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# Dan D'Agostino Relentless

PREAMPLIFIER



In Serinusland, smooth sailing has never been guaranteed. Some months back, for reasons not yet determined, my Stromtank S 2500 Quantum MK II power regenerator<sup>1</sup> began to hum mechanically—sometimes steadily, sometimes with a pulse—whenever I turned on battery mode. Simultaneously, the Dan D'Agostino Master Systems Momentum HD preamp's power supply began to hum.<sup>2</sup> I could listen through the hum—it wasn't that loud—but silence between tracks was a thing of the past, and rarely was the noise in the right key.

After Stromtank's remote diagnostic and repair procedure failed, Stromtank Chief Engineer/founder Wolfgang Meletzky left Berlin for a previously scheduled visit to D'Agostino headquarters in Arizona. Tests there revealed that Stromtank and this D'Agostino preamp mated perfectly, without generating hum,

<sup>1</sup> I reviewed the Stromtank S 1000. See [stereophile.com/content/stromtank-s-1000-computer-controlled-battery-power-source](http://stereophile.com/content/stromtank-s-1000-computer-controlled-battery-power-source).

<sup>2</sup> See [stereophile.com/content/dan-dagostino-master-audio-systems-momentum-hd-line-preamplifier](http://stereophile.com/content/dan-dagostino-master-audio-systems-momentum-hd-line-preamplifier).

buzz, pulse, or anything else. With fingers now pointing at the preamp as perhaps defective, I returned it to D'Agostino HQ for a thorough going over. It and a different Stromtank S 2500 Quantum MK II mated perfectly, in blissful silence.

At that point, the two companies arrived at independent decisions. Stromtank decided to send me an S-4000 ProPower MK II so that I could try using it to power everything in my system, including the mono amplifiers, and report my findings in *Stereophile*. D'Agostino explained that because a replacement for the Momentum HD preamp was in the works—in the form of the Momentum C2, which was introduced at Munich High End 2024—it made no sense to send the Momentum HD back to me.

Instead, D'Agostino President Bill McKiegan asked if I might be interested in writing the first US review of the top-line, three-piece, fully balanced D'Agostino Relentless preamplifier (\$149,500, plus \$19,500 for the optional digital streaming module), which since its 2021 introduction had only received a single review, in Europe.

Me, review a \$150,000 preamp? This was not a kid in a candy store—scale event. This was a kid let loose in a big-assed candy factory—scale event.

My glucose levels spiked. Questions whirled. What new virtues might a cost-no-object, presumably state-of-the-art preamplifier bring to my reference system? Would images be more corporeal? Would the soundstage be wider and deeper, tonal colors more intense? Would bass—already fabulous—be even more solid? Would the Relentless preamp move me closer to a premium-seat-in-a-live-concert experience?

Or would all those possible pluses (and others)—assuming they delivered—be outweighed by previously unperceived weaknesses in my system, now exposed in the blindingly bright light of \$149,500 worth of resolution and transparency?

And so began the review. As typically happens with exciting new components, work and fun vied for supremacy until everything was tuned, until I felt the relief that comes from knowing my reference system was passing on sonic dividends—whether all or only some of what the new component offers remains, as always, impossible to know.

### What do you get for \$149,500? Part 1

The Relentless preamp comes with some intangibles that one cannot count on in high-end hi-fi: a well-designed webpage and a readable, information-packed manual. From these resources, I learned that the Relentless preamplifier's heavily shielded power supply is housed in its own chassis, which is intended to sit between the boxes housing the two audio channels. I learned that the power supply incorporates "internal line conditioning circuitry [that] filters RF noise on the AC power and compensates

for asymmetric power waveforms and DC on the mains."

Two 150VA toroidal transformers supply power, one to the analog circuitry, the other to the digital and control circuitry. "These transformers drive an 8A bridge rectifier and 26,400µF of filter capacitance," the D'Agostino website states. The company claims the Relentless preamplifier has "nearly as much power supply capability as many power amplifiers."

A "novel" discrete, differential FET input stage can handle a 30V input signal—compare to the "Red Book" CD full-scale output voltage of 2V—and has an input impedance exceeding 1M ohm. D'Agostino boasts about the preamp's "consistent bias," said to maintain sound quality regardless of component temperature, and "a nearly 30-fold improvement in linearity over conventional designs," which I translate as "big reduction in distortion." The Relentless utilizes four-layer circuit boards, careful segregation of analog circuitry, digital circuitry, and ground planes, and hermetically sealed relays with gold-plated contacts. The signal path is "fully complementary and balanced from the input to the output." The frequency response remains flat up to 120kHz, D'Agostino insists.

The Relentless is the first D'Agostino preamplifier to offer a Digital Streaming Module (DSM), which is to say, a built-in DAC with streaming capability. The DSM is optional of course, and field upgradable. I received it after this review was complete; I will evaluate it in a follow-up review.

