

## Dan D'Agostino Progression Integrated Amplifier Review

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### Dan D'Agostino Master Audio Systems

#### Progression Integrated Amplifier

AUD **\$47,985 RRP** (fully optioned as reviewed)

\$34,995 base, plus \$8,995 DAC Module, \$3,995 Phono Module

Dan D'Agostino – the man behind the brand bearing his own name – is a designer with decades of experience creating state-of-the-art high-end amplifiers. His \$34,995 Progression Integrated Amplifier that you see here is the love child of the \$39,995 Progression Preamplifier and the identically priced Progression Stereo Amplifier. It's a single chassis integrated with a modular platform, so the optional \$8,995 DAC Module and/or the \$3,995 Phono Module can be fitted to round out its comprehensive capabilities.

As you'd expect from this stable, it looks and feels special. Rated output power is 200W RMS per channel into 8 ohms and 400W per side into 4 ohms, of what the company calls “high biased Class AB”. This comes through the use of discrete through-hole components, fully balanced and direct-coupled circuitry and a hefty output stage to its dual-mono amplifiers. The power supply uses a unique custom toroidal transformer winding first used in the Momentum M400 amplifier, designed to offer more power output from a given sized transformer – but it's still huge nonetheless.

Also seen is the SuperRail circuitry first used in the Progression Mono for the Progression Integrated. It operates somewhat like a turbocharger, specifically for the driver stage, before the



Link <https://youtu.be/vBa9WDGX2Rc>

output stage of the power amplifier, which boosts the voltage rails that would ordinarily experience loss. The company says, “the voltage boost allows the musical signal to exploit the full capability of the output voltage rails. Extending the musical signal swing closer to the output rails maximises the performance of the output circuitry design itself. The result is improved dynamics, lower distortion and a fierce grip of the speaker.”



**stereonet**

At the rear you'll find a single pair of high-quality gold plated speaker posts, an unswitched IEC power input and an antenna for the Bluetooth remote control, allowing it to operate without a line of sight and in a large listening room. There are also two single-ended inputs and three balanced

inputs, including a home theatre pass-through. A single balanced preamplifier output is also included to connect an additional power amplifier or subwoofer. A single 6.35mm headphone socket is fitted.

One of the two single-ended inputs is a phono input, so if the optional phono module is fitted, the input will operate. This only supports moving-coil cartridges and offers a variety of resistive loading options via two rows of dip switches. The cover of the amplifier will need to be removed to access the switches, but your local dealer can take care of that for you.

The other option is the digital module, with inputs for optical, coaxial, and USB, plus wired and wireless LAN connectivity which includes the ability to stream services such as Tidal, Qobuz, and Spotify via the built-in Converse Digital streaming platform. MQA decoding is included, and the module will support files up to DSD256 and PCM 24-bit/192kHz from its built-in premium quality ESS 9038PRO digital converter. Bluetooth connectivity is one obvious omission. The manufacturer says that having an onboard module looking after digital connectivity and streaming has several advantages which include the elimination of external connections, gain stages and additional components, which should offer sonic advantages.

D'Agostino offers two custom apps that operate on Apple's iOS devices exclusively. These give extensive control of what is playing, letting you access your stored music collection and preferred streaming app, as well as controlling the amplifier with more functionality than the remote control has. Alternatively, Roon Music management is also integrated into the unit, although at the time of the review, the certification had not been completed, but is due shortly.



## IN USE

The Progression Integrated looks special. The styling is unmistakably D'Agostino with a combination of modern and retro steampunk. I remember seeing the prototype amplifier at the 2019 *StereoNET Melbourne Hi-Fi Show* and being impressed with the sheer size of the aluminium chassis and unique styling, with the large central volume dial and the two analogue gauges. The heatsinks, integrated into the sides, are also a highlight with their distinctive rounded profile. There are no sharp edges to catch on your clothing, something that Dan D'Agostino learned years ago, after handling a product that destroyed an expensive suit.

My review sample was finished in anodised black, but silver is also available. The large rotary volume control is a work of art to use, with a silky smooth action and it operates a highly accurate

relay-controlled stepped attenuator that is specifically used for its sound quality. The twin analogue gauges are also multi-function meters, as they display volume level, balance, phase and mute. They change operation when a setting is altered, then they revert to being signal level indicators. There are also two small LED indicators for Digital Input and Network, but there are no direct access buttons anywhere on the front panel, nor on the remote control. Those functions are only accessible via the Progression Integrated app, which is rather clumsy to use. Still, I love its very high standard of finish, and that it's hand-built at the D'Agostino facility in Cave Creek, Arizona, USA.



