



MEMO: To all Bryston Customers
SUBJECT: Audio Ideas Guide - Bryston BP-25DA Preamplifier

Review In Audio Ideas Guide – Spring 2005

Bryston BP-25 DA Preamplifier \$3,495 US



BP-25 DA

Occupational hazards are minor and few when it comes to reviewing audio equipment. Perhaps one of the most common occurs when a product under review is updated by the manufacturer during the review process. This scenario played out before I could finish with Bryston's BP-25 DA preamplifier, the fully loaded version of the venerable BP-20 series with its own built-in digital to analog converter. The newest and just released iteration of the BP-20 series is the BP-26, which Bryston's James Tanner assures me, differs significantly from the BP-25 only in terms of power supply. Moreover, the BP-25's DAC section, he says, hasn't changed at all. The price, however, has risen to \$3195 US for the BP-26 plus another grand for the DAC for a total of \$4195 US.



BP26/MPS-2

As much as I would have loved to spend some time with a BP-26 DA for comparison, the review of the BP-25 had to be finished regardless. I had already taken too long to get it finished! Luckily the BP-26 is an evolution of the BP-25 rather than a replacement, and, judging by every other new Bryston model we've reviewed, no doubt an improvement. With this company it's the engineering department that dictates new model releases, not the marketing department. As such I think it's relatively safe to assume that a BP-26 will sound very much like a BP-25, and very likely better. Existing BP-25 owners can apparently use the new power supply with their preamps, a \$1200 US upgrade.

The BP-25 DA is a full-featured, high-end, purist preamplifier, if such a thing can be said. Versatile? Very. But there's nothing extraneous or gimmicky about it. In a preamp for a serious two channel system it's hard to ask for much more than what this one offers: Two coaxial digital inputs (switched by a toggle on the front panel), six RCA analog inputs, a pair of balanced inputs, balanced and unbalanced outputs, a tape loop, headphone jack, a rotary balance control, polarity inversion, and a chunky, machined aluminum remote control. The styling is simple, classic Bryston and available in silver or black. The power supply is an outboard unit connected by an umbilical DIN cable. You can get a phono stage built in too, but to do so you'll have to forgo the DAC option.

Let's talk about that DAC for a minute, a \$1200 Canadian (\$1000 US) option. The converter chip is a Crystal CS43122, a hybrid multi-bit delta-sigma device. "Before the digital data reaches the delta-sigma modulator, it is run through an 8x over-sampling process and digital interpolation filter." The DAC is also an up-sampling design. A Bryston product memo continues on the subject: "So in the BP25 DA, if a 44.1 kHz signal is present: we up-sample to 96 kHz (with the Sample Rate Converter) and then the DAC will internally 8x over-sample that signal." You're not limited to 44.1 kHz, mind you. The BP-25 DA will accept incoming sample rates between 16 and 108 kHz and bit depths up to 24.

Upsampling and oversampling are nothing new, the sonic benefits of these processes by now quite well documented (see my review of the Perpetual Technologies D to D and D to A converters in the Fall 01 issue). However, the BP-25 DA goes one better by taking advantage of building its DAC right into the preamp. "The most critical part of the DAC circuit in the BP20/25 Preamplifiers and B60 DA Integrated Amplifiers," the memo goes on to explain, "is that the output from the D to A is directly connected to a pair of Bryston proprietary Class A Discreet Operational Amplifiers rather than the typical IC chips employed in most other products. This makes a huge difference in resolution and dynamic headroom performance." Also making a difference is that each component of the DAC (input receiver, sample rate converter, DAC) has an independently regulated segment of the power supply (the analog and digital sections of the power supply are also strictly segregated for maximum signal purity).

This DAC is no quick and dirty add on to a regular BP-25. It's a carefully integrated, meticulously engineered component in its own right, isolated on its own independent circuit board no less. It may seem a like pricey option on an already pretty expensive piece of gear, but the cost is more than in line with competitive outboard DAC's, and, as you'll read below, the sound makes it a stunning value. Having the DAC built right in also takes one interconnect cable out of the equation, further increasing the chances of a sonic improvement in your system.

The rest of the preamp embodies what you'd expect from Bryston: simple, carefully thought out (the balance control, for instance has a finer range of adjustment close to center), meticulously hand-built, and generally bulletproof. The remote is especially robust, being machined out of a

solid block of aluminum. Well thrown it could very likely pass right through one my plaster walls and continue hurtling into the next room. Thankfully I was never inclined to attempt this, nor did I risk toe fracture by dropping the thing on my foot. The remote may be minimalist, featuring only volume, mute and absolute phase adjustment, but you'll be hard pressed to break the thing. Should you encounter any kind of operational mishap with the preamp or the remote, keep in mind there's always the now legendary twenty year Bryston warrantee to back you up.

