



Keeping it in the family

When I learned the fertile mind of James Tanner at Bryston was turning his interest towards turntables, I took notice immediately. Here was a manufacturer famed for their industrial strength amplifiers, those of the famed 20 year warranty, that had in recent years added a great sounding DAC to their line (which I reviewed in its first iteration back in 2011) and then surprised everyone by developing their own line of speakers. I reviewed a pair of those too, the Mini-T's, in 2014 and found that once again Bryston had managed to extend themselves into new areas with ease.



Still, even I was surprised when I read on AudioCircle that James was contemplating a new turntable to complete their offerings. Amps and preamps are one thing, DACs not too much of a stretch to my mind but speakers and then a turntable seemed really to push Bryston into new territory. I know I was not alone in asking if this was going too far for one company? I gather James heard that a lot from people, but undeterred he pressed on.

Be glad he did. The result is the BLP-1 turntable.

At its price the BLP-1 is priced for those who appreciate the Bryston brand's reputation for quality and sonic goodness. Still, this is not chump change and many potential customers may ask how does a company with no track record in this area go about producing a new turntable that warrants a \$4k price tag? Well, the answer here lies in a partnership with GoldNote of Italy, manufacturers of a range of high quality tables who build the BLP-1 for Bryson based on the

design choices James and colleagues consider most important. Nothing wrong with this, in fact it's actually an optimal solution from my perspective, ensuring a resulting product that allows James and colleagues to apply their design insights through an experienced company that has an established reputation and the necessary production facilities.

So what does your money buy you with this table?

In basic form this is a mass loaded, non-suspended, belt-driven table with an external power supply, a 35mm Delrin platter, and a hinged lid on a lightweight plinth with adjustable feet. Nothing terribly new there it would seem at first glance. The GoldNote tonearm and phono cable come pre-installed, just add your cartridge of choice, connect to your phono amp and away you go. So yes, it's a convenient, single stop solution, but that description does not really do justice to the thought that has gone into this turntable.

First, the bearing is an extreme tolerance hardened bronze custom built for this table. This provides the stability for the platter that is spun by a 12v pulse width modulation motor ensuring linearity. In combination with a fixed motor location on the plinth and assured belt tension, the table is designed to deliver consistent speed, a fundamental requirement for good sonics.

Second, the 300mm thick MDF plinth contains a series of cutouts near the center that help reduce the resonance that can be induced from the motor. This might seem like a pretty basic method but it works remarkably well. Turn on the motor, let the platter spin and put your finger on the underside of the plinth and you can hardly tell if the motor is running or not. For those of us who think only dense, heavy plinths dampen motor-induced vibration, this is an example of an alternative approach that works well. With the platter in place, you never see the cut-outs but they clearly serve their purpose well.

Third, this motion is all powered by a Bryson power supply that is reportedly one of the best you can use for delivering smooth energy to the motor. James suggests this power supply alone would sell for \$1000 as an option on another table and given the price of such products on the market, I don't dispute it. Put the power supply, the PWM motor, thick Delrin platter, and tight tolerance bronze bearing together in one package and you can start to see where your money goes. But wait, as the man says, there's more.

The table comes with a GoldNote tonearm, what appears to be a slight variant of their B7 model without the anti-skating mechanism, which I understand can be supplied if requested so let's not argue the merits or not of anti-skating here. Suffice to say I did not miss it. This is a 9" gimbal design with a titanium armtube and adjustable VTA. The dual counterweight design allows for a lot of flexibility with cartridge weight, and azimuth adjustment is made possible by loosening the collar near the fingerlift. A four pin DIN connection underneath allows for appropriate phono cable swaps (note that the more typical DIN phono connectors use a five pin design). This arm alone would supposedly retail for close to \$2000 (though I find the armtube somewhat unfinished looking for a tonearm in this price range) (The titanium tube is precisely machined on CNC lathes. If you are used to seeing the inexpensive painted tone arms or some old fashion polished stainless steel arm a machined arm can look unfinished

but the Bryston tonearm is a high quality machine part.)so when you add up what is on offer in the complete package, the price tag seems more like a bargain, at least by high end audio standards.

