

# the absolute sound

ELECTRONICALLY REPRINTED FROM JULY/AUGUST 2018

## Analog Focus

### Bryston BLP-1 Turntable and Tonearm

#### Life in the Vinyl Lane

Paul Seydor



**A**s little as a year or so ago, Bryston's James Tanner said the company would never offer a turntable and now here we have the BLP-1, Bryston's first turntable and tonearm. Tanner himself stepped right up to the contradiction: "As we set out to design the newest Bryston phono preamplifier models BP-2MM and BP-2MM/MC, the wide bandwidth and low distortion of our new gain stages reminded us of how breathtaking and fresh high-resolution vinyl playback could be. With the BLP-1, we have created a turntable that represents premium performance to supplement our lineup." In other words, the company's new turntable exists to demonstrate the excellence of its new phonostages. Really? I'd have thought record-playing gear from the likes of Basis, SME, Graham, SOTA, Clearaudio, Well Tempered, Acoustic Signature, Brinkman, VPI, and numerous others more than adequate to that task.

Let's get real. While vinyl is a niche market and almost certain to remain so, it happens at the moment to be a niche market that is both large and *growing*. Best Buy now sells *sixteen* integrated turntables. Granted, few if any of them are exactly high end or even audiophile grade, but *still*. And most of the remaining big record labels now routinely offer a limited vinyl run of their most popular artists (which my local Best Buy also stocks). Plainly Bryston wants in on the action, and why not? Several audio manufacturers have introduced or re-introduced integrated turntables into their lines, including McIntosh, Marantz, Luxman, Technics, and Denon. The reason is obvious: Many audiophiles are brand loyalists. Bryston has a reputation that would be the envy of any manufacturer for high-level electronics that are superbly designed, ruggedly built, and boast state-of-the-art performance at prices that, while not cheap, are certainly reasonable (everything the company sells comes with an industry-standard-setting

guarantee of twenty years, so reliability is a non-issue). No doubt there are a great many Bryston owners who will get themselves into vinyl—or back into vinyl—just because a turntable and a tonearm wear the Bryston badge. And "badge" is the operative word. Like most other electronics manufacturers who've never offered vinyl products before, Bryston has gone the badge-engineering route, that is, commissioned a turntable-and-<sup>2</sup>arm combination from a manufacturer with long experience in manufacturing same, in this case the Italian manufacturer Gold Note.

#### Design, Features, and Setup

As the photograph shows, the BLP-1 cuts a basic and traditional profile. Open the box and you think Rega, owing to the svelte dimensions, the integral dust cover (hooray!—maybe turntable designers are becoming practical again), the plain-Jane styling, the tonearm already mounted, the belt

drive (motor mounted below the matte-black plinth), the complete absence of any sort of suspension except for adjustable feet that couple the plinth to the surface it's placed upon. And the whole thing is so blessedly compact, so easy to lift and situate without herniating one's lower back or C5 (as I did stupidly attempting to lift a 135-pound turntable I reviewed a few years ago—there's just got to be a better way than the oil-derricks-in-your-living-room approach). Although Gold Note makes plinths of various finishes, the BLP-1, in keeping with the clean industrial aesthetics of Bryston's electronics, is offered in matte black only. The plinth is made from dense MDF with the unusual feature of being vented via cutaway slots to help dissipate any vibration from the motor (the platter hides the slots). A weight is supplied to help couple LPs directly to the thick Delrin platter, intended to be used *sans* mat (though doubtless this won't prevent

## Analog Focus **Bryston BLP-1 Turntable and Tonearm**

many purchasers from trying after-market mats). The bearing, meanwhile, is hard bronze (“ultra hard,” says Bryston’s literature) polished to 0.02mm tolerance, while the spindle is “hardened carbon-steel.”

If the turntable is once removed from Bryston, the tonearm is twice so inasmuch as Gold Note sources it from the German manufacturer GRM. It’s a gimbal-bearing design with a nine-inch titanium tube that is constructed in seven segments of differing diameters—the better to suppress, break up, or otherwise deal with unwanted resonances. Wiring is oxygen-free copper, two counterweights of different sizes allow for correct balancing and tracking force of any pickup likely to be used with it, and there are provisions for azimuth height and azimuth adjustment. A close look at the picture will reveal another unusual feature or rather lack thereof: no anti-skating (see sidebar for more on this).

