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DAC Magic!

New high-end DAC from Bryston presses all the right buttons

PRODUCT Bryston BDA-1

TYPE Digital-to-analogue convertor

PRICE £1,950

KEY FEATURES Size (WxHxD): 43x8x29cm

○ Weight: 8.2kg ○ Digital inputs: 6x S/PDIF (2x phono, 2x BNC, 2x Toslink), 1x AES/EBU (XLR), USB, (for firmware upgrade via PC) ○ Digital outputs: 1x S/PDIF ○ Analogue outputs: 1x unbalanced (phono) and balanced (XLR) ○ Sample rates: 32kHz-192kHz

CONTACT ☎ 0870 444 1044 🌐 www.bryston.com

Bryston is a company with an enviable standing in the high-end marketplace. Although it has probably never been the most famous name associated with amplifiers, it has long been one of the most respected among cognoscenti for its no-frills performance, high power, professional build and reliability and general all-round understated excellence. The famous 20-year guarantee no longer excites the raised eyebrows that it once did, but it does indicate a certain seriousness of purpose.

In accordance with that seriousness, Bryston doesn't introduce new products on a whim. It hasn't offered a standalone DAC before, preferring to incorporate a DAC board in its preamps, but the current rapid growth in digital sources has made plenty of manufacturers (and customers!) reconsider the value of a DAC as a high-quality hub in a modern system. It is probably the best way of getting the most from not only silver discs, but also digital radio, digital TV and computers. Like several of the newer DACs on the market, the BDA-1 includes a USB socket for connection to a desktop or laptop computer, potentially turning a cheap bit of consumer electronics into a high-end server.

The USB socket is one of eight inputs, catering for all the usual flavours of interconnection except 192kHz sampling rate via dual AES sockets, something we admittedly can't recall seeing in a single

domestic installation. And anyway, you can send such ultra-high sampling rates to the BDA-1 down a single cable. On a piece of upmarket kit like this it's no surprise to find both unbalanced and balanced analogue outputs, but the digital output is a nice bonus, handy if, for instance, you run some sort of digital recorder or a digitally-fed slave system elsewhere in the house.

incoming digital streams even when their rate is on the border of what's acceptable, while the latter uses Bryston's own 'discrete Class A op-amp' circuits which have exceptionally low distortion, high slew rate and good cable-driving ability. Along with the rest of the circuitry, they are assembled using surface-mounted components on the single audio circuit board, which runs the full

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Like many DACs, the BDA-1 features upsampling of digital sources running at 96kHz or lower sampling rate and it's also possible to switch the upsampling off – of course the second stage of upsampling, within the DAC chips, is still active, but basically the upsampling option is an alternative digital filter. Those DAC chips, by the way, are a pair of Cirrus CS4398s, as used in all sorts of DACs and CD players, some costing a good deal less than the BDA-1. This may look like a bit of a cheek at first, but we entirely sympathise with Bryston's decision to use them: as with FM tuners, mass-market integrated circuits do such a good job that exceeding their performance would be a vastly complex and expensive operation. dCS is a case in point here, its fabulous proprietary DACs starting at around four times the price of the BDA-1.

Instead, Bryston has concentrated on what comes before and after the DAC itself, which means the digital reclocking circuitry and the analogue output. The former is a double-stage arrangement which is claimed to reduce jitter while locking rapidly to

width of the case, but uses less than half the depth – there's quite a lot of fresh air inside. Power is taken from a pair of small encapsulated transformers followed by plenty of filtering and regulation. Build quality, as usual for Bryston, is beyond reproach and the sockets in particular are of commendably high quality.

SOUND QUALITY

One tends to approach a piece of kit like this with quite high expectations and we were encouraged to find them almost immediately fulfilled. Having connected up the BDA-1 to the first CD player that came to hand – nothing fancy – we used it first to listen through some newly arrived recordings that had come in for quality monitoring purposes for a record label. That meant that the recordings themselves were unfamiliar, so a highly positive overall reaction boded well for them as well as the BDA-1. In fact, we were really most impressed, not only with the general degree of tonal purity and detail exhibited, but also with the unusual degree of what, for want of a better word, we'll call 'polish' on the sound. ■



