

THE MOMENTUM OF A MASTER

The Dan D'Agostino Master Audio Momentum Phono Preamp

by Greg Petan

Dan D'Agostino Master Audio has been on the scene since 2010, but founder D'Agostino is no newcomer to high-end audio. After leaving Krell Industries, the company he founded in 1981, D'Agostino found himself unshackled, free to create the components he had been contemplating for some time. The Momentum mono amplifiers, his first offering in 2011 was a first shot firing across the bow of the audio industry, letting everyone concerned know that he was still very much in the game. The Momentum Stereo followed, and it was equally impressive, receiving an enthusiastic review at this magazine as well as others round the world.

Dan
D'Agostino
MASTER AUDIO

Over the last few decades, I have owned several Krell amplifiers, CD players, and preamps. The KPS25 CD player, in particular, was a favorite, combining staggering build quality and industrial design with state of the art sound; a bonus in the late nineties when digital was just beginning to find it's footing. I wish I still had that one, but time marches on and as the river flows we find ourselves twenty years downstream.

For those unaware, Dan D'Agostino Master Audio is not Krell by another moniker. D'Agostino approached these new designs with a clean sheet of paper, combining his vast engineering knowledge and cost no object mentality. My first experience with the Momentum integrated amplifier over two years ago forced me to recalibrate my expectations and get to know Dan's current work with fresh ears. Faster, cleaner, less colored, more accurately rendered timbre and a completely grain free top end are only a couple of virtues that make an impression upon first listen. Clearly, these designs are an entirely fresh take and a new level of achievement for Dan D'Agostino.



Though D'Agostino designed more than one phono stage for Krell, it wasn't what they were known for. Analog was in a death spiral at the time, and very few manufacturers were eager to invest resources into what was then a dying medium. What's old is new again and analog has miraculously risen from the grave. D'Agostino has taken his take no prisoners approach to developing a full function state of the art phono stage. That challenge is always about offering outer space silence while providing enough gain to boost the minute signals transferred from the cartridge to

a level where the stereo preamp can take over.

This juggling act requires a deft touch to get right, and a "me too" solution merely would not suffice for one of high-end audio's founders. The resulting Dan D'Agostino Master Audio Momentum phono stage is not, I repeat, not for the fair-weathered hobbyist or faint of heart. (or wallet) The Momentum phono stage, at \$28,000 MSRP, is capable of hosting four tonearm/cartridges, two MC cartridges, two MM cartridges each with their own loading options and selectable RIAA, FFRR, RCA, Columbia, and DGG

EQ curves, selectable via a front-panel knob. A push button for +/- 6db of additional gain and a wide range of loading options for each channel are all at your fingertips via the front panel. All this adds up to the Momentum phono stage being perhaps the most serious piece of audio gear I have ever reviewed.

I will confess I'm a relative newbie when it comes to collecting vinyl yet I have managed to assemble a respectable front end in the form of the Triangle Art Signature turntable, Osiris tonearm, and an Ortofon Cadenza Black cartridge. *(continued)*

Real High Fidelity. BRINKMANN

*"The World's Finest Turntables...
endorsed by the world's greatest Mastering Engineer"*



"Brinkmann's Bardo Turntable and 10.0 Tonearm are essential reference tools in my evaluation of test pressings. They simply let more of the music through."

—Bob Ludwig, Gateway Mastering Studios



BRINKMANN Brinkmann-USA.com

"The World's Finest Turntables...and more!"

The Dan D'Agostino Momentum phonostage's price tag only reinforces the above characterization as a piece of audio gear designed for ultimate performance and intended for use in the best possible systems. The Momentum claims 70db of gain and utilizes no capacitors in the signal path to smear detail and curtail bass dynamics. With balanced inputs and output, the Momentum phonostage is ready for any and all configurations. The Momentum phonostage also uses two separate power supplies. Power rectifying and regulation circuits located in the separate base of the phono stage and an isolated transformer is connected via an umbilical cord.

