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D'Agostino Momentum Integrated

With an almost indecent haste, Dan D'Agostino has now delivered an integrated Momentum derived from the existing separates – and it's a stunner
 Review: **Ken Kessler** Lab: **Paul Miller**

If any component type appeared to have been defined by price category, it was the integrated amplifier. You didn't get into separate preamp/power amp combinations unless you upped the budget. But cost-consciousness is *not* a crucial element of the high-end sector, the notion of the upscale integrated being almost ironic – a minority pursuit like high-priced, high-spec but pocket-sized, all-in-one cameras. For a grand-plus, you're conditioned to expect a separate camera body and interchangeable lenses.

And yet here is an example of the genre from a designer who has made zero-compromise a *cri de cœur*. Certainly, the D'Agostino Momentum Integrated isn't the first-ever integrated with a price to match a loaded Lexus – £44k in copper black finish [see our cover] or £42k in silver – but it just may be the most over-the-top.

AN OUTBOARD PSU

All one needs to know, should one's inner tyre-kicker demand non-sonic evidence of its high-end worthiness, is that its weight out of the crate is nearly 55kg for its two sections combined.

Regardless, one must not allow the absence of a second AC cord to suggest any lack of audiophile-approved resolve, so let's dispense with semantics right away: this *is* a two-box affair, but not in the sense of conventional amplifier combos, 'separate preamp/separate power amp'. Rather, this is an integrated amplifier with an outboard power supply, in the form of a massive slab machined from solid aluminium that sits beneath the main unit.

At first glance you might think you are looking at the Momentum Preamplifier, as they share identical styling, though the

dimensions differ [see *HFN* Nov '13]. To the left are the on/off and source buttons for choosing between six line inputs. To the right are the by-passable tone controls. In-between is the signature illuminated Momentum meter, styled to resemble a classic timepiece. Its 'bezel' is also the rotary volume control. The supplied remote control is also round, too, itself a gorgeous metal construct.

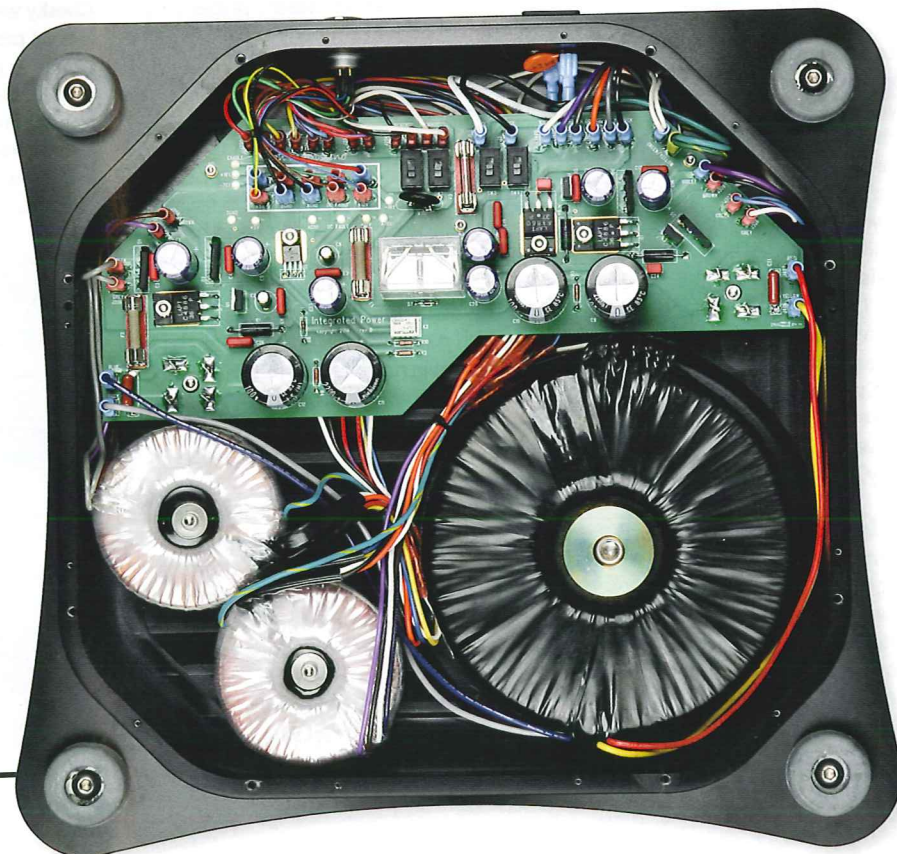
Not that this will impress readers who care only about sound and are immune to build quality, perceived value, fit-and-finish or the like, in which case I can name a few UK- or Chinese-made valve amplifiers that will charm you with their let's-live-dangerously constructional integrity. This product is awe-inspiring in its physical presence. The feel of the rotary, the click of the illuminated press buttons, the way the

