



Bryston BDA-3

Mention Bryston to me, and the first thing that still comes to mind is the Canadian marque's iconic 4B-SST stereo power amp, which has become something of an audio legend in its various iterations over the years.

But of course, there is a lot more to Bryston than that. These days, the company's product portfolio not only comprises a raft of different pre-amps, power amps and integrated amps, but also loudspeakers, power conditioners, accessories — and digital components.

The BDA-3 is the latest addition to the Bryston digital product family. It's a full-featured D/A converter compatible with both PCM and DSD digital signals, and offering no less than 10 digital inputs.

The last time I listened to a digital product from Bryston was three years ago, when I reviewed the now defunct BDA-1 DAC and matching BPA-1 digital player. The BDA-3 takes full advantage of technology's continuous advances, especially in the digital domain, to offer an altogether more sophisticated, and theoretically more sonically talented take on the DAC formula.

If you're familiar with Bryston, you'll recognise the all-metal construction, the thick alloy faceplate, and the deep-etched Bryston logo. It's a no-nonsense aesthetic approach that's also mirrored in the switchgear.

Individual soft-touch selector buttons are provided for each of the 10 — yes 10 — digital inputs. To the left of these, the sample rate of the incoming digital

signal is shown in two banks of LEDs, one for PCM, the other for DSD. There is no remote control handset.

The rear panel confirms that there are indeed 10 digital inputs. Four of those are S/PDIF, offered in balanced AES/EBU XLR, coaxial RCA, coaxial BNC and Toslink optical flavours. A further two are asynchronous USB Type B sockets, typically used for hooking up to Mac or Windows computers.

The remaining four inputs are HDMI, which comes as a bit of a surprise. They are 4.1a compliant, but implemented here as stereo audio-only inputs, although there is a 4K-compliant video pass-through facility, coupled to an HDMI output.

It's fair to say that the BDA-3 will therefore accommodate just about any digital



source component and interface. The same goes for digital signal compatibility.

A pair of AKM 4399 DAC chips are configured in a dual-mono arrangement, and offer PCM decoding up to 384 kHz at a maximum bit rate of 32 bits. The chipset also offers full DSD decoding capability up to DSD256.

It's important to note that not all the digital inputs share the same capabilities. For instance, Toslink remains limited to 96/24 in this application, while RCA coaxial, BNC coaxial, AES/EBU and HDMI have a 192/24 ceiling for PCM.

However, the HDMI input will accept native, single-rate DSD64, while the USB inputs accept high-res material with PCM sampling rates of up to 384 kHz/32-bit, and also DSD at up to four times the rate, e.g. DS256.

The BDA-3 offers optional upsampling, in addition to native D/A conversion. With the upsampling feature engaged, digital signals with sampling rates of 44,1 and 88,2 kHz are upsampled to 176,4 kHz. Similarly, 48 and 96 kHz signals are upsampled to 192 kHz.

Upsampling is only available via the S/PDIF digital inputs, and not from USB or HDMI.

Other under-the-covers highlights include a fully balanced circuit layout, a highly regulated low-noise power supply, and full system control integration via RS232, USB and Ethernet. Yes, that means the Ethernet port isn't for conventional network connectivity.

The analogue output array comprises a choice of balanced XLR and single-ended stereo outputs, with the former considered the output set of choice. Certainly, it was the way we hooked up the BDA-3 to our Primare PRE32/MM30 pre-amp.

Digital signals were drawn from various quarters. My MacBook Pro was linked to the Bryston using the USB 2.0 interface, while the Yamaha and the Primare sent their digital signals via the BNC-terminated S/PDIF input and the conventional coaxial RCA respectively.

First impressions were almost a little disappointing, if only because the Bryston seemed unwilling to stamp a specific sonic

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signature on the music. It appeared to play the role of an unassuming diplomatic facilitator between the digital and analogue domains, successfully overseeing the progress from digital to analogue.

If I had expected the Bryston to sound slightly warmer, a little richer, or perhaps more resolute, I was going to be disappointed. Instead, the BDA-3 exuded an honesty and a truthfulness that allowed it to extract the essence of the incoming signal, and to pass it onto the pre-amp without interference.

In other words, don't expect the BDA-3 to transform a pedestrian recording into something exalted, or to ameliorate any tonal shortcomings with boosted bass or rolled off trebles. The declared intention of this DAC is the truth, and nothing but the truth.

