

Dan D'Agostino Master Audio Systems Progression Stereo Amplifier and Preamplifier

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I know somewhere, deep in my heart, that the physical appearance and style of a preamp and amplifier should not matter—only the sound. So let me begin this review by admitting that I approach the review of D'Agostino's Progression-series electronics with an element of extraneous aesthetic prejudice. I am more than happy to live with the serious side of audio design: Bauhaus or "form follows function" styling. (My own reference system looks as if it were styled as a result of a search for the front panel with the most controls, the effort to create the world's largest front-panel meter, and more recently the world's most complex and unreadable digital display.)

After decades of reviewing, however, I find that Dan D'Agostino's willingness to add a touch of whimsy to the look of every component goes a long way. The D'Agostino Progression preamplifier and stereo power amp may not have the full-scale Baroque touches of the company's Momentum and Relentless series—particularly the MOMA-like Lifestyle amplifier—but they do have enough styling to mix dignity with actual fun. Their colored meter lighting alone invites you to actually enjoy the music rather than simply to respect it.

Fortunately, the pleasures of the Progression preamplifier and stereo amplifier go well beyond the visual. They are true audio originals in terms of superior sound quality—something they should be at a price of \$22,000 for the preamp (\$26,500 with the optional DAC), and \$22,000 for the power amplifier. Happily, they more than justify the money. They may not be the top of the D'Agostino line, but they provide exceptional life, dynamic detail, and apparent power, and it is hard to believe that any serious audiophile would not have even more fun listening to them than looking at them.



Features and Technology

The features of the Progression preamplifier and stereo amplifier are pretty straightforward. The basic preamp is an analog line-level stereo unit with two sets of RCA inputs, four sets of XLR inputs, and two sets of XLR outputs that can be operated separately or used with a subwoofer. The preamp has a slightly unusual Bluetooth remote that's easy to use and has a lot more range and ability than an IR control.

Aside from that, the preamp has a minimum of front-panel switches, some useful indicator lights, and two large level-meters that actually perform a function if you use them to adjust volume or balance. There is a slim, shielded separate power supply, which fits under the control unit and does not require its own shelf space, but delivers the kind of power that top preamps need.

One key feature is that the preamp has an optional DAC that fits into its back and has coaxial, TosLink, and USB inputs. D'Agostino states that it is a fully differential DAC that handles PCM signals up to 24-bit/384kHz and DSD signals up to 4x DSD (11.2MHz). It can be added later or delivered fitted into the preamp. There are also some useful set-up options for Roon, JRiver, Windows computers, and streaming services. (Mac setup is

automatic; Windows machines require downloading a driver.) Be aware that the DAC is designed for dealer installation, and the set-up instructions are basic. A bit of expert help can be useful.

As for the preamp's circuit topology, both the analog and digital modules feed a discrete, fully complementary, balanced analog signal path from input to output. Negative feedback is not used anywhere in the preamp, but open-loop distortion is less than 0.02% and the open loop bandwidth exceeds 75kHz.

The power amplifier is, well, a power amplifier. Aside from a large front-panel meter, with some fun color options, it has no special controls. The only practical feature I'd flag is that the amp has XLR inputs only, but few audiophiles today are going to use RCA cables in any case. Like all good power amps, you put it in place, hook it up, turn it on, and forget about it, although you will want to run a mini-cable between the preamp's 12V trigger output and the power amp's trigger input so that the amplifier turns on automatically with your preamp.

This is not just an ordinary power amp, however. When D'Agostino uses the word "power," he is not kidding. The Progression stereo power amp is a 125-pound unit that can deliver 300 watts into 8 ohms and 600 watts into 4 ohms. Its gee-whiz technical features include 42 output transistors, a nearly 3000VA power-supply transformer, and 400,000 microfarads of power-supply storage capacitance, and it can optionally be hooked up to a 240V AC socket.

It also has some truly innovative circuitry to help provide its power and dynamic life. D'Agostino describes this "SuperRail" circuitry as follows: "Every amplifier employs a voltage rail—actually two—a positive one and its companion negative partner. Voltage rails support the delivery of power to the speaker. The music signal swings between these two rails but due to natural loss, the musical signal never reaches the output rails' full capability. Borrowing the idea of a turbo in a car engine, the unique SuperRail circuitry employs higher-voltage rails in the sections prior to the output stage. This voltage 'boost' allows the musical signal to exploit the full capability of the output voltage rails and maximize the performance of the output circuitry itself. The results are improved dynamics, lower distortion, and a fierce grip of the speaker."

