernet connectivity is only for the convenience of remote control. Nothing, Bryston says, gets in the way of processing music files streamed into it via USB.

The objective, according to Bryston, was to isolate every segment of the playback process, and use the highest grade components in the market, in a device with just a single function. This, of course, means you need an outboard DAC to partner it.

The BDP-1 uses a Linux operating system tweaked for optimal audio performance. It is compatible with the FLAC, WAV and AIFF file formats (yes, MP3, MPEG-4 Audio and OGG, too), and capable of sending out sample rates of 44.1, 48, 88.2, 96, 176.4 and 192kHz, of between 16- and 24-bit word lengths. Digital content is output at native sample rates and bit depth, so the conversion process is up to the partnering DAC.

Two USB inputs (“1” and “2” compatible) are provided in front, two more at the back; the latter is for USB hard drives that require port power. There are two digital outputs – AES/EBU (balanced, 110 ohms) and BNC/SPDIF (75 ohms). If you’re not using a DAC with balanced or BNC inputs, then you should source an adaptor for the latter.

The dot-matrix display window is rather small, and the controls on the fascia somewhat fiddly; the optional BR2 remote should be more useful.

However, the BDP-1 control app can be downloaded on your iOS or Android-based handheld device, allowing playlists to be set up and cover art to be viewed. The BDP-1 has to be connected to your router via its Ethernet port to enable this, as well as firmware updates.

Another network option is Minion, as a Firefox browser add-on. Also, a remote trigger in/out allows for hard-wired powering up and down of the player.

A whole lot of cool

If you’ve already dabbled with computer/NAS-based systems, the BDP-1 is a breeze to get going. Here’s the process – load music on to a thumb drive or hard disk, and plug it into the player’s USB port. Download the control app for convenience. Hook up the Ethernet port. Done!

The distributor also provided Bryston’s BDA-1 DAC and a Wireworld XLR digital cable for the duration of this review. I also hooked up the BDP-1, via its single-ended option (and a BNC/RCA adaptor), to the DAC section (Red Book and 24/192 upsampling) of the resident Ayon CD-1s CD player. Ideally, though, you might want something more flexible that detects the native sampling rate and word length automatically, which the BDA-1 does.

The system was hooked up to Odyssey Audio Tempest/Khartago SE pre/monobloc amplification, with Magnepan MG1.6 and MG1.7 speakers at different points of the review sessions. MIT wires and Furutech cables were used, with all electronics plugged into the AVIA Powertrans balanced transformer.

Used with the BDA-1, the BDP-1 quickly made clear the virtues of Bryston’s single-minded approach to skinning this cat. First, I noted the inherent crispness and clarity of the reproduction.

Two, I perceived the stealth in operation, musically and mechanically. Third, I was bowled over by how involving and detailed it sounded. Additionally, the BDA-1’s sonic attributes held true when linked with the Ayon CD-1s.

Of course, it makes sense that such a purist design would merely stream the digital information to the DAC, sans editorial, and Bryston has achieved its initial brief. I initially felt the ancillaries used with the BDP-1 effected the results more than anything else, so I had the same tracks ripped using dBpoweramp (on uncompressed FLAC) and transferred them to the resident Linn Majik’s NAS and a thumb drive.

Playback on the respective devices, through both the Ayon and BDA-1 revealed the Linn to have a warmer and silkier texture, while the Bryston sounding airier and more neutral. I was hard press to decide which carried more grunt and drive, or had better bass – both systems were phenomenally great sonically, in a variety of conditions and with all sorts of music. Importantly, the Bryston is easier to set up for the non-geeks.

The distributor also provided a couple of thumb drives with 24/96 selections. While I had no apples-to-apples comparison available, I can say that with the BDP-1, things look extremely promising on this front. Not quite analogue yet, perhaps, but still more resolving and insightful in delivery and presentation than the standard we’ve been used to from the digital medium.

In good hands

The Bryston BDP-1 is very well executed from everything angle I can imagine – purist, yet more convenient and easy to use than most equipment under this category. The user is in good hands with the BDP-1 and will only grow fonder of it in time.

Factoring in the cost of the BDA-1 may take it out of the range of many, but hey, start modestly before aspiring to greater audio highs. Luckily, the BDA-1 is a considerate beast. Now, excuse me as I start negotiations with the distributor.

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