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JASON VICTOR SERINUS

D'Agostino Progression M550

MONOBLOCK POWER AMPLIFIER

We audiophiles so frequently get caught up in the pursuit of perfection that some have attempted to rebrand high-end audio as “perfectionist audio.” But is it even possible for a single piece of audio gear, let alone an entire audio system, to attain perfection when there’s no common agreement as to what “perfection” means? It’s easier to cue up a Nirvana track than to find the way to audio nirvana.

Nonetheless, the journey toward sonic perfection continues to grip many of us like a Siren who lures sailors to their death with the sweetness of her song. For some who listen closely and steer wisely, however, that death can be more akin to *La petite mort* than to a dead end.

I like to set sail with people whose sonic values, as manifest in the equipment they design, mirror my own. In the field of amplification, few American designers are more known for the pursuit of a certain vision of perfection than Dan D’Agostino. Over a 40+-year history in audio, which includes founding and serving as CEO and chief engineer of Krell Industries (1980–2009) before moving on to found Dan D’Agostino Master Audio Systems (aka D’Agostino) in mid-2010, Dan¹ has envisioned, designed, and shepherded



When an amp can deliver all that from a simple performance with voice and piano, it's a great amp.

the development of a host of solid state amplifiers and other products that have established a benchmark for melding power and speed with sonic beauty, tonal accuracy, and bass response.

“I want to make something that sounds musical—that satisfies and brings me closer to the musical event that’s being reproduced,” Dan said at the start of a phone chat that also included Senior Engineer Burhan Coskun, who did crucial work on D’Agostino’s latest designs. “I’ve always strived for this goal. The closer I get, the more engrossed I get in making it better.

“Where I am is way farther than I’ve ever been. With Krell, I never achieved sonically what I’ve achieved with Dan D’Agostino. Dan D’Agostino is much, much, much more musical and way closer to my sonic goal.

1 To avoid confusion between Dan D’Agostino the man and Dan D’Agostino the company, I’m identifying the former by his first name.

SPECIFICATIONS

Description Solid state class-AB mono power amplifier. Inputs: XLR. Outputs: Custom binding posts. Input impedance: 100k ohms. Output impedance: 0.1 ohms. Power: 550W into 8 ohms, 1100W into 4 ohm, 2200W into 2 ohms (all 27.4dBW). Frequency response: 1Hz–

80kHz, –1dB; 20Hz–20kHz, ±0.01dB. S/N ratio: 105dB unweighted, 75dB A-weighted. Distortion: 0.15% @ 1kHz at 550W into 8 ohms. Power draw at idle: 80W.

Dimensions 17.875" (454mm) W × 9.0" (230 mm) H × 23" (584mm) D. Weight: 115lb (52.2kg).

Finish Silver or Black; custom finishes upon request.

Serial numbers of units reviewed PM0506P, PM0507P. Manufactured in the United States.

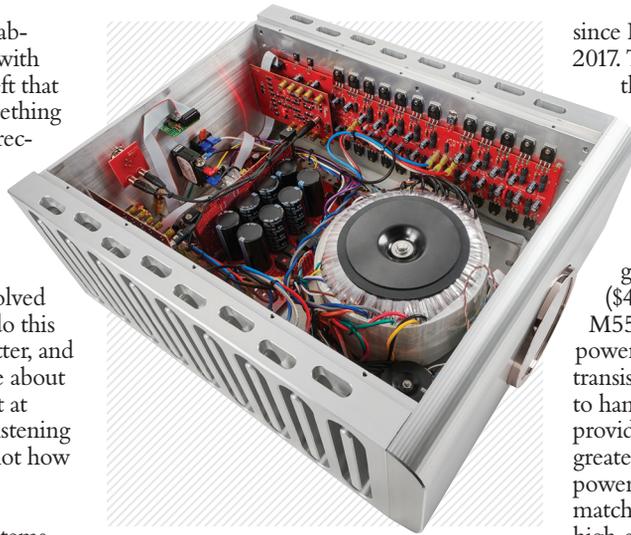
Price \$44,950/pair. Approximate number of US dealers: 27. Warranty: Three years from date of retail purchase

or four years from date of manufacture for original purchaser of a new product from an authorized dealer.

