

HIGH-END AUDIO PRODUCT OF THE YEAR AWARDS!

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CROWNING GLORY

DAN D'AGOSTINO'S NEW MOMENTUM ELECTRONICS



POWER AMPLIFIERS OF THE YEAR



Bel Canto REF600M Monoblock \$4990/pr.

The Bel Canto REF600M is the first amplifier in the REF series to use the NCore technology designed by Bruno Putzeys for Hypex. With this latest design Bel Canto claims it has achieved “the right balance between neutral transparency and musicality.” John Stronczer, Bel Canto’s designer, believes that the REF600M, “demonstrates the full sonic promise that began to emerge over 15 years ago with the implementation of our first Class D amplifier.” How good is the REF600M? To reviewer Steven Stone’s ears it’s good enough to qualify as the best all-around power amplifier he’s heard to date, regardless of technology or circuit topology. Its combination of extremely low noise (which allows it to drive even highly sensitive loudspeakers), precision three-dimensional imaging, relaxed and natural harmonic balance, and power capability makes for a potent package. Couple all its sonic achievements with its relatively modest price and you have a power amplifier that could well be a benchmark reference for many audiophiles for years to come. (269)

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D’Agostino Master Audio Systems Momentum M400 Monoblock \$65,000

Dan D’Agostino has seriously upped his game from earlier designs. In particular, the earlier version of the Momentum amplifier, while boasting considerable power, lacked the finesse and sheer gumption of the new M400. D’Agostino has taken several steps to improve these monoblocks, including redesigning the driver stage with individual transistors for the negative and positive halves to ensure that the circuit is fully complementary. D’Agostino says that change greatly increases the current that the output stage sees. As a result, this 400W monoblock doubles up on power delivery as the impedance halves (down to 1800 watts at 2 ohms), which means it’s essentially unflappable. What reviewer Jacob Heilbrunn heard from the changes that D’Agostino made was a remarkable degree of control—an ability to disentangle complex musical passages with great fidelity, thereby rendering them easily intelligible to the ear. He also heard a linearity and silkiness that make these supremely high-resolution monoblocks easy winners of TAS’ Power Amplifier of the Year Award. (review this issue)





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MASTERPIECE!

**D'AGOSTINO MASTER AUDIO SYSTEMS MOMENTUM SERIES PREAMPLIFIER,
PHONOSTAGE, AND 400 MONOBLOCK POWER AMPLIFIERS**

Jacob Heilbrunn

Photography by Dennis Burnett

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MOMENTUM SERIES PREAMPLIFIER,
PHONOSTAGE, AND 400 MONOBLOCK
POWER AMPLIFIERS



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VERA DECADE AGO, WHEN AUDIO SHOWS WERE STILL a big deal in New York, I saw a veritable galaxy of new audio equipment and demonstrations, ranging from one called the “HP Super Room,” named after TAS founder Harry Pearson, who was holding forth in the hallway to his acolytes and friends, often one and the same, to the introduction of the Continuum turntable to an early Avantgarde Trio system. But one demo in particular sticks in my mind: It was watching Dan D’Agostino display one of his new Krell amplifiers. My memory is that he played back a piano and violin sonata on a system in which speakers were placed wide apart. The audience was transfixed. None of the usual audiophile whispering that plagues many demos occurred. Then, after the cut ended, everyone sat in shocked silence for a split-second before applauding the performance, as though it had been a live one.

That’s the kind of reaction that D’Agostino, one of the premier designers in the industry, could elicit. Now, from his Arizona workshop and his new company called D’Agostino Master Audio Systems, he’s once more wowed me with his new triple-threat package of Momentum series monoblock amplifiers, phonostage, and preamplifier. Coupled with the new Wilson WAMM Master Chronosonic loudspeakers they produced an unrelenting combination of grip, slam, and musicality. Lithe and nimble, they belong in the top echelon of audio products. No matter the musical genre selected, these electronics were a pleasure to audition.

I ran all three separately with gear from other companies but it was clear to me that they sound best when coupled to one another. There is nothing thin or strident about the sound. Rather, it lands on the sumptuous side of the sonic spectrum without sacrificing transparency. No, it isn’t quite as refulgent as tube gear—I heard a direct comparison, for example, with the VTL Siegfried, and the differences were plain. But the linearity and silkiness of the Momentums are



D'AGOSTINO MASTER AUDIO SYSTEMS
MOMENTUM SERIES PREAMPLIFIER,
PHONOSTAGE, AND 400 MONOBLOCK
POWER AMPLIFIERS



addictive. There is no sterility to be found here. Put bluntly, the Momentums have a touch of pulchritude that I found more than welcome.

