

Right first time

Bryston's first-ever CD player brings class-leading build quality to the £2k sector

PRODUCT Bryston BCD-1

TYPE CD player

PRICE £2,050

KEY FEATURES Size (WxHxD): 43.2x7.9x28.6cm
 ● Weight: 8.2kg ● Crystal 192kHz/24-bit DAC
 ● Digital outputs: SPDIF, AES EBU, Toslink ● Analogue outputs: single-ended RCA phono, balanced XLR

CONTACT ☎ 0870 4441044 @ www.bryston.ca

Bryston is a solid, dependable company that offers a 20-year guarantee with all its amplifiers, even though they rarely seem to require any attention during that time, if long-term owners are to be believed. It's this overarching desire to make reliable products that has, perhaps, prevented Bryston from making a CD player until now – 25 years since the format was first introduced. One theory is that Bryston was waiting for components that could match the rock-solid reputation of its amplifiers. If that's the case, then the three-year parts and labour warranty on the BCD-1 would suggest that Bryston's long wait for failsafe componentry was ultimately in vain. In any case, to hear the official line on why it's taken Bryston so long to release a CD player, turn to the James Tanner interview on page 70.

The BCD-1 is a pretty sensible-looking player: it's clearly hardcore and makes few, if any, concessions to audiophile fashion, although it does have a nice bit of laser-cut branding on the front of the disc drawer that's keeps it looking cool. It's a little disappointing that the drawer behind is a regular, plastic variety of the Philips kind, but given that the drawer has little if any effect upon the sound, this shouldn't come as a surprise. Bryston doesn't do things for the sake of showroom appeal, it does them for the right reasons – a lesson learned from years of providing amplifiers for the pro-audio fraternity.

The BCD-1's display is not an off-the-shelf unit, not in the audio world at least, and while it's a little on the small side, you can use it to do unusual things, like turning the 12-volt trigger on and off, as well as the more popular time, repeat and scan displays. If you select a new track while it's playing another, it will display both for the two seconds or thereabouts that it takes to make the change, which, while hardly essential, is quite nice. The remote handset feels reassuringly solid and features a plethora of small buttons like those on the player, albeit

with volume control for a Bryston integrated or preamp such as the BP-26, plus a code facility that allows you to select which component will respond to volume changes and muting. It'll also allow you to change the display brightness.

Inside the steel and aluminium casework, Bryston has gone to great lengths to create a

impedance that the Crystal chip can deliver, which allows maximum ease of flow. As you don't have the same limitations with regard to heat dissipation that you do in a chip, Bryston is able to provide a powerful signal for the balanced and single-ended outputs.

As with most Bryston products there is

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player that avoids the small but significant timing errors introduced by jitter, citing the fact that both transport and DAC have to be run off the same master clock if optimum performance is to be achieved. The engineers at Bryston's Ontario facility selected Crystal's CS4398 digital to analogue converter for this player, a DAC that oversamples at 128 times and uses a hybrid of multi-bit and delta sigma technologies. While the company does its level best to provide this component with the cleanest power supply it possibly can, there are limits to the extent in which it can influence the sound. The output stage, on the other hand, allows more flexibility, especially as it is a discrete (non chip) type built to the high standards associated with Bryston amplifiers.

Bryston claims that the output stage has been tailored to precisely match the requirements of the DAC: specifically to offer

nothing fundamentally different about the way this player has been put together; the brochure details the extent to which the engineers have tried to minimise noise and jitter, but you'll find the same with the competition. What really differentiates this player is Bryston's track record for building very reliable, low coloration amplifiers alongside an approach to aesthetics that is truly hardcore. There is variation available, though; the BCD-1 also comes in silver, and there is the option of a 19-inch rack-mount front panel.

While Bryston is first and foremost an amplifier maker, the BCD-1 is designed to be compatible with all high-quality amplifiers, be they integrated or pre/power, with or without balanced inputs. Having said that, the volume/mute buttons on the BCD-1's remote handset are designed to operate



Q&A

We spoke to James Tanner, vice president of Sales and Marketing at Bryston about the BCD-1.



HFC Why wait 25 years to build your first CD player?

JF We had no intention of getting into the CD player market, but when we designed our internal stereo DAC about three years ago for our preamps, the response in the market was overwhelmingly positive to say the least. Given that most people are fed up with all the 'format wars' we decided – based on our customers input – to offer a state-of-the-art CD player built around our DAC for the thousands of Red Book CDs and CD-Rs that already exist.

Were you not tempted to go down the universal player route?