Manufacturer Dan D’Agostino Master Audio Systems, LLC. 5855 E Surrey Dr., Cave Creek, AZ 85337. (Tel): (480) 575-3069. Web: dandagostino.com.

“Our current designs have absolutely nothing in common with what I did at Krell. When I left that company, I wanted to do something in the completely opposite direction. I’m glad in a way that I was asked to leave, because [the move] provided me with the platform that I could use to do the designs I do today. I think that at Krell we got involved in a numbers game: We can do this better because it measures better, and it does this better. It was more about technology than listening. But at D’Agostino, we listen a lot. Listening is the most important thing, not how it measures.”

After Dan founded Dan D’Agostino Master Audio Systems, the Momentum monoblocks² led the way in the first half of 2011. D’Agostino subsequently developed three tiers of products: Relentless, Momentum, and Progression. The monoblock amplifier line, topped by the 570lb Relentless monoblocks (\$295,000/pair), until recently extended down through the 95lb Momentum M400 (\$65,000/pair) to the 125lb Progressions (\$38,000/pair)—my reference amplifiers



since I reviewed them in October 2017. The Progressions are among the best sounding amps in their price range that have ever graced my system.

Now the company has replaced the original Progression monos with the fully balanced, 115lb Progression M550 monoblocks (\$44,950/pair). The class-AB M550, which requires a 20A power cable, has a new input-stage transistor structure that is claimed to handle a lot more current and provide six times more power, greater thermal stability during power delivery, “perfect” gain matching between the improved high-signal N and P-channel transistors, and an improved high-frequency response that melds lower saturation voltage with higher gain. There’s also an upgraded output stage that includes 48 power transistors and a 2000VA power supply transformer with nearly 100,000 microfarads of power supply storage capacitance. Together

² Later called the Momentum M300s.

MEASUREMENTS

For logistical reasons, I measured a different sample of the Dan D’Agostino Master Audio Systems Progression M550 monoblock (serial number PM006P) with my Audio Precision SYS2722 system (see the January 2008 “As We See It”). I repeated some of the measurements with the magazine’s Audio Precision APx500 analyzer. Usefully, the box included a set of tests performed with the APx500.

Before I performed the testing, I preconditioned the amplifier by running it at one-eighth its specified power into 8 ohms for 30 minutes, as recommended by the Consumer Electronics

Association. After the preconditioning, the M550’s top panel was surprisingly cool, at 96.8°F (36°C). The temperature of the massive heatsinks on the amplifier’s sides was 101.8°F (38.8°C) and didn’t increase significantly with the amplifier idling.

The voltage gain into 8 ohms for the balanced input was 29.7dB, and the input inverted absolute polarity, the opposite of what I had found with earlier D’Agostino amplifiers.² The input impedance at low and middle frequencies was very slightly lower than the specified 100k ohms, at 95k ohms, dropping inconsequentially to 50k ohms at 20kHz. The

output impedance was higher than the specified 0.1 ohm, at 0.37 ohm at 20Hz and 1kHz, rising slightly to 0.4 ohm at 20kHz. The response with our standard simulated loudspeaker³ therefore varied by ± 0.26 dB (fig.1, gray trace). The amplifier offered a wide small-signal bandwidth, the output into

¹ See stereophile.com/content/measurements-maps-precision.

² In measuring the Momentum HD, I found it inverted polarity, but in a Manufacturers’ Comment, Dan D’Agostino wrote that this was due to an error in the preproduction code that was fixed in all production units. See stereophile.com/content/dan-dagostino-master-audio-systems-momentum-hd-line-preamplifier-measurements.

³ See stereophile.com/content/real-life-measurements-page-2.

