

# Bryston BCD-1 CD player

by Alan Sircom



Unlike many electronics companies in the hi-fi business, the Canadian Bryston company was a digital hold-out. Yes, it has included DACs in its integrated amp and pre-amp for some time, but to make a whole CD player... that was someone else's job. Technically, Bryston claims it held back on producing the BCD-1 until such time as digital audio was mature enough to achieve the same performance as the company gets from its amplification, but we suspect there's a hint of 21st Century hi-finomics at play, too; very, very few people buy just an amp today, and people seem to think systemically, even if the products are reviewed solo. So, the BCD-1 is necessary for those who wouldn't consider buying an amplifier without having at least a CD player from the same brand in tow.

On the face of it, there's not much to differentiate the BCD-1 from other CD players currently on the market. It's a Red Book standard spinner, capable of supporting CD and CD-R. It features a 24bit, 192kHz over-sampling DAC (a hand-selected Crystal CS4398, if we are being specific) and discrete Class A amplifiers specially made for that chip in the output stage. Yes, it has both balanced and single-ended analogue outputs, fully isolated digital Toslink, AES/EBU and S/PDIF connections, an easy-read, two-deck LCD readout and has an RS232 port for firmware updates, but even this hardly separates the BCD-1 from the middle-range CD players. So, what's so special?

Paradoxically, it's the distinct lack of 'special' that makes it so, er, special. There are no fancy tube output stages, no filterless, zero times oversampling converters, no special fairy dust sprinkled over feet made of spun gold or the rarest hardwood in existence. No CD draw painted with special inks and no remote control penned by a sports car designer in a spare moment. It's a bullshit-free product in a bullshit world, and that it is ▶

► super-glued to the Red Book standard only serves to highlight just how many liberties are taken with that notional standard for disc play.

Okay, so there is a little more than just commonplace Red Book build. Like the jitter-busting concept of using the same master clock to drive both transport and DAC stage and a well-constructed analogue power stage with a goodly sized toroidal transformer. Essentially though, the BCD-1 is a good CD player built with a full-on belt-and-braces approach to making digital audio.

Then – there's the build. There's something oh so satisfying about handling a Bryston product. It's not just the long, transferable guarantee (20 years on analogue

computer and weigh as much as the desk itself. There isn't the same necessity to over-engineer a CD player (it's a temptation that should be resisted if at all possible, as over-engineered players usually suffer in the sound quality stakes). So the BCD-1 is a slimmer device than most Bryston products, standing just 2.8" high and just over 11" deep (irrespective of whether you chose the 17" or 19" sized version). It's still a heavy player, due to the solid aluminium case and close to half inch thick front panel. Similarly, the solid billet remote control also feels purposeful

players, they seem set on digging out the beauty inherent in any piece of music. Sounds are polished, refined and mannered, as if everything has been played through a Mendelssohn filter. We bask in a sumptuously deep soundstage and listen to the instrumental microdynamics. Trouble is, sometimes this audiophile majesty can lead to a bloodless performance.

The last thing you could ever say of the BCD-1 is that it is 'bloodless'.

Music is a visceral,  
living, breathing  
event



circuits, five on digital ones) or the thick, slightly cheesy Bryston name laser cut into the cover for the transport. Or even the fact that the company's products have a big following in the studio world. It's that all things Bryston are just so 'built'. It's nice to own a CD player that could survive a HALO drop. It's reassuring that – in the event of nuclear Armageddon – the small enclave of cockroach survivors will have something to play their discs on.

Of course, Bryston built its reputation on über-butcher power amplifiers that are the size of a desktop

in a sort of welterweight fashion. This isn't added mass for mass sake; the whole thing sits small and muscular.

We've become so used to products that demand a hundred hours of running in that we forget what a joy no-nonsense players like the BCD-1 are. Yes, you can leave it running in if you like. You can use it with crazy cable costing more than the player itself if you choose. It doesn't seem to bother the player one iota. It sounds good, whether you treat it with kid gloves or utter contempt.

Of course, there's good sound and good sound, and once again we're presented with something wholly different from most high-end players. When we listen to many

through this player – sometimes violently so. Listen to Stravinsky's *Firebird Suite* and you discover why people used to riot over this stuff.

It starts in the guts of the music itself – the bass. Here, the player is rigidly controlled, powerful and tactile, yet possessed of a very rhythmic drive to the sound. No matter how intricate the bass line – and we are talking Chapman Stick virtuosity or Kraftwerk-grade precision polyrhythms – the BCD-1 takes control of the bottom end like it was born with Mole grips in its transport mechanism.

Don't imagine the sound is as big as it is powerful; this is a tightly controlled, dry and taut performer. Some will find the dryness of the sound too arid and light – those who live for rhythm often use amplifiers and speakers that can ►

▶ sound lean, and the addition of this player could pitch that over the edge. Also, those who have engineered their sound for a mellifluous, sumptuous performance might find this player

soundstage. And neither did the mid-band let the side down. It might not have the transparency of top-notch players, but neither is it veiled or sat upon in the midrange.

There is a (probably unsurprising) commonality between the sound of this

appeal to those who like their music slightly softened and beautifully presented, but if you love music for the experience and use the words 'soul', 'feel' or 'passion' when talking about your music... oh boy! ▶+



somewhat lacking when it comes to mile-wide soundstage. These are the extremes of audiophile use, though... and those in the middle ground will find much to like in the BCD-1.

If you selected your system on the grounds of absolute accuracy then you will love the precision of the Bryston player, but for once this precision is allied to a sense of musical enjoyment and insight both into the music and the performance that's very alluring. It's an earthy precision; you get the feeling of peering round the door of the recording studio control room, but you also get the feeling of musical entertainment rather than musical analysis.

The acid test of any CD player with the Bryston's character is the brass section of an orchestra. Too stark and the player turns French Horns into powerful oboes; too brash and the brass dominates the orchestral sound entire. Here it trod carefully between the two, giving a sense of insight into the music, even if this is not the sort of CD player that readily lets you listen into the

CD player and Bryston's amplification. That powerful, highly rhythmic and slightly topky sound found on Bryston amps appears here. Strangely though, I don't think this will undermine the overall Bryston sound. It will not sound more topky or bright when CD and amp are partnered together... instead it will just sound bright and bold and energetic. It's also little wonder that Bryston and PMC have a close connection; judging by the BCD-1, the sound is very studio-like in its directness and accuracy. It's a player that ticks all the right boxes, which is more than many rivals do. Much of what you are enjoying on other, similarly priced players is deviation from the Red Book standard. Personally, I prefer this more precise approach, even if it's perhaps not the most immediately gratifying.

Ultimately, if this player doesn't stir the blood, you should get checked over for anaemia. The Bryston BCD-1 is never going to

#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Integrated CD player
DAC:	Crystal 192k/24bit DAC, 128x o/s
Analogue Outputs:	1pr single-ended RCA 1pr balanced XLR
Output Levels:	2.3V single-ended 4.6V balanced
Digital Outputs:	1x co-axial S/Pdif 1x balanced AES/EBU 1x optical TosLink
Finishes:	black and silver
Dimensions (WxHxD):	432 or 483 x 79 x 286mm
Weight:	8.2 kg
Price:	£2050
Guarantee:	5 years (digital parts) 20 years (analogue parts)
Number Of UK Dealers:	12
<b>UK Distributor:</b>	
	PMC Ltd
	Tel. 0870 4441044
	Net. www.bryston.ca