



Bryston SP1.7/9B SST

A high-powered THX-certified surround processor/power amp combination from Canada, this macho heavyweight two-box package stands comparison with the very best in home cinema

Think North American audio companies and the chances are you're going to come up with the names of a handful of outfits based in the United States, either in the New York or New England areas of the East Coast or over in California, where the mighty Harman operation is headquartered. But there are audio companies north of the border in Canada, too: the API group is one of the largest speaker manufacturers in the world – as I discovered when I went there and made a total hash of building a pair of its OmniSats, taking about half an hour to do what the regular assembly staff manage in minutes – and then there's amplification manufacturer Bryston, based in the familiar-sounding Peterborough, Ontario.

Two things you need to know about Bryston: one is that all the company's products are hand-assembled; the other is that everything comes with a 20-year guarantee. And given that we're dealing here with a well-established company with over a quarter of a century of history behind it, and products widely used in the professional arena, it's kind of comforting that, should your amp go on the blink some time around 2020, you'll be able to get it

fixed under warranty. Not only that, but every unit the company makes gets a 100-hour run on the test bench after assembly, which means any component likely to fail prematurely is going to get spotted before it so much as goes in the box.

Bryston doesn't even dabble with the entry-level market: its least expensive stereo integrated amp will cost you £1775, while the processor and power amplifier on test here are £4725 and £4450 respectively. Expensive? Maybe – but then you are buying not just excellent performance but also two decades of peace of mind. And from where I sit, having an amp that will see me through at least to retirement age seems a pretty attractive prospect.

Unbox the SP1.7 processor and 9B SST power amp and what grabs you immediately is the build quality. These things have a 'hewn from solid' feel that's immensely reassuring, promising long-term reliability even before you read all the literature. The processor is a hefty 10kg unit – I know of some power amps that weigh less – while the THX-certified 9B SST power amp, at least in its 5x120w configuration, weighs 28kg. I mention that configuration matter as the device is built from discrete amplifier

Also available in silver: the black finish of the Brystons certainly looks pretty macho. If it's still not butch enough for you, alternative faceplates are available complete with rack-mounting slots for that real studio look

modules, allowing any configuration of up to five channels – a three-channel version of the amp is £3050, and a four-channel £3850. And for anyone thinking that 120w per channel isn't a lot, the test certificate supplied with the review unit – as with every Bryston product – shows that the amp will deliver 160w into an 8 ohm load before clipping, which should be more than enough for most needs. If not, you could go all the way up the Bryston range to the 14B SST power amp, which for £5850 will give you 2x600w. Three of those and a £3000 7B SST 600w monobloc might be a giggle.

For now, though, the 9B SST will be more than sufficient, with the extra channels required for 7.1-speaker configurations coming from anything from the company's £1700 2B SST to the £1900 3B SST provided as an add-on for this test. I have to say I stuck to 5.1-channel operation for most of the test period, having had fine results when using the SP1.7 with the PMC AML1 speakers (which also have Bryston amplification within) for last month's test, and I didn't miss the extra rear channel.

The SP1.7 has full DTS/Dolby Digital decoding into 5.1, 6.1 and 7.1 outputs, and also supports THX Surround EX decoding,