After the amplifier has been connected to a power outlet for a few hours, the chassis warms to slightly above room temperature, with the digital module remaining active so that the Bluetooth connection is ready to accept instructions from the remote control. In use, the amplifier is capable of generating a large amount of heat, with the lovely looking heatsinks silently doing their job, but it does require some space around the amplifier – a minimum of 75mm all around, according to the user manual. Just make sure that your equipment rack is large enough to handle its size, ventilation needs and the 26kg weight.

During my audition period, I used the hard-wired RJ45 Ethernet connection into the digital module, as recommended in the user manual, which proved to be very stable. For a digital source, a Melco N1A server was employed, feeding the USB port, and an Oppo 203 as a CD transport using the coaxial connection. A variety of high-quality loudspeakers were deployed, including B&W 705 Signature, Chario Constellation Mk2 Cygnus, Revel Performa F228Be, JBL HDI-3800 and DALI Epicon 6. Comparing the unbalanced RCA input to the balanced XLR showed quite a difference in performance – with the latter sounding more dynamic and transparent – so my comments focus on this.





## SOUND QUALITY

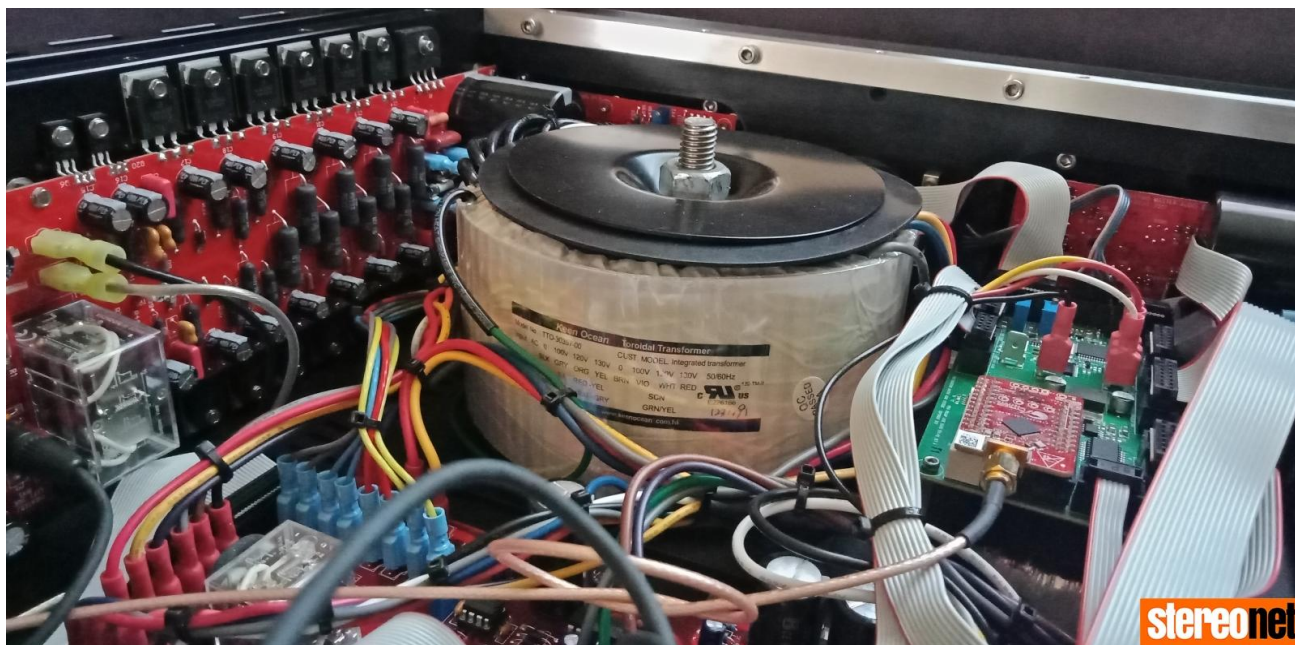
The D'Agostino Progression Integrated has great strengths in virtually all areas of its performance, with very few weaknesses. It sounds disciplined, powerful, dynamic and detailed. With stunning control over the loudspeakers, it's the closest to the 'straight wire with gain' adage that I have heard in my system. There are no embellishments to the sound, nor are there any omissions. It simply amplifies everything in the recording with accuracy and balance, to a very high degree, and thus craves equally flawless ancillaries.

