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Issue No. 522

January 2025

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► DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
D'Agostino Relentless 800

**ORIGIN**  
USA

**TYPE**  
Monoblock power amplifier

**WEIGHT**  
145kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
549 x 264 x 660mm

**FEATURES**

- Quoted power output: 800W (8ohm)
- Balanced XLR input

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Absolute Sounds

**WEBSITE**  
dagostinoinc.com  
absolutesounds.com

# Heavier than heaven itself

The hi-fi world's most powerful amplifier – the aptly named Relentless – has spawned two new offspring, but the 'baby brother' of the duo still weighs in at 145kg apiece

**L**ame analogies – both banal and obvious – tend to spring to mind when you're directed to review an amplifier which offers a little over half the power of its predecessor. One thinks of cars powered by engines of half the horsepower of a more expensive sibling, of second growth wines and other half-pint offerings. But the D'Agostino Relentless 800 Mono Amplifier – a heady £236,000 per pair – delivers the wattage that provides its model name: 800W per chassis. And that is conservative. The original Relentless monoblock – CEO Dan D'Agostino's "dream of an

amplifier without limits" – is now superseded by two siblings, the massive Relentless Epic 1600 and 'baby sister' Relentless 800 (with no Epic in its name), seen here. Let's get the physically daunting stuff out of the way first...

### Take the strain

Each Epic 1600 monoblock weighs 258kg, the 800 a marginally more manageable 145kg. Lucky owners will welcome a team of beefy schleppers when receiving either. Once in situ, you will not be moving them around in a hurry. Halving the power may have halved the weight,

but you still need two spaces on the listening room floor to accommodate each of the 800's 549 x 264 x 660mm (WxHxD), which is a limited saving over the 1600's deeper, wider and taller 572 x 280 x 826mm.

Available in a choice of silver, black or custom finishes, with a distinctive copper trim, the Relentless 800 dominates the view in front of the listener almost as much as would any loudspeaker. This is not a discreet little block of chocolate like a Meridian amplifier of yore, nor a Quad 303 the size of a loaf of sourdough. The Breguet watch dial-inspired meter, a D'Agostino

signature, glows a comforting green but its 'time-keeping' is less accurate... As its moon-tipped needle swings past the midday position the amp is delivering a little under 20W/8ohm, not the indicated 800W.

It will deliver this sort of power, of course, but by then the needle will be hard right and your speakers firmly in the red zone. Truth is, such is the power of the Relentless 800, if the metering were accurate then you'd barely see the needle twitch!

Once installed, these are about as set-and-forget as any good amplifier comes. The sides of each chassis are

**The presentation is as close to absolutely 'real' as anything is ever likely to get**

channelled for convection-style cooling, while the top is suitably vented to keep the heat at bay – so thankfully no egg-frying safety issues emerge in our testing sessions.

Wander around the back and the unit reaffirms Dan D'Agostino's insistence on robust connectivity suitable for a powerhouse. Inputs are on balanced XLR only, while the solid copper speaker terminals are designed for spade lugs, not 4mm bananas. A toggle at the rear turns on the power, while a soft-touch button under the fascia – another D'Agostino hallmark – switches on the units from standby. As this might inconvenience some users, the back panel also has 12V trigger sockets for system-sync'd switch on. Lastly there's an industrial-strength 30A locking connector for



At a cool quarter million per stereo set and a 'real world' power output that's as close to 1kW/8ohm and 2kW/4ohm as makes no difference, the Relentless 800 has precious few peers outside of D'Agostino's own range. Its ability to drive the toughest of speakers is reflected in its 8kW/90A dynamic capacity. The larger 'mainstream' amps, including Hegel's H600, the Michi X3 S2 and Musical Fidelity Nu-Vista 800.2, have maximum current capabilities between 40-50A, so doubling this current clearly comes at a massive cost! But if a wallet-busting, back-breaking amp is a must then try the Apex Monos, rated at a modest 225W/8ohm, from Gryphon Audio at £195,000 a set or check out the new Constellation Statement monos (EPOA!) when they finally arrive...



the AC mains – another touch which tells you that Relentless models are built with the robustness of your average Sherman Fury. In short, wusses need not apply.

Devising a half-power (or thereabouts) version of the 1,500W original was not simply a case of reducing the number of active devices or the capacity of the power supply for D'Agostino. In practice, the development of its MxV amplifiers affected the entire range, with 'trickle-up' technology transitioning the original Relentless Mono amp into both 800 and Epic 1600 siblings.

