



Bryston

B100 SST integrated stereo amplifier

When audiophiles get together to talk about the latest cool high-end gear, the name Bryston rarely pops up. But that's not an indictment of the company or its products. It's just that this 46-year-old Canadian manufacturer chooses to fly a little under the radar, building a following for its electronics one loyal customer at a time rather than trying to generate a pile of press with some flavor-of-the-month new model. In fact, its 3B and 4B amplifiers have both been in continuous production, albeit with numerous upgrades, going all the way back to the 1970s.

As one of the only electronics manufacturers to successfully straddle the divide between professional users such as recording studios and the audiophile world, Bryston's goal is to make products that can satisfy both camps equally. Pros want gear that can be run hard 24/7 for decades without breaking, while picky audiophiles demand gear that pushes the envelope of sonic performance. That Bryston can sell what are essentially identical products to both of these groups, even while including a 20-year warranty, demonstrates its success at meeting these seemingly incompatible needs.

The higher-priced option of the two integrated amp models in Bryston's lineup, the B100 SST essentially com-

bines the company's BP 16 preamp and 2B SST power amp in one box. Weighing in at a hefty 30 pounds, with a thick alloy faceplate that exudes quality without being too flashy, the B100's build quality inspires confidence. A row of buttons controls input selection, balance, muting, and power on/off, while discrete LEDs above the buttons indicate their status. The analog-style rotary volume control actually activates a digital encoder that in turn switches an analog resistor network. This arrangement offers much more accurate control than a traditional motorized potentiometer without compromising the sound.

Several variations of the B100 SST are available: a version with a moving-magnet phono stage (B100P), another version with a digital-to-analog converter card that gives you two optical and two coaxial digital inputs (B100DA), and one that combines both of these features (B100P/DA). At \$500, the remote control is a pricey option, although I suppose opting out of it lets you save some coin if you plan to operate the B100 using a home control system via its RS-232 port. If you buy the base version of the B100 SST, these options can be easily retrofitted as your needs change.

The B100 SST has seven pairs of line-level inputs, although the digital input

card and phono-stage options take up one input each. But even a fully loaded version like my B100P/DA review sample still gives you five line-level inputs. This should still be plenty since many of your sources will connect to the integrated amp's optional inputs. There's also a set of preamp outputs and power amp inputs should you feel the need to use these sections independently, along with a switch that connects them internally for normal operation.

Custom installers will appreciate the RS-232 port, along with an IR input jack and a pair of 12-volt trigger outputs. A fixed-level pass-through option that can be assigned to any input helps to ease integration of the B100 into a home theater rig. This lets you maintain a proper level match when using the B100 to drive the front left and right speakers of a multichannel system, without potentially compromising the system's two-channel stereo performance by running it through a surround processor.

SETUP

I used the B100 in two different settings over the course of several weeks — as a stereo amp in my two-channel music system and to drive the front speakers of my

The Short Form

Snapshot

A beautifully built, neutral sounding centerpiece for a music system, designed to last a generation

Plus

- ⚡ Impeccable construction quality
- ⚡ Exceptionally neutral sound
- ⚡ Compatible with a wide range of sources and speakers

Minus

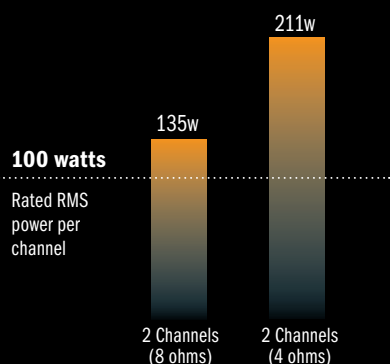
- ⚡ Remote control isn't included
- ⚡ Pricy — especially when loaded up with options

Price \$3,895 (with phono input, \$4,365; with D/A converter, \$5,095; with phono input and D/A converter, \$5,565)

