

D'Agostino Progression Mono

The Progression Monoblock is the largest and most powerful amplifier that D'Agostino Master Audio Systems has made to date, but it's not the costliest...

Review: **José Victor Henriques** Lab: **Paul Miller**

Dan D'Agostino's original Momentum amplifiers, now style icons in their own right, had barely touched the ground before audiophiles began demanding something bigger, something even more powerful... Thus the original Momentum [HFN Jul '11] eventually grew into the Momentum Mono [HFN Oct '16] which, in turn, inspired the more affordable Progression Mono we have here.

Says D'Agostino 'this is the largest and most powerful amp we've made to date, delivering 500W/8ohm, doubling to 1000W/4ohm and doubling again to 2000W/2ohm'. Editor PM discusses this in his Lab report on p35. The watchface power meter is larger too, now with a 90° swing and driven by a 'high-speed ballistic circuit that enhances the meter's responsiveness'. *Eppur si muove* – unlike the needle on the Momentum series, which seemed to barely move.

The venturi heatsinks are now milled from a single 22kg aluminium billet, rather than the more expensive copper used for the Momentum, and with larger diameter cooling tube openings better adapted to the needs of a Class A/B mono amplifier output circuit. The Progression also 'borrows the circuitry greatly from the Momentum flagship and the audio signal path throughout is discrete, balanced, and direct coupled' (the Progression offers balanced inputs only). This much you can learn from the brochure while PM uncovers more in our boxout [p33].

D'AGOSTINO'S BEST EVER?

Listening to the Progression was a walk down memory lane, although wisdom has it that you should never return to a place where you've been happy. Now I am longing not for yesterday, but for a near future where the Progression will play as an important role in my audiophile

RIGHT: Powered by a massive 1400VA linear PSU, the balanced/bridged output stage employs no fewer than 12 pairs of high-current transistors per side (48 devices per monoblock)

life as did Dan's Krell KSA100 MkII in the past. In hindsight, after listening to the Progression, I now consider the Krell's sound to have been perhaps a tad dark, almost 'humid', with a creamy midrange, slightly reticent and hazy highs, and a powerful, propulsive, expansive bass that made each listening session an arresting physical experience. A psychedelic musical 'trip' some would say. I would describe it as a cleansing of the soul.

Dan's designs evolved – might I say progressed? – and over the years, with the introduction of 'Plateau-Biasing', the sound of Krell amplifiers became airier, clearer, more transparent, better resolved and faster, while maintaining their power, wallop and grunt. Listening to the Momentum I was

reminded of Krell's 'old soul', only now in an amp dressed in new attire. Yet I still longed for the sheer energy that was part and parcel of the Krell sound.