sections fit – the only manufactured goods to which it can be likened are upscale wristwatches, Leica cameras and the Bugatti Veyron.

There's a shock around the back for those with legacy components and no phono-to-XLR adapters. The Momentum Integrated Amplifier only provides *balanced* inputs. Also fitted are stout speaker binding posts and a socket to accept the umbilical from the power supply 'slab'.

ADJUSTABLE OUTPUT

D'Agostino rates the output at 200W/ch into 8ohm and 400W/ch into 4ohm [see Lab Report, p35]. Maximum output can be adjusted – a safety feature not unlike units with variable gain in addition to main volume control. I used it side by side with the Momentum Stereo Power Amplifier



RIGHT: The new outboard PSU offers four supplies in one: +5V and +12V for logic, ±18V for the preamplifier section and ±70V, and a very large toroid, for the balanced power amplifier



[see *HFN* Aug '12] driving Wilson Alexias [*HFN* Mar '13], and power was never an issue. The rest of the system, connecting the aforementioned sources, consisted of Transparent Reference wiring throughout, with no other tweaks or accessories.

Operationally, there are no secrets, no arcane practices associated with this amp. Beyond the need to feed it balanced sources, everything is nearly self-explanatory. The remote operates faultlessly, the warm-up time is brief. I guess the only caveat one needs to emphasise is that getting this amp out of the metal trunk is a two-person job.

While reading this review keep in mind that we are talking about a big ticket integrated amplifier with the chops to vanquish like-priced separates. I know that borders on the heretical for some, but there are precedents in the extreme high-end, including Unison Research's Ultimate 845, darTZeel's

CTH8550 [*HFN* Jul '09] and plenty of others. It's just not what I expected...

A CHARM OF ITS OWN

How much of the lush, seamless, coherent, 'of-a-whole' sound that I heard is attributable to the inarguable lone benefit that integrated amps have over separates is impossible to define. It is hard to fathom, let alone accept, that the mere removal

of a cable between preamplifier and power amplifier can be so beneficial.

Conversely, separate pre/power combos benefit from two power supplies, two AC sources and total isolation from

each other, so maybe it's a draw. Whatever the truth, this beauty has a charm of its own that was made apparent from the very first notes of Lou Rawls' *At Last* [Blue Note CDP 7919372]. And I mean instantly.

Those who have heard Momentum components will be familiar with what may

'This product is awe-inspiring in its sheer physical presence'

ABOVE: Fabulous casework oozes luxury. Rotating the outer ring of the watchface dial adjusts volume; defeatable bass and treble controls (right) offer subtle tonal adjustment

be the most commanding lower octaves in the business. I'm not just referring to 'rich' or 'extended' or 'deep' or even 'truly palpable'. There's an uncanny presence recreated through the Integrated that combines all of what are arguably the virtues of authentic bass reproduction, not least being a sense of the physical. You need only stand next to a kick-drum to 'feel' what bass can do. Even with the title track, Rawls' CD sounded more convincing than I'd heard it before.

STARRY-EYED

This, in and of itself, was disconcerting to say the least, because the amplifier was inserted where normally sits the Audio Research Ref 5 preamp [*HFN* Jan '10] feeding the D'Agostino Momentum Stereo Power Amplifier. They remain superior in key areas, and I am so wedded to the Ref 5 that it borders on the emotional, but the Momentum Integrated had a certain majesty I'd not heard before. Maybe it just liked the Alexias. Perhaps it was the atmospheric pressure in early September, or the alignment of the stars. All I know is that I was transported...

