DAN D'AGOSTINO PROGRESSION

PREAMPLIFIER & PROGRESSION STEREO POWER AMPLIFIER

Reviewer greg borrowman

Dan D'Agostino has gone over to the dark side! Yep, his new Progression Preamplifier and matching Progression Stereo Power amplifier are finished in lustrous, shiny black… plus the pre-amplifier actually has a 'Dark Mode'.

OK, so a silver finish is available as an option, and so is grey, plus custom finishes are available to special order, but once you've seen this pair (well actually not a pair, but a trio, because the preamplifier has a separate power supply) you wouldn't even consider the alternatives. (Though if Dan ever brings out one finished like his top-line Momentum amplifiers, we'd have to give that one some serious thought!)

A good part of what makes the black finish look so good is the copper-coloured trimming on both the Progression Preamplifier and the Stereo power amplifier, primarily the trim around the output meters — twin multi-purpose meters in the case of the preamplifier, and a complicated dual-needle power meter in the case of the Stereo power amplifier.

PROGRESSION PREAMPLIFIER

Dan D'Agostino's Progression preamplifier has one of the best-looking volume controls we have ever seen, thanks to its black surround and copper-coloured inlay. It's also one of the nicest we've ever

△ THE REMOTE CONTROL IS NOT YOUR 'STANDARD' DEVICE NOT ONLY BECAUSE OF ITS DESIGN AND SHAPE, BUT ALSO BECAUSE IT TRANSMITS CONTROL SIGNALS VIA BLUETOOTH, NOT INFRARED.

used, due to the fact that it's neither a 'standard' nor a 'motorised' potentiometer, but instead a rotary encoder that drives a stepped precision resistor ladder via high-linearity relays. Part of what makes it so nice, apart from its looks, its 'feel' under the fingers and its ability to make such high-precision adjustments in volume is that it's weighted so that if you want to decrease volume very rapidly, you can just flick it anti-clockwise, after which it will continue spinning until there's no sound coming from the speakers at all.

We weren't quite so keen on the ratchet sound the encoder makes when it's 'encoding' (once you've turned it full left, you can continue spinning the control left, but the 'clicking' sound ceases) with the sound reminding us of a chocolate wheel. But we came to appreciate the clicking because if you don't have any music playing through the speakers, you can both 'feel' (if your fingers are on the control) and hear from the volume control itself when it is completely counter-clockwise, so you can be sure that when you switch to another input (for example), you won't be served a sudden blast of sound through your speakers.

To the left of the volume control are the input selector buttons, which run, from left to right: Phono, Auxiliary, Theatre, Radio, Server and DAC. These selector buttons are surrounded by bezels which makes the 'touch' a bit vague, but there's a confirming central LED that glows to show the input has been correctly selected — red (Phono), blue (Aux), green (Theatre), red (Radio), blue (Server) and green (DAC). If you select the DAC input — assuming the optional DAC module has been installed! — additional LED tell-tales alongside show the active digital input.

The ability to install a DAC in one of its preamplifiers is a first for Dan D'Agostino — it's never been previously available on any Dan D'Agostino preamp. The newly-designed module adds coaxial, Toslink, and USB capabilities. It contains a fully-differential DAC that handles PCM (up to 24-bit/384kHz) and DSD (up to 4×/11.2MHz). Irrespective of whether you option it in at the time of purchase or add it later, the DAC module lists at $6895 (RRP).

The front panel also has a 'Zone' button that allows you to send music to one of two 'zones' or both. When playing Zone 1, a small green LED lights as a tell-tale, a red LED when playing Zone 2, and both LEDs illuminate when playing both zones. Curiously, although Dan D'Agostino labels them 'Zones' on the front panel, the Owners' Manual describes them as: '*independent outputs that can be individually operated or used simultaneously for driving a second amplifier in a subwoofer-based system*.'

So why not print Output 1/Output 2 on the front panel, rather than Zone 1/Zone 2?

If you were wondering about the seeming omission of a 'Mute' button in the Progression Preamplifier's arsenal, you will find one on the remote control. When the preamplifier is muted, the front panel meters indicate this by alternately pulsing their back-lights between showing green and green/white (the Zone button LED also flashes). The Owners' Manual says that: '*If the polarity of the preamplifier is inverted, the multi-function meters will alternate between white and red*,' — though we can't attest to this, because we didn't test this mode.

