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D'Agostino Momentum Stereo (£23,500)

One year on from *HFN's* exclusive review of D'Agostino's astonishing Momentum monoblock amplifier comes this stereo version with its dual-metered 'watchface'
Review: **Ken Kessler** Lab: **Paul Miller**

Whether it's a new camera, wristwatch, notebook computer, fountain pen or any other much-anticipated acquisition, one of its greatest joys is opening the box. It should be an 'Experience', with a capital 'E'. Dan D'Agostino 'gets' this, because even the container for his Momentum Stereo Power Amplifier is, well, downright cool: it's a wheeled, family suitcase-sized Pelican case, the same transit enclosure used by film crews to keep their cameras safe from airport luggage handlers.

We've been here before, last July to be precise, when we had the honour of the exclusive world scoop for the monoblocks, a review that anticipated its worldwide success. This time I learned that the initial thrill is repeatable: the precious cargo arrives cosseted in its shaped foam insert, complete with cut-outs for easy access by two pairs of hands. And you will need a friend to help you with the circa 40kg load. You'll want to get this up-and-running as soon as possible, without back injury.

What counters the overwhelming sense of *déjà vu* are three things. First is that only one unit has been delivered, telling you that, secondly, this is a stereo amplifier. The two sets of speaker binding posts on the back, the two XLR inputs and – at the front – a meter measuring the behaviour of two channels inform you that this may look like a Momentum, but it's two-in-one. The third? The review sample arrived in the new black finish, and it is nothing short of alluring.

Aesthetics first, then. I've now seen black D'Agostinos on three separate occasions, and every time, I have been

RIGHT: Rows of stepped venturis are drilled into the massive solid-copper side sections, cooling eight pairs of Sanken power transistors per channel. The main power transformer lies underneath the smaller toroid seen here

reminded of Dan's appreciation for wristwatch visuals. They inspired the original Momentum's dial, and the same stylistic conceit has been adapted to provide the metering for both channels in one dial.

RETROGRADE MOTION

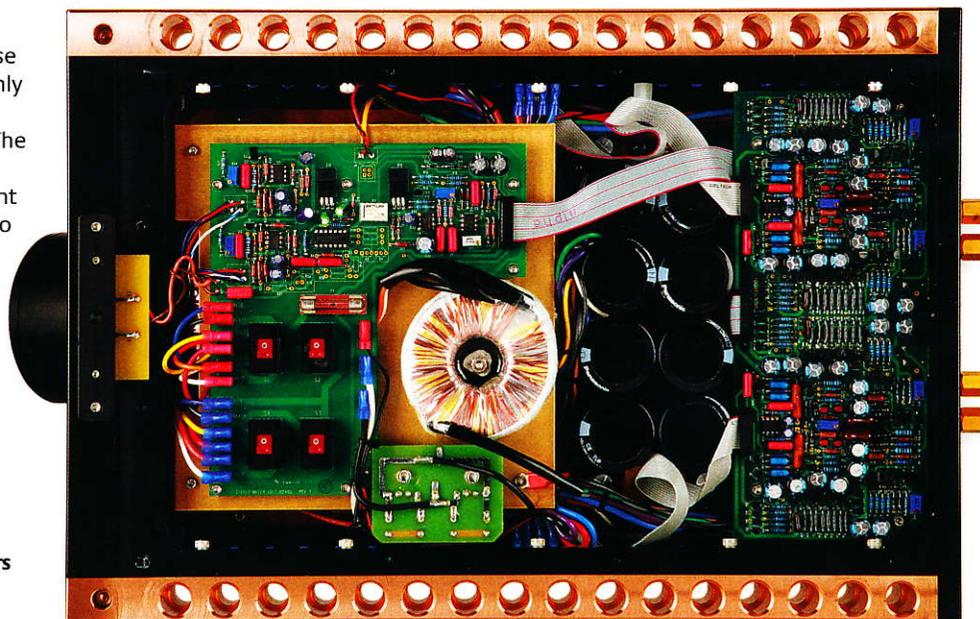
By following two vertical arcs, the needles replicate the activity of what are known in watch circles as 'retrograde hands'. These fly from zero to maximum and back, unlike conventional hands that complete a full circle. As all mechanical meters used for electronics complete an arc rather than a circle, this hi-fi/horology connection is natural, not forced. What's even more apt is that the exposed 'hub' for the meter even looks like a watch's balance.