ZZ Top is as far removed from Lou Rawls as one can go, I suppose, and the opening salvo of 'Gimme All Your Lovin'' [Warner] is blatant in its intent. This is growling boogie with a heavy metal cast: massive, powerful yet delivered with the trio's unique finesse – hard rock for closet intellectuals. The integrated D'Agostino delivered all of the slam, every erg of the guitar assault, ☺

TONE CONTROLS

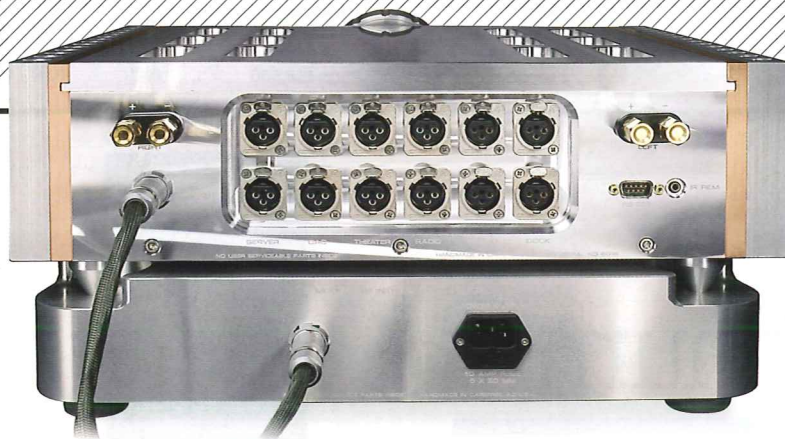
Integrated amps, *per se*, are not anathema to the high end, and every brand offers them, from Audio Research to Krell to Constellation to Conrad-Johnson to Mark Levinson. What D'Agostino is also 'reviving' – if that's the word – are tone controls. Like the Momentum Preamplifier, the Integrated features a pair of by-passable rotaries that allow the user to tailor, fine-tune or tweak the sound. Along with phase inversion, mute and balance, bass and treble controls can be addressed via the remote, so you can make adjustments from the listening position. Because the action was as subtle as one wants it to be, it would be churlish to equate these with the coarse tone controls of yore. I didn't need them in my system, but there *are* recordings with far too much bass or over-emphasised treble that I know would benefit from their use. Do I see a comeback for tone controls? No, but you do notice their absence when you need them.

D'AGOSTINO MOMENTUM INT.

So just how close is the performance of the Integrated to that of the Momentum Stereo power amp [HFN Aug '12]? In practice, not as close as the Stereo is to the monoblock Momentum [HFN July '11]. The Integrated and Stereo are both rated at 2x200W/8ohm and 2x400W/4ohm but achieve 215W/295W and 245W/390W respectively – so the Stereo looks more powerful. Under dynamic (music-like) conditions however, it's the Integrated that takes the lead with momentary outputs of 345W, 635W and 1.07kW into 8, 4 and 2ohm loads [see Graph 1, below], increasing to a whopping 1.62kW/1ohm or 40.2A (the Stereo managed 1.3kW or 36A).

Distortion proved more consistent with output through the Stereo but is often lower through the Integrated, dipping from 0.06% at 1W to a minimum of 0.012% at 20W before rising gently to 0.06% at 100W and 0.15% at the rated 200W. Versus frequency, THD is typically lower too, from 0.02%/20Hz up to 0.11% at 20kHz (all at 10W/8ohm). Furthermore, unlike the Momentum Stereo, there's a clear reduction in distortion as the amplifier warms up – from 0.055% cold to 0.011% after 15 minutes at a continuous 10W/8ohm.

The Integrated has a slightly more tailored response, flat from 1Hz out to -0.2dB/20kHz and -3.5dB/100kHz but this remains virtually unaltered with load, despite the moderate 0.3ohm output impedance. Finally, D'Agostino has clearly nailed any noise issues with this outboard PSU as the Integrated enjoys a very impressive 93.9dB A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBW). Readers may view a comprehensive QC Suite test report for D'Agostino's Momentum Integrated by navigating to www.hifinews.co.uk and clicking on the red 'download' button. PM



ABOVE: Fed via a short umbilical from its outboard DC PSU (doubling as an isolation platform), the Momentum Integrated offers six balanced inputs and pairs of 4mm speaker binding posts. Trigger and RS232 support system integration

with a freedom from restraint that suggested unlimited power. The Alexias are not the easiest speakers to drive, favouring as much grunt as an amp can deliver. The Integrated never indicated that it was 'smaller' than its separate stereo power amplifier sibling.

