



THE RETURN OF THE BRYSTON 2B

Remember the Bryston 2B power amplifier? It became famous back when Bryston was young.

Well, perhaps not *that* young. When the company was born it made medical gear for hospitals. Then followed — for no obviously compelling reason — amplifiers for pro sound. Since there was then a boom in hi-fi for the home, the Canadian company launched a line of stereo amps.

You may recall that they didn't catch on right away, because you can't just take a public address amp and ship it to a hi-fi dealer. The second wave was something else: the Bryston gear combined the ruggedness and no-nonsense engineering of professional equipment with a lot of the qualities audiophiles were looking for.

Even so, there was something special about one of these amplifiers, the Bryston 2B. Or, to give it its full name, the 2B LP. The suffix did not stand for a then popular music source, but for "low profile." The 2B was a "1u" product, which meant you could bolt into an equipment rack and it would take up only one unit of space (the amplifier shown above, by contrast, is a 2u product). Studios loved it, stacking up a dozen of them into a tall rack, feeding the control room, three studios, the talk booth, and the office of the boss's brother-in-law.

But they weren't alone in their love of the 2B. Countless audiophiles heard it, and they either bought it, or else they

put it on their wish list. Either way, many still remember it to this day.

So do we. When we reviewed it back in issue No. 13, we called it "one of the very finest small class AB amps on the market." We particularly praised its mid-range, whose transparency, we wrote, "must be heard to be believed." We said kind things about the top end too.

When Bryston brought out its ST amplifier line, we were told an effort had been made to give all the products the transparency and smoothness that had made the 2B famous...and significantly the 2B itself continued without modification. Now that the line has been bumped up to the "SST" designation, there is a 2B SST, which is the amplifier above.

Incidentally, the 2B LP has not been killed off. It lives on in Bryston's pro line, no doubt because of its slim 1u size. You could, no doubt, buy one from a pro sound dealer. Should you? Well, that is what this review is designed to find out.

As already mentioned it is twice as high as the older 2B, and it has twice the rated power: 100 watts per channel. We noted wistfully that the 2B cost a mere \$775 when we reviewed it...but then again the issue containing the review sold for only \$2.95.

The front panel is clean and uncluttered, since there was enough space to move the heat sinks from the front to the sides. There is only a rectangular power switch, plus two green pilot lights

indicating operation of the two separate power supplies.

The rear panel (on the facing page) shows evolution over the last Bryston amplifiers we have seen. The binding posts (sheathed in plastic for the safety of certain Europeans from the shallow end of the gene pool) are of good quality. The phono input jacks are still connected directly to the circuit board and poke out through a hole in the chassis, but now they poke out a lot farther, allowing use of thicker connectors, such as those of WBT. The one oddity: the 12 volt trigger connection (allowing a preamplifier to switch the amplifier on remotely) is not the usual miniplug, but a screw terminal block. Of course pro users and installers will not even blink.

There are several switches on the rear. You can choose either the single-ended (unbalanced) input or the balanced XLR connection. There is also a switch to raise or lower the sensitivity by 6 dB (either 1 volt or 2 volts input for full power). Note that the two channels must be switched individually. A centrally-located switch lets you bridge the amplifier to use it as a 350 watt monoblock. Of course you then need a second one for stereo use.

We put a few dozen hours of break-in time on our 2B, though we are aware that Bryston themselves do some running in before shipping. And then we brought the unit into our Alpha room for some serious comparisons.



We began with a favorite, Dvorak's *Pièces Romantiques*, op. 75 (Analekta FL 2 3191). This remarkable recording offers a particularly realistic reproduction of James Ehnes' Stradivarius violin, which should sound smooth and silky. If an amplifier is at all harsh or strident, not to say downright flinty, we'll spot it right here.

But we didn't. It still sounded like a Stradivarius, with no hint of screechiness, and Ehnes' playing was expressive and emotional. From the standpoint of music, we were happy. Sonically there were some obvious differences. "The violin strings sound smooth," said Albert, "but I don't hear the woody sound as much." Gerard noted that a slight vibrato, caused by the bowstrings sliding over the resin, was less evident.