While a silver version would have oozed familiarity, the black finish rewrites the rules: it simply looks better – to my eyes at least – than the silver colour, and the copper heatsinks and venturis running the

length of the chassis complement the black in precisely the same manner that a rose gold watch with a black dial is a standout among timepieces. An added visual treat is the copper visible through the slots in the top of the case. With all due respect to our amazing photographers, printed images don't quite do it justice.

Those venturis deal with the heat from the banks of output devices, but the unit never got as hot as the monoblocks. On a transatlantic call, Dan explained that the stereo uses '... *exactly* the same circuit as the monoblock. The only difference is that it employs fewer output devices, reducing the output from 300W/ch to 200W/ch.'

That's straight from Dan's mouth, and it explains why switching to the stereo version brought us *déjà vu*: they sound so close that the differences for other manufacturers would be equal to acceptable sample-to-sample variation among two of the same units popping consecutively off the assembly line.





Which made it both easy and tough to assess: 'easy' because I vividly recall the monos, but tough because they're almost too similar. Warily, then, I slipped it into the system using a variety of preamps – this only accepts balanced signals via XLRs – including the McIntosh C2200 and C22 Commemorative, fed by the Musical Fidelity kW25 transport/DAC and driving Wilson Sophia 3s. All wires were YTER.

There was nothing to address other than setting the meters to their higher sensitivity, because otherwise I wouldn't have known the amp was working: they barely moved, even when the levels approached the silly. This amplifier dispatches the Sophias with ease. In my situation, I can't imagine needing more power.

Switch-on is via a soft-touch control beneath the front edge of the unit, below the meter. I didn't even listen to it until it

'It's a Clydesdale that makes other amps seem like Shetland ponies'

had been on for three hours – not out of some form of journalistic hyper-integrity, but simply because I had other things to do – thus my first impression of the amplifier was in its warmed-up, burned-in state.

PALPABLE PRESENCE

A day later, switching on from cold revealed it to need mere minutes to deliver nearly all of its performance, with few sonic gains to be made after the first half-hour. Hence, you don't have to provide a day's warning before coming in for a demo. As *The Best Of Elvin Bishop* was in my player, I couldn't have chosen a better 'reveal', should poker terminology have any part in hi-fi assessment, of the Momentum Stereo's personality. This disc is heavily balanced toward funk elements, the sort of thing that makes PRAT ('pace, rhythm and timing') addicts swoon. The Stereo dug deep into the bowels of the

ABOVE: Dan's inspired-by-watches vision continues: the Stereo, needing two needles, mirrors what horologists call 'retrograde' hands – travelling in an arc, not a circle

Sophia 3s, making those woofers shake their respective booties in the most soulful, lusciously languid, almost salacious way, without ever sounding sloppy.

'Struttin' My Stuff' is the best example of this, with snappy bass, keyboards that have a harmonium's tinkle and crisp drumbeats. The Stereo separates the instruments into layers in front of the listener, as if to augment the left/right placement. It's almost 'enhanced 3D', but it serves to showcase every instrument. Lovers of vocals would delight in the interplay between the near-falsetto of Mickey Thomas and Elvin Bishop's growlier delivery, the amplifier balancing utterly disparate textures with the deftness of a Rothko.

Where the Stereo most recalled its split sibling is in its ability to convey *majesty* – of prime importance in rock as much as in orchestral. One minute and 57s into 'Fooled Around And Fell In Love', setting up the music for the positively stately lead break, is a drum fill across the soundstage with the sheer grandeur of a Kodo drum phrase. Here the Stereo behaved with such unassailable command that I kept asking myself, 'Who needs more?' Weight, power, palpable presence – the Stereo is the Clydesdale that makes other amps seem like Shetland ponies.