The DSM supports PCM up to 32/384 (including MQA) and DSD up to DSD256, both decoded natively. Tidal, Qobuz, and Spotify streaming are supported, and the unit is Roon Ready. It's controlled by an iOS app. (There is no Android app, apparently, at least for now.) The DSM includes S/PDIF coaxial and optical (TosLink), USB-B, Ethernet, and Wi-Fi inputs. When installed, the DSM lives in the power supply chassis, which keeps it away from low-level preamp circuitry.

D'Agostino Master Systems states that "each volume control is constructed using 14 separate metal components [to ensure] the smoothest response and control of the military-grade, high-linearity solid-state switches and discrete precision resistors employed in the volume circuit. There's a different resistor for each volume position, with resistors matched for left and right channels. The bandwidth and transient response of the Relentless Preamplifier is completely unaffected by the volume setting." This point was reiterated later: The volume control has no sweet spot. Speaking of which, the volume control knobs are the smoothest I've ever turned.

Input three can be configured as a theater bypass, allowing a connected surround-sound processor to control the volume of the main speakers. There's an RS-232 control output and a 12V trigger.

## SPECIFICATIONS

**Description** Two source, two zone fully balanced two-channel analog preamplifier with theater bypass, remote, and optional field-upgradable Digital Streaming Module (DSM). Preamplifier section: Frequency response: 0.1Hz–120kHz, ±0.0dB. S/N ratio: 105dB, unweighted, 100dB, weighted. Gain: 6dB, 10dB selectable. THD: <.006%,

20Hz–20kHz. Inputs: five pair balanced (XLR). Outputs: two pair balanced (XLR) for Zone 1, one pair balanced (XLR) for Zone 2. Power consumption: 30W standby, 34W engaged. Optional digital module: PCM up to 32/384, MQA, DSD to DSD256, both decoded natively. Support for Tidal, Qobuz, Spotify. Added S/PDIF coaxial, optical, USB-B, Ethernet (Wi-Fi

network) inputs. Roon ready. iOS app available.

**Dimensions** 17" (43.2cm) × 3.9" (9.2cm) × 17" (43.2cm) for both preamps and power supply/base. Weight: 132lb (60kg).

**Finish** Silver or black; custom finishes available.

**Serial number of unit reviewed** 0001 (auditioning), 1035 (measuring). Manufac-

ured in USA.

**Price** \$149,500 + \$19,500 for the optional Digital Streaming Module (DSM). US dealers: 33. Warranty: 5 years.

**Manufacturer** Dan D'Agostino Master Audio Systems  
5855 E Surrey Dr.  
Cave Creek, AZ 85331.  
Tel: (480) 575-3069  
Web: dandagostino.com.

The power supply has extra DC outputs for some future product, plus two programming ports for future options.

### Part 2: Cabinet and remote

On each side of the easy-to-read volume readout in the center of the power supply module's front panel are, on the left side, five buttons: Standby/Power On, Mute, Polarity, Zone 1, and Zone 2—yes, this a two-zone preamplifier, with independent inputs and outputs. On the right are five source-selector buttons, labeled One through Five. It is possible to play the same source to both zones simultaneously, or to play different sources to each zone. In this case, the two volume controls operate independently, one for each zone.

On each preamp's rear panel are five inputs (XLR only), two Zone 1 outputs (both XLR), and one Zone 2 output. The rear panel also includes an IEC power input, an on/off switch, a serial number plate—the usual stuff.

The Relentless preamp's rechargeable, volume-knob-shaped remote control is, or was, a huge, weighty affair—it would make an effective weapon if hurled or catapulted. I won't discuss it further because there's now a new version, which was almost ready to ship when I submitted this review.

### Part 3: Talking the walk

Toward the end of a Zoom interview that included the man himself—Chief Designer and cofounder (with Petra D'Agostino)



Dan D'Agostino—McKiegan, and Vice President of Engineering Burhan Coskun, Coskun outlined what he considered most important about the Relentless preamp's design and dividends:

1. The Relentless has ultralow distortion and operates discretely to ensure exceptional performance and stability across various system configurations.
2. Each channel has its own power transformer. Audio signals and power travel through gold pins embedded in the feet of the top and middle chassis.
3. The noise floor is extremely low, and the dynamic range is wide.

## MEASUREMENTS

**J**VS's sample of the Dan D'Agostino Relentless could not be shipped to me in time for my test results to be published in this issue. I therefore performed the measurements on a different sample of the Relentless, serial number 1035, at Manhattan dealer Innovative Audio. (My thanks to Innovative's Elliot Fishkin and Chris Forman.) I examined the performance with my Audio Precision SYS2722 system (see the January 2008 "As We See It").