Set-up made easy

Unpacking and set-up of the BLP-1 is simplicity itself. Not since my days of spinning on a Rega 3 have I experienced such ease of installation. Primarily, but not exclusively, this results from the arm being pre-installed for you. Just open the box, remove some packing and you can place the table where it will operate without fuss. The lid too is already installed, the fussiest part being removal of shrink wrap that keeps it all safe in shipment. The initial comparison with the Rega is not entirely wrong. It's not just the comparative ease and simplicity of these tables, both designs eschew weight for rigidity. You might be forgiven when initially unpacking and lifting the BLP-1 for thinking that you spent all that money on a lightweight design in the worse sense but that thought won't last long in use.

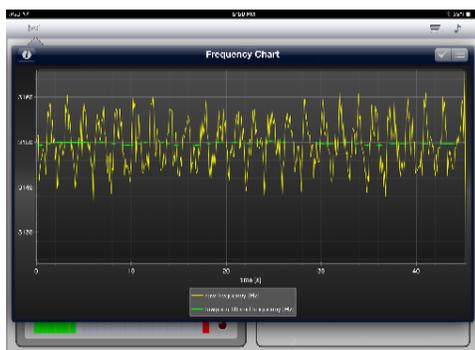
Despite the instructions, the spindle in my shipment needed to be assembled then screwed into the bearing before placing the platter on top. I assume the disconnect with the manual is a minor early production issue but it's relatively trivial. The belt slips easily on the mounted motor, and once you connect the power supply and speed controller, you've only got the cartridge to install.

Now, having installed cartridges on a variety of arms over the years, I do realize this process can sometimes prove challenging. However, I have to say, the arm on the Bryston, for a couple of reasons, renders this often awkward step about as easy as I've experienced. Both the open layout of the headshell area, coupled with the extra length provided on the flexible tonearm wires, create more than enough room for fingers and tweezers (if needed) to access the wires easily and maneuver everything into place cleanly without fuss. After years of contorting my fingers with short headshell wires in cramped areas, the cartridge installation on the GoldNote arm was a comparative delight. Over the course of the review I installed a cartridge four times on the arm and each time achieved everything barring height adjustment in under 10 mins.

Speaking of height, this is one aspect of the design that I don't care for too much. In principle it's simple enough, just loosen some screws in the arm base with the provided hex driver, adjust and re-tighten. But in reality, I found the loosening and tightening of three screws, equally spaced around the circumference of the base, to be a challenge for my hands. The innermost one offers little clearance for hand and hex tool without removing the platter, and once all screws are loose, the up and down travel is not as precise or repeatable as I've known with other arms. It works, and I presume it gets easier with practice, but you won't be performing on the fly adjustments of this parameter with the BLP-1.

The reputed cost of the motor and power supply that are at the heart of this table's momentum warranted checking, and while the table comes set up for speed, and seemed to run just fine from the box, I decided to put this to the test. As the manual explains, the owner can make fine

adjustments via the power supply control buttons and this proves quite easy in reality, involving first a double press of keys to get into adjustment mode, then using the 33 or the 45 to decrease or increase speed. Trust me, this is not hard to do and the results are worth it. A test via the Feickert speed app on my iPad in conjunction with a 3150hz test tone on the Acoustic Sounds test record allowed me to get the following speed trace:



Let me tell you, this is about the best speed test result I've ever measured, an almost ruler flat line that I achieved with only minor tweaks of the supplied setting. The data summary reports the table as delivering 3149.7hz with 0.02% deviation. Unless you have the hearing of a bat, this deviation from target will be imperceptible. If you need proof that the table is delivering engineering quality commensurate with price, this is it. If only all tables were as precise.

Music, maestro

I initially installed my reference Sumiko Pearwood Celebration II on the arm. This also had the advantage of giving me a known product with which to determine the sound of the table. I am inclined to imagine many people thinking the near \$3k Sumiko might be overkill for a \$4k table but don't be so sure. The Celebration II is a wonderfully musical cartridge that has a smooth, even hand with all genres and became my cartridge of choice once I installed it on an SME V. It's the sort of cartridge that I feel subtly demonstrates why one might pay a little extra for some sonic rewards and then not feel the urge to spend more.

