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Fortunately, there are still places, where beyond the robotized machines, the human being is placed; where quality comes above quantity.

THE DEMO  
IS  
EVERYTHING

# BRYSTON

## REVIEW

## BRYSTON 4B CUBED REVIEW 'X' TWO



### BRYSTON 4B<sup>3</sup> ENGLISH VER.

#### OPINION 1

When the surrounding world constantly accelerates, despite increasing automatization, shortening of travel times and all kinds of amenities as well as unification and integration, instead of having more leisure time we have less. Due to this we eat, live and love in a hurry, faster and faster, to not wake up at the age of 30 or forty realizing we do not have a stable relationship with our nearest and dearest, if we managed to have them, and many times we have a gratis civilization surplus in the form of a nervous breakdown or even worse, a hear attack.

Am I exaggerating? I do not think so. Please look around yourselves and honestly respond to the question, how much time do you spend with your family, and how much on fighting the battle for the next, higher position, bigger office or newer car. When to this, not very optimistic, view we add the

lowering quality and durability of the things we like to be surrounded with, and for which we are losing our health and minds, the reality seems to become quite apocalyptic.

Fortunately, there are still places, where beyond the robotized machines, the human being is placed; where quality comes above quantity. Such place is for sure in the city of Peterborough in Ontario, where one of the most recognized, on the audiophile market, Canadian manufacturers is located, with its "factory" – Bryston.

You do not believe me? Then tell me, what would you say knowing, that the full cycle of manufacturing (in case of amplifiers and preamplifiers) takes 30-35 hours and is completely hand-made, and the control stages are at every production step. The care of perfection takes an obsessive level; the finished device is subdued to hundreds of hours of testing, so that when it reaches the consumer, the unit is burned-in and ready for work. When we add to that prices more typical for the pro market, far away from the audiophile curiosities, and a twenty year warranty, yes, yes, this is not a typo – 20 years of warranty, then the situation should be clear – Bryston does not think about changing the idea, which was there in 1962, when the company was founded, and was clear also to subsequent owners, that the company will offer the music lovers, but also people, who treat those devices as work tools, years and years of enjoyment.

This is the reason, that we enthusiastically received for testing the stereo-

## Bryston – It Is Not Making The Sound ... It Is Simply Amplifying



phonic 300 W power amplifier 4B<sup>3</sup>, belonging to the Cubed series, provided to us by the Warsaw based distributor, MJ Audio Lab.

I hope that you can see on the attached pictures, as it is usual for audiophile standards, the tested amplifier is very elegant and compact at the same time. Of course it has some minimalism and coarseness typical for this Canadian manufacturer, but you should know, that besides the “civilian” 17” version of the 4B<sup>3</sup> there is also a 19” version available, with heavy duty handles and the Pro Edition, which can be mounted in a rack. Compared to the 4B SST2 we tested some time ago, the 4B<sup>3</sup> is clearly better looking, as the front, which was quite monotone then, now is enriched with a centrally placed, milled logo, model name and two LEDs, indicating the working mode of the unit and the power switch. The conventional side panels made place for tightly finned heat sinks, which are aided by the open-work top cover to dissipate heat.

The back of the amplifier also does not shock with originality. It emphasizes on logic and ergonomics instead. Despite my concerns, the single, transparent plastic covered loudspeaker terminals accept even loudspeaker cables with massive, 16 mm spades, while the signal can be supplied using balanced and unbalanced line inputs. The selection is done using a small dip switch, one of three, where the second one allows to choose gain – 23 or 29 dB (the first one is recommended when

using XLR cables, the second is for RCA inputs) and the power amplifier mode – stereo or bridged mono (the power after bridging increases from 2×300 W / 8 Ω to 1×900 W / 8 Ω). Interestingly the balanced inputs accept not only XLR plugs, but also used in the studios 6.35 mm TRS jack plugs. There is also a trigger socket allowing for “remote” waking up of the amplifier, as well as a centrally placed IEC power socket and the main power switch. You might have expected, that as a classy and uncompromised stereo power amplifier, the 4B<sup>3</sup> is in fact two monoblocs placed into one chassis. So we have here a dual-mono construction, where the left and right channels are not only separated in the power stage, but the amplifier has two toroidal transformers, each dedicated to one channel, and also responsible to a large extent for the total mass of the amplifier being almost 30 kg.

Well, I went lengths to describe the less corporate, but very consumer-oriented approach to business as well as the construction of the Bryston, so I could now, at least theoretically, start to describe its sonic values. The problem is, that the 4B<sup>3</sup> is a very ungrateful, in audiophile terms, review sample; as being a device fulfilling the professional and studio approach to the reproduction of sound, it approaches in a different way than most Hi-Fi and High-End devices. I mean, that it is not “making” the sound, it only amplifies it. So where is the problem? Well, it is in the fact, that in most civilian gear we can talk



# Without The Slightest Traces of Being Overly Analytical

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about its own character, which impresses on the final sound of the system in smaller (rarely) or bigger (mostly) way. And the Bryston does ... not have such character. After plugging in the Canadian amplifier into our system we hear the components that composed it, from the sound source through the cables and ending with the speakers. But we do not hear the power amplifier as an element contributing to the sound.