Having lived with and reviewed the D'Agostino Momentum Integrated amplifier and spent time with the MLife Integrated amplifier streamer/DAC as well as adding the Momentum stereo preamp to a permanent place in the system, there are a few conclusions I have drawn. First off, seeing these pieces in photos does nothing to prepare you for seeing them and living with them in person. Leaving personal biases aside for a moment as far as looks go (I happen to love the looks), there are precious few if any equals when it comes to build quality, creative use of materials and overall finish. This is a component that stands on its own as an object worthy of the highest praise as industrial art. For those that care little about how something is designed, constructed or takes up physical space in one's home, you can still count on the sound being stellar, but you would be missing out on a big part of what is on offer.



The Momentum phonostage has such wonderful proportions and confident stance with its gleaming polished aircraft grade aluminum chassis and copper heat sinks; it is massive yet relatively compact. It just looks right.

The second and most important point is, of course, the sound. I have been taken by the performance of the D'Agostino lineup from my first listen to the Momentum integrated amplifier. Is there a house sound? An identifiable touch or fingerprint that offers guys like me a handle to put the sound into some kind of context? A small yes. Is that a bad thing? A big No. There are no gross colorations distortions or deviations that get in the way of the music ...ever. The Momentum Phono Stage passes the signal with utter liquidity and fidelity. Ray LaMantagne's *Till The Sun Turns Black*, one of the most honest recordings and sincere pieces of music in my collection shows the D'Agostino Momentum's strength in spades. The recording is rendered so convincingly, and with such ease, the music is consumed as if injected intravenously. Textures and colors of the bands instruments and Rays voice are vibrant, yet never edgy or thinned out in the critical upper mid-band lower treble.

This is what I love and value about not only the Momentum phonostage but all the other D'Agostino products I've lived with. D'Agostino electronics, the Momentum phonostage, in particular, manages to deliver all the detail, texture and dynamics in the critical upper midrange and lower treble without any of the hyped over emphasis that plagues so many other pieces of gear whether tubed or solid state. (continued)

REVIEW

I hear a refinement and a lack of sonic noise or over emphasis leaving a totally natural and a perfectly integrated instrumental timbre. In a way, they remind me of Jeff Rowlands older designs, but those were a bit colored in an attempt to achieve the same result. Of course, if there are frequency imbalances or distortions in the recording, they will show themselves, like a high school football team mooning passing cars from their bus windows. There is no softening or blunting of transients, no golden cast to romanticize the music. The Momentum phonostage simply does not need to depend on such sonic sleight of hand. When the recording is right, the sound is stellar. When the recording is flawed, it's still amazing how much you can find right with the music through the Momentum. A combination of sheer resolution and an ultra-low noise floor, reveals musical nuggets of truth no matter what the quality of the recording.

As far as the rest of the spectrum goes, the low noise and vanishing levels of distortion carry through revealing a mid band and bass that seems limitless as to how much density of information and how free from any typical sonic restrictions I've heard from other products. Midrange dense instruments and voices come through as complete and as whole as any component I've ever heard. Listening to Stanley Clarke *If This Bass Could only Talk* through the Pass Labs XA200.8 Mono amplifiers, MIT ACC cable, and the Sonus Faber Liliun speakers, in addition to the abovementioned analog front end, this is music reproduction on a level I've never heard in my home. The deep bass while incredibly controlled and extended still manages to be rife with color, pitch, and texture. Discovery of low bass information alone could warrant a full write up, but I think you get the point. From top to bottom, the Momentum is full on transparent and completely faithful to the source material. *(continued)*



T H E F I N E A R T S

In celebration of 40 years in the pursuit of high-performance in audio, conrad-johnson is pleased to present our new limited production ART150 (stereo 150 Watts/channel) and ART300 (mono 300 Watts) amplifiers, each a virtual window on the emotional experience of live music right in your home.



conrad-johnson It just sounds right.

2800K Dorr Ave • Fairfax, VA 22031 • phone: 703-698-8581, fax: 703-560-5360 • www.conradjohnson.com

Dynamically Notes simply fly through the Momentum Phono and when things get serious, like on my original RCA Living Stereo Heifetz and the Boston Symphony Orchestra Beethoven Violin Concerto it can be enthralling. I expect big dynamics from digital. But compared to the Momentum phono stage in my analog system, Big dynamics via digital can sound a bit artificially loud rather than provide the seamless sonic expansion that a swelling orchestra in full bore can provide. Here the dynamic ebb and flow presented by the Momentum phono stage captures big swings in dynamics beautifully, and when the crescendo hits, there is still a feeling it could go bigger if necessary. This is very compelling, the kind of thing that sends chills up and down the spine! An instantaneous rise and fall creating stark contrasts that keeps ones attention riveted offers a suddenness to the presentation that is always enticing. This benefits all types of music and contributes to the overall level of competence of the Momentum. Music should surprise, and through the Momentum, that's exactly what it does.