Having compared differently rated models from the US manufacturer in

the past, we know that they are voiced so closely to each other as to be instantly recognisable as 'D'Agostino', which is precisely as it should be within any family of audio components. You wouldn't expect, say, two loudspeakers from the same brand to sound wildly dissimilar. And the same goes for power amplifiers.

### Sound quality

The progression of the 'D'Agostino sound' over 40-plus years preoccupies our thinking while listening to the Relentless 800, through the same Wilson Alexia Vs that we last heard the original Relentless. Older readers will know that Dan was one of the





fiercest champions of Class A operation when founding Krell back in 1980. He hates distortion, but here it's as if he's also reassessed elements of timbre presentation at the frequency extremes. What follows is what we think he's achieved.

Although we have a long history of hearing a combined D'Agostino/Wilson Audio/Transparent audio chain, there are still some surprises in store and they run parallel to the evolution of Wilson speakers under the aegis of Daryl Wilson. Dan D'Agostino has discovered sweet, almost romantic top ends. Which makes the name 'Relentless' somewhat ironic as aggression plays no part whatsoever in this amp's behaviour.

### Step back in time

At the same time, the bottom octaves are by some degree more lifelike than we have heard from a solid-state amplifier since those circa-Eighties big Krells. Just as the previous two generations of Wilson speakers have traded hyper-forensic detail for more seductive upper registers and the bass is warmer and more airy, so, too, do these observations apply to the Relentless 800.

It might be a mono track, but The Dave Clark Five's *Glad All Over* via the remastered version on *All The Hits* exploits bass, maximum levels and transient attack – bass and treble transients. Like a Buddy Rich or Ginger Baker performance, it's engineered to give the drums prominence and through the D'Agostino behemoth becomes a Spectorian wall of sound. Our listening takes place on a ground floor



with no basement nor cavity below, yet the floor still shakes like crazy.

Each slam of the bass notes is so visceral that you can easily understand how subsonic bass can be used as a lethal weapon. It's so loud that, had

### Once in situ, there's no chance that you will be moving these monoblocks around

we not possessed a concern for the welfare of the loudspeakers – although we are assured they can take it – we might have reached our very own threshold of pain.

Despite this barrage – relentless by name but not by nature – at no time

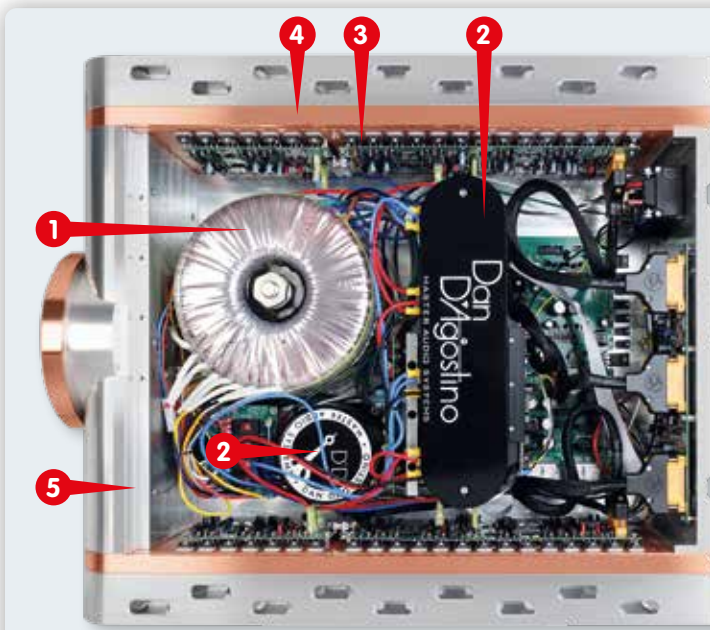
**The massive speaker cable binding posts are joined by a single balanced XLR in**

is there any harshness, nor a single whiff of clipping, constraint nor compression audible. Meanwhile, the non-percussive instruments – especially Denis Payton's saxophone – enjoy uncanny positioning. Don't forget: this is a mono recording, yet there's so much depth and such plentiful air around each player that (as with the best systems) the single-channel, dead-centre positioning – instead of room-filling stereo – hardly seems much of a sacrifice. It is, in a word: huge.

Happy as we are to spend the rest of the day headbanging, we want to hear what this sledgehammer of an amplifier can do with something that requires a touch more delicacy and finesse. Juice Newton's *Greatest Hits (And More)* can sound strident on



**The stunning casework comes in a choice of silver or black finishes**



- 1 A pair of stacked 1,320VA toroidal transformers
- 2 Four 100,000uF/100V reservoir electrolytics
- 3 Each side of the amplifier is one half of the 'bridged' output, comprising 42 pairs of transistors per chassis
- 4 The chassis is fashioned from CNC-machined slabs of alloy and copper
- 5 Solid copper plate forms the backbone of the amplifier's heatsinking

**TAKING THE HEAT**

The latest circuit revisions to have worked their way into the MxV and, now, the Relentless amplifiers not only include the use of identical/symmetrical On Semi transistors in both the (high voltage) driver and main power output stages, but also a general relaxation in corrective feedback – courtesy of these stages' generally improved linearity.