GEORGE FORMBY – AGAIN!

Just as it embraced the crystal clarity of Dianne Reeves' vocals in tandem with Rawls, so did it create an onslaught of sound with the Texan boogie merchants. The readily-identifiable textures of the vocals, with that slight nasality, the 'electric' feel that reminds me of the atmosphere before a thunderstorm – the Momentum demonstrated as much panache with hard rock as it did with silky standards.

In both cases, the presentation was wall-to-wall, with that elusive, yet treasured ability to make the speakers 'disappear'. If you're addicted to a convincing soundstage, this amplifier will alter your perceptions. The mind's path (at least mine) can be convoluted and full of non sequiturs, so I have no way of knowing quite why the playback made me think of Decca Gold and Denon DL-103 cartridges. Still, something in me recalled the 'wide-open prairies' effect both were known for as being present here.

I couldn't resist a go with my hero, George Formby, with a mono recording that pre-dates WWII. *When I'm Cleaning Windows – His 52 Finest 1932-1946* [Retrospective RTS 4104] is just a normal CD, not an audiophile remastering. (I may be the only schmuck who'd buy a copy if MoFi suddenly discovered him.) Did I hear more detail in 'When I'm Cleaning Windows'? Yes, indeed, which is especially helpful

in trying to decipher his inimitable virtuoso strumming technique with its blinding speed. How did the Momentum dig more out of those 80-year-old recordings?

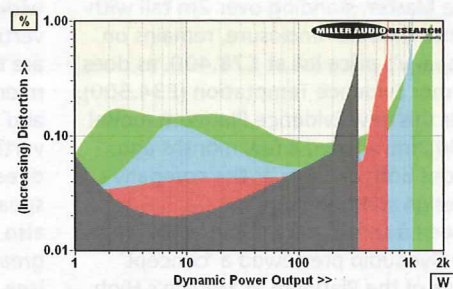
I cannot begin to count the number of times I've listened to that Formby recording, but I swear I was hearing elements of the backing band that were not apparent before. There was a sense of layering, of *depth*. And when you consider how limited the dynamic range must be, it even possesses passable contrasts.

What sealed my esteem for the Momentum Integrated, though, was The Band's *The Band* [Mobile Fidelity UDSACD 2129]. 'Up On Cripple Creek''s bass and kick-drum opening is dry, distinctive and rich with an ambience that means lots of moving air and a clearly palpable sense of space. You can hear the drum-skin stretch. It builds up: a Jew's harp injects the unmistakable metallic twang, swirling Hammond organ, tinkly piano, those moonshine-and-barbecue vocals. All of a sudden, it's 1969, I'm 17 and I didn't even feel the need for a joint. ☺

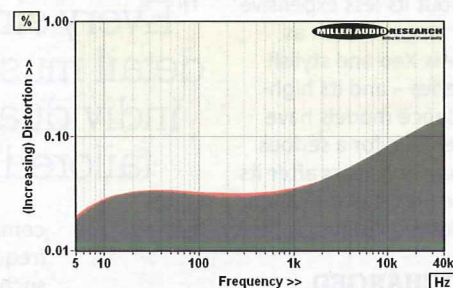
HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

While I'm already a committed Momentum user, I wasn't expecting the baby of the range to prove so rewarding. It's an exceptional product irrespective of its topology, blowing away any nagging belief that an integrated is a compromise. No, it won't save that much space. But, yes, it will delight you every time you use it. Powerful, graceful, musical – and (in black) the sexiest-looking amplifier I can name.

Sound Quality: 88%



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)	215W / 295W
Dynamic power (<1% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)	345W / 635W / 1.07kW / 1.62kW
Output impedance (20Hz-20kHz)	0.33-0.35ohm
Freq. response (20Hz-20kHz/100kHz)	+0.0dB to -3.5dB
Input sensitivity (for 0dBW/200W)	45mV / 638mV (balanced)
A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBW/200W)	93.9dB / 116.9dB
Distortion (20Hz-20kHz re. 10W/8ohm)	0.018-0.11%
Power consumption (Idle/Max. o/p)	116W / 830W (22W standby)
Dimensions (WHD) / Weight	457x109/102x406mm / 54.4kg