One thing is immediately apparent upon listening to the Momentum series: D'Agostino has seriously upped his game from his earlier designs. In particular, the prior version of the Momentum amplifier, while boasting considerable power, lacked the finesse and sheer gumption of the new M400. D'Agostino has taken several steps to improve the design of these monoblocks, including redesigning the driver stage to ensure that it is

fully complementary by employing individual transistors for the negative and positive halves of the driver stage. D'Agostino says that this almost doubles the current that the output stage sees. The amp also deploys a new 1800VA linear transformer, and doubles up as the impedance halves down to 1800 watts at 2 ohms, which means that it's essentially unappalable. What I hear from the changes that D'Agostino has instituted



D'AGOSTINO MASTER AUDIO SYSTEMS
MOMENTUM SERIES PREAMPLIFIER,
PHONOSTAGE, AND 400 MONOBLOCK
POWER AMPLIFIERS



in the amps is a remarkable degree of control—the ability to disentangle complex musical passages with great fidelity, thereby rendering them easily intelligible to the ear. And don't kid yourself: If you're going to run a big speaker like the WAMM, power is a must to get what you paid for. This is a speaker meant to be run full-range; SET amps need not apply.

The Momentum preamplifier plays a decisive role in allowing the amps to sing. It has a separate 300VA power supply. The volume control consists of a resistor ladder that deploys an optical controller for maximum sonic purity. The large meter in front allows you to see the volume setting, which you can govern either by turning a ring around the meter or by using D'Agostino's remote control. The pre-amp is a fully balanced design and sounds extremely quiet when coupled with the amplifiers. It has two sets of outputs, which allowed me to run the Wilson WAMM subwoofers directly. In checking out

the Momentum gear, I ran the Wilson both with and without subs. The headroom on the preamp is impressive, and I can't imagine that you will run out of gain with it. Quite the contrary. Last but hardly least, there is a very attractive phono stage, which contains multiple inputs and no fewer than two separate power supplies. Why two? One contains a power transformer and the on-off switch for the unit. The other sits on a separate base on which the control circuits sit. The base contains the power rectification and regulation circuits. The result is a very low noise floor. The

The control of the amplifiers means that the notes and instruments are properly scaled. No bloat or Rab here. This is an amp with a six-pack.



D'AGOSTINO MASTERAUDIO SYSTEMS
MOMENTUM SERIES PREAMPLIFIER,
PHONOSTAGE, AND 400 MONOBLOCK
POWERAMPLIFIERS

phonostage has no fewer than 16 loading options, in addition to equalization curve selections—all available at the touch of a button. Finally, a special feature of the phonostage is that it permits you to add up to 6dB of gain to the standard settings for mc and mm inputs. (I didn't find this necessary given the abundant gain on tap with the preamplifier.)

One of the immediate benefits of these measures is a fascinating blend of silky smoothness and control. I've often found Bach violin concertos to sound a bit congested. Even a new Hyperion CD featuring Alina Ibragimova suffers a bit from this phenomenon. But the Momentums went as far as I have heard in sorting out matters in an enticing fashion. They seem to possess a grip on the notes that helps to prevent things from flying out of control. Precision, for the most part, supplanted confusion. The orchestra sounded as though it had, in some ways, been tamed, allowing Ibragimova's violin to emerge with excellent clarity, particularly on the andante movements of the concertos in A minor and E major.

On a Concord CD produced by the great jazz arranger Benny Golson, for example, I was quite taken with the presentation of the Momentum gear on cuts like "Whisper Not," which features Al Jarreau. Even as Jarreau croons away, the bass line, which is deep and can be somewhat murky on lesser gear, was clearly audible. Ditto for piano. On the Golson album the deepest notes resounded with an authority and decisiveness and richness that reminded of what I recently heard in New York at Dizzy's Coca-Cola Club, where I recently had the good fortune to see the Jamaican jazz pianist Monty Alexander. If you're familiar with Alexander's playing, you know that it's no holds

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Specs & Pricing

Momentum 400 Monoblock Amplifiers

Power: 400 watts @ 8 ohms, 800 watts @ 4 ohms, 1600 watts @ 2 ohms

Frequency response: 1Hz–200kHz, –1dB; 20Hz–20kHz, ±0.1dB

Distortion: 0.1% @ 1kHz, 400 watts @ 8 ohms

SNR: 105 dB, unweighted

Inputs: One balanced XLR

Input impedance: 1M ohm

Output impedance: 0.12 ohms

Dimensions: 12.5" x 5.25" x 21.5"

Weight: 95 lbs.

Price: \$65,000 per pair

Momentum Preamplifier
Inputs: Six with theater throughout

Outputs: Two balanced
Input impedance: 1M ohm
Output impedance: 10 ohms

Dimensions: 17" x 8" x 16"

Weight: 85 lbs.

Price: \$35,000

Momentum Phonostage

Inputs: Four pairs via XLR and RCA (two moving-coil, two moving-magnet)

Outputs: One pair balanced via XLR

Gain: 70dB for mc, 50dB for mm

Dimensions: Main, 15.5" x 3.5" x 12.75"

Power supply: 13.5" x 2.5" x 11"

Transformer box: 4" x 2" x 10.5"

Weight: 65 lbs.

