

D'Agostino Progression Integrated

By extreme high-end standards, it's almost an 'entry level' product – so is Dan D'Agostino's Progression Integrated amplifier the perfect introduction to the brand?
 Review: **Ken Kessler Lab: Paul Miller**

After nearly four decades' worth of using Dan D'Agostino's designs, from Krells in the 1980s through to his more recent, eponymous models (I use a Momentum Stereo as my solid-state reference and love it to bits), I thought I knew what to expect. Silly me: surprise No 1 provided by the D'Agostino Progression Integrated was that I could lift it without any assistance. Surprise No 2 was a price under £20k.

To the Progression Integrated's £18,500 – for either the silver finish seen here or the black anodised alternative – one can add a digital board at £5500 and an MC phono board for £2250. Even with both, this is still a long way from the £54k for the Momentum Integrated [HFN Dec '14]. By these elevated norms, then, the Progression Integrated's cost is hardly a shocker.

SITTING PRETTY

Like all of its siblings, the Progression Integrated is impressive to behold, with a finish to match the costlier models, but the Progression range is less in-your-face. Indeed, it may be the prettiest, most discreet control product yet from D'Agostino, because it's clean, if not quite minimalist – something power amp stylists have over preamp and integrated amp designers, who must accommodate buttons, knobs and switches.

I'd say it looks 'purposeful', but that implies the brutality of function over form. In the Progression Integrated, the fascia's design balances both, with looks and ergonomics in perfect equilibrium. Restrained or not, this amp will impress your hi-fi-lovin' buddies, especially when lit up, glowing with blues, greens and reds.

RIGHT: One large Keen Ocean toroidal transformer [left] feeds separately regulated supplies for the preamp [daughter boards, top/bottom rear] and main power amp boards bolted to the combination heatsinks/sidecheeks



By retaining certain signature details which adorn nearly all D'Agostino models, there will be no mistaking it for any other maker's wares. Despite such familial touches, it has a freshness which distinguishes it from the instantly-recognisable Momentum models. There are, for example, no massive, solid-copper, girder-like heatsinks to add a sense of both purpose and bling, but you do get the Breguet timepiece-inspired meters on the right-hand section of the front panel. These serve multiple roles, indicating signal level, volume and balance settings.

Still with the genetic markers, the centre of the fascia is dominated by a massive rotary volume control; its copper trim one of the few concessions to visual adornment. A freely-rotating attenuator,

it offers stepwise increments but does not shoot up or down in level if spun too quickly [see PM's Lab Report, p43].

Further delighting the senses, the bank of buttons delivers a tactile thrill, accompanied by a colour-coded light show to indicate which source is selected, mute engaged, standby and other functions.

WELL BALANCED

Hard-core audiophiles less concerned with styling, however, will be more impressed by the back panel. Dan D makes no bones about preferring balanced operation, so the inputs marked 'theater', 'radio', 'server' and 'DAC', as well as the preamp output, are all on balanced XLR sockets.

When fitted, the phono board takes over one of the unit's two sets of single-ended



RCA-type sockets, the other remaining line level-only for non-balanced, legacy sources. I fed the phono stage with the output of the AVID Reference Ruby [see p68] and TechDAS TDC01 Ti [HFN Sep '14] moving-coil cartridges. Note that the switches for changing the phono board settings are to be found inside the amp, which necessitates removing no fewer than 19 screws...

Also on the back panel [see pic, p43] are the headphone socket, multi-way speaker terminals, RS-232 control port, 12V triggers and IEC mains inlet while the forthcoming DAC module adds digital coaxial, optical, Ethernet, Wi-Fi antenna and USB-B connections. (The option included here was pre-production and not tested.)

At this point, though, I must state that I was mainly interested in the unit's line-level performance, both single-ended and balanced, because I can control and depend on the sources. Hence my feeding

of the review sample with assorted CD players and DACs, and two phono stages to compare with the phono board.

SIMPLY IRRESISTIBLE

Although the main speakers used for this review were Wilson Audio Sasha DAWs [HFN Mar '19], I couldn't resist listening to the Progression Integrated through the diminutive Falcon Acoustics LS3/5As [HFN Jan '19]. I was almost afraid to hook them up to this amplifier, because their power handling is – how do I put this? – their Achilles' Heel. Fortunately,

the amp's rotary has a lot of travel when you adjust the levels for a precise setting, so I didn't sacrifice tweeters or woofers.

And I am glad I tried this unlikely pairing, because the Falcons sang when fed from the Progression Integrated. The first track I played was the 12in single of Aretha Franklin's 'Respect' [Atlantic 5046727630], wanting to hear a song I knew intimately,

'With Sasha DAWs I cranked it up. Oh, does this amp rock!'