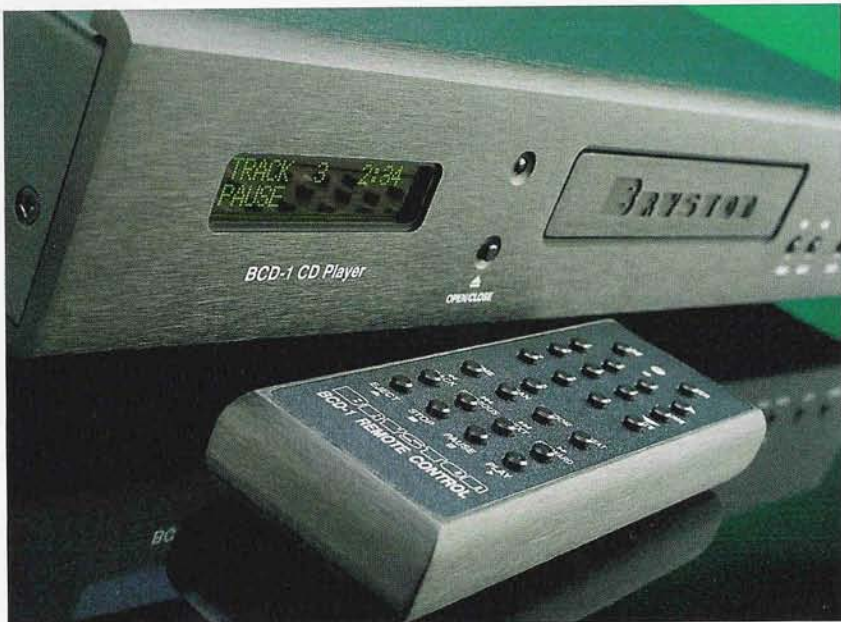
Yes, due to the increase in the home theatre market and the success of our surround-sound processor, we did consider a universal player. Given the continued indecision on which format will win, and when, we decided to steer clear. Also, universal players have issues with 'clocking' at multiples of the CD standard of 44.1kHz due to their video requirements.

What was it that appealed to you about the Crystal DAC you have selected?

We tested a number of DAC's when we were designing the internal preamp DAC and felt that the Crystal performed and sounded the best, given our designs. That said, I have to say that most of the quality DACs from the five different manufacturers we looked at performed very well. I think the significant difference in our CD player is the discrete analogue stages around the DAC. The Bryston BCD-1 CD player uses fully discrete Class A operational amplifiers after the DAC, instead of the commonly used integrated circuits.

Can it be upgraded by using the MPS2 power supply?

No, the MPS-2 will not work with the CD player. Originally, we were thinking of going down that road, but discovered that we got much better performance by totally separating the digital power supply section from the analogue power supply section in the CD player. The other big advantage of an internal power supply is that we can optimise the voltage and current required by the CD player.



Bryston components, specifically the BP26 and BP6 preamps, B60R and B100 integrated amplifiers and SP2 preamp/processor. These Bryston amps will also have 12-volt trigger outputs that can be used to automatically turn the BCD-1 on, as they themselves are powered up, and vice versa. This, however, is a feature of many North American amps.

SOUND QUALITY

The player's sound reflects in many ways the build and technology used for the job, by which we mean that it delivers a grounded, solid sound which majors on neutrality at the expense of romance. Bryston amplifiers sound much the same, but where things differ is in

the phenomenal sense of precision and pin-sharp timing. We were actually surprised at how upfront and keen the BCD-1 is; it takes the pace, rhythm and timing qualities so espoused by some hi-fi companies and shows them how such things should be done. It boasts genuine authority too, no doubt a result of the great lengths Bryston has gone to in order to eradicate jitter. Bryston's marketing spiel may not read a great deal different to the efforts of their competitors, but the end result certainly sounds much more solid and compelling.