The Relentless preserved absolute polarity (ie, was noninverting) and with the volume control set to the maximum of "99," the gain was inconsequentially higher than the specified 6dB, at 6.28dB. (This was the gain setting Innovative had been using; I didn't test the preamplifier with its maximum gain set to the alternative of 10dB.) The volume control operated in approximate 0.2–0.3dB steps; a volume control setting of "79" reduced the gain by 4.47dB, a setting of "69" reduced it by 9.8dB, and a setting of "49" reduced it by 19.9dB. I performed most of my testing with the control

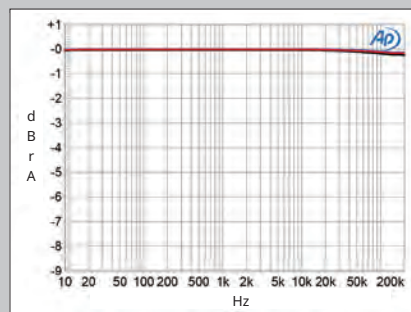
set to "65," which was equivalent to a gain of  $-5.64\text{dB}$  ref. unity gain.

D'Agostino doesn't specify the Relentless's balanced input impedance.<sup>2</sup> I estimate input impedance by noting the voltage drop when I change the Audio Precision's balanced source impedance from 40 ohms to 600 ohms. This method becomes increasingly inaccurate for values greater than 100k ohms, but my measure-

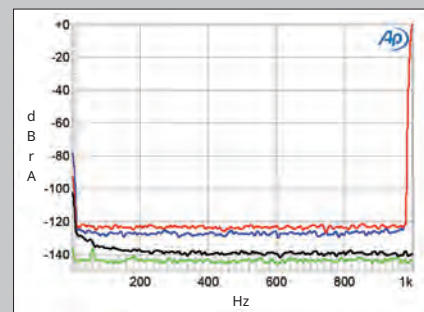
ments indicated that the Relentless's input impedance was close to 1M ohms at low and middle frequencies and still 600k ohms at the top of the audioband. The preamplifier's output impedance was an extraordinarily low 1.6 ohms at 20Hz and

<sup>1</sup> See [stereophile.com/content/measurements-maps-precision](http://stereophile.com/content/measurements-maps-precision).

<sup>2</sup> Jason heard from D'Agostino that the input impedance "exceeds 1M ohm."—Jim Austin



**Fig.1** Dan D'Agostino Relentless, frequency response with volume control set to "99" at 1V into: 100k ohms (left channel blue, right red), 600 ohms (left green, right gray) (1dB/vertical div.).



**Fig.2** Dan D'Agostino Relentless, spectrum of 1kHz sine wave, DC–1kHz, at 4V (left channel blue, right red) and 0V into 100k ohms (left green, right gray) (linear frequency scale).

4. All this adds up to a transparent soundstage with exceptional detail and resolution.

There's more to say, and far more was said before that summary arrived. According to Dan, the Relentless is something totally new and different for D'Agostino. My reference Momentum HD preamplifier "has almost nothing to do technically with the Relentless preamplifier. Nonetheless, the ideas that we learned while designing the HD spurred us to design the Relentless." The difference between the two is "all about how much space you like and how much information you like that's way down in the black part of the audioband.

"I don't know about you, but I want to hear the fine-grained detail that's way down there that most equipment doesn't reveal, particularly if you run a DAC right into the amplifier. I want to hear everything. If there's dirt in the background, if there's hum in the background, if there's somebody scraping their feet in the other room, I want to hear all that. Because in real-life music-making, that's a part of the feeling. Totally. In addition, don't you want your soundstage to be as big as an orchestra's?"

I asked D'Agostino to explain the implications of each of the technical advances he'd incorporated into the preamp. He replied, "I react to differences in sound. When I had Krell, I reacted to differences in technology; this company is based in sound only, and sometimes technology advances our quest.

"If an electrical improvement doesn't translate into better



sound, we don't use it. Even if it's the greatest advancement since sliced bread, it's not going in the unit if it doesn't sound better. Burhan has been with me for almost six years, and his audio knowledge comes directly from me. He's grown into a really good audio designer. He knows that when we listen to something, I can grow impatient, because from the first note, I know if the design is good or bad. Together, we bounce ideas back and forth and make something that sounds better."

Some of D'Agostino's circuits, including those in the Relentless amplifier, are based in other technological realms—"in measurement and

instrumentation amplifiers that have nothing to do with audio," Dan said. "The whole front end is based on that. Once we adapted the technology to work in audio—it took a year before we even considered putting it into production—it sounded amazing. In developing the Relentless preamp, we took what we learned from experimentation and pushed it as far as we could push it. I'm not gonna tell you that in a year or two years that we might not say, hey, wow, I see something better. But right now, at this juncture in my life, I don't think we can make anything better."