The two meters on the front panel of the Progression Preamplifier (which have a soft green illumination that's stronger at the base of the meters than it is up near the top) default to showing output voltage, though rather than showing output voltage *per se*, there are instead markings at 0, 25, 50, 75 and 100. The needle movement is fast but also nicely damped, so it's easy to read peak levels and also to estimate average levels, if you're so inclined. We'd rather ignore the meters entirely and instead adjust volume entirely by ear.

On most amplifiers which have meters on the front panel, the meters are really only there for show, but on the Progression, Dan D'Agostino has given them real purpose because in addition to the extra-curricular display functions noted in the previous paragraphs, they have other functions.

The first of these is that when you are adjusting the level of the volume control, the meter's action changes to show the volume level you have set. The second is that when you're

DAN D'AGOSTINO PROGRESSION

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adjusting the channel balance (only possible by using the remote control), the needles' operation changes to show the relative gain in each channel.

After you have finished adjusting volume or balance, the meters immediately revert to show output voltage.

So far as we can recall, this is the first time any designer has ever thought to use meters to perform all these functions, so we'll definitely have to put this down as a 'first' for Dan D'Agostino.

We thought the meters looked great, and the LEDs on the front panel are not intrusively bright. But if you'd prefer not to not see them at all, the Progression Preamplifier has what designer Dan D'Agostino calls a 'Dark Mode' that, if activated will, 15 seconds after you've touched a control, turn off the lights in the multi-function meters as well as all the front-panel LEDs. You can select (or deselect) this mode by holding the Standby button in for several seconds whilst the unit is in Standby Mode. If whilst in 'Dark Mode' you adjust a front panel control, the relevant LED will glow briefly and then switch off.

The design of the Progression Preamplifier's front panel is curious. The front panel itself is flat, but has a 'curve' at the top to meet the top surface. But rather than this curve being smooth and continuous, it's a series of 'flats' that are formed into a curve, so the curve feels quite granular under the fingers. (It's also a contrast to the other corners of the chassis, which are quite sharp.

Other than the Phono and Auxiliary line-level inputs, which are via unbalanced RCA sockets (and not gold-plated), all the other inputs are balanced XLR using gold-plated Neutrik fittings. There are so many of these — and they're so closely packed together — that from the rear it looks a bit like a piece of professional studio equipment... not that there's anything wrong with that!

The remote control (which we didn't get to use, as it was unavailable at the time of the review) is not your 'standard' device, as you can see from the photograph opposite. It's not only not standard because of its design and shape, but also because it transmits signals via Bluetooth (hence the reason for the antenna fitted to the rear panel of the Progression Preamplifier). This means that you don't

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need line-of-sight in order to use the remote, which could come in very handy in larger, more palatial homes (or wildly cluttered smaller ones).

The circuitry of the Dan D'Agostino Progression Preamplifier is discrete, fully-complementary and balanced from input to output, and negative feedback is not used, yet the circuit is so clean that Dan D'Agostino says its bandwidth extends beyond 100kHz, and that THD measures lower than 0.006%.

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PROGRESSION POWER SUPPLY

As stated in the introduction to this review, the Progression Preamplifier's power supply is contained within a completely separate chassis whose power supply circuitry is both electrically and magnetically shielded.

Incoming a.c. voltage is high-frequency filtered to remove radio frequency noise and Dan D'Agostino says additional conditioning circuitry is included to compensate for asymmetric mains power waveforms. The power supply has two d.c. outputs. One is for the Progression Preamplifier. The other has no purpose as yet, with Dan D'Agostino stating only that it has been included: '*to power future Progression source components*.'

The power supply is considerably smaller in all three dimensions — height, width and depth — than the Progression preamplifier itself. This introduces a 'visual disconnect' in that the two components don't seem to relate to each other at all, particularly if the power supply unit is placed underneath or on top of the preamplifier. We assume this is a deliberate tactic on Dan D'Agostino's part, to ensure that owners will place the power supply as far as possible from the preamplifier… which is of course the ideal location. If so, it's a very clever strategy, because the very worst place you can put any power supply is on top of — or underneath — the unit it's powering. To that end, maybe a slightly longer power cord might be nice: the one provided with our review unit was not overly long.

PROGRESSION STEREO AMPLIFIER

Dan D'Agostino's new Progression Stereo power amplifier is essentially a dual-channel version of his Progression Monobloc and like that monobloc, it uses what Dan D'Agostino likes to call his 'Super Rail' circuitry.