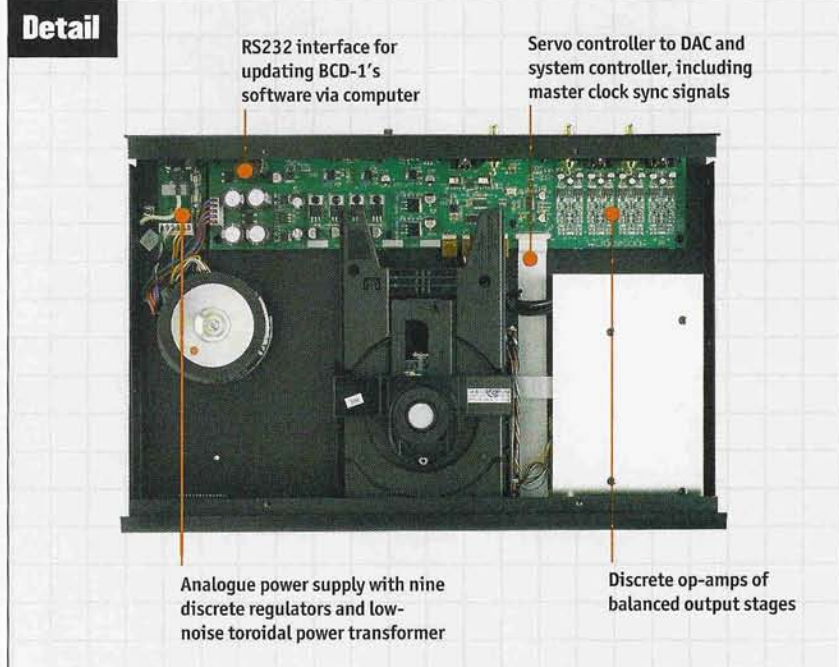
The key lies in the bass, which is the hardest part of the spectrum to make tuneful and tight, or so it would usually seem. Here though, even the thickest, most complicated bass lines are clearly revealed, overcoming what one might otherwise have ascribed as limitations in the amplification or loudspeaker in the process. One track that aptly demonstrates this is Soweto's *Where It's At*, the stand-out piece on *Friends Seen and Unseen* by the Charlie Hunter Trio. With this track the bass line is usually huge and lumbering on nearly everything you play it through, yet in the BCD-1's hands it has a clarity and precision that is quite surprising.



This is partly because the Bryston has a dry balance; its sound is the opposite of the romance you get with a valve output stage, for example. There is, therefore, rather less 'juice' and rather more 'crunch' to the result in tonal terms. Doubtless, there will be those who will find this approach less appealing. When it comes to engagement with the music, however, the BCD-1's approach does the business in no uncertain terms.

Our comparison source, the Resolution Audio Opus 21, costs another thousand pounds and is, therefore, not a direct competitor, although it does put the Bryston into perspective. Next to it, the Opus 21 produces a bigger, more seamless picture with a greater sense of openness, with more convincing imaging as a result. The BCD-1's imaging seems a little restrained by comparison, and the overall sound lacks the degree of finesse on offer from the more expensive machine. Yet while the sonic picture is seemingly more complete with the Opus 21, the Bryston does produce very similar levels of detail when it comes to hard facts. By which we mean notes, noises and suchlike, rather than the more ephemeral (but equally important) sense of acoustic space that is also to be found on the disc.

The Bryston does seem to delve right down into the mix, picking up fine details that are not always apparent. Clearly the work that the company has done to keep noise out of the signal has been effective because the noise floor has obviously been pushed down a long way. Better still, it has managed to do this without letting go of the most important factor – musicality. This nefarious term applies equally as much to transistor radios, yet when it comes to achieving high-resolution, can sometimes get forgotten in the quest for ever lower noise and greater imaging. The Linn Akurate CD that we reviewed (HFC 299) also demonstrates this quality, but in the context of a sonic character that borders on the coloured, Bryston has merely ended up with a slightly dry-sounding player. It is, however, a player that is so good at revealing what every instrument and voice in the mix is



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doing that it's possible to follow, and even enjoy, the most dense of musical passages. Sean Noonan's *Stories To Tell* can get a bit that way in places, what with so many virtuoso musicians in one place. In the Bryston's hands, however, everything falls into place with a coherence that is locked down by Thierno Camara's bass playing, which the BCD-1 resolves so clearly. And it does so without emphasising that end of the spectrum, *a la* Wadia for instance.

We might be over-emphasising the dryness here: put a luxuriant recording on, such as *Eva Taylor at the Pawnshop* (see *Choice Cuts* p22) and you get a fulsome, warm and expansive soundstage, populated with gorgeous-sounding brass and the remarkable voice of the lady at

the microphone. Ditto Cornelius and his percussive guitar and bass gymnastics, which are served all the better for the Bryston's ability to stop and start so precisely.

If it's not already apparent by now, this is a great CD player. We judged it by standards that are fifty per cent more expensive and found little wanting in terms of musical engagement. In fact, if timing is your bag then you might well prefer the nailed-down approach of the Bryston to competitors at twice the price. **HFC**

Jason Kennedy



VERDICT

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| SOUND >> 89% [Progress bar] | PRO In terms of performance, the BCD-1 boasts solid, superbly timed and uncannily engaging sound. In terms of the build it's as solid as they come, which is backed up by a three year warranty. |
| FEATURES >> 86% [Progress bar] | CON The slightly dry sound lacks the openness of competitors, while the display is a little difficult to read at a distance. |
| BUILD >> 92% [Progress bar] | |
| VALUE >> 90% [Progress bar] | |

CONCLUSION
A surprisingly engaging and entertaining CD player that eschews bells and whistles in favour of getting the fundamentals locked down. It's not as open as some, but is rather more timely than most and it sounds as good as it looks.

HI-FI CHOICE OVERALL SCORE >> 90%