Next we gave the amplifier a little more to work with, to see whether it could handle a large orchestra as well as our Moon W-5LE reference amplifier does: Rachmaninov's celebrated *Piano Concerto No. 2* (PentaTone 5186 114). This is an SACD made from one of Decca's original analog master tapes. The sound stage is huge, but an inadequate amplifier can shrink it right down.

But the 2B sounds bigger than it looks, and there was little shrinkage. The deep piano chords which open the concerto were powerful, and the orchestra was large too, with smooth, natural strings and pleasant woodwinds. We easily followed the structure of the concerto, despite the sheer number of notes Rachmaninov packed into it. "The tone is warm," said Reine, "and the space opens up into every one of the three dimensions." The overall effect was one of majesty and grandeur. Only once did

the 2B come close to running out of breath, hardening up just enough to let us know that it was close to exhausting its reserve of current.

We pulled out another SACD, this one of Eric Bibb's Gospel Blues, *Needed Time* (from the *Spirit and the Blues* album, Opus 3 CD19411). "This amplifier is sounding better and better," commented Albert.

Indeed, the piece began and ended well. We liked the distinctive sound of the two guitars, one of them a bottleneck, and the evocatively plaintive harmonica caught our attention as well. Background percussive effects were subtle, but they remained audible and in balance. The image was very good.

Did Bibb's voice have the same "roundness" it exhibited with our own amplifier? Perhaps not, but it remained expressive, and the rhythm worked wonderfully well. Not for the first or the last time, we concluded that the 2B served the cause of music well.

There had been plenty of low-frequency content in the last two pieces, but much less than in our next recording. It

was *To Each His Own* from Ray Brown's *Trio* album (Hi-Res HRM 2008). This is a 24 bit 96 kHz uncompressed DVD, and — lest we forget — bassist Ray Brown is very much the soloist. His instrument's sound can be truncated by bad systems, or it can push them over the edge into cacophony.

Not this time, though. From the first notes the strong rhythm caught our attention and never let go. Despite the solidity of Brown's instrument, it never got unnaturally boomy, and the recording had a certain lightness we appreciated. "The original 2B wouldn't have gotten this far," commented Gerard.

The piano had less of a natural "roundness," as had been true of Eric Bibb's voice and James Ehnes' violin, but it was so expressive and rhythmic we quickly forgot about the tonal change. This is a tough recording to reproduce, but the 2B SST did it justice.

We wanted to end off with a female voice, because for reasons we have explained before a lot of audio components — and not just amplifiers — get a little panicky trying to handle high frequency content. That would show up on all music, of course, not just voice, but it is most noticeable on voice because that is the one instrument most of us get to hear often.

So we wound up the session with *Soft Lights and Sweet Music* from Margie Gibson's always delightful *Say It With Music* album (Sheffield CD-36). We can say right off that the Bryston had little difficulty with it. As with the very first recording, both voice and piano had changed character a little, but we

SUMMING IT UP...

Brand/model: Bryston 2B SST
Price: C\$2595/US\$2195
Size (WDH): 48.2 x 35.5 x 11.5 cm
Claimed power (8Ω): 100 W/channel
Most liked: Good performance on every aspect of music
Least liked: Some minor aspects missing
Verdict: Remember the legend, but buy this one

THAT FAMOUS WARRANTY

Some audiophiles have been known to choose Bryston over competitors for the warranty: an awe-inspiring 20 years. In actual fact, at one time Bryston wouldn't even check the age of a product, merely fixing it if it broke. The only reason it wasn't a "lifetime warranty" is that such warranties are illegal in some jurisdictions (a local garage was compelled to change its "lifetime warranty" on brakes[!] to a "99 year warranty").

The warranty is still 20 years, but the incidence of Internet sales of grey market products has prompted the company to require a copy of an invoice before doing warranty work.