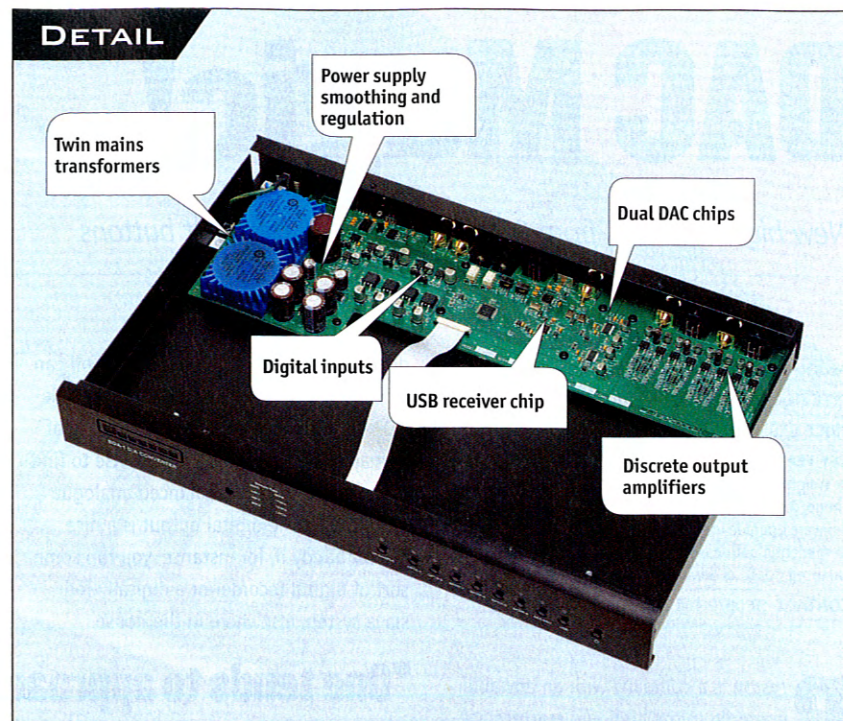
EDITOR'S CHOICE
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BDA-1 D/A CONVERTER

That could be taken as a very back-handed compliment, if read in the sense that rough edges have been polished out or otherwise sweetened, but that's certainly not the case here – the recordings in question, being orchestral, have plenty of natural instrumental tone including the bite of bow on string and the rasp of loud brass instruments. But somehow there seems to be a burnished quality to the sound, which we aren't accustomed to hearing often from recordings, though a good performance in a fine hall can certainly possess it. Details positively shone through, like a landscape in bright sunlight.

Curious as to how much of this (very welcome) finding was due to the DAC and how much to the recording, we resorted to a familiar mid-range CD player. Now the recording simply sounds good – it would probably be mean not to say very good, but it was not outstanding in the way we had first heard. Reverting to the BDA-1 restores the original excellence, so it was no trick of a first impression. Still, this comparison was across nearly a four-to-one price differential, so could an alternative near-£2,000 DAC manage the same result? Not quite, turned out to be the answer. A dCS Elgar did, admittedly and, perhaps, manages a shade tighter bass too, but in this case the four-to-one ratio was the other way and, well, one would hope so!

This turned out to be probably the most marked example of what the BDA-1 can do, but across a wide range of recordings, both familiar and unfamiliar, it maintains a consistently high standard of resolution and realism, making the music practically leap out of the loudspeakers. It has admirably even-handed tonal characteristics with particularly fine rendition of voices, maintaining the delicate balance between



“...across a wide range of recordings, both familiar and unfamiliar, it maintained a consistently high standard of resolution...”

vowels and consonants without sibilance, chestiness or any of the other all-too-common misdemeanours and it extends effortlessly to the frequency extremes. Bass has a lovely sense of weight but is still plenty lively, while high treble is open and spacious. Incidentally, it's good to report that these results hold via any of the digital input options, including USB when it is sourced in such a way as to be bit-perfect. Bryston seems to have nailed the problem of jitter very effectively in this unit.

There is a legitimate question over the value of any expensive DAC (or CD player,

really) when devices such as the Cambridge DacMagic (HFC 313) at one-tenth the price can achieve remarkably good results. It would be ridiculous to claim that the BDA-1 is ten times as good, but if you are not afraid of the good old Law of Diminishing Returns there is certainly a rewarding step-up in quality from even the best budget units in a fine component like this. As with so many things in life, the finest and rarest come at a price, but we think the arguments the BDA-1 makes for itself are exceptionally convincing. **HFC**

Richard Black



VERDICT	
SOUND ★★★★★	PRO Beautifully detailed sound and particularly good extension at both extremes. The presentation has that lustre that's the true mark of the high end.
FEATURES ★★★★★	
BUILD ★★★★★	CON About the only sonic flaw we could identify is the smallest amount of softness in the bass and one might perhaps wish for a volume control.
VALUE ★★★★★	
CONCLUSION As a way not only of upgrading well-loved and still functional disc players, but also of unifying and optimising new digital sources, this takes some beating. The price is high, but still sensible and the overall package highly attractive.	
HI-FI CHOICE OVERALL SCORE ★★★★★	
URL www.techradar.com/488837	

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