McKiegan noted that a preamp's three primary signal circuitry functions are its input stage, volume control stage, and output stage. The Progression preamplifier handles those functions with two boards. The just-discontinued Momentum HD preamp used six boards, three for the left channel and three for the right.

### measurements, continued

1kHz, and still 2 ohms at 20kHz.

The preamplifier's frequency response was flat from 10Hz to 100kHz into both 100k ohms (fig.1, blue and red traces) and 600 ohms (green, gray traces), with the output at 200kHz down by just 0.15dB. Fig.1 was taken with the Relentless's volume control set to the maximum. Both the frequency response and the superb channel matching were preserved at lower settings of the control.

As I expected from the use of separate chassis for each channel, the D'Agostino preamp's crosstalk was superbly low, at -130dB in both directions below 2kHz, decreasing to -114dB at the top of the audioband (not shown). The Relentless offered extremely low noise; the wideband, unweighted signal/noise ratio, measured with the input shorted to ground but the volume control set to its maximum, was a high 83dB ref. 2V output (average of both channels, which were very similar). Re-

stricting the measurement bandwidth to the audioband increased the S/N ratio to an excellent 94dB; switching an A-weighting filter into circuit further improved this ratio, to 98dB. There were no power-supply-related spurious in the Relentless's output with 1kHz reproduced at 4V into 100k ohms (fig.2, blue and red traces). The levels of the random noise components

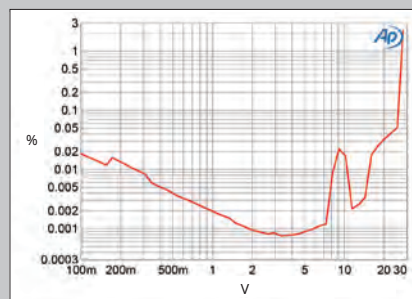


Fig.3 Dan D'Agostino Relentless, THD+N (%) vs 1kHz output voltage into 100k ohms.

in this graph were a little higher than I was expecting, so I repeated the spectral analysis with the Audio Precision's output turned off and without changing the volume control setting. The random noise dropped by 15dB (green and gray traces). It might be possible, therefore, that the blue and red noise floor spectrum is due in part to the resolution of the SYS2722's A/D

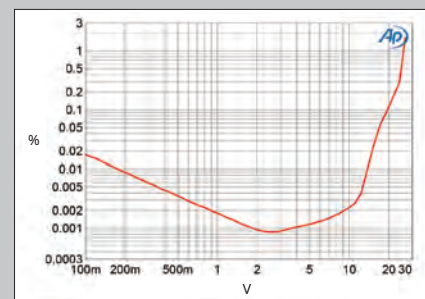


Fig.4 Dan D'Agostino Relentless, THD+N (%) vs 1kHz output voltage into 600 ohms.

The Relentless also uses three boards per channel, but there is a completely separate section for its Zone 2 preamplifier. That makes 12 boards total, plus additional boards for purposes other than carrying signal.

“As the real estate gets larger, there’s more availability for circuit sophistication,” McKiegan said. “As we climb the ladder, each step allows for the greater audio technology that the guys are able to put in the boxes. In the Relentless, all sections within each chassis are on separate boards and platforms. In addition, the entire digital control module, volume control, logic board—all that stuff—are in the center box, and audio signals are isolated from other signals. In every respect, there’s so much more isolation.”

“Bigger transformers create less circuit noise because their cores do not radiate the noise that smaller transformers do when pushed close to their limits,” D’Agostino explained. “In preamps, the purpose of bigger transformers is not to create more power; instead, they run cooler and wider with less noise.” The Relentless has separate transformers for the digital/control and analog signal circuitry.

When it comes to power products, accessories, and tweaks, every designer I’ve encountered has a bottom-line belief system. I hear benefits from Wilson Audio Pedestals and HRS vibration



control devices, but Dan D’Agostino is of a different mindset. “I know a lot of people talk about vibration in audio products, and you see those ridiculous bricks sitting on top of somebody’s product,” he said. “We design our products so that vibration is not really going to affect them at all. If a product needs those things, then the designer didn’t really do a good job in the beginning.”

His thoughts on power products are more nuanced. “We don’t like power conditioners because they add dirt to a properly controlled power supply. Most well-designed circuits don’t need conditioners. There’s nothing to be gained when you do it right in the front end of the power supply. If I needed all that stuff,

I would take the whole design and review it again, because there’s something wrong with it.”

The Stromtank, though, is different. “The Stromtank runs a separate AC signal with a precision frequency stability of 60Hz, and the sinewaves are satin smooth. Those things are nice and will not ever harm the sound. But if you have reasonable power coming from the wall, our power supplies will be very happy.”