I'll leave the hyperbole about a fierce grip to the copywriter. I didn't see the amplifier try to grab a speaker, a passerby, a small child, or a pet during my entire review period. As I'll discuss shortly, however, I would agree with D'Agostino that the amp has exceptionally clean sound and great dynamics.

If you do want a bit more adventurous styling, check with your dealer about cabinet and meter color options for the preamp and amplifier. It isn't quite clear at this writing what all the options are, but it does seem that you can have a bit of fun or choose more "serious" colors.

Finally, like most high-end manufacturers, D'Agostino now puts the instruction manuals for the preamp and power amp on its website, and both are good sources of additional data on features and technology.

The Challenge of Synergy

Before I plunge into the sound quality of the Progression duo, I should make some points about the practical problems in evaluating today's best electronics. The more I review today's finest preamps and amps, the more I hear levels of improvement that make the differences in the sonic nuances between them more matters of taste than clearer matters of superior sound quality.

Quite frankly, when I compare how the level of coloration or nuances in top-quality preamps and amplifiers interact with the much higher colorations in other elements of a system—particularly the colorations inflicted by the speaker and the listening room—the more I find that today's best preamps and amplifiers have nuances that only add a subtle additional level of coloration—one that needs time and patience to characterize.

The problem this presents for both the reviewer and the audiophile is twofold. First, no reviewer can ever predict the extent to which there will be a positive synergy between a given preamp and amplifier and the rest of another audiophile's system. Every experienced audiophile knows, however, that such synergy does make a difference when it is based on the strengths of components, rather than on an attempt to somehow use one set of colorations to correct those in another component. This is why I strongly advise any reader to listen for himself and—to the extent possible—audition a preamp or amplifier using as many of the other components in his own system as possible.

Second, when colorations are this low, I find myself becoming more and more careful about assuming that there is any one standard of musical "truth" to listen for. Harry Pearson—my mentor in reviewing—used to stress that listening to live music was the key reference standard, but he did so spending most of his time listening in one city and in a narrow range of halls.



I do most of my live music listening overseas. Part of my real job is to travel to parts of Europe and the Far East where there are plenty of concerts or live musical performances, but little entertainment in English. You can't go from hall to hall and venue to venue in places like Prague, Berlin, Venice, Tokyo, and Beijing without becoming all too aware that the sound of live acoustic music has different nuances from place-to-place, or even from seating position-to-seating position.

Moreover, regardless of where you listen to live music, you become aware in listening to recorded music that some of the worst colorations occur in the recording rather than in the playback system. For all of the talk about digital versus analog, some of the worst colorations occur in the microphone.

Beyond that, placement of the mike and the musicians, choice of hall, the particular approach to selecting and tuning instruments—and the rest of the nuances and colorations in every aspect of the recording process—do as much to color the sound as any aspect of a really good home-stereo system and listening room, and sometimes this seems to be particularly true of recordings of great performances. It is one of the great ironies of the high end that the best equipment sometimes reveals more of these defects than mediocre components do.

The Sound of the Progression Preamp and Stereo Amplifier

That said, I have no problems in praising the two D'Agostino components under review. I compared the sound of the Progression preamp/DAC and stereo amplifier to two other sets of DACs, preamps, and amplifiers in my reference system through three pairs of speakers. I also took advantage of some obsessive audiophile friends to move the Progression preamp (easy) and stereo amplifier (hard) to two different systems and listening rooms outside my house.

In spite of all the issues I just mentioned, I heard the same sonic strengths from the Progression preamp and amplifier in every case. As I noted earlier, these included exceptional life, dynamic detail, and apparent power. Both Progression components did have a slight bit more midrange liveliness and detail than usual, and just a touch of added energy in the upper midrange. The end result was to make the low-level details of strings and woodwinds exceptional, and to do so without any added hardening of violin or brass timbre. Low-level guitar detail and soft, simple piano passages were unusually clear, as were the low-level details of male and female voices.