The chassis-mounted synchronous motor is driven by the BTP-1, an outboard pulse-width-modulation power supply wholly designed and manufactured by Bryston itself. On/off, 33/45 speed selection, and speed (i.e., pitch) control are all front-panel accessible. Bryston claims the BTP-1 makes for exceptionally accurate absolute speed and speed constancy. I checked the accuracy with a strobe disc and it was spot on and never varied throughout the evaluations.

Apart from pickup installation and alignment, setup is principally a matter of unpacking, inserting the spindle, and putting on the platter. Even the dust cover is factory

attached and can be removed only with a screwdriver, suggesting Bryston and Gold Note feel it should be left on. While it will stay up at virtually any height, it cannot be closed while an LP is playing. Vertical clearance is sufficient, but about halfway across a record the counterweight bumps into the side. A template is provided to set stylus overhang and offset angle. I can truthfully state that it took me no longer than about ten minutes to install and align the pickup—a trusty Ortofon Windfeld, my longstanding reference these last several years, and the whole process from opening the box to playing music around 25 leisurely minutes. Associated equipment included Musical Surroundings Phenomena II phonostage, McIntosh C52 preamplifier, the built-in phono section of the C52, Pass Labs X150.8 and Quad Stereo amplifiers, Harbeth Monitor 40.2 speakers, and cables and interconnects by AudioQuest and Kimber.

### **The Sound**

When I listened to music two impressions immediately struck me. The first was of exceptionally precise timing and articulation of rhythm. Perhaps I was overly influenced by the point Bryston makes about the speed precision and constancy due to the outboard power supply, but the sense of ensemble “togetherness” on attacks and releases is unusually persuasive. (Bear in mind that my daily reference is a truly stellar setup, Basis’s 2200 turntable and Vector IV ’arm.) Any number of jazz albums will reveal this timing, including a couple of old friends. On the Sheffield direct-to-disc classic *The*

*Name Is Makowicz*, the pianist Adam Makowicz and the legendary saxophonist Phil Woods launch into a stunning riff on “You Do Something to Me” that is furious and even frenzied without ever losing control. The BLP-1 matched the performers every step of the way. The other classic is Bernstein’s first *The Rite of Spring*, from 1958, which Sony has reissued on 180-gram vinyl in addition to a digitally remastered compact disc. On fire himself, Bernstein set the orchestra ablaze too—go directly to “Dance of the Earth” for an object lesson in how a conductor knows how to push his players to the absolute brink of speed and rhythmic intensity but no farther.

The other impression that struck me forcibly was the strength and power of the bass. I have what some might call a weird prejudice when it comes to small, lightweight, non-suspended turntables, those exemplified by Rega and its derivatives, namely: They never seem to me to be capable of the kind of bass weight and foundation that physically larger turntables and/or those with tuned suspensions are capable of reproducing. There’s also a corollary to this that is probably related: These light fixed-plinth turntables always have to my ears a certain difficult-to-define but very real “drummy” coloration. The reason for this seems to be obvious: the light plinths, which are typically made from MDF, wood, or some synthetic, cannot help but respond sympathetically when lots of bass energy is poured into a listening space. Indeed, they behave rather like a musical instrument in that way. Tuned suspensions filter this sort of thing out, while more sophisticated non-suspended designs often use combinations of materials for damping (constrained-layer is one of the more popular). So the first thing I played on the Bryston/Windfeld setup was Impex’s reissue of the Gould/Bernstein Beethoven Fourth Piano Concerto, beginning with the slow movement, which opens with all the strings playing a powerful descending motif that Bernstein essays with Klempererian weight and deliberation, doublebasses especially present and potent. This is followed by the piano with a meditative, even calming motif (an early biographer of composer’s rather fancifully imagined Orpheus taming the furies). The BLP-1 rendered this opening with a commanding sit-up-in-your-seat power and involvement, and no drumminess that I could readily discern. I suspect there’s something to those slots that help reduce the resonances of the plinth (perhaps by redistributing them to a frequency range where they’re less noticeable?).

I pulled out several recordings with impressive bass, first among them the old Argo recording of Kings College’s *Procession with Carols on Advent Sunday*. As the *Procession* was recorded in a considerably wetter and more reverberant acoustic than the Beethoven’s Manhattan Center, you won’t get extreme clarity in the Kings College organ, but pitches are still easily differentiated and there is no gainsaying the amplitude and power of the lowest registers. This is also a superb test for imaging and soundstaging inasmuch as Argo’s engineers staged the performance for the microphones in imitation of the service itself, complete with the choir entering (from the left), pausing at certain points, then advancing until it enters the stalls opposite each other (on the right). The liner notes describe the movements in considerable detail. The BLP-1 completely vindicated itself.