Now the Celebration II never sounds like it's pushing music at you, it tends to envelope you in goodness, with suitably firm bass and a detailed but non-peaky upper frequency delivery. On the BLP-1 it spoke as I know it can, with the control, calm, and authority I've experienced when using it with the SME V on a 20/2 table. In fact, on the BLP-1, it seemed to lose little in comparison to my familiar rig. Detail, resolution, musical flow were all excellent, indicating to me that the BLP-1 provides the sort of platform for delivering analog sound that will allow expensive phono cartridges to shine. This matters to many audiophiles as it ensures a future for your purchase if you want to explore the qualities of upper-end cartridges come upgrade time. This table and arm will do them justice.

Later, and for most of this review period, I used a Charisma Audio modified Denon 103R, a wooden-bodied repotting of the venerable classic that Charisma sell for \$750. This proved a superb match, offering the big Denon sound that many people love but lacking little in terms of resolution and timbre that I love with the more refined Sumiko. It took about 10 hours to lose the initial slight sizzle, whereupon it consistently offered a firm, meaty sound with a little more bite on some tracks than the Sumiko, making it wonderful for rock and amplified jazz.

The first record I spun was Bucky Pizzarelli and Bud Freeman's *Buck and Bud*, a lovely recording of the guitarist and sax player with accompanying rhythm section on a set of swing standards. To hear the BLP-1 deliver the music here is to understand that visual impressions can be deceiving. The table is light in weight but it delivers a fully fleshed out, solid, big sound, with Freeman's sax gloriously soaring between the speakers. By the time you get to track three, Tea for Two, the unaccompanied pair take a speaker each, and weave around each other's lines to create a tangible presence in the room, with Bucky's guitar strings sounding remarkably real to my ears, with appropriate attack that sounds familiar to me from my own playing. At this point, I was already noting that the BLP-1 has got something good going on, and with a great cartridge it is capable of offering up top-notch sound.

Over the next few weeks I continued to enjoy this set up with only minor tweaks to arm and cartridge set up. Larry Coryell's wonderful cover of Miles Davis' All Blues on his *Monk, Trane and Me* album (1999, Highnote) is full of instrumental nuances and percussive texture, a propulsive, well-recorded drum sound leading the tune to resolution. The BLP-1 delivers this music appropriately, with the atmospheric space between instruments maintained even as the groove takes over. Coryell is a master guitarist who also surrounds himself with talent and on this recording everyone plays wonderfully but never indulgently, combining to create a joyous palette that honors the original tunes and composers.

Joan Armatrading's *Show Some Emotion* is an album I've owned for nearly 40 years (a frightening thought really) and it's followed me around the world as I've moved. If ever there was evidence that vinyl is robust, here's exhibit one for the defense. I've played this copy on multiple stereo systems, some not very good, and yet it continues to sound wonderful and I regularly use it to check set-up when installing a new cartridge. Get that thumb piano and voice right on 'Woncha come on home' and you know you're getting close. On the BLP-1 this album sounds as great as I know it can. Life oozes from the grooves, from funky bass lines to sharp, crisp acoustic guitar riffs and punchy percussion, all while Joan floats between the speakers with her young voice articulating lines of love, unfaithfulness and poor choices that tell stories older than her. Some guitar notes on Willow linger in space with a sense of location that seems to me more precise than I've noticed before.

John Martyn's '*Sweet Little Mystery*' is quite simply a beautiful song, hauntingly, achingly articulating a sense of longing for one's lover. OK, it sounds good to me everytime I hear it, on every system, and the BLP-1 is no different. What I hear with the Bryston is a tremendously full bodied sound that totally belies the apparently light form of the table's structure. Yes, I keep noting this but it's proof how influenced we are by sight. Martyn's achingly soft voice is alive in the room, allowing you to forget anything in your rig and to just concentrate on the mood evoked by the music, an experience I repeatedly enjoyed with this table. Reviewers often talk of a component just getting out of the way. I prefer to think of it as the gear delivering the music in all its glory into your space.