LEARNING CURVE

Everything that designer Dan has absorbed during his most recent, post-Krell, Momentum/Progression 'journey' is packed into this compact but weighty chassis. The wired/wireless network audio board [far right, pic p40] is informed by the previous MLife integrated [HFN Apr '17], although the Cypress Wi-Fi/Bluetooth remote interface is separated here [green logic board, above the transformer, pic p40]. The optional network/digital audio solution can only be navigated via the legacy iPhone, iPad and iPod touch app (iOS 7.0 or later) developed for the MLife, but there is still currently no Android app on offer. So, for Apple affiliates, all that you need to operate the Progression Integrated's digital section is just a touch away, including input selection for optical, coax, USB and network, plus volume control, balance, mute, phase invert and standby. Everything else is pure tried-and-tested 'D'Agostino' including the relay-controlled stepwise volume [mounted on the rear panel, far right of pic p40]. Also familiar are the parallel complementary output devices (six pairs per channel), governed by the minimum negative feedback, and powered by a very substantial linear PSU – all of which has an imprint on the amplifier's technical, and subjective, performance [see Lab Report, p43]. PM

ABOVE: The Progression aesthetic is a subdued version of the Momentum series amps with their 'watchface' dials. Volume is governed by relay-switched attenuators while the meters offer a broad indication of signal level

which would exploit the LS3/5A's *raison d'être*: the reproduction of voice.

Here I made two instant discoveries. The first is that the phono stage is, in short, superb, and will prove irresistible to those who favour a warm, almost valve-y sound. The second is that the Progression Integrated tempers the usual D'Agostino traits of authoritarian, you-will-sit-still-and-behave presentation with a more relaxed feel. It's almost as if someone fed Dan a couple of Mogadons.

Not that 'Respect' is about dozing off. The impact of the sax solo, following Aretha's powerful pipes, was indicative of the amplifier's speed and power, even if the overall level-related thrills were by necessity reined in by a small two-way monitor that could never exploit this Progression's abundant wattage. Detail was exceptional, with nuances like the backing vocalists' 'Whoops' enjoying their own spaces behind the Queen of Soul.

ROCK GOD

Connecting the Wilson Sasha DAWs, I cranked it up. Oh, does this amp rock! Confusingly, however, it did so with an air of civility, which is not quite what you expect during moments of head-banging excess. I realise that those two qualities seem mutually exclusive, but not here. Ordinarily, 'politeness' is a compliment for, say, chamber music, but it's an affront for sweaty soul music, heavy metal or even disco. But the Progression Integrated amplifier does the D'Agostino shtick without ever seeming overpowering.

As my Otari MX5050 open-reel is balanced-output-only, it was perfect for listening to Chasing The Dragon's sampler

D'AGOSTINO PROGRESSION INT.



ABOVE: Fully loaded, the amp offers four balanced line ins on XLRs, one MC phono and a line in on RCAs. Antenna [left] is for the BT remote, the other for wireless Wi-Fi alongside Ethernet, USB-B, coaxial and optical digital ins. Outputs include 4mm speaker binding posts, one balanced pre out (on XLRs) and a 6.35mm headphone out

on 1/2-track, 15ips tape. This has no catalogue number, but the selection is mainly classical, including a superb version of Mouret's *Rondeau*, a brass performance that exploited the Progression Integrated's speed, attack and undeniably dazzling command of transients. The clarity alone was enough to endear this to veteran D'Agostino fans, but even more impressive were the openness and the soundstaging – specialties of the tape label.

FULL FAT

Because such tapes seem to make everything sound better than it should, I turned to CDs to counter any unfair advantages open-reel bestowed upon the Progression Integrated. *The Band* [Capitol/Universal UICY-40185] is one of those Ultimate HQ/MQA discs that you have to import from Japan at great cost, but they sound so good that they're hard to resist.

Via the Progression, Levon Helm's drumming sounded perfectly fat and thwack-y throughout, while the nasality of the vocals on 'Up On Cripple Creek' had a realism that almost matched the vinyl from the 50th anniversary reissue.

While the Momentum Stereo still offers a perceptible, added measure of control and extension, the Progression Integrated isn't far behind. It is, for so many reasons, arguably no less rewarding, in the

hoped-for manner of a less-expensive model relative to a dearer unit in a catalogue. Which is as it should be.

Running them side by side, the Progression Integrated's amplifier section is undoubtedly less bold, less forceful than the costlier Momentum Stereo. But the differences were so minute as to cause a bit of head scratching. I had to keep reminding myself of the Law of Diminishing Returns, acknowledging that the Progression customer is not the same as the Momentum client.