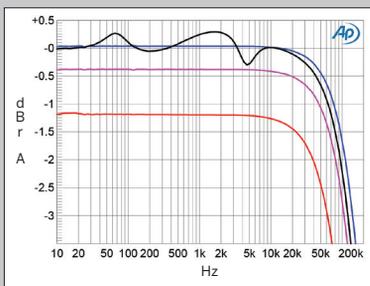


Fig.1 Dan D’Agostino Progression M550, frequency response at 2.83V into: simulated loudspeaker load (gray), 8 ohms (blue), 4 ohms (magenta), 2 ohms (red) (0.5dB/vertical div.).

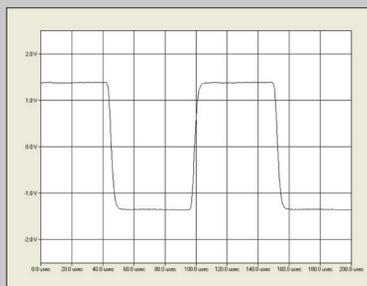


Fig.2 Dan D’Agostino Progression M550, small-signal, 10kHz squarewave into 8 ohms.

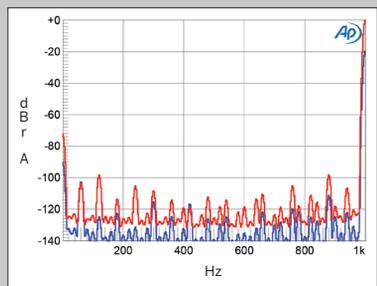


Fig.3 Dan D’Agostino Progression M550, spectrum of 1kHz sine wave, DC-1kHz, at 1W (blue) and at 100W (red) into 8 ohms (linear frequency scale).

with a new and far more efficient heatsink design borrowed from the Relentless, these changes enable the Progression M550's transistors to handle a lot more current flow and run hotter than previous devices used by D'Agostino. "We're pushing a lot harder on all the circuits, but our safe operating area has actually gotten bigger," Dan said.

According to Coskun, technological advances in the Progression M550s have made possible what amounts to a "new amplifier" with a higher bias setting. The M550s can remain in class-A for up to the first 100W of their output. When used in a moderately sized room—mine is 16' × 20' with ceilings that flatten out at 9'—the Progression M550s can deliver 550Wpc into 8 ohms, 1100Wpc into 4 ohms, and a whopping 2200Wpc into 2 ohms. Operating in class-A avoids the switching distortion that is an inevitable result of operating in class-B at higher power levels. Yet, because the M550 is a class-AB design, it consumes only 80W at idle.³ They're not the Relentless monsters, which start at 1500Wpc into 8 ohms and keep doubling down from there, but they are still a significant advance for products presented by a man who has been pursuing what he refers to as "audio pleasure" for his entire career.

"In all my products, I like to put enough class-A in [the output stage] so that at low, low levels, the amplifier maintains its sweet presentation and sounds more musical," Dan explained. "I'm certainly not advocating pure class-A operation, which is very inefficient. The techniques I've de-

veloped do not necessitate the use of pure class-A circuitry, because I get a very musical sound without being in class-A all the time and using a tremendous amount of energy and huge heatsinks. Our designs give you the best of high-powered delivery when needed, as well as the sonic accuracy that class-A bias delivers."

Dan told me that if he'd listened to the new Progression M550s when he designed the original Momentum monoblocks 10 or 11 years ago, he would have declared the Progression M550s better. Nonetheless, in the current lineup, price reflects sound quality. "All three amps are very musical," he insisted, "but they're all absolutely different designs that we borrow from [as we upgrade]. If part of a circuit works really well, we will incorporate it into an existing or future design to see if we can improve it.

"The Momentum 400 is definitely another step toward ultimate musicality—it has a mammoth soundstage, sits on a warm palette, and has more harmonic texture to it. We're not upgrading the Relentless; we're kind of in stasis mode because we don't know how to improve it. The Relentless is a completely different-sounding amplifier with a different presentation. It's big and musical with a really solid platform, but it seems as ultradelicate as listening to a small 10W amplifier on a small speaker. The unfortunate thing is that the Relentless is very heavy. It takes a crew to get them in your

3 For additional information, please see dandagostino.com/products/progression-mono-amplifier.

measurements, continued

8 ohms (blue trace) not reaching -3dB until 140kHz. The Progression M550's reproduction of a 10kHz squarewave (fig.2) accordingly featured very short risetimes with, commendably, no apparent overshoot or ringing. (This is something that has been a consistent feature with amplifiers designed by Dan D'Agostino.)