The various technical descriptions we've seen of the 'Super Rail' technology seem contradictory, with one describing the output stage as having a higher voltage rail than the input stage, and another describing the input stage has having a regulated high-voltage rail that's completely separated from the output stage's rail, so that in cases of overload, the input stage's performance remains the same, even when the output stage is starved of voltage.

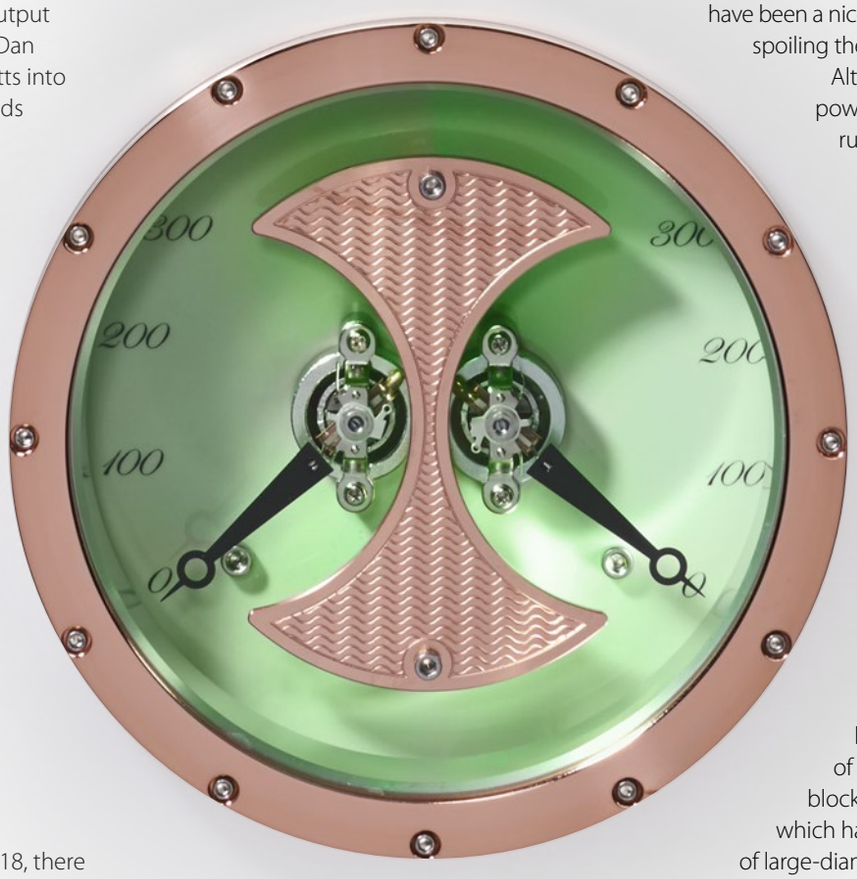
But whatever the Super Rail actually is, it is unlikely that the output of the Progression

amplifier could ever be starved of voltage, seeing that the power supply comprises a 3,000VA (nearly) 240V transformer and a capacitor bank with a storage capacity of 400,000µF. Nor are you ever likely to run out of power to drive your speakers — whatever they may be — because the output stage uses 24 bipolar output transistors per channel, which Dan D'Agostino says deliver 300 watts into 8Ω loads, 600 watts into 4Ω loads and 1200 watts into 2Ω loads.

In common with many high-power amplifiers, the Progression Stereo's output stage uses a bridged circuit topology to deliver this power (though Dan D'Agostino prefers to refer to this topology as being 'balanced' rather than 'bridged'). This represents a major difference between the Progression and Dan D'Agostino's top-line Momentum power amplifier, as the Momentum uses a standard (unbalanced) output stage despite being more powerful than the Progression Stereo.

As you can see from the photographs on pages 16 and 18, there are no controls at all on the front panel of the Progression Stereo power amplifier, just a very large circular power output meter (shown here) that has dual needles, of which the left-channel needle moves upwards first to the left then to the right with increasing output power, while the right-channel needle moves upwards first to the right and then to the left... which can make the two needles looks like they're dancing whilst ever music is playing, which makes for a very nice visual illusion.

The meter dials have calibration points marked 0, 100, 200 and 300. Although these are intended to indicate actual power output, they can only ever be an indication of the true power, as the meters will only ever be exact if your speakers have an impedance of precisely 8Ω ohms at every frequency — which they won't (though some planar magnetic speaker designs get close).