Then the soaring guitar work shows you how the Stereo can climb those frequencies, the attack so precise and the ascent so smooth that you forget you're listening to a CD. Bishop rips his heart ↻

D'AGOSTINO'S DIARY

Dan D'Agostino is surprisingly forthcoming about his plans for the future, with only one hint of intrigue. Although he had said he would stick with analogue, Dan has since told us, 'I have been "reconsidering" the design of DACs.' It's a statement pregnant with possibilities, though this is clearly not as much a priority as the arrival of three products to complete a basic D'Agostino amplification line-up. Already announced, though absolutely no timetable has been proffered, in order to preclude self-imposed deadlines and any possible disappointment caused by missing arbitrary ones, are a preamplifier, a phono stage (or amplifier) and an integrated amplifier. I suspect that is probably the order in which they will appear. What Dan couldn't resist saying, before terminating our call, is that, he 'may have a big surprise for us by the year's end.'

D'AGOSTINO STEREO (£23,500)



ABOVE: Balanced (XLR) inputs and screw-down speaker terminals. The close setting of the latter and surrounding metal casework means great care should be taken with bare speaker cable and/or 4mm spade adapters

out on this one, and the D'Agostino lets you know it. I wondered if the supplied gloves were for mopping sweat off the performer's brow.

As a laugh – and because I love the song to pieces – I fed it 'The Door Is Still Open' by The Cardinals. For the first time, I noticed how crisp is the snare positioned behind the vocalists on the mono doo-wop masterpiece. The Stereo provided a rich woodiness to the piano, the sax had that moist reediness that suggests real rather than recorded. It sounded so much like the Momentum monoblock that one has to accept Dan's statement that it is, for all intents and purposes, the same beast.

From the vocal histrionics of that track – we're talking Johnny Ray-type melodrama – to 'Johnny Ace Is Dead' on Dave Alvin's recent masterpiece, *Eleven Eleven*, meant only a change of bombast from acoustic to electric. There's a lot going on, with that kind of trashy drumming found only in Country & Western ensembles or juke joints, and vicious electric guitar that recalls Alvin's work with The Blasters. The Stereo proved as adept with this boozy swamp rock as with the delicacy of doo-wop.

ALL-ROUND COHERENCE

Presenting the sound as a wave (as in a surfeit of water such as surfers pray for), the Stereo exhibits wall-to-wall and floor-to-ceiling cohesion. Within that panorama, you can pick out every sound, and focus on it to your ears' content. This is an amplifier for the fastidious, but who also need (or simply crave) dynamic slam to temper the subtlety. It could, indeed, be all things to all men/women. And that's why I dug out something equally 'huge' but demanding absolute finesse.

Etta James' breathtaking cover of The Eagles' 'Take It To The Limit' graces that song with a gospel backing group, blues guitar, a grand piano in every sense of the word. It grows and swells to relentlessness,

and the Stereo grows with it, the lower registers and drum fills reminiscent of the Elvin Bishop track, subsumed by a huge chorus, Etta's voice front and centre. For any amp to do justice to her pipes, it's gotta have both power and clarity in abundance. The Stereo could have been made for her. As for the Temptations' 'The Way You Do The Things You Do', well – I ain't never heard the brass sound so shiny. It could be this amp's anthem.

Thanks to a number of causes, I'm in a 'perfect storm' of financial woe, which is a good thing: once the unit was collected, I didn't immediately start pining, dreaming of a Lotto win. Yet I would gladly live with the Momentum Stereo without letting my mind stray elsewhere. And I admit, in the most infantile manner possible, that the looks grabbed me almost as much as the sound, however heretical that may seem.