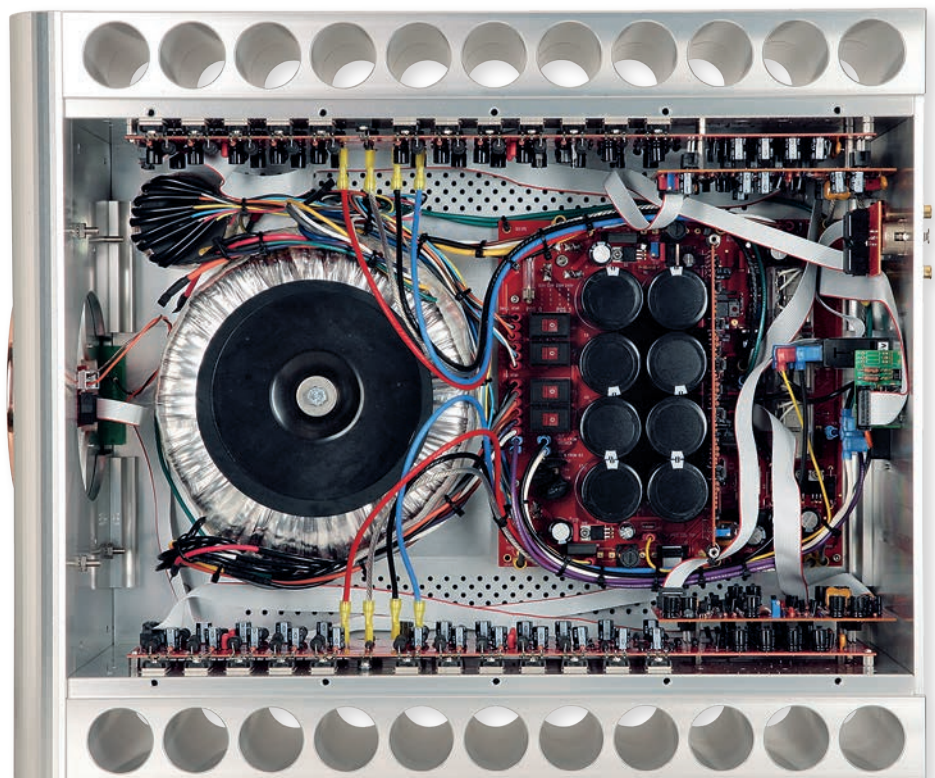
BEAUTY AND THE BEAST

This is no longer the case thanks to the Progression, a disciple that surpasses the 'master' in more than one way, but especially when it comes to power.

Dan likes his stuff big and mean – and beautiful. Unlike the Momentum, the Progression is just the right size and at least as beautiful, if not more so

for they look better balanced aesthetically. Mine were the pure breed black stallions, which cost extra to cover for the cost of anodising. The power-on button is

*'It has '90s Krell
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with Momentum
grace and finesse'*





concealed on the underside of a fascia that is clean save for the company logo and the huge Swiss-clock like meter. On the back you'll find just an XLR plug for balanced input, a single pair of multi-way speaker cable posts, the mains socket and a 12V trigger input/output for connection with other D'Agostino devices.

UNFLAPPABLE CONTROL

The Progression Monos were driven by a Momentum preamp [HFN Nov '13], with music sourced from a dCS Rossini DAC. All cabling was by Transparent. My first experience with the monoblocks saw them happily driving a pair of Wilson Audio's Alexx loudspeakers [HFN Nov '16] while a second encounter was no less impressive, as they partnered Martin Logan Neolith hybrid floorstanders [HFN Jul '16]. If I had thought the Neoliths to be bass heavy

and sonically detached, due to a conflict between their dynamic drivers and electrostatic panels, then the Progression disproved my assumptions on both counts. In fact, via this amp the sound was greater than the sum of the speaker's parts.

The Progression Monos do not keep loudspeakers on a tight leash but simply provide a steady hand that allows them to breathe and the music to flow unhindered, giving the listener a feeling of unflappable control and uniformity over the entire audio band – even at live concert levels. It's like driving a car with a high-torque V12 engine up a winding mountain road, absolutely confident you'll arrive safely, no matter what dynamic obstacles, tonal curves or intricate harmonic content you may encounter on your way to the top.

And the proverbial 'stop-and-go' is also there. All the Krell grunt and wallop of

ABOVE: The classic 'D'Agostino' chassis shape is retained, albeit hewn entirely from aluminium, while copper now features only around the face of the huge, green-illuminated power meter

yesteryear with today's Momentum grace and finesse. The Momentum can boast higher resolution while revealing even the finest threads intertwining the musical fabric, and it is no slouch either when it comes to macro dynamics and fine nuance. But there's no substitute for sheer power.

The Progression Mono renders the complete mix in a single cohesive piece, lifting it with ease into the 'air' around you, yet managing to keep intact the delicate temporal and spatial relationships between the dynamic, tonal and harmonic elements of the music. What's more, the dimensions of the recording venue – whether an intimate jazz club or a concert hall – are recreated faithfully. Whether it's the cozy, almost cossetting setting of *Mary Stallings, Live At The Village Vanguard* [Maxjazz Vocal Series – MXJ112] or the atmospheric *Belafonte At Carnegie Hall* [Classic Compact Discs – LSOCD 6006] venues are painted with appropriate size, acoustic cues and, above all, unwavering solidity.

