the absolute sound®
ISSUE 183 ELECTRONICALLY REPRINTED FROM AUGUST 2008

Bryston BCD-1 CD Player

One for the Ages

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There has been a lot of talk lately about "buying your last CD player," and understandably so. The format has come under assault from above and below. At the low end, we find Millennials downloading compressed MP3s rather than purchasing CDs. And the high-enders, largely unsatisfied with CDs from the get-go, can barely wait to do their own downloading of files whose resolution trounces that of the silver disc, and whose playback from magnetic drives is, by all empirical evidence, sonically superior to CD's optical mechanism. CD's plight only worsens when surveying the portable music scene. The Discman is long dead, replaced by iPods and their ilk, and automakers can't incorporate MP3-compatibility fast enough. No doubt, then, the future for music reproduction—at any resolution, whether for the home or portable—will be computer-based (with maybe a little Blu-ray thrown in), leaving CD an orphan.

And yet, having had no real alternative for the majority of releases over the past few decades, we audiophiles have accumulated a substantial catalog of CDs. So the timing seems auspicious to buy that last CD player—one built for the ages, one that will do full musical justice to our libraries, even as new releases inevitably slow to a trickle.

But what makes a CD player an ideal "last" player? Upon the arrival of the equivalent historical moment for LPs, the industry and consumers agreed that "last turntable" really meant "expensive turntable." This widely accepted premise was not mere marketing hype; it was grounded in the reality of turntable production. Turntables (and tonearms, for that matter) are, first and foremost, exercises in mechanical engineering. In this field, principles do not change over time; mass and materials are paramount considerations; and R&D is costly because the industry at large applies so little intellectual capital (relatively speaking) to the field. Meanwhile, manufacturing output is low, so production costs are inevitably high. For all these reasons, building a truly great turntable has always been a pricey proposition. And buying the most expensive one you could afford as your last made sense.

However, CD players are entirely different. True, these components, like turntables, must employ solid mechanical engineering. But once the bits are off the disc, the bulk of what CD players do is digital. Clocking, jitter reduction, D-to-A conversion, and filtering are the biggies on the block diagram. And those functions, like all silicon-based processors, are subject to Moore's Law, which basically states that you can count on an exponential growth in power even as costs plummet. The internal components of CD players also benefit from a massive intellectual capital investment and from economies-of-scale. So the best, last CD player may not be the most expensive one at all—it's more likely to be the most recent.

Enter the new Bryston BCD-1, the venerable Canadian firm's first CD player. Why introduce such a unit now, when its competitors have had comparable models in their stables for years? Simply put, the company decided to wait out the SACD/DVD-A format war. The fact that there was essentially no winner allowed Bryston to do what it really wanted to do all along: eschew DVD-based drive mechanisms—which are compulsory on universal players but which compromise CD sound because the clock speed is not an even multiple of CD's 44.1kHz sampling rate—in favor of a purpose-built, CD-only drive.

To this it has added a DAC that employs an advanced, hybrid multibit/Delta-Sigma, 24-bit/192kHz, 128x over-sampling Crystal chip, and rigidly synchronized both the DAC and the transport to a master clock. This arrangement essentially abolishes the jitter inherent in SPDIF connections. The final block in the diagram is the analog output stage. Here, rather than pulling a chip-based op-amp off the

shelf, as most CD-player manufacturers do, Bryston pressed into service its own highly refined, fully discrete, true Class A circuit.

All these premium parts nestle within a handsome, rigid chassis that exemplifies Bryston's legendary reputation for build-quality. Ditto the solid aluminum remote, which offers satisfying heft, positive tactile feedback, and backlighting. The chassis also houses both balanced and unbalanced outputs, SPDIF, AES/EBU, and TosLink digital outputs (though I can't imagine why you'd want to bypass the internal DAC), a 12-volt trigger, and an RS232 jack for software upgrades. And thanks to Moore's Law and the other aforementioned fortuitous trends, a BCD-1 can be yours for the staggeringly reasonable price of $2695.