For example, listening to **Brian Culbertson's** funky *Been Around the World* highlighted the consummately balanced nature of this amplifier. Every instrument sounded the way that it should, without glare or metallic overtones. Brass instruments on the track had a rawness and bite. At the same time, the piano and the vocal backing sounded natural and even – tonally, it's almost characterless, such is the accuracy of the reproduction. It simply gets out of the way and allows the music to flow unimpeded. Even though it's amazingly even from top to bottom, it is never dull or sterile sounding because every other critical parameter has also been heightened.

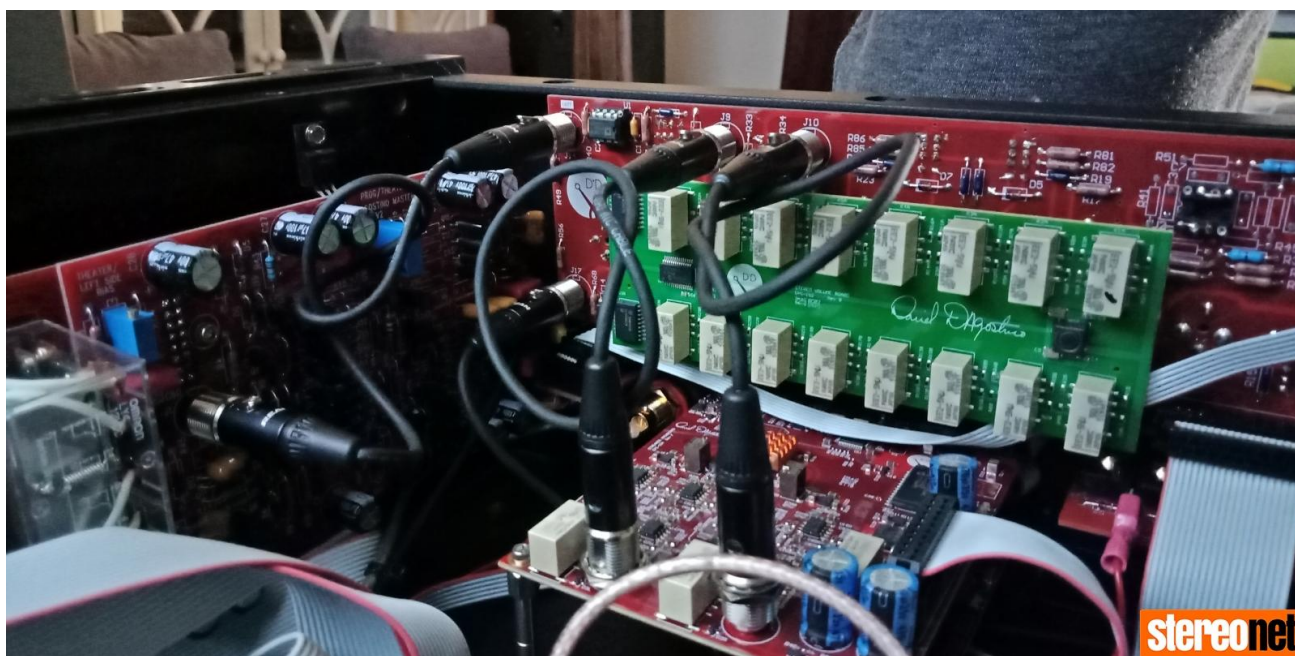
Treble has lots of smooth energy, even at high volume levels, with plenty of top-end extension. This is balanced with the revealing and open midrange and deep, well-extended bass. Listening to the way **Hans Zimmer** soundtrack *Up is Down* from *Pirates of the Caribbean* sounds is an excellent example of these qualities. With its inherently wide frequency range and evenness, the amplifier presented the orchestra as a vast soundscape with ideal top to bottom balance, plenty of definition of the many instruments and with thundering bass impact. It made the track sound majestic and powerful.

The Progression Integrated also served up some of the quietest backgrounds I have ever heard. Hearing *Canto At Gabelmeister's Peak* by **Alexandre Desplat** and the fine line pencil detail of the snare drum, shakers, triangle, balalaikas and everything else within the track was mesmerising. The dark backgrounds worked hand in glove with its highly transparent nature to become a wide-open

window into a musical performance. This amplifier resolved this complex track in its stride, unravelling complex rhythms and layers so effortlessly.