So let us take the bass for example. We should expect the lower frequency to be atomic, with a 500 W amplifier (my Gauder are 4  $\Omega$ ). Yet with the synthetic soundtracks for the "Swordfish" by Paul Oakenfold and "300: Rise of an Empire" authored by the Danish musician Antonius Tom Holkenborg hiding under the stage name of Junkie XL did not cause any fireworks to go off. Instead of an overwhelming, formless bass-like mass pushing us into our listening seat, we could hear and feel even the smallest nuance of the seemingly homogenous sounds generated on the console. Sounds, that were still a solid foundation for the other parts of the sound spectrum, but at the same time were revealing their very fine structure to the listener. The Bryston was presenting the whole without limiting the our perceptive abilities to the surface, but when we had the need, it allowed us to get down to the level of the DNA, and that without the slightest traces of being overly analytical of aseptic.

Are the climates too technical and not musical enough? In contrary, this is a very professional and thorough approach to music, which returns the



native, recorded in the source material, "musicality" to the listener, but stripping it down from artificiality and cheap effects. You do not believe me? Then please listen to the over advertised, pompous and exaggerated up to the extreme cult album from Roger Waters "Amused to Death" . Of course the tricks with the barking dog, chopping wood or the snow sleighs will be there, but they will form only the consciously used means of artistic expression, the ornaments chosen by the author, the background to the much deeper thoughts of Waters, and not a self-standing eye-catcher. Do you understand what I am talking about? About balance and reaching the meaning, and not meaningless and thoughtless sliding on the surface – about listening and not just hearing, about noticing and not just looking with a blind eye.

It was similar with symphonic music. Regardless of the fact which disc was placed in the player – the reference sampler "Bolero!: Orchestral Fireworks" (Minnesota Orchestra) or the much less boosted at the mixing table, but instead striking with authenticity, "Rhapsodies" Stokowski, each time the palpability of the virtual sources, three-dimensionality of the stage or truthfulness to the timbre of the natural instruments were obvious and indisputably conform with reality. And while with big ensembles we needed to agree with a kind of re-scaling, being the result of limitations brought by the size of the listening room or the loudspeakers themselves, with small jazz ensembles the Bryston was immediately capable of placing the reproduced set in our



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room, what made listening to pearls like “Contra La Indecision” Bobo Stenson Trio, move us from being just a listener to become a part of a certain recording session. And although in my personal ascent I would go even further, as I would never be able to get such a directness and palpability of the cymbals, or the might of the piano of the leader at home, so when I did hear and feel them, it means that the Canadian power amplifier got me an individual journey to Auditorio Stello Molo RSI Studio in Lugano, where the mentioned disc was recorded under supervision of Manfred Eicher. Do you need a better recommendation?

So may we assume, that the Bryston 4B<sup>3</sup> is an ideal construction? In terms of neutrality, truthfulness, honesty surely yes, but you need to know, that the consumer market has its own, sometimes not very rational rules, and something really – objectively better does not get the praise and honor it deserves. So please do not be surprised, that the 4B<sup>3</sup> might not be regarded as good as more smart, or showy, sounding devices. And when we add to this the fact of it being so truthful, we need to take into account people, who will not be able to swallow the truth about their own systems. **But if you ask about my individual and very subjective opinion, then the Bryston 4B<sup>3</sup> seems to be the summit not only of my audiophile, but also my reviewers dreams.**

Marcin Olszewski

## OPINION 2

What is the difference between two devices, theoretically both being in service of music lovers, but coming from the “pro” and consumer markets? Leaving aside the usually much less attractive design, as this is usually the result of the device being designed for the harsh conditions of the recording studios or concerts, for the “pros” the price tag is essential.

Of course the cheap/expensive tag quite often is depending on the reference point, or the size of our money bag, but let us not fool ourselves, the consumer market lately got detached from reality. What can we do about that? Well, there are a lot of ways. From avoiding novelties, to the common sensual approach to the range of devices and picking devices from the middle parts of the catalogs. Are those the only possibilities? Of course not, as you can direct your interest to brands, which fare well on both markets, which I confronted in the first sentence.

Which brands am I talking about? And this is a fantastic question, which fits ideally to our today’s meeting, as this time I am inviting you to read a few paragraphs about a manufacturer, which besides being successful in its main market, which is the professional one, does not forget about the last link in the chain – the consumers, music lovers and audiophiles. But it would not be anything special, if not for a small thing, the very reasonable approach to pricing of their products,



# BRYSTON - THE ESSENCE OF HI-END MINIMILISM

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which is a not to the clients. Are you interested? In that case I invite you to meet the Canadian brand Bryston, which is represented by the stereo power amplifier 4B<sup>3</sup>, and which was supplied for testing by the distributor MJ Audio Lab.

In the very beginning of the general presentation of the Canadian I am putting the guns out of the hands of all people telling, that devices with a studio background must be ugly. Why? Please look at the series of photographs. This is the essence of High End minimalism. The front made from a thick slab of aluminum, with milled elements delicately breaking the monotony of the plane, the slanted edges, the centrally placed power switch with two LED indicators and the company logo and model number above.