Still, features, internal goodies, and brawny construction, while necessary, are insufficient to qualify a CD player for the ages. Performance, too, must be extraordinary. And here is where the full scope of Bryston's achievement becomes apparent. CD sound simply doesn't get much better than this. Is the BCD-1, even at its relatively modest price, of reference caliber? Unquestionably. It certainly matches the considerable virtues of my own reference, a superb Goldmund transport and DAC combo that has, overall, shamed everything else I've previously heard. But the Bryston gives no ground in musically critical areas such as dynamics, where it delivers the full measure of dramas large and small, and detail resolution.

The latter capability is closely related to—but not the same as—the ability to separate and allow the listener to follow multiple musical lines. This is where the BCD-1 really rises above competitively priced units. The Resolution Audio Opus One CD, for example, is only slightly more expensive than the Bryston, and boasts many of its own charms. But the BCD-1 is simply in a different league, with the greatest disparity being what Linnies would call the ability to "follow the music." A fine example is the addictive Radiohead track, "Everything in its Right Place" from *Kid A* [Capitol]. The song sounds great through the Resolution, but the Bryston allows me to hear everything going on within the deeply textured mix. Of course, this feat requires excellent resolution, but both players have that. Only the BCD-1 brings out these hidden musical layers, and effortlessly integrates them within the musical whole. This is something reference-level players do, while lesser units do not.

Admittedly, the Bryston and my own reference are not always equal—in some areas, the Bryston is better. Its timing, for example, is quicker; not only are attacks sharper, but rhythms in general are tighter. And while both the reference and the Bryston deliver wonderfully realistic timbres, the BCD-1 is ever-so-slightly better at capturing an instrument's unique essence. Listen, for instance, to the opening of Prokofiev's *Romeo and Juliet* as captured on the excellent Mercury CD. The composer allows each section of the orchestra its moment in the spotlight, and the Bryston shines a light on each with brighter illumination and, thereby, reproduces them with more recognizable sonic truth.

The reader might now have the impression that, aside from these minor distinctions, the Bryston and Goldmund setups sound remarkably similar. Well, they don't. With the Prokofiev the Goldmund has a richer, more voluptuous sound; the Bryston is lighter and cleaner. Note my deliberate use of the word "light" rather than "lean." I do not care for components that are tonally lean, that is, those that rob music of warmth and natural opulence. Never once did the BCD-1 strike me as lean or analytical (leanness' kissing cousin). So what is going on here? The answer is that the Bryston exposes the Goldmund as being darker than neutral, with a false richness caused by a mild boost in the midbass. The effect is not unpleasant (and is, in fact, rampant in high-end components), but can cause trouble with certain source material. One example is the ultra-pure *Nils Lofgren Acoustic Live* CD [Vision]. Through the Goldmund, Nils' guitar sounds mildly but inescapably bloated. The Bryston, with its greater neutrality, depicts the guitar far more naturally. Further, the BCD-1's superior timing renders the entire album much more lively and buoyant. Light, but not lean.

To fully experience what the Bryston is capable of requires a few set-up considerations. First, do not skimp on interconnects; this player deserves good ones. Second—and this almost goes without saying—replace the stock power cord with an audiophile-grade unit. Finally, although Bryston did put some effort into vibration isolation, the job is not complete until the BCD-1 is perched atop a good set of cones. I used those made by Goldmund, which are well worth their price if you can find them, and their effect was not subtle. Have you read elsewhere that the BCD-1 can sound "dry," or that its soundstage is a mite squished? Those potential detriments are real, but they fall by the wayside if you use good cones and ancillary equipment. The biggest effect of the cones is in the bass, which becomes much clearer. But the cones also reduced glare and increased spatiality. Obviously, these are benefits you wouldn't want to miss.

In sum, I am as surprised as anyone to discover that the best "last" CD player might well be an unprepossessing, modestly priced machine. But the Bryston BCD-1 has all the chops to qualify for the honor, from state-of-the-art digital components, to an audiophile-grade analog output section, to the feature flexibility and durability that will allow it to serve its role over the long run. Most importantly, it gets the music just right. This player is like a friend who takes a book from the shelf and opens it to a particularly enticing passage for your reading pleasure. That is what the BCD-1 will do for your CD library: Open it, and present it to you in all its glory. **TAS**

Specs & Pricing

Analog outputs: RCA single-ended analog, XLR balanced
Digital outputs: SPDIF, AES/EBU, TosLink
Dimensions: 19" x 3.1" x 11.2"
Weight: 18 lbs.
Price: $2695

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