When a component gets out of the way...

I had the pleasure of listening to the BP-25 DA for a rather extended period of time, and in two different listening rooms no less. Part of the reason the review period was so extended was that I was in the process of buying a house, and then (ughh) moving into it. Hence, the two different listening rooms. **The other part of the reason was that I didn't want to send it back! The sound was addictive.** The BP-25 DA sounds just like a preamp should, which is like no preamp at all. It gets out of the way better than any I've heard, delivering musical, natural, squeaky clean and just plain effortless sound. My listening notes are peppered with words like "clarity", "coherence", and "resolution".

When evaluating the Roku Soundbridge network music player (review elsewhere in this issue) the BP-25 was the perfect partner, providing quick and easy digital input switching between it and my CD player for comparisons. With products like the Roku becoming more and more common, multiple digital inputs are going to become de-rigueur in modern preamps and DACs, as they already have in receivers and surround processors. The Bryston was also transparent enough to hear everything the Roku was capable of, one of the major points of the review in the first place. Listening to Wilco's *Yankee Hotel Foxtrot* through the digital out of the Roku and, simultaneously, though that of my Rotel RCD-951 CD player, **the Bryston revealed details I had never heard on the record before, a recording I thought I was pretty familiar with. What was even more impressive was the subtle shading, nuance, and inflection I could hear; the minute differences in presence, attack, and decay that make music sound alive and real. Spooky real. Here's a direct quote from the notes I made at that time: "Smooth, smooth, smooth and hyper detailed with phenomenal rhythm and pace. Highly involving." In a word? Musical.**

Naturally I made some comparisons with my reference outboard DAC, a Musical Fidelity A3 24. The MF is also an up-sampling DAC, selectable to 96 or 192 kHz, and also uses a Delta Sigma chipset with 8x over-sampling. It also costs roughly what the DAC option on the BP-25 DA costs so it made for a pretty fair comparison. I liked the MF enough to buy it a few years back and have been enjoying great sound from it ever since. I was very interested to see how Bryston's internal DAC would stack up.

Differences between closely matched DACs can be vanishingly slight, but in this case, and perhaps this is where the BP-25 DA's direct op-amp connections pay off, they were quite audible. Ry Cooder's *Mambo Sinuendo*, for instance, sounded distinctly more natural and three-dimensional via the Bryston's internal DAC. Transients seemed to "pop" out of the background with a little more alacrity too. By comparison the Musical Fidelity, albeit burdened somewhat by a run of interconnect cable (Ultralink Ultima, by the way) to the preamp, sounded a little duller and more diffuse and lacked the superfine detail of the internal DAC. The presentation also lacked some of the spaciousness and air that the Bryston conveyed so readily. The sense of

effortlessness and speed wasn't quite the same either, the sound "jumping" out of the speakers to a greater extent with the BP-25 DA.

This sense of speed and what perhaps is best described as general vigor carried through the comparisons with my reference preamp, the Musical Fidelity A3CR. With the Bryston there never seemed to be anything held back, almost the audio equivalent of doubling the diameter of water feed pipes in your house: more gush, and a much better shower. I'm not talking about a simple question of more volume. That's easy for a line level preamp to accomplish. It was as if the sound was under greater pressure, coming at me quicker, fuller and firmer than before. With the BP-25 DA the sound was more alive and more dynamically exciting than with the Musical Fidelity preamp. At the same time it could be intimate and super-detailed while never straying from grain-free smoothness.

Midrange neutrality was as good as I've heard from any preamp, as the eerily palpable image of Beck (from *Sea Change*) and other vocalists appearing between my speakers attested. The sound was startlingly open, intimate and direct. Where the Musical Fidelity preamp sounded slightly veiled but pleasantly lush, the BP-25 DA was as crisp and clean as freshly bleached sheets. Again the dynamic performance of the Bryston instilled a feeling of the music being completely uninhibited and unrestrained.

While its internal DAC connection to op-amps seemed to be giving it a leg up in the digital department, the BP-25 retained its exemplary character traits whenever I switched to vinyl as a source. The gap between it and the Musical Fidelity narrowed a bit, but it was made abundantly clear that I was hearing the differences between a very good preamp and a truly great one. Music through the Bryston just sounded more natural and alive.

It's hard to imagine that the new BP-26 could sound much better, but it's certainly likely. If you're looking for a state of the art preamp, with a state of the art DAC built right in, you need to spend some time at a Bryston dealer soon. I was sorry to see the BP-25 DA go back to the factory. Had I not just sunk all my disposable income, and a good chunk of income I have yet to earn, into the aforementioned house, I would have bought one myself. It's not cheap, but I suspect you'd have to spend far more to do any better.

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