Toward the end of our chat, I asked Dan what he most wanted *Stereophile* readers to understand about the Relentless preamp.

“After our success with the Momentum HD preamp, we envisioned what we were looking for next. We went through eight

## measurements, continued

converter; I would have liked to repeat these spectral analyses with the magazine’s higher-resolution APx500 analyzer, but I hadn’t taken it and its host Windows 10 PC to Innovative Audio.

Fig.3 plots the percentage of THD+noise in the Relentless’s balanced output against the output voltage into 100k ohms. The downward slope of the trace below 4V in this graph is due to the reading being dominated by noise; distortion starts to rise out of the noise at voltages >4V. However, the THD is extremely low below 7.1V, where there is a sudden rise to a still-low 0.02% before dropping again. The actual clipping voltage, defined as the voltage at which the THD+N reaches 1%, is 27V, which is 10 times the voltage that will drive the D’Agostino M400 MxV monoblock power amplifiers JVS used for his auditioning into clipping. Fig.4 plots the THD+N percentage against the Relentless’s output voltage into 600 ohms. The distortion starts to rise above the noise at 3V but is almost as low

as it had been into 100k ohms. The discontinuity in fig.3 is absent, and the preamplifier clips at an extremely high 25V into this punishing load.

To be sure that the reading was not dominated by noise, I measured how the Relentless’s THD+N changed with frequency at 4V. The distortion percentage was extremely low throughout the audio-

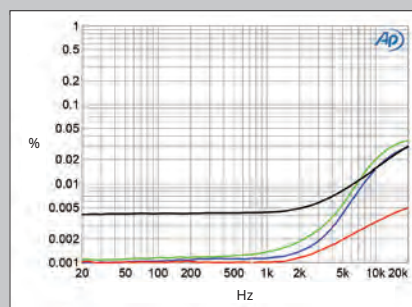


Fig.5 Dan D’Agostino Relentless, THD+N (%) vs frequency at 4V into: 100k ohms (left channel blue, right red), 600 ohms (left cyan, right magenta).

band into 100k ohms (fig.5, blue and red traces), though with an increase in the top two audio octaves, more in the left channel (blue) than the right (red). The left channel behaved similarly into 600 ohms (green trace), but the right channel’s THD+N (gray) was four times higher than the left’s. It was still low in absolute terms, however.

The spectrum in fig.6 was taken at 4V

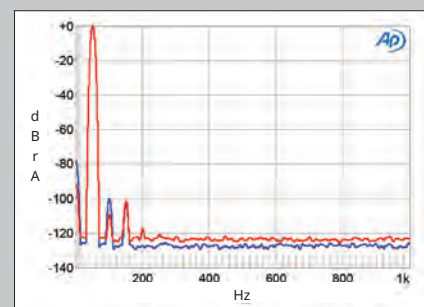


Fig.6 Dan D’Agostino Relentless, spectrum of 50Hz sine wave, DC-1kHz, at 4V into 100k ohms (left channel blue, right red; linear frequency scale).

or nine prototypes—that's a lot of prototype money out the door—until we achieved circuit stability and everything behaved as we wanted. With the harmonious transfer between input, line, control, and output, we have a very different configuration in the Relentless from what came before. Ultimately, we achieved something better than what we had hoped to create. It's very, very unique and musically correct.

"In this state of our development, with what we know, there is nothing left we can possibly do to make a better preamp. It's our best effort."

### Power prepping

I'm convinced that the Relentless preamp needs no special power treatment. Nonetheless, as a Senior Contributing Editor to *Stereophile* who often reviews five- and six-figure products, it behooves me to do everything within my means to build the most revealing and musical reference system I can.

So, when Edward DeVito of Audio-Ultra<sup>3</sup> offered to help me further upgrade my dedicated electrical lines, I bit. After many hours of work—supervised by Ed to ensure all grounding, polarity, and connections were implemented properly—I now have five dedicated circuits. Each of my monoblocks has its own dedicated circuit, my front end has its own, and my two Wilson Løke subwoofers have *their* own. Three circuits use twisted, direction-controlled 10-gauge wire, and all wall outlets are now AudioQuest Edison.

Shortly after the Relentless preamp arrived, I received a Strom-



tank S-4000 MK II battery power generator, in for a future review. My entire front end was now receiving pure battery power. After a prolonged round of power cord juggling between the Stromtank and a Nordost QB8 Mark III power distributor, I arrived at the most musical and revealing configuration I could achieve.

