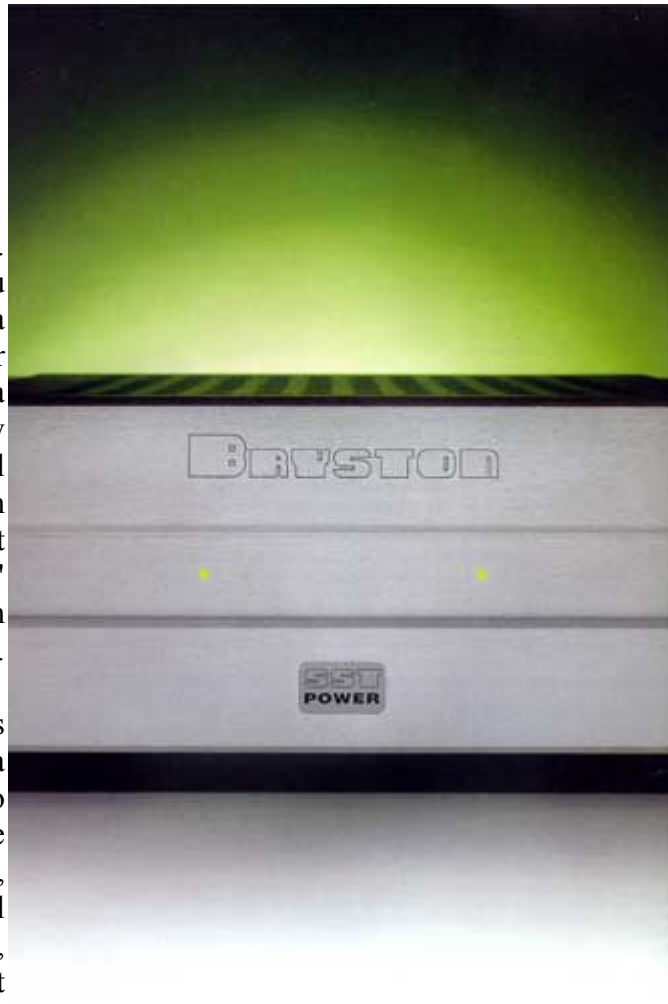


The Hammer

A power amplifier is either powerful or playful? Wrong, Bryston successfully achieves a dream synthesis with their new SST-Amps.

Sometimes testing is very easy. Imagine that you believe that you know the palette of products of a manufacturer who has built power amplifiers for 40 years, and then a colleague reports about a new amplifier generation which puts all predecessors in the shade. When such a quantum leap occurs, then one can't wait to hear grass grow, or "burn-in" components for half a year, no, then things begin to happen...

I have to admit that I have always viewed Bryston somewhat from a distance, I never really warmed up to the components from Toronto - aside from the smart power amplifier. OK, they are considered ultra substantial work horses: long lived, reliable, unbeatable, yet the feeling of "I want it" has not occurred yet between me



and the Brystons. Until now.



Until now I have considered Bryston amplifiers more as "working tools" rather than as "music reproduction instruments." For example, what the most successful amplifier of the Canadians, the 4B - since 1975 30,000 units are said to have been built - offered, I have never searched for in the past or required: gigantic power reserves and a mighty push. However what I have always liked about Bryston equipment: they never sounded "bloodless" or empty. This tradition is also clearly continued by the SST amplifier

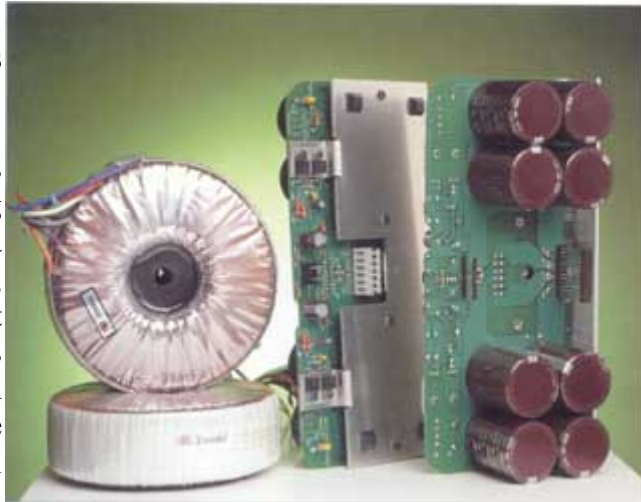
generation. My colleague Dr. Martin has appropriately greeted the first component of this species two (magazine) issues ago, and it is then and now the 14B SST amplifier. The main difference between this flagship and the brand new 4B SST amplifier: Power output - and the price. The 4B SST amplifier costs 3,800 Euro, not even half.