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Dan D'Agostino says the meter was: '*inspired by the elegant faces of classic Swiss watches*' and says the needle swing arms have '*high-speed ballistic circuitry that enhances their responsiveness*'.

Despite this, needles can never move fast enough to capture transients, so peak LEDs might have been a nice touch — though perhaps spoiling the steam-punk aesthetic.

Although the Progression Stereo power amplifier has heat-sinks running down each side of the chassis, they're not 'standard' heatsinks. This is at least partly because Dan D'Agostino is touchy about the heatsinks he used on his designs for Krell, which were renowned for being so sharp-edged they'd draw blood and rip clothing — even D'Agostino's own. "*I have a very expensive Canali suit with a big rip in it from a heatsink, and it can't be fixed*," he once told Jason Serinus.

So instead, the heatsinks down either side of the Progression are huge blocks of aluminium alloy into which have been drilled a number of large-diameter holes through the full thickness — a design Dan D'Agostino calls a 'Venturi-style' heatsink, as used on the Momentum Series power amplifiers. We doubt this design is as thermally efficient as conventional fins, but it's certainly more attractive, and definitely far more user-friendly — we didn't rip anything during our review, and they make for handy handles when lifting the amp. They also obviously also do the job, no matter how (in)efficient they may be, because our review amplifier ran barely warm to the touch despite being played for long periods of time at very loud levels in a swelteringly hot listening room (the triple-wammy of an Australian summer, a flat tin roof and no air-conditioning!).

The rear of the Progression Stereo is almost as bare as the front panel, with just a single pair of balanced inputs (via XLR terminals), a single pair of unbalanced inputs (via gold-plated RCA terminals), left- and right-channel loudspeaker posts, and a mains power switch.

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The balanced and unbalanced inputs cannot be connected simultaneously; you use only the one or the other of the pairs. There are also 12-volt trigger input/outputs so you can switch the amplifier off and on remotely, plus a small pushbutton that allows you to adjust the brightness of the front-panel meter (low, off, high). We were in no doubt that the Progression Stereo is a new model — the sample we auditioned bore the serial number PS0001P.

LISTENING SESSIONS

There is something quite glorious about the moment when you have just started playing a track that has a few moments of silence before the start of the music, and the volume of an amplifier is turned close to maximum and yet there's absolutely no noise from the speakers at all… not even a peep. Maybe it's the satisfaction that the amplifier's noise floor is so low that it can't possibly interfere with the music, no matter how quietly you're playing, or maybe it's just the anticipation of knowing something wonderful is soon about to launch. But when the launch pad is the once-heard-never-forgotten triple-note entry to Bach's famous *Toccata and Fugue in D minor* (BWV 565), followed by that equally famous six-note run, well those are the moments when the sheer audio quality of a hi-fi component is etched into your consciousness.

In this case, of course, it was the sound of the Dan D'agostino Progression pre-power combo that was indelibly etched on our auditory memories… and not least the broken chord that brings the theme back up the manual. The majesty of the Great Organ of Saint Eustache was brought to life in the listening room, from the room-shaking pedals to the sound of the multiple stops chosen by organist Jean Guillou to create a soundfield that Bach would no doubt have mightily approved. His own German organs did not compare with this modern French instrument, which has 101 stops and no fewer than 8000 pipes. *Magnifique!*

Despite the demands of the music and the volume level we were playing, the Progression pair didn't even raise a sweat, with absolutely no distortion on peaks (or at all, actually!) and the ability to convey the acoustic of the church not only in the longer moments but also in those 'space-between-the-notes' moments. And as for the slow decay of sound in the acoustic of the church…again, *trés magnifique!*

The way in which the D'Agostino Progression duo was able to reproduce the decay of sound in a live acoustic so realistically, without any feeling of the sound being stepped, and with the sound audible right into a silence that was the true acoustic silence of the venue — not a 'digital black' silence — had us reaching for a recording that allowed this superior performance to be examined more minutely: David Hyke's 'Hearing Solar Winds' (Ocora X558607)… co-incidentally also recorded in France. We were not disappointed… indeed we were even further enthused by this D'Agostino pair's performance. This album was recorded by Radio France in the dead of night at L'Abbaye du Thoronet, a 12th-century Cistercian monastery in Provence, and the atmospherics are truly ethereal, and thanks to Dan D'Agostino, the music becomes more than just music: it becomes a life-transforming experience, infusing one's soul with wonder.