TECHNICAL PERFECTION

It was time to indulge myself with a 'soundscape journey' comparing Pavarotti, Carreras, Domingo and Kaufmann singing 'E lucevan le Stelle' from Puccini's *Tosca*, courtesy of Tidal. Pavarotti delivers the technical perfection and power of a '90s Krell while Carreras lights up the darkness of paths with the warm glow of passion like a KT150-tubed ARC GS150. ➔

THE SUPER RAIL

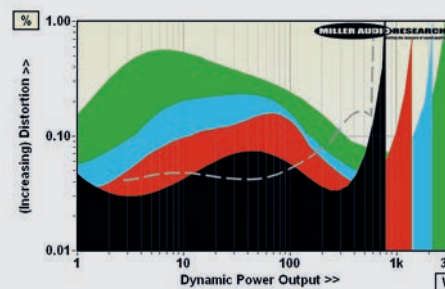
Achieving high power outputs into a moderate 8 or 4ohm is as much about delivering a high voltage across the load (70V for >600W/8ohm) as supplying the current to support it, which is why most amplifier manufacturers opt for a bridged-mode output configuration. This is the case here where designer Dan D'Agostino has implemented one 'negative-going' and one 'positive-going' Momentum-style bipolar output stage as a bridged pair, per mono chassis. The PSU voltage rails feeding the pre/driver (voltage) stage of the amplifier have been beefed-up accordingly – the essence of the so-called 'Super Rail'.

But the Progression is not the most powerful bridged monoblock we've tested. Musical Fidelity's Titan [HFN May '10], based on the Tri-Vista kW power amp [HFN Aug '03], matched the kW with massive power outputs of 1050W and 1996W into 8/4ohm loads and recorded a near-perfect doubling of 1060W to 2100W to 4100W into 8 then 4 and 2ohm loads under dynamic conditions. The 2kW PSU transformer limited the Titan to 5896W/1ohm (76.8A) while the behemoth Tri-Vista kW went on to achieve 8820W/0.8ohm or over 100A... PM

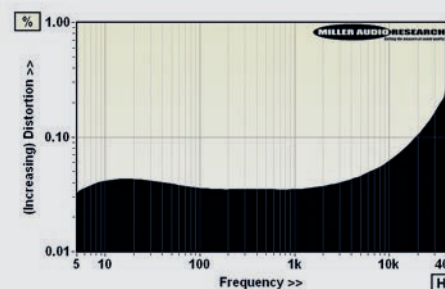
D'AGOSTINO PROGRESSION MONO

So is the Progression Mono really the most powerful D'Agostino amp to date? Whatever their specification, the Momentum Mono offered 430W/810W into 8/4ohm and 475W, 940W, 1775W and 3010W into 8, 4, 2 and 1ohm loads under dynamic conditions [HFN Oct '16] while this Progression Mono delivered 640W/1000W into 8/4ohm with 800W, 1420W, 2200W and 2990W into 8, 4, 2 and 1ohm loads under dynamic conditions [see Graph 1, below]. So while the Progression offers more volts, and thus more power, into 'everyday' loudspeaker loads both this amplifier and the Momentum are current-limited to 55A so their tolerance of extremely tough loads is broadly similar. In practice, either amplifier will conquer any loudspeaker likely to cross its path without raising a sweat.

Interestingly, the manner in which distortion increases through the 10-100W range with reducing load impedance (from 0.07%/8ohm, 0.15%/4ohm, 0.25%/2ohm and 0.55%/1ohm) is more pronounced under dynamic than steady-state output conditions [dashed grey trace, Graph 1]. This difference is less obvious via the Momentum and at least partly informs the bridged Progression's 'character'. This, along with its higher 0.4ohm source impedance, slightly poorer A-wtd S/N ratio (86dB vs. 89dB re. 0dBW) and mildly higher distortion which increases from 0.02%/1W to 0.045% from 5W to 50W up to 0.17% at the rated 500W (distortion also increases at HF to 0.1%/20kHz/10W). These figures are well enough below the typical distortion levels of most loudspeakers to limit their impact, but they do illustrate the trade-off(s) of single-ended versus bridged operation of D'Agostino's 'Momentum' multi-transistor output stage [see Opinion, p103]. PM