More and more manufacturers and distributors have been forced to adopt the same policy. For buyers, it's a good argument for renting a safety deposit box.

admired the subtle details, the coherence of the sound, and the sheer beauty of the song. Albert, who has been known to play cello, called the sound of the accompanying cello magnificent. "What is really good," said Gerard, "is that your attention is drawn not just by the loud parts, but by the *soft* passages, the ones you can barely hear."

We placed the 2B SST on the test bench and hooked it up to our instru-

ments. We saw nothing to complain about. Like other Bryston amplifiers we have reviewed, it met and considerably exceeded its rated power. At 1 kHz it managed more than 129 watts before clipping, with both channels driven. It did nearly as well at 20 Hz, where most solid state amps (and virtually all tube amps) fall on their faces. It managed "only" 120.9 watts at 20 kHz. There are all too few audiophile-oriented ampli-

fiers able to boast figures like those.

At low level the performance was also excellent, with no strange artifacts even just above the noise level...which was, by the way, very low.

What to conclude about this new incarnation of the legend? The 2B SST doesn't call attention to itself the way the version of 20 years ago did, but that may be simply because the available points of comparison aren't the same. Make no mistake, however, the 2B SST is a thoroughly competent amplifier. Which leaves just one question: should you, possibly, look up a pro sound dealer and buy the original 2B LP instead?

If we were you we wouldn't do it. Look up our 1987 review, and, amidst all the praise you'll find *this* quote: "Only the bottom end disappointed us. It has a slightly tubby sound, as though the 2B didn't quite have the muscle to handle the woofer cone."

We'd guess that what we wrote then would still be true of the 2006 version of the 2B LP. But it is definitely *not* true of the 2B SST. There's been a change of the guard.



CROSSTALK

You can dream about a remarkable sonic performance, and with this amplifier the dream can come true. I quote this from experience.

I was impressed by the 2B's irreproachable definition, which lets through the subtlest of subtle details. I was charmed by the pleasant tonal color which emerged throughout the session — sounds that were as beautiful as they were precise, guitars rendered without harshness, silky violins with engrossing sensitivity, clean piano with no false "warmth," superb human voices, ample basses, soothing cellos, attractive counterpoints.

The bottom end was opulent, I thought, and I heard no distortion even when a large orchestra opened up with quick cascades of notes. Brass was bright but not hard, and the rhythm was communicative and accurate. And all the better to thrill, it never fails to deploy its excellent dynamic range.

For musicians, the Bryston 2B is a faithful vehicle for their virtuosity. For audiophiles, it's a treat.

—Reine Lessard

Call it a legend revisited. But it isn't really. Smiling audiophiles then spoke of the original amplifier with a touch of regret as in "yes, but..." After going through this listening session, I predict it'll now be changed to "yes, *and*..."

No problem, I thought, because with large, imposing orchestral works the 2B SST speaks with authority, and yet it retains what it was most liked for in the distant past (you know, when dinosaurs walked the earth and cables were called wires). If your speakers are a touch heavy and slow, this amp will make them dance lightly with confidence. If they *already* dance lightly you'll hear them drop all pretense and become real and simple, as they should be.

There is something just right about the music played through this amp. Not in analyzing every aspect to death, however, but in letting the music flow and in sitting back and remaining available to its beauty.

—Albert Simon

You'd think I would be the only one of our trio to be talking about the original 2B,

because I'm the only one who was around in 1987 when it was reviewed. But Albert remembers it too, and so do a lot of our readers. I know, because they've talked to us about it for years.

I wish we could have had a 2B LP here as well, so that we could have done a comparison, but honestly I think I know pretty much how it would have turned out. The original 2B had a sweet transparent sound that was nearly unrivalled in its day, but a number of manufacturers have since done better. And that includes Bryston itself.

The 2B SST is a well-balanced product, doing justice not only to mid and high tones, but to the bottom end too. Because it's so easy to lift I wasn't sure whether its power rating would translate into real-world muscle. It does.

The price tag might disappoint anyone who remembers only the 1987 price, but compare to what Bryston's competitors charge in 2006. The 2B may have represented value two decades ago, but the modern version does too.

—Gerard Rejskind