

D'Agostino Progression Preamplifier Reviewed

By Brian Kahn | September 16, 2019



D'Agostino is as close to a household name as there is in the world of high-performance audio. Dan D'Agostino has been an established force in the audiophile world for over three decades now, and while he may have started in the speaker category by founding Great White Whale speaker company, he is best known for founding and running Krell for 29 years. Over the years, he built amplifiers that earned the reputation as being among the best in the industry, with tons of power and deep, controlled bass.

Close to a decade ago, Dan D'Agostino left Krell and shortly thereafter formed Dan D'Agostino Master Audio Systems. Gone were the home theater and lower-level products. Instead, the focus was on uber-performing, very high-priced two-channel electronics for the ultimate audiophile connoisseur. The first product to market were the Momentum series of compact amplifiers with gorgeous steampunk inspired copper case work and a sloped face dominated by a large, backlit dial. In an industry full of wow-factor, these products set a new high bar, not just for audio performance but for visual design, as well.



Fast-forward a few years and D'Agostino Master Audio Systems came to market with the Progression line, which is slotted below the Momentum series pricewise but is still pretty spendy. One glance at the Progression Preamplifier and its D'Agostino heritage is immediately apparent. The top of the front panel is radiused back into the top panel. The finish of the top panel is a more matte and brushed than the front panel and is solid, with the exception of two rows of small, rectangular vent holes that run down the center of the top panel.

At the center of the front panel, where the Momentum had a large backlit meter, the Progression Preamplifier has a large, copper-trimmed volume knob. A pair of round meters on the right side of the panel is backlit in the same shade of green as the rest of the D'Agostino line. Besides being attractive, with a design that D'Agostino says was inspired by classic tourbillon watches, the meters are used to convey a variety of information, including signal level, volume, balance, and mute status.

The left side of the panel has source and "zone" selection buttons, as well as the standby button. I placed the word "zone" in quotes, as this is not really a multi-zone unit. There are two outputs, but each has the same signal. While that is quirky, each source has a different colored LED light that illuminates when that source is selected. That is a clever solution. The front panel of the bottom chassis simply has "Dan D'Agostino Master Audio Systems" engraved on it.

Wait! Did I say bottom chassis?

Yes. The Progression Preamplifier has two chassis. The bottom chassis contains a sophisticated power supply and the top chassis holds the audio circuitry. A single DC power cord connects the two chassis. You may note the power supply chassis has two DC outputs; one is for future capabilities. D'Agostino is not saying what they have in mind, but one could guess some sort of

source component or phono stage. Despite the use of two chassis, the overall dimensions of 7.5 inches high by eighteen inches wide and twelve inches deep are rather modest, although the package weighs in at a solid forty pounds.



The top chassis has two analog audio boards, one for each channel. There are two pairs of single-ended inputs, four pairs of balanced inputs, and two pairs of balanced outputs. Interestingly, one of the pairs of single ended-inputs is labeled "phono," but there is no phono stage. Maybe another hint at future plans?

Adding the DAC to the equation also gives you one USB Type A port, one optical input, and one coaxial digital input.

All of this engineering and nicely finished chassis do not come cheap. The Progression Preamplifier can be ordered as an analog only model for \$22,000. The DAC is an additional \$4,500 and can be added at time of purchase or at a later date.

The Hookup

At forty pounds, the Progression Preamplifier was still easy enough to install by myself, especially since the weight was spread out to two chassis. The unit came nicely packed in foam cut to support each chassis separately and protect the finishes from damage. I placed the power supply chassis on my stand; the built-in soft feet are designed to dampen vibrations. Coned feet were supplied for the top chassis and fit into impressions on the top panel of the bottom chassis. The bottom chassis was plugged directly into the wall as suggested in the owner's manual. The included DC power cord connects the two units and the Bluetooth antenna simply screws into the back of the unit.



The rest of the review system components included a **PS**

Audio DirectStream DAC and Network player, an **Oppo BDP-95**, D'Agostino Progression Stereo Amplifier (review forthcoming), and a **Halcro dm38 amplifier**. In addition to using two different amplifiers, I also used two pairs of speakers: my MartinLogan Summits, as well as a pair of **Vivid Audio Kaya 90s**. Kimber Select cabling was used throughout.

Performance

I was in the middle of reviewing the Vivid Kaya 90s when I hooked up the D'Agostino electronics, so I went back to my listening selections from that review since they were fresh in my mind and on my ears. I started my listening with Progression Preamplifier feeding my Halcro amplifier, then switched to the Progression Amplifier, and finally switched speakers to the MartinLogan Summits and listened to those through each amplifier. I did this to get a better feeling of what was coming from the preamplifier as opposed to other components.

Jennifer Warnes' "Bird on a Wire" from her album **Famous Blue Raincoat** (CD, Private Music) imaged better through the Progression Preamplifier than I have ever heard. The sense of space or blackness in between the instruments added to the definition without any artificial etching. I tried muting the signal, which, with many components, will allow you to find the audible noise floor if you listen closely. The noise floor on the Progression Preamplifier was audibly lower than that of my McIntosh, which is the best that I've heard in my system to date.