### Places, please

With power addressed, we hoisted the Relentless preamp's three pieces onto the top shelf of my Grand Prix Monza rack and installed four appropriately sized Wilson Audio Pedestals beneath the stack. (The other part of "we" was Hans Brackmann of Definitive Audio

Bellevue, who drove the preamp to my house.) We attached XLR cables from the dCS Vivaldi Apex DAC to the preamp and from the preamp to either the D'Agostino Momentum M400 MxV monoblocks or the Accuphase A-300 monoblocks. Attaching the subwoofers via their XLR interconnects was just as easy. After separating interconnects and speaker cables from power cables and lifting all the cabling off the floor, I commenced listening with assurance that I had done all I could to ensure that the system was functioning at the highest level.

### Part 4: Sound beyond words

At the risk of receiving multiple missives (missiles?) from readers

<sup>3</sup> See [audio-ultra.com](http://audio-ultra.com).

### measurements, continued

into 100k ohms. The third harmonic lies at -101dB (0.0009%) in both channels, with the second harmonic close to the same level in the left channel (blue trace). Repeating this analysis at the same level into 600 ohms (fig.7), the third harmonic remained at the same level in both channels, as did the second harmonic in the left channel, but the second harmonic in the right channel rose to -89dB (0.003%, red) and was joined by the fourth harmonic at -100dB. Peculiarly, the noise floor in fig.7 is 12-15dB lower than it is in fig.6, a result I found repeatable. Neither the differences in the two channels' distortion signatures nor the noise floor differences into different loads will have any effect on sound quality.

Tested for intermodulation distortion with an equal mix of 19 and 20kHz tones at a peak level of 2V into 600 ohms (fig.8), the second-order difference product (at 1kHz) lay at a superbly low -120dB (0.0001%) in the right channel (red trace).

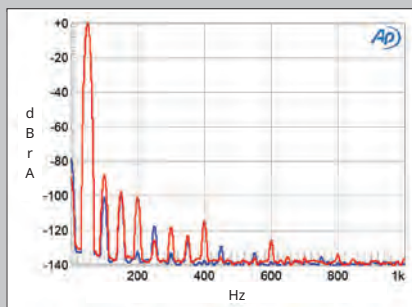
It lay at -90dB in the left channel (0.003%, blue trace), as did the higher-order products—still a very low level of intermodulation distortion, especially taking into consideration that this is with the preamplifier driving 600 ohms.

Overall, the Relentless offered excellent measured performance, better than that

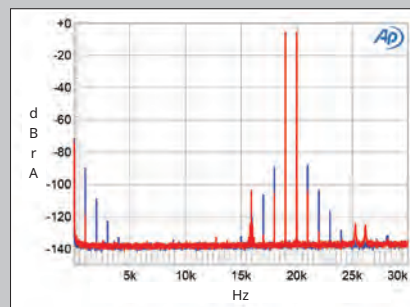
of the D'Agostino Momentum HD preamplifier JVS reviewed in February 2020,<sup>3</sup> with very low levels of noise and distortion, even into low impedances!

—John Atkinson

<sup>3</sup> See [stereophile.com/content/dan-dagostino-master-audio-systems-momentum-hd-line-preamplifier-measurements](http://stereophile.com/content/dan-dagostino-master-audio-systems-momentum-hd-line-preamplifier-measurements).



**Fig.7** Dan D'Agostino Relentless, spectrum of 50Hz sine wave, DC-1kHz, at 4V into 600 ohms (left channel blue, right red; linear frequency scale).



**Fig.8** Dan D'Agostino Relentless, HF intermodulation spectrum, DC-30kHz, 19+20kHz at 2V into 600 ohms (left channel blue, right red; linear frequency scale).

who disapprove of such language, I feel impelled to speak honestly. My first listens generated a host of “holy f\*cks!” The first came when I introduced Brackmann to one of my favored demo tracks, the first movement of Mahler Symphony No.5 performed by Rafael Payare and L’Orchestre symphonique de Montréal (24/96 FLAC download, Pentatone). Bernstein’s 1988 recording with the Vienna Philharmonic (16/44.1 FLAC, Deutsche Grammophon/Tidal) may go deeper than Payare’s—Bernstein’s bleak opening funeral march is considerably more threatening and emotionally devastating, his plasticity of tempo more expressive, his phrasing more heartbreaking—but the Pentatone recording quality is far superior.

Having listened to Payare’s first movement more than 100 times, I was amazed to now hear instruments and images that were larger, more tangible, and more emotionally impactful. The visceral impact of timpani, bass drum, and the lowest double bass lines increased. I’d long experienced lightning-fast attacks and credible leading edges on bass, but the center of bass tones occasionally lacked ultimate shape and color. Now, bass absolutely rang true, from first attack to final decay. Dynamic contrast between soft and loud passages increased. When all hell breaks loose in the first movement and every instrument exclaims a different sound in different directions over every octave, detail and textural definition were clarified in ways I never imagined possible.