# Analog Focus

## Bryston BLP-1 Turntable and Tonearm

### Specs & Pricing

**Type:** Turntable and tonearm with outboard power supply

**Tonearm bearing:** Gimbal

**Speed:** 33/45

**Drive:** Belt

**Motor:** Synchronous

**Dimensions:** 16.7" x 6.7" x 14.7"

**Weight:** 25 lbs.

**Price:** \$3999

**BRYSTON LTD.**

677 Neal Drive

Peterborough, Ontario K9J

6X7 Canada

(705) 742-5325

bryston.com

Back to bass: I performed the usual tests I try on all turntables. Let the 'arm/pickup rest on a stationary LP and turn the volume as high as I could before hearing the "howl" effect—that is, a feedback loop. In the worst cases, once it starts, it just gets louder and louder because the feedback picked up by the stylus is re-amplified through the system at an increasingly louder level. You can blow out a speaker this way. Most non-suspended turntables will produce some feedback if you raise the level enough, but this is of no consequence if it disappears at normal levels. With the BP-1 I had to raise the level to higher than *twice* my loudest levels before I heard any feedback, and even then the effect never got out of hand (i.e., reinforcing itself at ever high levels without any further raising of the volume). As for microphony, well, yes, tapping hard or pounding the surface the BLP-1 is playing on will produce thumps that are audible. This is again true of virtually all non-suspended turntables except for those that are really heroically damped, and for the same reason: There is no mechanical isolation between the environment and the stylus/groove interface. But this particular test has less validity. For one thing, pounding on the surface the turntable is sitting on or tapping on the LP itself while it's playing is hardly a normal operating condition. What you want to hear when this is done is a single, well-damped click or thump that doesn't linger or otherwise resonate. And here once again the BP-1 acquitted itself excellently. I should point out that all things being equal I prefer suspended turntables, such as those from Basis and SOTA, because feedback as such ceases to be an issue. That said, however, as regular readers of mine will know, I've given sterling reviews to several turntables that address the issue of damping and isolation in other ways, and so it is with BP-1. Indeed, it's quite the best compact, lightweight turntable I've ever used.

I hauled out an old M&K sampler of some of its direct-to-disc recordings. These are not the d-to-d originals, rather a compilation made from the back-up tapes. Still, the sonics are knockout. Whether it's the pipe organ from *The Power and The Glory* sessions (overwhelming depth and stomach-rumbling power), the dancers from *Flamenco Fever* (you can practically tell the kind of wood the stage floor is made from and how braced it is), the Roger Wagner Chorale stomping their feet at the opening of "Set Down Servant." Indeed, going through my old collection of direct-to-disc LPs brought some of the greatest pleasures I've had in recent reviewing. My lord, what fabulous, no, literally sensational, reproduction the likes of Ken Kreisel and Sheffield's Doug Sax

were getting onto vinyl in those days—hardly surpassed even down into our day with DSD and hi-res. Of course, these recordings are not all about bass. Equally striking is their peerless dynamic range and astonishing detail. Kreisel "firmly believes" that his *Hot Stix* with Ed Graham "is the cleanest, tightest, most dynamic drum recording ever made." Well, I'd prefer not to have to decide whether Sheffield's *Track & Drum Record* is any less accomplished, but *Hot Stix* is *for sure* better musically—the performances are explosive—and that's enough for me. As loud as I could stand to play either of these recordings, the sound remained clean, clear, and sensationally dynamic, the only drumminess coming from the instruments themselves, not the BLP-1.

How about "normal" good recordings? If you cut your teeth in high-end audio and serious music recording when I did, in the late Sixties, then Bruno Walter's last relaxed, genial, supremely lyrical go-round with Beethoven's "Pastoral" Symphony was the recording with which he claimed ownership of the piece. Made with a Los Angeles pickup group that consisted largely of LA Philharmonic players, this is a splendidly full-bodied recording, detailed without giving the impression the orchestra is picked apart by a forest of microphones. The bass lines are wonderfully firm and defined with a beautiful spread and depth to the soundstage. No RCA or Mercury from the same vintage can claim more natural sound or truth to timbre (or in my view even as much). Lines and textures are marvelously luminous—as they must be in

this the most difficult-to-play of all the Beethoven symphonies (because everything is so exposed), and the melodies expand with an ease and grace that can come only from the wisdom of a lifetime. Walter's approach can almost seem uninterpreted until you realize that all along your attention has been on the music, not how it's being "done" or "done up," as the case may be.

