

ELECTRONIC HOUSE

Hands On: Bryston BDP-1 Digital Player

A bold musical statement for the digital age.

by Arlen Schweiger

I'm a big vinyl enthusiast, but even I can admit that there's more mainstream interest in digital audio. The problem with traditional playback of such files, whether compressed MP3s or higher-res FLAC and AIFF formats, is a system usually revolves around a computer. Macs and PCs can certainly offer serviceable interfaces for cataloging and selecting music, with programs such as iTunes or MediaMonkey, but they can also introduce adverse factors, like clocking, soundcard and physical computer noise issues. Plus, depending on your setup you could be juggling the equalization of the PC's soundcard, the music aggregator software and whatever A/V receiver you may have connected with a digital-to-analog converter (DAC).

Canadian manufacturer Bryston has seen the future of music playback, and it's basically a CD player without the disc. The company simply calls it a digital player, which it boldly introduced as the BDP-1 (Bryston recently rolled out the second-gen BDP-2), and it removes the computer from the equation of an audiophile-grade digital system.

Features

What's great about the BDP-1 is that it strips down the potentially daunting world of a computer-based audio system and rebuilds it as the more familiar component-based system. The silver chassis (also available in black) fits right in with other pieces from the company. It's sleek and slim, but at 12 pounds you know there's also



plenty under the hood. However, the company notes that the BDP-1 does not have moving parts or a hard drive, which also makes it a nice, silent option over a computer's fan noise.

Bryston says the inside features "a fanless motherboard with an integrated processor and flash drive memory," running essentially a Linux lite operating system. The Bryston-modified soundcard can play native resolutions up to 24-bit/192kHz, and the company adds that the BDP-1 boots in read-only mode to avoid system crashes.

How do you play files? Two USB ports on the left side of the front panel let you connect thumb drives or larger USB hard drives, presumably brimming with content (that you've loaded via a computer). There's a small onscreen display, and the right side of the front includes conventional navigation buttons (previous, next, stop, play, pause) to complement up/down/right/left arrows.

The rear panel includes S/PDIF and dedicated AES/EBU XLR balanced outputs, plus Ethernet

and RS-232 control ports, and two more USB 2.0 ports. Bryston's BR-2 can be used, as well as iOS and Android devices (with proper apps), for remote controls.

Setup

The BDP-1 was easy to integrate into my system. Although it can be connected directly to some Bryston integrated amplifiers and preamps via their optional DAC modules, the BDP-1 otherwise requires an external DAC so Bryston shipped it to me with its excellent BDA-1 (which also got a recent next-gen release, BDA-2).

I connected the BDP-1 to the BDA-1 via the AES/EBU using the included cable, and kept the balanced XLR chain going by using a pair of balanced Clarus Aqua cables to hook into the 2-channel inputs of my Anthem D2v preamplifier. The rest of my setup includes balanced connection to Anthem's P5 amplifier and Clarus Aqua speaker cables running bi-wired to Paradigm Studio 20 bookshelf speakers.

I also ran an Ethernet cable from the BDP-1 to my home network router, and used the Bryston "Mini" browser interface of my iPod touch to select tracks. All I had to do was plug the BDP-1's IP address into the Safari browser to get the Mini interface working, and its basic functions were simple to command.

Performance

I've never heard music in my home system more dramatic or detailed. The combination of Bryston's digital player and DAC gave the entire system, which already had very good pieces, more dimension and airiness that made listening to all kinds of digital files truly exhilarating — even on low-res MP3s that I'd heard tons of times through my PC.

The BDP-1 is seemingly effortless in its playback, and I had to dial down the volume because it was inherently louder than other sources I use. But at the lower levels the detail and dynamics still came through loud and clear. I listened to everything from 128kbps MP3 and AAC files to 24/192 FLAC, and was awed by how full and vibrant they sounded even without implementing



How the BDP-1 and BDA-1 look stacked>

the upsampling feature on the BDA-1 when I played low-res tracks. Doing some A/B comparison of "You're a Big Girl Now" from Bob Dylan's *Blood on the Tracks*, for example, the quality gap between the 128 AAC and a 16/44.1 FLAC remaster was not nearly as apparent as I expected with the acoustic guitar work and imaging sounded highly realistic on both.

Depth and imaging are the strong suits of the BDP-1. As I began concentrating on high-resolution 24-bit files — an area that Bryston really designed this product for — I found the playback superior to my PC setup. The company says the BDP-1 produces low distortion, and that was evident as I cranked up high-res files to near-reference levels and the utter cleanness of the music further revealed itself. Classical music like the 24/96 HDtracks version of Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov's "The Snow Maiden - Dance of the Tumblers" was deep and textured, with a great feel for where everyone in the orchestra seemed to be sitting. On the whole, the individuality of instruments was given really strong presentation through the BDP-1/BDA-1 combination.

Several other high-res files from HDtracks exemplified the BDP-1's authoritative low end, including Elton John's "Tiny Dancer" when the drums and bass line are introduced — light years from how it sounds on the radio or CD they thunder in, plus you hear subtle detail like Elton's lips smacking as he opens his mouth to sing. On Bob Marley's "Could You Be Loved," in 24/192, the well-defined drums come hammering in and every instrument's crisp notes help create an incredible overall soundscape, including the



Pros

Stunning clarity and detail, precise image, great depth, easy setup

Cons

Lengthy bootup, occasionally confusing navigation

Specs

4x USB 2.0 inputs

SPDIF (BNC), AES/EBU (XLR) outputs

Ethernet (RJ-45), RS-232 (DB9) control

AIFF, FLAC, WAV, MP3, M4A, OGG formats

External DAC required

Silver or black faceplate

12 pounds

MSRP \$2,150

bryston.com



tle grunt on “Sympathy” and the chilling piano intro to “Monkey Man.” Then you get hit with aspects such as the guitar solo in “Sympathy” that seemingly floats in the middle of the image and screeches at you as if Keith Richards was standing 5 feet away.

Value

If you’re looking for audiophile-grade playback of digital music, the Bryston combination can’t be beat. In a quality system, it delivers breathtaking, lifelike sound. The only knock I had was that as a computer-like machine it does take about a minute to boot up. But the overall merits of this component-based system outweigh a more convoluted computer-based alternative.

Conclusion

With its prowess in delivering both low-resolution and high-res digital files from storage devices, the BDP-1 is a player that will be able to satisfy consumers’ music demands for years. It’s a great path toward re-discovering one’s music collection and getting excited over hearing old songs in a new light.

right-channel clavinet that is far more impactful and pronounced in high-res.

Finally, I’m not a huge Rolling Stones fan, but playing some of their high-res tracks through the BDP-1 showed just how commanding their music can be, especially during the rich, carefully assembled preambles to “Sympathy for the Devil,” “Gimme Shelter,” “Monkey Man” and “You Can’t Always Get What You Want,” for instance. The clarity and instrumental detail, plus the enhanced vocal definition of the latter, were effectively spine-tingling to hear—including every lit-