The electrostatic panels of the MartinLogans made it easy to experience the speed and coherence of the Progression, and the Kayas were an excellent vehicle for a fun display of dynamics, although this was even more evident in some of the later listening selections. I listened to this very familiar track many times during this review process, mostly with the PS Audio DirectStream as a source, but also through the Progression Preamplifier's internal DAC. The difference in reproduction of the triangle on this track was readily discernable. With the built in DAC, there was more energy in the upper midrange and I was able to hear additional detail in the ring. D'Agostino notes that using the

built-in DAC as opposed to an external DAC bypasses one gain stage as well as a set of interconnects, which, theoretically, makes for a cleaner signal path with, all else being equal. Scala & Kolacny Brothers' cover of Radiohead's "Creep" from their **self-titled album** (CD, Atco) was one of the other female vocals I listened to. Rather than a single vocalist, this album features a female choir accompanied by piano. As with "Bird on a Wire," the voices and instruments sounded natural, with no artificial sibilance, chestiness, or other sonic artifacts.

What got my attention was the effortlessness and musicality of the reproduction. My plan was to simply audition this one track, but I was so engrossed by the Progression Preamplifier's performance that I ended up listening to the whole album. The music just seemed to flow more naturally. The rhythm and timing sounded more believable, with the reproduction of space feeling more immersive.

This album has always provided a good sense of space, but the level of nuanced space I heard through the Progression Preamplifier was better than what I had previously heard in my system. Perhaps the amount of low-level detail in the reflection and decay of the voices and piano notes is what provided this. The combination of speed, detail, and quiet backgrounds make for a wholly engrossing combination.



I again switched between the internal DAC and the PS Audio. As before, the internal DAC appeared to have more detail and the PS Audio was more laid back in the upper midrange. While I think all will appreciate the additional detail, the amount of upper midrange presence will be a personal choice.

Dire Straits' "**Money for Nothing**" (Warner Brothers, DSD64) is another track I listened to through both pairs of speakers and both preamplifiers. The best combination for the nearly clichéd opening riff was the Vivid Audio Kaya 90s and D'Agostino Progression Preamplifier. With this combination, the guitars sounded so resolute during the often-cluttered intro that you could hear new detail that most can't outside of the mastering studio.



Moving to more modern EDM music that has all of the technology to push today's best electronics, I spooled up Skrillex's "Scary Monsters and Nice Sprites" from the **album of the same name** (CD, Big Beat Records). The Progression Preamp demonstrated its Krell heritage with fast, deep, and well controlled synthesized bass notes that make for an impressive demo.



For an all-out audiophile assault, I cued up Tchaikovsky's "1812 Overture" performed by **Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra led by Erich Kunzel** (TELARC, CD), which I listened to through both speaker systems. The MartinLogans were not as dynamic as the Vivid Audio Kaya 90s, but otherwise my impressions below apply to both. The Progression Preamplifier easily revealed the many nuanced layers of music. As I noted before during my Kaya review, the Progression distinctly placed the instruments on the soundstage. The overall position of the soundstage changed between the two sets of speakers but with both sets of speakers the instruments were rendered with natural detail and specific relative positions among them. The Progression rendered the details and dynamics of this piece without any sense of compression or loss.



Throughout my time with Progression Preamplifier, I found the overall experience impressive. While the remote was quite simple to use, I often found myself walking to the preamplifier to adjust volume as the knob, as I couldn't resist its perfect combination of weight, fluidity, and inertia. These aspects, coupled with a variable rate encoder, made this one of my favorite volume controls of all time. The overall aesthetics, particularly the analog meters with their green backlights, were very pleasing, and the combination of meters and lights made it easy to see what was being selected or adjusted.

Competition and Comparison

The D'Agostino Progression Preamplifier's price point puts it in a rarefied level of company, but there is still a surprising amount of competition. The **Ayre Acoustics KX-R Twenty** (\$29,950) is another highly regarded solid-state preamplifier with a fully balanced, no feedback topology. Unlike the Progression, it does not have a DAC option.

The **Mark Levinson No. 526** (\$20,000) is also a fully balanced, solid-state preamplifier, but adds a phono stage in addition to the built-in DAC.

One other highly regarded stereo preamp from another audiophile legend is the **Pass Labs XP-30** preamplifier (\$16,500). Like the Progression, it is a fully balanced, solid-state, multiple-chassis design. Unlike most other preamplifiers, it is scalable up to six channels in case multichannel music is your thing.

The Downside

I find it hard to fault the sonics of the Progression Preamplifier, any quibbles with which will be more due to personal tastes. However, there are a few things I would like to note.

The limited number of inputs, especially single-ended, may be problematic for larger systems with numerous analog sources. The DAC is quite good, but I would like to see a way for the end user to upgrade firmware to take advantage of the FPGA. Many of today's state-of-the-art DACs provide MQA decoding; tomorrow may bring something else.

This DAC does not decode MQA, which I'm OK with, but if you stream a lot of MQA encoded music from, say, Tidal, you may miss this capability. I would like to see a network input on the DAC or another way of being able to implement Roon (or similar server software) without having to add another box to the equation.

Conclusion

The Progression Preamplifier by D'Agostino is simply an excellent stereo preamp. While I was expecting a pretty strong performance, the Progression went above and beyond my sonic expectations. Expect the warmth of tubes without the headaches associated with tubes. Expect detail at a level that, frankly, I have never heard in 20 plus years of reviewing some of the world's finest audiophile electronics.

In terms of fit and finish, the D'Agostino Progression Preamp is simply in a class of its own. This is a product for a very small group of people with the means to appreciate the best, and to those people I say that I am jealous. It is going to be hard to find a stereo preamp that outperforms this one.

Additional Resources

- Visit the **Dan D'Agostino Master Audio Systems website** for more product information.

HTR Product Rating for D'Agostino Progression Preamplifier	
Criteria	Rating
Performance	★★★★★
Value	★★★★☆
Overall	★★★★☆

Disagree with our product rating? [Email us](#) and tell us why you think this product should receive a higher rating.