Music seemed more present, alive, and convincing. The system reached deeper into music’s essence, laying it bare and seeming to rejoice in its accomplishment. Without wishing to unduly anthropomorphize a product whose “life” derives solely from a musical superposition of electrical sinewaves, the Relentless metamorphized organized sound into an expressive vehicle that impacted my heart and gut in revelatory new ways. I had difficulty recalling another product that left me wanting to listen to music deeply, for so many hours on end.

The discoveries multiplied when I compared Payare’s recording with Bernstein’s. On the latter recording, I expected to hear dynamics constrained by early “Red Book” digital, but Bernstein’s recording seemed more *dynamic* than Payare’s hi-res version! I never thought I could be so blown away by an early digital recording from one of the periods when Deutsche Grammophon’s recordings were consistently overly bright.

Next I listened to a recording that I had begun to review for this issue until the label abruptly postponed its release, *Les Siècles au Théâtre des Champs-Élysées* (24/96 WAV, Harmonia Mundi/download). On this recording, which deserves to be heard, François-Xavier Roth leads his period orchestra in music by Lalo (Namouna Suite No.1), Debussy (*Prélude à l’Après-midi d’un faune*), Roussel (*Bacchus et Ariane/Suite No.2*) and Dukas (*L’Apprenti sorcier*). “Debussy has never seemed so colorful and delightful,” I wrote, as I sat mesmerized by sound and beauty.

Sticking to French repertoire, I decided to celebrate the Fauré centennial by reviewing *Gabriel Fauré: La Bonne Chanson, L’Horizon Chimérique, Ballade, Mélodies* by baritone Stéphane Degout and pianist Alain Planès (24/96 WAV download, Harmonia Mundi). There was no mistaking Planès’s 1892 Pleyel “Grand Patron” for either a modern Steinway D or a brighter Érard.

After a walk with my dear friend Anna Frank, who some months back spent time alone with Pink Floyd in my music room, I invited her to take another listen to the 2023 50th Anniversary remaster of *The Dark Side of the Moon* (24/192 FLAC, Legacy Recordings/Qobuz). After declaring that the impending doom of “On the Run” left her short of breath, she reported that she heard elements of hi-hat, keys, and bass lines that she had “actually not noticed before.” Individual instruments sounded crisper and more location-specific, and the album’s concluding heartbeat had a lower depth of tone than heard previously. “I’ve listened to this album 100+ times, but I

## ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

**Digital sources** dCS Vivaldi Apex DAC, Vivaldi Upsampler Plus, Vivaldi Master Clock, and Rossini Transport; EMM Labs DV2 Integrated DAC, Meitner MA3 Integrated DAC; Innuos Statement Next-Gen Music Server, and PhoenixNET network switch; Small Green Computer Sonore Deluxe opticalModule (2); Broadcom/Avago AFBR-5718PZ 1GB SX-SFP Gen 5 Fiber Optic modules; Nordost QNet switch and QSource linear power supply (2); Sonore Audiophile Linear Power Supply; Synology 5-bay 1019+ NAS with Ferrum Hypsos linear/switching hybrid power supply; Linksys MR9000 mesh router and Arris modem; Apple iPad Pro and MacBook Pro laptop with 2.8GHz Intel i7, SSD, 16GB RAM.

**Power amplifiers** Dan D’Agostino Momentum M400 MxV monoblocks, Accuphase A-300 monoblocks.

**Loudspeakers** Wilson Audio Specialties Alexia V, Löke subwoofers.

**Cables** Digital: Nordost Odin 1, Odin 2, and Valhalla 2 (USB and Ethernet), Frey 2 (USB adapter); AudioQuest WEL Signature; Wireworld Platinum Starlight Cat8 (Ethernet), OM1 62.5/125 multimode duplex (fiber optic). Interconnect (XLR): Nordost Odin 2 and Blue Heaven subwoofer, AudioQuest Dragon, Canare (subwoofers). Speaker: Nordost Odin 2, AudioQuest Dragon. AC: Nordost Odin 2, Valhalla 2, Valhalla 1; AudioQuest Dragon and Firebird; Kimber PK10 Palladian. Umbilical cords: Ghent Audio Canare on NAS; QSource Premium DC cables with Lemo terminations for QSources; SotM SPS-500 umbilical cable for SotM Master clock.

**Accessories** Grand Prix Monza 8-shelf double rack and amp stands, 1.5" Formula platform; Symposium Ultra Platform; Nordost 20A QB8 Mark III, QKore 1 and 6; Titanium and Bronze Sort Kones, Sort Lifts; Stromtank S-4000 MK II power generator, SEQ-5 Audio Distribution Bar; AudioQuest Niagara 7000 and 5000 power conditioners, NRG Edison outlets; Environmental Potentials EP2050EE surge protector/filter; Wilson Audio Pedestals; A/V RoomService Polyflex Diffusers; Resolution Acoustics room treatment; Stillpoints Clouds (8); HRS DPX-14545 Damping Plates; Marigo Aida CD mat.