From the same vintage is Bernstein's first recording of Mahler's Second Symphony. I bought this record in 1968 as part of Columbia's box of all the Mahler symphonies, the first time they'd even been released as an integral set. It has to have been a few decades since I last played this particular LP, and I was astonished how clean, clear, and transparent the sonics are, how wide the dynamic range, and how quiet the surfaces (superior to any number of recent pricey vinyl sets I've bought from specialist labels). This from a nearly fifty-year-old LP that's been well taken care of but never even cleaned with a dedicated record-cleaning machine. The climax, full orchestra and chorus, undergirded by a massive pipe organ, is one of the grandest and most exalted in the symphonic literature, and the Bryston/Windfeld did it justice.

I was so taken with the two selections from the M&K *Roger Wagner Chorale Encore* on M&K's sampler that I managed to find an unopened copy on the Internet of the direct-to-disc original. I'm not sure I've ever heard a more immediate, tactile, and transparent choral recording anywhere anytime by anyone (it's a live recording). You might not think a small chorus with piano accompaniment would

# To Skate or Not to Skate? Or, How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Listen to the Music

With the long-playing record over six decades old, it may come as a surprise that there is still no universal agreement among tonearm designers and vinyl enthusiasts about the necessity, not to mention the desirability, of antiskating adjustment (AKA bias compensation). As even neophytes surely know a pivoted tonearm wants to “lean” or accelerate in the direction that it travels across the surface of an LP. Because of this bias, there is a possibility, so the argument goes, for the stylus to maintain greater contact with the inner wall (left channel) of the groove and correspondingly less contact with the outer wall (right channel). One consequence of this is that the stylus doesn’t stay centered in the groove, another is that it can wholly lose contact with the outer wall. I have my suspicions about this last: The only time I’ve ever had a stylus actually lose contact with the groove is on one of those ridiculous cannon blasts on the vinyl release of Telarc’s *1812 Overture*, but that had nothing to do with skating force as such—the particular pickup simply couldn’t handle the modulations of the groove at that point. (Back in the day quite a number of pickups came a cropper with those cannon shots.)

I first became hooked on high-end audio in the late Sixties, by which time bias compensation had become pretty common. However, the turntable I purchased then and used for well over a decade was an Acoustic Research XA, the integral arm of which had no antiskating device. Edgar Villchur, its designer, argued that any mistracking owing to bias is easily addressed by a modest 10-15% increase in tracking force, which is certainly born out in my own experience. I used a Shure M91E pickup—a popular combination back then—and I almost *never* heard any mistracking. Indeed, that Shure/AR combination could out-track many far fancier and more expensive setups, while the pretty rare LPs that it couldn’t track couldn’t be tracked by any other arms I knew of either. (I own and still listen to an XA, fitted with a Shure V15xMR pickup, and it sounds wonderful and tracks for all intents and purposes flawlessly.) In the decades since, every arm I purchased had bias compensation, and I used it, mostly because it was available, not because I could absolutely demonstrate that it was better. To wit: About a year ago I somehow lost one of the tiny rubber grommets that keep the loop of the anti-skating thread in the proper indented ring on the outrigger of the Basis Vector IV arm. So I just removed the thread and used the arm *sans* antiskating. The result? I’d have to lie

to say I heard *any* difference either in the reproduction as such or in the truly superlative tracking with my reference Ortofon Windfeld, nor have I increased tracking force. (I never did get around to asking Basis for replacement grommets.)

None of this surprised me. Inasmuch as skating force varies both across the record and with groove velocity (not to mention tracking force, stylus geometry, and several other factors), any given setting is always a compromise representing an average value. I won’t get into the various mechanisms by which bias is set—they all work more or less satisfactorily—but how do we know we’ve set it correctly? Mostly this involves taking on faith that the tonearm designer has done his homework. Some designers recommend getting the arm to remain stationery on a grooveless record; trouble is, a grooveless record has no groove friction. One guru I read suggested setting the bias so that there’s the minimum observable snap-back of the stylus when you lift it from the groove. (Try eyeballing that some time!) At least one tonearm designer recommends setting it by ear as you listen for mistracking, to which end the manual provides no numerical indicators on the bias mechanism itself. Of course, you can always use test records, though in my experience they sometimes lead to settings on the high side. For myself, since too much bias compensation is far worse than none at all, I generally reduce the numerical value by about 25%, e.g., If I’m tracking at two grams, I’ll set the antiskating dial to 1.5 (not that 1.5 grams of bias is actually applied—bias is a tiny fraction of tracking force).