ABOVE: Continuous power (dashed grey trace) and dynamic power output vs. THD into 8ohm (black), 4ohm (red), 2ohm (blue) and 1ohm (green) loads



ABOVE: Distortion versus extended frequency (from 5Hz-40kHz) at 10W output into 8ohm

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Power output (<1% THD, 8/4ohm)	640W / 1000W
Dynamic power (<1% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)	800W / 1.4kW / 2.2kW / 3.0kW
Output impedance (20Hz-20kHz)	0.41-0.43ohm
Freq. response (20Hz-20kHz/100kHz)	+0.0dB to -0.05dB/-1.0dB
Input sensitivity (for 0dBW/500W)	93mV / 2085mV (balanced in)
A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBW/500W)	85.8dB / 112.8dB
Distortion (20Hz-20kHz re. 10W/8ohm)	0.035-0.010%
Power consumption (Idle/Rated. o/p)	83W / 910W (4W standby)
Dimensions (WHD) / Weight	445x228x584mm / 56.7kg



ABOVE: A single balanced (XLR) input is joined by 12V trigger ports, a miniature toggle to set the meter brightness and 4mm terminals to serve the speaker output

As for Domingo, he shares with the Momentum a velvety and mature voice, and the unmatched dramatic artistry of his insightful reading of musical content. And Kaufmann? Like the Progression, he has it all: the weight and sonority of an 'Heldentenor' with a strong low-end register like that of a baritone – a gorgeously dark middle voice and a tenor's ability to hit true highs. The transitions – thrills and all – from forté to piano and *pianissimo* left me dumbstruck. Likewise, the purity of timbre and the unique tonal nuances of his room-filling power.

NO SOUND HIDDEN

Driven to explore my CD collection further, I stumbled upon treasures I used to play to death with my Krell amps back in the 1990s, from titles released by the GRP label to those from Sheffield Labs, among others. Some were limited editions, now very valuable, which used special recording and mastering techniques with names such as the 'Zeonex CD' and the 'First Generation Direct Master CD' of vocalist Claudia Gomez's *Salamandra* [Clarity Recordings CCD-1002], or 'Ultradisc I' (made in Japan) and II (made in USA) of Supertramp's *Crime Of The Century* [MFSL UCDC-505].

I thought it would be interesting to find out how they had 'aged' and how they would withstand the scrutiny of a modern high-quality system. Supertramp's complex and dynamic studio mixes are perfect for testing the resolving power of an amplifier and the Progression left no sound 'hidden in a shell'. Neither did it conceal the fact that both 'Ultradiscs' sounded clean, transparent and exciting but bright, the Japanese version maybe less so.

Salamandra was a different story: Claudia Gomez playing acoustic

guitar and singing 'Cancion' with Rebecca Mauleon, who also plays Cuban claves as a hypnotic rhythmic backbone to the beautiful Pablo Milanês melody, is inherently sweet, enchanting and mesmerising. Via the Progression the track sounded positively spooky, such was the feeling of real presence. It was recorded live to just two mics and you could tell exactly where each singer sat as they played.

Claudia sings in Portuguese with a perfect Brazilian accent in 'Aquele Um' and 'Saudações'. Never had I detected a fault in her accent. Until now. The Progression sold her out. She's a native of Colombia not Brazil. But she could have fooled me...

Finally, it was time for the Progression to work its magic on Jacques Brel singing 'Les Marquises' then Bob Marley wondering 'Is This Love', courtesy of a Blu-ray 'Pure Audio' demo sampler [Universal 373 947-8]. 'Ça va Monsieur Brel?' I wanted to ask the Belgian singer, as his voice flooded the room. Then 'Hi, Bob, nice to see you again!'. As I said, so realistic is this amp's rendition of music, it's spooky... ☹

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

The Progression Mono is the best 'Watt per pound' design from Dan D'Agostino. It embodies the past, present and future of his philosophy of keeping the listener engrossed in the music and glued to the chair. The Progression boasts dynamic power, wallop and control while maintaining the smoothness, high resolution, and finesse defined by the Momentum Series. By Jove, Dan has done it again, only better!

Sound Quality: 90%