It is an astounding performer that also happens to be as 'wantable' as any I can recall, one that joins assorted Nagra's, WAVACs and Air Tights on my 'bucket list'. But – given how this proves how the Momentum monos are no fluke – I still wish that the D'Agostino amps were called '1st Dan', '2nd Dan', '3rd Dan' and so on, because, man, do they kick ass. ☺

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

At just over the price of one mono unit, the Stereo will prove to be a godsend for those who can't afford the pair. It seems absurd to call this 'a bargain', but in some systems, it may even be *preferable* to the monos. Combine sublime sound, a sense of unlimited power on tap and looks that beggar the term 'heart-stopping', and you have the most exciting and desirable solid-state amplifier on the planet.

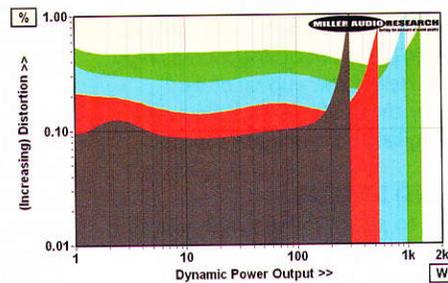
Sound Quality: 89%

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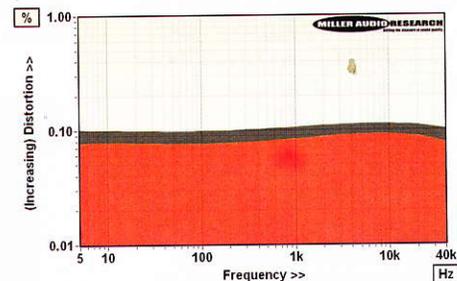
Unsurprisingly, perhaps, the 'Stereo' behaves exactly like a smaller sibling to the monoblock Momentum [HFN July '11]. Rated at 2x200W to the mono's 300W, the Stereo features a similarly well-regulated power supply and delivers far closer to 2x240W/8ohm with 2x390W/4ohm. Under dynamic conditions there's an appreciable uplift, its transient power improving to 300W, 550W, 970W and 1.3kW into 8, 4, 2 and 1ohm loads, respectively [see Graph 1, below]. So while the Stereo lacks the full beef of the parent monoblock, it's no slouch and will surely tackle the most demanding loudspeakers with relative ease.

Like the Momentum, the Stereo also incurs a moderate but very consistent level of distortion of ~0.1% from 1W to 200W and across a very wide 5Hz to 40kHz frequency bandwidth [see Graph 2, below]. Distortion increases with decreasing load impedance [Graph 1] but, once again, the trend is largely unvarying right up until the point of clipping. Along with its prodigious power output, this 'uniformity' is key to the Stereo's sound quality. And, despite the amplifier's moderate 0.3ohm output impedance it also maintains a very flat (-0.1dB/20kHz) response without further loss into the lowest impedance loads – just like the Momentum monos.

The Stereo is slightly 'quieter' than the monoblocks we tested last year, the former offering a wide 90dB A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dB). Performance is about 5dB poorer on the left channel here, possibly due to the proximity of the mains inlet, but this will not be audible. Readers are invited to view a comprehensive QC Suite test report for D'Agostino's Momentum Stereo amplifier by navigating to www.hifinews.co.uk and clicking on the red 'download' button. PM



ABOVE: Dynamic power output versus distortion into 8ohm (black trace), 4ohm (red), 2ohm (blue) and 1ohm (green) speaker loads. Excellent load tolerance



ABOVE: Distortion versus extended frequency from 5Hz-40kHz at 10W/8ohm (black, left; red, right)

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Power output (<1% THD, 8/4ohm)	240W / 390W
Dynamic power (<1% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)	300W / 550W / 970W / 1.3kW
Output impedance (20Hz-20kHz)	0.28-0.29ohm
Frequency response (20Hz-100kHz)	+0.0dB to -1.9dB
Input sensitivity (for 0dBW/200W)	174mV / 2470mV (balanced)
A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBW/200W)	90.8dB / 113.8dB
Distortion (20Hz-20kHz, 10W/8ohm)	0.07-0.10%
Power consumption (Idle/Rated o/p)	99W/690W
Dimensions (WHD)	318x109x470mm