Are there other audible consequences of using or not using bias compensation apart from mistracking? Not much that I’ve been able to hear. I was curious about the experience of others, so I checked out some audiophile websites. Some listeners claim they can hear instability of imaging, lack of smoothness, and reduced dynamic range when anti-skating is defeated—and others complain of the same characteristics when it is engaged. A couple of years ago, VPI’s Harry Weisfeld told our own Anthony Cordesman, “I never use anti-skate adjustments in my own listening. I can always hear it working since the record hole is almost never centered. This means the anti-skate adjustment is working full-time to engage and release at different rates, not for me.”

Obviously, I’m not about to resolve these issues here. When bias compensation is available I use it and when it isn’t I don’t worry about it. In the case of BLP-1, the only mistracking I heard during the entire review period was a slight bit of edginess when the trebles are singing at their loudest on that Kings College *Advent Sunday* LP. However, this is a notoriously difficult passage to track and most otherwise fine tonearms and pickups have had problems with it. Further, I doubt the lack of bias compensation had anything to do with it, because the hint of mistracking occurs on the *left* channel, the inner groove wall, which means that anti-skating wouldn’t have improved it and might have worsened it. But if this is the sort of thing that keeps you awake at night and the BLP-1 still piques your fancy, Bryston will happily oblige you with an antiskating mechanism for the asking. I reviewed only the standard version, which was so good as to banish all worries in favor of the pleasure of the music-making. **tbs**

## Analog Focus **Bryston BLP-1 Turntable and Tonearm**

be much of dynamic-range test. But this is to reckon without the sheer drive, verve, and near riotous involvement the group bring to the spirituals on side 2. The pots, pans, and assorted other “instruments” that appear in “Dem Bones” are so vividly registered they seem to pop into view before your eyes, and in “Set Down Servant” when the group sings/shouts the refrain “My soul’s so happy that I can’t sit down”—well, that pretty much sums up my response to these fabulous performances, the sonics, and the BLP-1 in reproducing them.

I was about to wrap up this review when it occurred to me that I haven’t said anything about detail and resolution. This is because I some-

times think detail has become a fetish for many reviewers and audiophiles, and also because—in my opinion—all up and down the price-scale, audio has advanced to such a point that we get more detail than we need and certainly more than we hear most of the time in live musicmaking. Indeed, detail in recordings and reproduction is so commonplace, not to mention so unnatural, that only when it’s *not* extreme is there any reason to remark upon it. Suffice it to say that the BLP-1 passed all the usual tests for registering inner detail that I regularly use, e.g., in the Bernstein/Vienna recording of Beethoven’s Ninth [DG] you can clearly hear the conductor’s foot stomping out the rhythm

underneath the four soloists, the large chorus, and the full orchestra before the sweep to the finish at the climax. If you need more detail than that, then I’d suggest you’re listening to the wrong things in music.

### Summing Up

Is the BLP-1 perfect? Of course not. It doesn’t achieve *quite* the levels of background blackness (source permitting) that I’ve heard from any number of SMEs I’ve reviewed, the SOTA Cosmos, the TechDAS Air Force One, the Basis 2200, the Kuzma Stabi M, and the Brinkman Spyder. Nor does it have their sense of ultimate iron grip and control, yet, paradoxically, supreme ease and relaxation. Yes, bass response is better still on larger, bigger, heavier, and/or suspended turntables. But vinyl being a pretty mature technology, the Bryston comes a whole lot closer to these other tables in all these areas and others than you might think given the differences in cost, size, materials complexity, and manufacturing. And it’s easily competitive with anything else in its price range. I recommend it especially to those who want to experience the joys of vinyl at an astonishingly high level of performance—without the fussiness, the need for continual adjustment and readjustment, and the sheer anxiety that all too often accompany some of the more esoteric setups. Can life in the vinyl lane be made any easier or more inviting?