This has been achieved without compromising overall bandwidth – the response is broadly unchanged – but juggled alongside a slight increase in odd-order distortion from, for example, 0.0015% in the Relentless to 0.021%

in the Relentless 800 at 1kHz/10W/8ohm, as well as an increase in output impedance from 0.04-0.06ohm to the 800's 0.07-0.1ohm (all 20Hz-20kHz).

Reduced feedback is also reflected in its thermal tracking, so where the Relentless' distortion decreased from 0.006%/1kHz/10W (cold) to 0.0035% over an hour and then 0.0015% as the amplifier slowly warmed from 20°C to 45°C, the 800's THD increases with temperature from 0.011% (cold) to 0.017% over the first 30mins and then to 0.019% once its thermal latency is almost entirely resolved (~40°C) after a few hours.

some systems, as the bulk was recorded during the Eighties when digital was still inherently edgy and studio techniques favoured treble tweaking. But better DACs and players over the years have proved otherwise, so her crystal-clear vocals remain a yardstick to challenge even Linda Ronstadt.

Here the Relentless 800 gives a first glimpse of the revolution in the D'Agostino sound. Without yielding any of the transparency or detail retrieval, the sound on *Break It To Me Gently* exhibits – as its title demands – a gentility that would be too easy to liken to the artificial euphony of fat tubes. The only reason we aren't shocked by this is because we have been listening regularly to the MxV-updated Momentum 250 Stereo, so are aware that in contrast to the meaning of the Relentless name, the power amplifier is actually forgiving of the recording's less savoury traits.

In the same collection is a track we have long used for its unbelievable

attack, and it's one that begs the unleashing of the system. Newton's version of *Queen Of Hearts* has snappy redneck bass, stereo guitars crossing left and right, clapping and all manner of activity going on. Above all of this are twin-vocalist harmonies in the best country-pop manner. What could sound tonally like nothing more than glorified AM radio acquires what we can only describe as 'humanity'. We've played this song many, many times, but never heard it with such scale, cohesion or – crucially – freedom from any digital artefacts.

Another useful vocalist to utilise in tests such as these is Mickey Thomas, particularly his take on Squeeze's *Tempted*. When it comes to clarity and absence of textures (as opposed to those where the textures are the voice), Thomas has a wide range like Juice Newton, so it's valuable hearing the openness of the midband to discern the nuances. At a level that would have an exhibitor thrown out of a hi-fi show, each subtle voicing is

conveyed with the kind of in-the-room veracity that makes the hairs on your arms and neck stand up.

For the obverse of these two clear-voiced warblers, we turn to Ozzy Osbourne and his dark but masterful *Under Cover*, which exhibits exquisitely instinctive taste in his choice of versions of rock classics. Listening to his cover of Mountain's *Mississippi Queen* with its originator Leslie West providing a ferocious lead guitar break, Ozzy's rasp vividly demonstrates that the 800 is not even remotely saccharine, despite

**The name 'Relentless' is somewhat ironic as aggression plays no part in its behaviour**

the experience telling us that it sounds as sweet as any massive solid-state amp we have ever heard – including the 'original' Relentless.

Now we're properly in the groove and longing for more, so out comes a vinyl copy of *Led Zeppelin II* with the famed Bob Ludwig cut. Within 10 seconds of the universally famous *Whole Lotta Love*, cranked up to 11, we get to experience a rare audiophile epiphany. The mass, the slam, the scale, the presence: it is about as close to absolutely 'real' as anything is ever likely to get.

**Conclusion**

"Speechless" is not a word often applied to HFC, but after hearing Bonham's drumming at realistic levels, some 3m from the speakers, we're really grasping for superlatives. For sheer force and authority, the sibling Relentless 800 bears such similarity with the original Relentless monoblocks that we're at a loss to justify needing more juice. Suffice it to say, Dan has done it again. This amplifier is an absolute titan ●

**Hi-Fi Choice**

**OUR VERDICT**

**SOUND QUALITY** ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Looks, sheer force and authority

**VALUE FOR MONEY** ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Price, obviously. Nothing else except maybe the weight

**BUILD QUALITY** ★★★★★ **WE SAY:** A titan

**FEATURES** ★★★★★

**OVERALL**

★★★★★