Test Bench

Full lab results at soundandvisionmag.com/bryston

MEASURED POWER OUTPUT



The B100 handily exceeded its power specs, easily doubled its rated 8-ohm power into 4-ohm loads, and displayed substantial dynamic headroom — better than 2 dB into 8 ohms. Measured distortion for the analog inputs was exceedingly

low, and D/A linearity on the PCM input was essentially perfect. The Bryston's signal-to-noise performance was good, and very consistent between analog and digital input signals, as well as between 44.1-kHz/16-bit and 96-kHz/24-bit PCM sources. This suggests that the limiting factor here (for example, the S/N being a couple of dB above the theoretical ideal in the B100's PCM mode) is analog output-stage noise rather than any digital-domain errors or products of analog distortion. This likely arises more from deliberate design choices (such as component selection and circuit topologies) made for sonic reasons than from any inherent shortcomings or limits in the B100's components. — *Daniel Kumin*

home theater's surround sound rig. Using a 100-watt solid-state amp to drive fragile Quad electrostatic speakers might seem akin to mounting a V8 engine on Lance Armstrong's finely tuned racing bike. But I wanted to see if the B100 could match the resolution and transparency of the tube electronics I normally use in this system.

The B100's phono stage is promoted as being primarily for moving-magnet cartridges. But its very low noise floor, coupled with higher-than-average gain, means you can use even lowish-output moving-coil cartridges with good results, although its cartridge-loading setting remains fixed at 47k ohms.

I used the B100's digital input mainly with my Alesis Masterlink ML-9600 hard-disk recorder. This let me try the DAC board with several combinations of sampling rate and bit depth, and to compare them to the B100's own Cirrus Logic receiver chip, which upsamples lower-rate incoming digital signals to 96-kHz/24-bit resolution. I also used the B100 with the LPCM digital output of my Denon DVD player to create a neat 2.0 system for watching DVDs.



PERFORMANCE

Starting out listening with the Quads, the first thing that really grabbed my attention was the B100's ability to tighten up and extend the speakers' lower-octave reach. Its performance here actually prompted me to make adjustments to both the level and crossover settings on my HSU Research TN1220 subwoofer. Using John Eliot Gardiner's Deutsche Grammophon recording of Holst's *The Planets*, I was struck by the additional focus and bite in the lower strings and percussion. Rock music sounded equally impressive:

I have rarely heard Sly and Robbie's rhythm backing on Joe Cocker's classic *Sheffield Steel* album delivered with as much clarity and tightness as it was with the B100 plugged into my system.

While the Bryston's low-frequency prowess wasn't really unexpected, what did surprise me was how the B100's palpable transparency and focus extended right up into the midrange and treble. The sound, while less sensuous and enveloping than that of my Audio Note tube amplifier, was in no way less engaging, and in an absolute sense

was clearly more accurate. Coherency and midrange transparency are hallmarks of Quad ESL57 speakers, and with the Bryston driving them I encountered previously unheard nuances in the many recordings that I listened to.

Switching over to my Snell AIIIIs, I was better able to focus on the Bryston's power delivery and its handling of large-scale dynamics. When combined with the whip-crack snap of Steve Jordan's snare and Charlie Drayton's thundering bass, Keith Richards' powerful chords on his *Main Offender* album had me pinned against my seat. The Bryston also delivered a massive sense of space on this especially natural-sounding recording, along with fine focus.

Plumbing the B100 into my surround system, the amp essentially disappeared, blending seamlessly with the Halcro MC70 amp and SSP100 processor. While the 100-watt Bryston was clearly out-powered by the 350-watt-per-channel MC70, I never felt that there was any shortage of power or control, even during the amplifier-taxing "creaking pipes" scene from *The Haunting*.

BOTTOM LINE

Bryston products are designed for a very different customer than the typical audiophile — someone completely uninterested in the trendy-gear merry-go-round but with enough taste to appreciate the equipment's timeless quality. Like many of the best things in life, the B100 impresses by not drawing attention to itself. It is tonally neutral, dynamically superb, and functionally flawless. While this type of performance clearly doesn't come cheap, there are plenty of more expensive amplifiers from the "celebrity" brands du jour that I doubt would prove as satisfying over the long haul.

S&V

Key Features

- 100 watts per channel
- Home theater pass-through mode
- 20-year warranty
- Optional D/A converter
- Optional phono stage
- 19 x 4¾ x 16 in; 30 lb

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