There was no blurring or loss of detail at higher levels of musical dynamics, even with relatively inefficient speakers and moderately loud preamp gain settings—where volume control sound quality issues sometimes appear. Orchestral and choral musical details and soundstage characteristics were limited by the recording, the speaker, or the room rather than by the electronics. Music that is nearly impossible to record—like Mahler's Eighth or Saint-Saëns' Third Symphony—came through as clearly as my recordings permitted. Operatic voices and demanding female popular music opened up and became more involving.

As might be expected, soundstage width and imaging were excellent. Depth was not quite as good, but was still very good, and few recordings have realistic enough depth to make this a real-world issue. Going back to power and dynamics, amplifier power ratings are often hard to tie to actual sound quality, but the power amp's rating of 300 watts into 8 ohms and 600 watts into 4 ohms was matched at every level of apparent power. Dynamics were exceptionally defined and tight from the lowest to the highest levels I care to listen to.

The power amp had outstanding control over a range of speakers, including some that had problems with really deep bass transients. As is the case with most really good electronics, this may lead you to think you hear a bit less upper midbass when you first begin to listen, but you then become aware that this kind of power and control is providing more and better defined low bass and more bass detail. If you are into natural bass sound, rather than simply making the room move, you'll appreciate the difference.

The Progressions' virtues also came with a minimum of coloration in other areas. One key test of a preamp and amplifier is that they transparently pass along the rest of the system's colorations. You cannot compensate for the coloration of any component in your system with some form of counter-coloration. You give up at least as much in sound quality as you can possibly get back, and the right solution has to be to replace the most-colored component first. In the case of the Progression preamp and amp, they were good enough so that all the relatively minor colorations in my cartridges, DACs, reference phono preamps, and cables came through with minimal change, as did the colorations in my reference speakers—but so did all their sonic strengths.

I was also impressed by the sound quality of the optional DAC in the preamp. No DAC is perfect, any more than any phono preamp or cartridge is, but the Progression DAC was very clean, and worked very well with both my digital transports and a Roon-based server. It also became clear that there are real advantages to a built-in DAC. Its nuances can be voiced to match the analog sound of the preamp as closely as possible, and the analog stages of every external DAC that I tried had a slightly different voicing from the Progression preamp.

Like all of the better DACs I've reviewed recently, the optional DAC for the Progression preamp did a better job of reproducing regular CDs—and 16-bit/44.1kHz recordings and streaming—than did previous generations of DACs. There is still a case for real 24-bit/48kHz and DSD recordings. However, I could hear little or no case for some of the so-called "high-resolution" recordings that simply transfer analog or 16-bit/44.1kHz originals into higher bit and sampling rates.

Summing Up

Both the Progression preamp and amplifier should work well in any system than does not have a hard upper midrange or excessive upper-midrange energy. I have to confess, however, that these are my particular *bêtes noires* in terms of musical coloration, and I wouldn't want to own a system with such front-end components or speakers in the first place. Any system that sounds worse when you improve the preamp and amplifier—particularly in the cases of upper string, brass, and woodwind music—isn't high end. It's a form of audio torture.

I've been listening to D'Agostino products since the earliest days of Krell—so far back that I can even remember the link between "Krell," *Forbidden Planet*, and Altair IV. What I can't remember is ever hearing any product associated with Dan D'Agostino failing to be at least competitive with the best, and finding most to be exceptional. The sound quality of the Progression preamplifier and stereo power amp are exceptional, as well.

Specs & Pricing

Progression Preamp

Distortion: <0.018% THD+N, 20Hz to 20kHz

Signal-to-noise ratio: >95dB, unweighted

Gain:+9.8 or +15.4dB, switchable

Analog inputs:Four pairs balanced XLR stereo, two pairs single-ended RCA stereo

Digital inputs (w/DAC module installed):One (each)USB A type, optical TosLink, SPDIF coaxial

Outputs: Twopairs balanced XLR stereo

Dimensions:18" x 4.3" x 12"

Weight (with power supply):40 lbs.

Price: \$22,00 (\$26,500 with DAC module)

Progression Stereo Power Amplifier

Power output:300Wpc into 8 ohms, 600Wpc into 4 ohms, 1200Wpc into 2 ohms

Frequency response: 1Hz to 200kHz, -1dB

Distortion: 0.15% @ 1kHz (500W 8 ohms)

Signal-to-noise ratio: 105dB, unweighted

Inputs:Two balanced XLR

Dimensions:20" x 18" x 7.5"

Weight:125 lbs.

Price: \$22,000