When there is such a low noise floor, imaging, the rendering of space and sound staging comes into being with incredible effect. The spread of the orchestra like that on the Beethoven Violin Concerto, the Momentum breathes life into the spaces separating each instrument and orchestras section.



Following individual musical lines becomes a visual as well as aural experience. Front to back depth is exemplary carving vast acoustic spaces beyond my brick wall 7ft. behind the speakers. The Momentum allows one to be drawn into the stage with utter believability. I have a hard time imagining a substantial improvement in this area from any other phono preamp.

Before seriously considering the Dan D'Agostino Master Audio Momentum phono stage one must ask one's self some sobering questions. First, Are you deeply committed to and down with the analog cause? Is your system up to the level of quality and resolution by which you can appreciate what the Momentum is capable of? Can one afford the substantial financial cost for entry? Like I said, this is one serious piece of gear so Posers and the casual analog trendsetters need not apply. Yes, there are many relatively cost effective options available such as the excellent Esoteric E-03 phono stage I recently reviewed. Sadly as good as the E-03 is, it is no Momentum. On the higher end, believe it or not you can spend double even triple the cost of the Momentum for a phono stage which is mind boggling but I digress. While the fact that even costlier phono stages exist still makes it a stretch to call the Momentum any kind of bargain, by comparison, the build quality, system flexibility and user interface in addition to the un-impeachable sound quality makes a strong case for investing in the Momentum. I'm keeping the Momentum phono stage despite having only one arm/cartridge (for now) in my system. Put simply, The Momentum phono stage is one of the finest components I have ever experienced. *(continued)*

Further Thoughts *by Jeff Dorgay*

Though I have only heard the Momentum phonostage (to excellent result, I might add) in dealer showrooms, what turns this guy with ten turntables on is its flexibility. I agree with Mr. Petan wholeheartedly about the sound of the D'Agostino components. I've always been impressed and if I had to characterize the sound, I'd call it slightly warmer than Burmester, but slightly less warm than Pass Labs. A subtle shad of grey, but I hope that gives you an idea.

Four inputs. They had me in the D'Agostino booth when this beauty was introduced. The more you get involved in analog, the more you know one turntable, cartridge and tonearm isn't going to do the trick. The wider the range of your record collection, the more you need one transducer to get the job done. Not only does the Momentum phonostage give you four options, they are all preset and stored on the front panel.

Offering a wider range of loading and capacitance options than any phonostage I've ever seen, their can't be a cartridge that this baby can not accommodate. And that's super cool as your turntable and cartridge collection grows. It's also worth mentioning that the Momentum phonostage has the best instruction manual I've ever seen with a phonostage. It talks you through all of the aspects of gain, loading and capacitance settings clearly and concisely. A big help as your enthusiasm expands your turntable collection, and even if you think you know all this stuff, a little refresher doesn't hurt. I've seen way too many five and six figure components that fail epically at this. Hats off to team D'Agostino for including it.

In the realm of mega phonostages, I'll even go as far to say that if you have more than one turntable (and especially if you have three or four active tonearm/cartridge combinations), I agree with Greg that the Momentum is a bargain. My only nit to pick is a single ground lug. That gets crowded with four tonearms regarding physical proximity. As for everything else, it's a beauty. And the separate DC power supply reminds me of the one that came with my Krell PAM-5 preamp – which had a damn good phonostage built in. ●



The D'Agostino
Master Audio
Momentum Phonostage
MSRP: \$28,000

MANUFACTURER
Dan D'Agostino Master
Audio Systems

CONTACT
www.dandagostino.com

PERIPHERALS
Analog Source
Triangle Art Signature/Osiris
Arm/Ortofon Cadenza Black

Preamplifier
Pass Labs XP-25

Power Amplifier
Pass Labs XA200.8

Cable MIT