The 25 Kilogram (55 pounds) heavy weight prove that there is still enough material in the "Little One." Two proud toroidal transformers with 600 VA capacity add considerably to this weight. Compared to the previous model, the 4B SST received double the filter capacitance in the power supply (now 44,800 Mfd. per channel), the manufacturer specifies 300 Watts power output into 8 ohms. Once again Bryston has loosely under estimated, we measured 355 hefty Watts. Does one then still need the additional 200 Watts which the 14B SST amplifier can supply? You can check that with a demonstration: As long as the green LEDs on the front panel don't switch to red (the sign for clipping) during usage, the 4B SST amplifier has not reached its limit. Power output, as is well known, is also not the only factor which contributes to the sound of an amplifier. The breakthrough which Bryston achieved with the SST Models can probably be primarily attributed to a "circuit trick", which enabled Bryston to employ NPN/PNP transistor pairs for both the positive as well as the negative half wave of signals (normally each complementary [transistor] type has to process "its half of the signal.") The result: Perfectly symmetrical output.

Sometimes testing is really quite easy.

When the 4B SST amplifier was expected I asked my colleague, Dr. Martin, to scrutinize it quite closely.

First because I knew about his curiosity, and second because as a long time 4B ST amplifier owner, and as a quite recent 14B SST amplifier owner, he is an unequivocal Bryston expert with ideal comparison conditions. His spontaneous reaction, quoted here in the original text, made me even more curious about this exceptional amplifier: "Was the SST-effort for this



smaller Bryston amplifier worthwhile? Yes, indeed. After all the "little one" is not one iota slower than the "big one." In turn, it is light years ahead of the former 4B ST amplifier not only in this discipline, but especially in matters of resolution. Also otherwise it looks straight ahead. More and stronger disciplined bass response. Velvety instead of restrained highs. Colorful instead of dim mid-range. Just a full-fledged audiophile amplifier, and practically a clone of the 14B SST amplifier. The latter provides one bit more of resolution, a more clearly defined room, and even better bass control over the CS 6 (speaker) and most of all through a practically unshakeable sovereignty also in the most violent chaos of Le Sacre du Printemps." With the little Thiel CS 1.6 speakers these differences however dissolve into trivia. The 4B SST

amplifier is also not only the best 4B amplifier that ever existed, but an amplifier of the 14B SST class."

Cogent words which our laboratory confirmed. But for a "center deviation of the shape of the curve" during testing with capacitive loads" the 4B SST amplifier delivered only dreamlike values. No evidence of audiophile sound sorcery, the Canadians simply moved once again a bit closer to the perfect amplifier.

Just like the 4B SST amplifier accomplishes the merging of high output with minute distortion, it also succeeds with an audible feat: combining power, sovereignty and tonal colors with liveliness, and sensitivity and openness. What a combination? The push and the power of the old Bryston amplifiers remained, a not thought possible lightness was added. When the Emerson String Quartet started its "Encores" (DG 471 567-2) there was not a trace of chunkiness, rather the opposite, the B&W 802 or the Wilson Benesch Arc speakers emitted unbridled jollity through the 4B SST amplifier.

We risked a comparison with the Mark Levinson monoblocks No. 434 (13,000 Euro/Pair). And at last here it was clear that we have reached the absolute top level amplifier league with the 4B SST amplifier, and that Dr. Martin had not exaggerated in the slightest. The Levinson amplifiers produced a nuance more openness and detail, during leaner tonal response, but they did not simply "sweep" the Bryston 4B SST amplifier aside. At this high level the direct comparison of amplifier sound is also a matter of taste. The No. 434 amplifier also offered a smidgen more resolution, but the Bryston amplifier in response provided more basic tonal strength, more from the "gut", and this could be a benefit depending upon the recording. Madness, much "comparison work" is facing us. But already I'll dare the prognosis that two Bryston 4B SST amplifiers, bi-wired, would provide a dream team for the B&W Nautilus 801/802 speakers. We will evaluate that - and we will keep you abreast of what else the 4B SST amplifiers can do.

Conclusion

This amplifier is a price breaker par excellence, which makes life really quite difficult for the large heavyweights. Performance is not an issue, with 580 Watts into 4 ohms the 4B SST amplifier can compete with practically anything that costs much, much more.

And soundwise it unquestionably belongs to the Creme de la Creme of manufactured amplifiers: Under the unpretentious hull is indeed one of the best amplifiers in the world. Wilfried Kress

Translated from the German by Peter Ullman