**Listening room** 20' L × 16'4" W × 9'4" H.—Jason Victor Serinus

loved this listen more than any,” Anna declared.

I felt similarly when I turned to a beloved fave, the final movement of Mahler Symphony No.4 performed by soprano Kathleen Battle and the Vienna Philharmonic, conducted by Lorin Maazel (16/44.1 MQA, Sony (Columbia)/Tidal). The expanse and warmth of the hall, the natural acoustic surrounding the voice, and every small vocal nuance stood out as never before. For an alternative to the Mahler heavies, play this movement and the rest of the Fourth Symphony and discover a succession of rare instances when Mahler allowed himself to be happy for more than a few minutes at a time.

You may recall last month’s Recording of the Month, Danny Elfman’s *Percussion Concerto and Wunderkammer* with Colin Currie and the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra under JoAnn Falletta (24/96 WAV download, Sony). I had no point of reference for this recording. I only knew that color, percussion, and imaging were fabulous. As I listened, my mind overflowed with images and feelings as vivid as every percussive impact. I don’t think any recording I’ve ever previously played conjured up so many wild images, including one of an extremely large man in a duck costume waddling through a carnival with outsized



webbed feet.

When buddy Scott visited, he requested our favorite Shostakovich bass-and-brass torture test, the second movement of Symphony No.11 from Andris Nelsons and the Boston Symphony Orchestra's superb recording of Shostakovich Symphonies Nos.4 & 11 "The Year 1905" (24/96 FLAC, DG/Qobuz). After discovering lowest bass lines more clearly pitched and focused than before—they seemed stronger because they were all of one piece—we turned to Peter McGrath's private recording of pianist Emanuel Ax performing Schoenberg's *Three Pieces* Op.11 (24/192 MQA) and marveled at the huge, realistic dynamic contrasts a great engineer can capture—did capture—from a grand piano.

Scott and I then switched amplifiers, to the Accuphase A-300 monoblocks, which I'd already warmed up. We confirmed once again that on Payare's Mahler recording, we could hear substantially more definition and texture and feel more turmoil when everything got going.

For what I thought were my final listens before I'd begin to write this review, I invited our 23-year-old dog walker and her similarly aged fiancé to play music of their choice. They chose the 2017 modified reissue of Cody Jinks's "Hippies & Cowboys" from *Less Wise* (24/44.1 FLAC, Late August Records/Qobuz), the *Moderato* from Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake* performed by the London Symphony Orchestra under Andre Previn (24/44.1 FLAC, Warner Classics/Qobuz), and Luke Combs & Billy Strings's "The Great Divide" (24/96 FLAC, River House Artists/Columbia Nashville/Tidal). They were blown away.

A second visit with Scott—"Scott, you've got to find the time to hear this thing again"—ended when, upon hearing a bit of the Craft Recordings 24/192 reissue of *Art Pepper Meets the Rhythm Section* streamed from Qobuz, Scott exclaimed, "Wow, listen to that. The

percussion is fabulous!"

I again began pondering my power cable connection scheme with an intensity of focus that resembled that of Hassidic scholars pondering Talmudic texts over multiple millennia. Moving some power cables around delivered a richer midrange, smoother top, and tighter bottom end, enticing me to listen deeply. When Ed DeVito surprised me with another visit, we cued up two of his references: "In the Wee Hours" from Junior Wells's Chicago Blues Band from Buddy Guy's *Hoodoo Man Blues* (16/44.1 FLAC, Delmark/Tidal) and Hans Zimmer's "Dream of Arakis" from *Dune* (24/48 FLAC, WaterTower Music/Qobuz). I'd previously chided DeVito for using as a reference Guy's "Red Book" recording, with its limited dynamics and soundstage width and depth. This time, I sat seduced by the warmth, texture, color, and musicality contained in its slowly sampled 16 bits.

### But words we gotta use

The problem with audiophile jargon is not in its expressive power but its overuse. Words and phrases intended to convey unquantifiable journeys into music's inner sanctum are too often reduced to clichés in which spiritual listening epiphanies devolve into assemblages of words devoid of comparable or analogous magic.

As elusive and indescribable as an audiophile's pilgrimage to musical truth may be, our words cannot harm the joy at the center of the pursuit. The D'Agostino Master Systems Relentless preamplifier has enabled me to bathe in the connection to greater truths that music offers to extents I never thought possible. It won't replace your favorite spiritual text or SNL skit, but you'll likely return to it with equal (or more) anticipation, fervor, and glee. It's that good. Giving it an A+ only begins to indicate the gifts it can bestow. ■