It was the subtlety of George Benson's guitar work on *The Other Side Of Abbey Road* [A&M Records 82839 3028 2] that showed how two amplifiers from the same designer can sound different, yet share common ground.

Sorry about this, folks, but an analogy from the world of wine best illustrates this: the Progression Integrated is to the Momentum what 'second growth' wines are to Premier Cru. For someone like me, who can't afford £800-a-bottle reds, there are, blessedly, plenty of astounding second growths. So, for you teetotalers: the Progression Integrated is to the Momentum what *Le Volte* is to *Ornellaia*. And that spells 'Bargain'. ☺

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

Like I said, put preconceptions to one side: I expected a brutal, commanding martinet of an amplifier, yet the D'Agostino Progression Integrated proved to be as listenable as my preferred valve alternatives. Free of fatigue-inducing nasties up top, and with rich and warm lower registers, it's a component that will win hearts as much for its jewel-like form as it will for the performance. A Momentum for the masses!

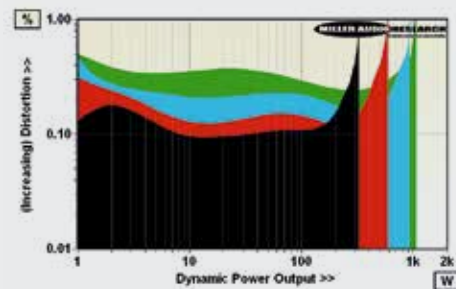
Sound Quality: 85%



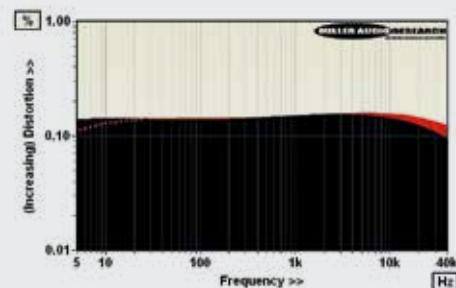
ABOVE: As supplied with the Progression preamp [HFN Apr '18], this chunky BT remote offers volume, balance, mute, polarity and (analogue) input selection

All amplifiers tested in *HFN* are subject to an accelerated (and fully automated) 30 minute burn-in – in this instance the hottest section of the Progression Integrated's heatsinks reached 50°C while the technical performance stabilised after ten minutes with distortion increasing from 0.10% to 0.19% (1kHz/10W/8ohm). Under likely listening conditions the heatsinks will run cooler and distortion will settle closer to 0.15% – a figure maintained very broadly with both frequency and output level over the amplifier's 200W/8ohm rated range [see Graph 2, below]. So while distortion is not especially low, with extended 3rd/5th/7th odd-order harmonics, it is impressively consistent (unchanging) with both volume and content. This is partly a feature of the limited feedback applied, as is the moderate 0.33ohm output impedance, and gently rolled-off treble reaching -0.75dB/20kHz and -8.2dB/100kHz.

The stepwise volume control operates in ±0.5dB steps over the top 33dB of its range, then ±1dB over the next 17dB (-50dB volume) before offering a coarser ±2dB over the final 20dB of its span (maximum range is 71dB). Overall gain is a sensibly modest +31.7dB and the A-wtd S/N ratio just a little 'above average' at 88.1dB (re. 0dBW). But the Progression Integrated's trump card is *power* – its 200W/8ohm and 400W/4ohm spec, beaten on the bench at 2x265W and 2x425W, respectively. Under dynamic (music-like) conditions there's a further boost with momentary outputs of 325W, 600W, 930W and 1030W into 8, 4, 2 and 1ohm loads. Note that under dynamic conditions distortion is *higher* at low power and also increases uniformly when driving lower impedance loads [see Graph 1, below]. PM



ABOVE: Dynamic power output versus distortion into 8ohm (black trace), 4ohm (red), 2ohm (blue) and 1ohm (green) speaker loads. Max. current is 32.1A



ABOVE: Distortion versus frequency over an extended 5Hz-40kHz range (1W/8ohm, black; 10W/8ohm, red)

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Continuous power (<1% THD, 8/4ohm)	265W / 425W
Dynamic power (<1% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)	325W / 600W / 930W / 1030W
Input sensitivity (re. 0dBW/200W)	75mV / 1060mV
Output impedance (20Hz-20kHz)	0.315-0.345ohm
Freq. resp. (20Hz-20kHz/100kHz)	+0.0 to -0.75dB/-8.2dB
A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBW/200W)	88.1dB
Distortion (20Hz-20kHz; 0dBW)	0.14-0.16%
Power consumption (idle/rated o/p)	125W / 830W (35W standby)
Dimensions (WHD) / Weight	432x178x432mm / 26kg