I've thrown a taste of everything at this table: jazz, rock, and classical. I've pored over the reproduction of strings, the lingering fade of piano decays, the sound of a singer breathing

words and the low gut punch of a kick drum. The value of the speed precision seems to my ears to matter most with transients and decay. On John Lee Hooker's *The Healer*, the title track's Latin percussion is so crisp and clean that you almost wonder if the drummer has been replaced by a machine. Lesser tables seem to smudge the snap of drumstick on skin ever so slightly in comparison. Similarly, Keith Jarrett's unaccompanied piano recordings, the piano fade is more present and unwavering, sounding more natural as a result. Small margins, but the best tables really help you immerse yourself in the music more. It's a cliché but no less true for all that.

My most played LPs of the last year has to be the wonderful MusicMatters Blue Note releases of classic jazz recordings that are given almost reverential treatment by Ron Rambach and the team. Among these, Kenny Burrell's *Midnight Blue* is good enough to have made me buy this old LP again, and the new version is my go-to copy for sonic enjoyment (not to mention the tactile and visual enjoyment provided by the great cover photos and sleeve quality). This is a recording I know intimately, having spent more than a few hours of my life trying to cop lines from Kenny. Unlike other records I own, I know this particular copy from playing it only on top-quality rigs like my SME 20 with V arm. It is not overstating the case to say that the BLP-1 lets me enjoy this album without feeling shortchanged in comparison. The Bryston offers the same warmth in the bass, the splash of the cymbals as the main groove of Chitlins con Carne kicks in, and the small details of Kenny's picking style that fellow guitarists note as him digging in a little harder on a middle string.

Value and values

I appreciate that some folks will believe that at \$4000, the BLP-1 really ought to be something special and that spending more (or even this much) on a 'record player' is a form of indulgence best left to the rich or slightly insane. I can't really contradict folks who feel this way, I've long since given up really explaining to doubters why I find a turntable to be such a good way to enjoy music or why it costs so much to get top quality analog sound compared to the price of consumer CD players. However, exposure to multiple analog rigs has taught me that the precision engineering needed to create a quiet, reliable, speed-stable, machine that reads groove modulations precisely really does not come cheap. More than any other component in an audio system, I understand that cost and sound quality do correlate positively (though not perfectly) with turntables.

With the Bryston BLP-1, I can recognize the value. This table delivers excellent sonics, it is easy to set-up, there is minimal maintenance involved in keeping it set up, the speed stability is world class, and the arm is good enough to house cartridges that would seem out of proportion with its cost. It also comes with a cover and a clamp, small details but items for which you often have to pay extra with other tables.

But I also recognize here the values of Bryston. This is a no-nonsense, no frills machine built for a singular purpose. The design is smartly thought out, the emphasis has been placed where it matters most and yes, while you could improve some small parts of the package (that clamp feels light, the arm tube looks to my eyes unfinished and slightly cheap for a table at this price

point), it's almost impossible to find serious fault with the sonics. Yeah, the Furutech clamp I use as a reference marginally improves sonics but it's a \$400 clamp, so it should.

James Tanner wanted to design a table that complemented the Bryston line and the risk in doing so was high. Bryston does electronics: amps, conditioners, even DACs, and has earned the respect of generations for audiophiles for their products' sonics, reliability and incredible warranted longevity. But analog front-ends emerge from a different niche world, one where the manufacturer is supposed to be primarily and maybe exclusively committed to this one audio component (think SME, VPI, Thorens), not an all-rounder that produces amps, cd players and speakers. That's obviously an over-simplification but audiophiles do have their own rigid expectations. If you're one of those who feel wed to the traditional brand structures, loosen up and give this table a listen, preferably in a system of matching quality.

To put it simply, if I were spending \$4000 now on an analog front end, the BLP-1 would be where I'd set the bar. There's plenty of competition from Rega, VPI, Pro-ject, all of which might catch the eye, but any serious alternative would need to sound exceptional to beat the Bryston. Add in the ease of set-up (no trivial matter given how some folks love to complicate the act into a form of mystery that only the initiated can solve) and, I'll say it again, the potential for cartridge upgrades, and here you have an investment in vinyl that will pay-off in the years ahead.

If you place a premium on music and a simple life, here's your table.

Patrick Dillon