Price: \$28,000

Associated Equipment

Wilson WAMM Master Chronosonic loudspeakers and subwoofers, Continuum Caliburn and TechDas Air Force 3 turntables with SAT tonearms, Lyra Etna SL, Miyajima Zero mono, and TechDas cartridges, dCS Vivaldi CD/SACD system, Ypsilon PST-100 Mk. II, VPS 100 phonostage, and Hyperion monoblock amplifiers, Transparent Opus Gen 5 and Nordost Odin 2 cabling

D'AGOSTINO MASTER AUDIO SYSTEMS
MOMENTUM SERIES PREAMPLIFIER,
PHONOSTAGE, AND 400 MONOBLOCK
POWER AMPLIFIERS

barred. I'm not going to tell you that the Momentums can match the dynamism of a live jazz band with two full sets of drummers, one on each end of the stage, going at full force. Nothing can. But in setting up the bass foundation, the Momentum amps and preamp also allowed me to hear more fully what the dCS Vivaldi stack was transmitting. Another album that vividly brought this home was the British trumpeter Alison Balsom's daring CD called *Caprice* on EMI Classics. The timpani whacks on Mozart's "Rondo alla turca" are powerful and vividly defined, emanating from the rear of the hall. The plucks of the Gothenburg Symphony Orchestra's bass section are also accurately captured on "Libertango." (Incidentally, another thing that the Momentum preamplifier demonstrated was that the Vivaldi DAC sounds a lot better in scale and power when set to output 6 volts, which the Momentum can easily handle, than at the Vivaldi's standard 2-volt setting.)

Another plus is a kind of reassuring placidity to the sound. On a Sony CD of Emanuel Ax playing Haydn piano concertos, I was struck by the flowing ease of the sound. There is a kind of understated gravity, a pearl-like enunciation of the notes that the Momentums convey. The Haydn concertos don't indulge in the storms followed by sunlight of a Beethoven sonata, let alone the fusillade of notes in a Chopin work. Rather, they have a playful and jaunty character grounded in an earnest classicism. Once more, the Momentum amplifiers, for all their power, were able to reproduce Ax's trills with great delicacy, allowing them to be sounded and then fade away into the distance. So here we come to the fabled decay so prized by audiophiles, which the Momentums possess in abundance—perhaps not to the extent of a tube amplifier, but still with a tenacity that conveys more than the penumbra of a note.

But it's not simply a question of a low noise floor and superb decay of the notes. Another noteworthy attribute here is that the control of the amplifiers means that the notes and instruments are properly scaled. No bloat or fáb here. This is an amplifier with a six-pack. You can listen to a Haydn piano concerto played by a top-notch performer like Ax at low volume and even then it sounds like the proportions are spot on. In some ways, it even becomes more alluring because the sound hovers in the air in a rather spooky fashion. Something similar occurred on the aforementioned Alison Balsom's rendering of Oskar Lindberg's "Andante," or on Jean-Baptiste Arban's famous "Variations on Casta Diva." There is a melting sinuosity to the sound that delivers almost more by implication than emphatic statement.

Still, the inner devil is going to emerge. You don't buy an amp and speakers like the WAMMs to sit around drinking out of porcelain cups in the sonic equivalent of a dainty tea party. There come moments when it's time to put on your big-boy pants, crank the dial, and get those air molecules vibrating. So I plopped on an SACD of Monty Alexander—actually, Sir Monty—playing Bob Marley tunes, and gave the volume ring of the Momentum preamplifier a healthy twist. Yeah, baby! On cuts such as "Running Away," I defy you to hear more



realistic instruments than what I heard emanating via the Momentums—a robust, resonant, life-sized trombone backed by an emphatic rhythm section. The scale of the soundstage wasn't big; it was cavernous.

Nor do you lose anything when going to vinyl. With the excellent TechDas Air Force 3 in situ (which the ineffable Maier Shadi of the Audio Salon visited me to install), I played an album I recently acquired in Los Angeles, a Pablo from 1984 featuring Milt Jackson, Ray Brown, Cedar Walton, and Mickey Roker. Jackson's mallets on vibes came through with concussive force, and the shimmer of the cymbals was to die for. The precision and force of Walton's piano playing was enthralling, block chord upon block chord reaching tumultuous crescendos. Pacing was also spot-on—propulsive and snappy like a string of firecrackers going off. To give the bass another test run, I listened to a Steeple-Chase recording of the Kenny Drew and Niels-Henning Ørsted Pedersen called *Duo 2*. The depth and solidity and weight of Pedersen's bass were uncanny. On *Led Zepplin II*, the phonostage easily coped with the welter of information let loose by the Air Force 3. Throughout, the nonchalant command of the Momentum over complex material was abundantly in evidence. Bass may have been tops so far in my system, getting the burr around the electric guitars to an unprecedented level on cuts such as "What Is and What Should Never Be."

So, yes, the D'Agostino complement will give you both refinement and a dose of rocket fuel. The word for this gear is commanding. Dan D'Agostino is back and ready to rumble. Are you? **tas**