As well as being highly transparent, this amplifier is exceptionally deft at reproducing the music's natural rhythms. For example, **Paul Simon's** *Wristband* played with absolute cohesion, speed and rhythmic authority. That complex bassline was clean and coherent, with deep notes growling and shaking the room. The joint piano, drum and upright bass notes on *Growlin' Dan* by **Cécile McLorin Salvant** came over with scalpel-like precision, and the decay of each note was perfectly resolved.



Dynamics are another one of its strengths. With a rated 200W per channel, some might expect this amplifier to sound like the audio equivalent of an 800-pound gorilla, but they would be wrong. Instead, it proved agile at tracking the dynamic accenting of music, showing outstanding grip and control over the speaker drive units. The opening kick drum and bass guitar on *Take the Power Back* by **Rage Against The Machine** played loudly, was as realistic as I've heard it – with physicality, chest-pounding impact and dynamics to die for.



If you're the type of listener who craves an accurate soundstage, you won't be disappointed. Yet another highlight of the Progression Integrated is the ability to recreate the recording's original acoustic. Elements of the mix in *Chicago* by **Sufjan Stevens** seemed to leap forward out of the loudspeakers, yet the chorus was clearly recessed – showing this amplifier's elastic depth perspective. **Opeth's** *To Rid the Disease* had a soundstage that extended way forward too, making the loudspeakers all but dissolve in my listening room; via the D'Agostino it seemed almost holographic.



## THE MODULES

I hooked my Victor QL-Y7/Origin Live Silver/Hana SL turntable/arm/cartridge to the D'Agostino and found the sound to be excellent. I heard a dynamic and punchy sound with quiet backgrounds, and fine tonality with good pace, rhythm and timing. Dense orchestral tracks were nicely unpacked with each instrument having air around it and sounding clean and pure. Soundstaging was very good too, with plenty of front-to-back depth and a large, broad image. Overall the character of the phono stage's sound is very consistent with the unbalanced line inputs, but certainly comes at a price.

The optional DAC module provides a great sounding set of inputs, and also streams from the internet, cloud services and local storage. For comparison's sake, I streamed *Canto At Gabelmeister's Peak* via Tidal directly into the network input via the app. It sounded very full range, with quiet backgrounds and a particularly deep soundstage, although it wasn't as wide as it was deep. Using an external streamer rather than the onboard one, with the same track and using the coaxial input, brought the soundstage forward with a wider spread, with similar tonal and detail retrieval capability. Using the Melco to stream the same track via the Progression's USB input gave me the best sound of the lot, with quieter backgrounds, more detail, deeper bass extension and a larger soundstage.

As you would expect considering its price, this module's built-in DAC did an admirable job with a wide variety of external digital sources, proving how capable the whole amplifier is. I even used the optical feed from my TV going into this amplifier's TOSLINK input to enjoy the better sound, and the Progression also worked a treat as an AV amplifier with clear, legible dialogue and thundering soundtracks. Yet I found that – for all of its outstanding qualities – the D'Agostino sings to the head rather than the heart. In general terms, sonically it is incredibly able in every way, yet doesn't *quite* have the emotional appeal of some other high-end amplifiers, especially tube-powered ones. As always though, it comes down to taste – and I'm in no doubt that many will love this amazing creation.



## THE VERDICT

Whichever way you look at it, this amplifier is an extremely impressive feat of engineering with highly comprehensive capabilities. It leans on technology from other more expensive D'Agostino products and is a solid first step on to the company's upgrade ladder but at an easier-to-swallow (for some!) price point.

In terms of sound quality, it's hard to see what it could do better at the price – with its silent backgrounds, explosive dynamics, great power, fine tonal balance and holographic soundstage. Music is given life through this amplifier, with energy to burn. Of course though, at this rarefied section of the market, it's competing with some other incredible designs with different sonic fingerprints. So it would be best if you auditioned as many as you can when buying.

The essence of this product then is its all-round excellence. It ticks so many boxes from its sublime and distinctive styling, immaculate finish and great sound, to its handy modular construction and upgrade options. Then, of course, there's *that* brand. So if you seek something of this quality, then do hear it if you possibly can.