VITAL STATS

DAC	Dual-mono balanced 32-bit AKM 4399
Digital conversion	DSD up to DSD256
	PCM up to 384 kHz/32-bit
Frequency response	20 Hz – 20 kHz (± 0,25 dB)
Digital inputs	AES/EBU, S/PDIF RCA, S/PDIF BNC, S/PDIF Toslink,
	2x asynchronous USB Class 2.0,
	3x HDMI 1.4a, 1x HDMI HDCP 2.2
Digital outputs	1x HDMI
Analogue outputs	1x balanced stereo XLR, 1x single-ended stereo RCA
Connectivity	Ethernet
Dimensions (WxDxH)	432 x 293 x 85 mm
Weight	3,9 kg
Price	R 51 454

Verdict

A vibrant, powerful, compelling sound that challenges the mind and touches your soul. No other DAC I've heard sounds quite as lifelike. A new benchmark – and still improving.

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OUR RATING: 82 / 100





While it means that flawed recordings and performances were ruthlessly revealed for what they are, real music – performed with passion and accurately recorded – was presented with vivid intensity.

Robert Plant's fascinating, multi-faceted *lullaby... And The Ceaseless Roar* (EastWest 44,1/16 WAV) was a good case in point. The set reflects a creative restlessness that turns every song into an adventure into the unknown.

On 'Rainbow', Plant's vocals were crystal clear, drifting over a densely stacked backdrop of guitars, percussion and effects. But the Bryston never allowed that backdrop to become an homogenous mass, preferring to discover and resolve every facet of the music to the rich benefit of the overall listening experience.

The effect is like lifting a veil: the music has always been there, but you've never experienced it in its full and detailed glory. And it wasn't only the music that benefited – on 'Embrace Another Fall', it was the ability of the Bryston to create a convincing sense of air and dimension



that elevated the listening experience.

The seemingly innocuous 'The Clock', from Paul Simon's recently released *Stranger To Stranger* (Concord CD) is a kind of interlude between stronger, more melodic songs, a coda that is easily dismissed or glossed over.

But with the Bryston in charge of D/A conversion proceedings, the very deep bass notes at the core of this short track were produced with astonishing authority and chest-thumping urge. The harmonic ring of the xylophone and the strident, scratchy beat of the guitar, sounded almost too aggressive, too close for comfort.

The same visceral intensity was prevalent in the close-miked, vibrant acoustic guitar,

the gentle synths and Simon's wistful vocals on 'In The Garden Of Edie'. By comparison, the crunchy percussion, layered choruses and chirpy guitars of 'The Riverbank' seemed to surround and overwhelm, immersing the listener in the bustle and the action of the performance.

Mozart's bright and delicate *Violin Concerto In G Major KV216*, performed with poise and soul by Marianne Thorsen and the Trondheimsolistene is recorded as beautifully as the performance, but the Bryston seemed to extract an extra sleekness, a further degree of bonhomie.

It allowed the solo violin to take another step forward into the spotlight, highlighting richer timbres and finer tonal hues, and also bringing Thorsen's intonation into closer perspective. The orchestra wasn't neglected in the process, though – the strings gained greater sheen and cohesion, the dynamics sounded more pronounced, and the cellos were presented with more succinct authority.

And that's really what the Bryston BDA-3 does so well: it doesn't attenuate or emphasise, doesn't enrich or emasculate. Rather it simply opens the window wider, offering a better, closer, more vivid view of the music.

Of course, not all recordings will stand up to that scrutiny, and in some cases, the BDA-3's unwavering exploration may reveal less flattering facets that detract from the experience. That, I suppose, is the price you pay for the truth.

However, it's a small penalty when compared to the thrill of well-performed, competently recorded music being unshackled, and coming vitally, potently alive.

Deon Schoeman

Software

Robert Plant – *lullaby... And The Ceaseless Roar*
(EastWest 44,1/16 WAV)

Paul Simon – *Stranger To Stranger* (Concord CD)

**Mozart – *Violin Concerto in G Major* – Marianne Thorsen/
Trondheimsolistene** (2L 96/24 FLAC)

Associated Equipment

Yamaha CD-S2100 disc player

Primare CD22 CD player

Oppe BDP-95EU universal player

13-inch MacBook Pro/OSX Mavericks/Audirvana 1.12.5

Primare PRE32/MM30 pre-amp

Parasound Halo A21 power amp

Line Magnetic LM-211A integrated amp

KEF LS50 monitors

KEF R500 loudspeakers

B&W PM-1 loudspeakers