Let us continue. Going to the back we move along the top cover, with a series of openings and the side walls, equipped with massive heat sinks. And when we look at the back plate of the model 4B<sup>3</sup>, then we see the following: single, typical studio sockets for balanced line inputs XLR/TRS, single RCA line inputs, three switches setting the operating

mode (gain, Bridged and the selection of the used input), a single set of loudspeaker terminals. Then we have the main power switch and a power socket. You must admit, that this is in contrast to studio gear, usually having millions of settings and allowing unlimited cross connections.

The tested power amplifier is fortunately very ascetic in terms of functions offered to the average consumer, what combined with the looks, allows to classify it as very music lover and audiophile friendly, and it can be easily positioned in the High End. Am I right? If the response is positive, then there is nothing else left besides reading the reminder of the text, where we will look how the confrontation of the



# BRYSTON ORIENTS ITSELF AROUND NEUTRALITY

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not so ordinary looks and features combines with the sound of the amplifier.

If I would need to shortly characterize the way of presentation of the musical world by our tested hero, the Canadian power amplifier, proudly displaying itself in front of my Japanese set, I would say, after placing it in the sound path, that it orients itself around neutrality. The Bryston proposes a very energetic presentation in the lower registers and very fresh in the upper frequencies. However a very important aspect is, that for once – this treble is not falling into inappropriate exaltation by shining out of proportion, and secondly – the midrange, despite the fact, that the Canadian constructors avoided unnecessary coloration, is very pleasant.

Why did I write “pleasant” and not fantastic? Well, its perception will depend on the system working together with the Canadian, and in my case, when it turned out to be a bit colder than I expected, I could counteract this with appropriate cabling, but in other comparison outside of my listening room, when I was lis-

tening to ancient music, I could not change it, and then I sometimes lacked the tad of musicality I deem required to this repertoire. This was not a failure, but a statement that came to mind: “It is a shame, that it is so technically correct”. Do you think I am writing nonsense? Absolutely not, as against appearances that what we should achieve, is not possible at home, and in my opinion it is better to bend the reality a bit to fit our preferences, than to suffer with a result far from truth and far from our internal spirit.

But as it happens in life, there are a lot of martyrs, and I am not entitled to decide, with which group we should be related to. And how did this translate into the individual silver discs? In the beginning I will mention material, which is the best fit for the tested construction, electronic music from Massive Attack “Protection”. The effect? Unrestricted in terms of control and reproduction of artificial bass power lower octaves.

But not only that. The treble was also helping this presentation, as its openness did not leave anything

# BRYSTON DEFINES THE WORLD OF MAGIC WITH NEUTRALITY

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hidden, what the musician composing those notes wanted to show. This was an attack of expressiveness of each and every note, and it was presented as such by the tested amplifier. No shortcuts, but the realization of the ideas of the constructors of the amplifier and the music recorded on the disc. And how was it with other musical genres? This time I will recall the impressions noted during listening to the compilation of Adam Baldych with Helge Lien Trio "Brothers". Easy. But with a small "but", but everything was all right. Starting with the work of the contrabass and the percussion and drums, through the piano and violin the sound was offered on a level needed to live music on an exceptional tier. The instruments working in the lower frequencies never escaped to any side, called lack of control, and the majestic piano and the violin, which often introduced a note of melancholy, were subject to spectacular decay.

So what do I mean with the "but"? This production was the first one, which confirmed my theory, about a tad of musicality being absolutely necessary even in a very neutral sounding reproduction. Everything was seemingly OK, but in my spirit, I felt the effect of lack of magic, which is a result of smoothness and juiciness of the sound of the last two instruments (piano and violin). I always confess that I am a romantic, of the never improving kind, and I like this state of adding spirit to music, but I have to note, that in my life

I have encountered devices, which combined the world of magic with neutrality. And having this result in memory, I expect it from the tested components. But to justify our tested hero, I will immediately add, that this art of combining those realities was presented by devices, which were very expensive, and today we are talking about a component, priced in a range available for the

everyman, and for that the manufacturer should be praised.

The presented in this test power amplifier Bryston 4B<sup>3</sup> I am able to describe as a brilliant occasion to learn a sound, which is very close to neutrality, by any high quality music lover. And I will not be bending facts doing that. Music lovers, who are orthodox tube lovers, will not find the erotica they do so love, but it must be said clearly, that from the point of view of the general model sound, the Bryston is topping every tube amplifier. But I will remind, that the world is very diverse, and each and every homo sapiens has its own sound master inside, and being tolerant, and at the same time deviating from the neutrality myself, I am not negating the point of view of the people loving tubes, I am just showing their point of view as a reference for the described Canadian.

So finishing this tale I cannot write anything else, in terms of recommendation, as the mandatory aspect of testing it in your own system. I am not able to predict the final effect of the clash of the 4B<sup>3</sup> with your system, **but for the money, it will be very difficult, if not impossible, to find something better.**

Jacek Pazio