That the D'Agostinos can also rock with the best of them was proved beyond any shadow of a doubt with a blast from the past in the shape of a selection of classics from Jethro Tull. The curious vocal presentations on 'Aqualung' are delivered with such precision we were lost in admiration. We have to confess that we'd totally forgotten there's a beautiful piano introduction to *Locomotive Breath*, but we did remember the stopped guitar sounds and the frenetic drumming and incessant bass... and of course Ian Anderson's iconic breathy flute, delivered with totally realistic breathiness by the D'Agostinos. With the volume maxxed out we were transported back in years to a smoky nightclub, listening to a live version. We'd also forgotten how prophetic Tull could be until the track *Too Old to Rock 'N' Roll: Too Young To Die*, started to play through the D'Agostinos. (Some of the acts that are touring these days would do well to add a cover version to their playlists.)

A problem that affects most commercial recordings is that they're compressed — via one method or another — which makes it easier for amplifiers — and loudspeakers — to reproduce their sound than would otherwise be the case. US musician Art Halperin was so annoyed by this that he created his own label (Soundkeeper Recordings) to make recordings that were not only completely free from compression, but also free from all engineering and production trickery: he simply puts all the musicians in a room and presses 'Record', a technique he calls '*recording without a net*' and the result is a sonic test for any system — particularly in high-res — yet playing Halperin's 'Winds of Change' it was easy to hear that this Progression duo was just taking it all in its stride — it sounded exactly as if all the musicians were in the room with us, complete with uncanny sonic effects, such as the tambourine really appearing to be at the back of the room. We did need to watch the playback levels, though, because Halperin has to record at a very low level to make sure he doesn't clip on peaks, which means that if you're not careful, it's very easy for a powerful amplifier like the Progression Stereo to overdrive the speakers on transients… so make sure your speakers can take the heat!

CONCLUSION

Dan D'Agostino has never been shy about charging what he thinks his products are worth, a tradition that extends right back to 1980, when he founded Krell and first gained a reputation for building the world's most expensive amplifier. But he's equally prepared to invest significant sums in purchasing only premium components to use in his products and also proud that all D'Agostino products are: '*100% built in the USA with all parts procured in the USA.*'

D'Agostino is also proud of the fact that the audio products he's designed and built rarely appear on the second-hand market and, when they do, command premium prices… sometimes exceeding the original purchase price.

None of which will make it any easier if you decide to join a very exclusive club by signing the cheque that will turn you into a proud D'Agostino owner… but at least you can rest assured that there's even more to his products than just high performance, superb sound quality and stunningly good looks!

SPECIFICATIONS

DAN D'AGOSTINO PROGRESSION PREAMPLIFIER

FREQUENCY BANDWIDTH: 0.1Hz to 1MHz (–3dB)
FREQUENCY RESPONSE: 20Hz to 80kHz (±0.5dB)
THD: <0.018%
S/N RATIO: –95dB unweighted
GAIN: 8/14dB (switchable)
STANDBY CONSUMPTION: <40W
ANALOG INPUTS:
4 stereo pairs of balanced XLR
2 stereo pairs of single-ended RCA
OUTPUTS:
2 stereo pairs of balanced XLR
CONTROL:
RS-232, 2 × 12V trigger outputs
FINISHES: Silver, Black, Custom.
DIMENSIONS–PRE (HWD):
108 × 45 × 300mm
DIMENSIONS–PSU (HWD):
75 × 275 × 200mm
WEIGHT: 18kg (inc. PSU)
WARRANTY: Five years
PRICE: $33,995
(add $6895 for DAC module)
CONTACT: Advance Audio Australia on 02 9561 0799
www.advanceaudio.com.au

DAN D'AGOSTINO PROGRESSION STEREO POWER AMPLIFIER

POWER OUTPUT:
300 watts/channel into 8Ω
600 watts/channel into 4Ω
1200 watts/Channel into 2Ω
FREQUENCY RESPONSE (1):
1Hz to 200kHz (–1dB)
20HZ TO 20KHZ (±0.1DB)
THD @ 1KHZ: 0.15% (at rated output)
S/N RATIO: 105dB unweighted
INPUTS: 2 × balanced XLR
INPUT IMPEDANCE: 100kΩ
OUTPUT IMPEDANCE: 0.15Ω
FINISH: Silver, Black, Custom
DIMENSIONS (WDH):
457 × 508 × 190mm
WEIGHT: 57kg
WARRANTY: Five years
PRICE: $33,995
CONTACT: Advance Audio Australia on 02 9561 0799
www.advanceaudio.com.au