Measured with both phases of the balanced input shorted to ground, the M550's wideband, unweighted signal/noise ratio was 55.3dB, ref. 1W into 8 ohms. This ratio improved to 80.5dB when the measurement bandwidth was restricted to 22Hz-22kHz, and to 89dB when the reading was A-weighted. The blue trace in fig.3, taken at 1W into 8

ohms, reveals that the primary source of noise is magnetic interference at 60Hz and its odd-order harmonics, which I assume stem from the massive toroidal transformer. However, at high powers (red trace), the spurious at 120Hz and its harmonics increase in level.

When I examined how the percentage of THD+N varied with output power, with clipping defined as when the THD+N noise in the amplifier's output reached 1%, the M550 clipped at 555W into 8 ohms (27.44dB, fig.4), which is marginally higher than the specified 550W (27.4dBW). The clipping power into 4 ohms (fig.5) was 840W (26.23dBW); though this is 1.17dB lower than the specified 1.1kW,

I don't hold the wall voltage constant during these tests, feeling that this is more representative of an amplifier's behavior in a typical system. The wall voltage was 118.7V with the amplifier idling but had dropped to 115.1V with the amplifier clipping into 4 ohms. Note from these two graphs that the distortion percentage at low powers is higher than it is at high powers. This behavior was consistent with both Audio Precision analyzers and is almost identical to what I found with the Dan D'Agostino Progression Mono amplifier that JVS reviewed in October 2017.⁴

4 See stereophile.com/content/dan-dagostino-progression-mono-monoblock-power-amplifier-measurements.

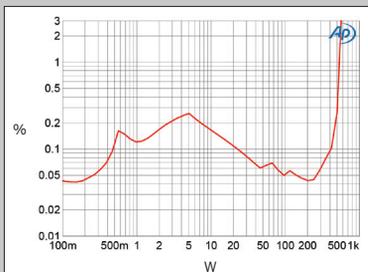


Fig.4 Dan D'Agostino Progression M550, distortion (%) vs 1kHz continuous output power into 8 ohms.

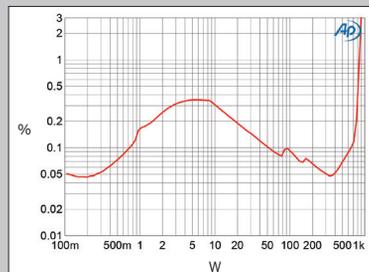


Fig.5 Dan D'Agostino Progression M550, distortion (%) vs 1kHz continuous output power into 4 ohms.

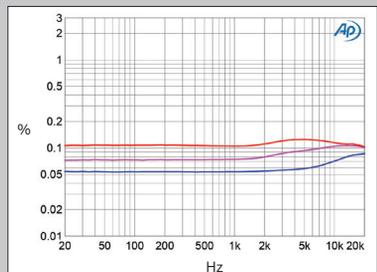


Fig.6 Dan D'Agostino Progression M550, THD+N (%) vs frequency at 28.3V into: 8 ohms (blue), 4 ohms (magenta), 2 ohms (red).

house. And they're very expensive as amplifiers go.

"We keep looking at the M400 to see how we can improve it, because it's my baby; it's my Phoenix of an amplifier that brought me back as a company. But I don't think you'll see anything migrating from the new Progression M550 into the Momentum, because we borrowed from the Momentum to develop the Progression M550, and we borrowed from the Relentless to make the M400. I guess the same thing happens with automakers."

Several times during our chat, Dan was effusive in his praise for Coskun, his chief engineer. "Now that I have Burhan, who is so astute with circuits, I conceptualize what I want to do," he said. "Then I draw up a circuit and ask him what he thinks. We decide what looks good and where we might try to change it before we make one. After we get it where we like it, we simulate it to make sure it does what it's supposed to do. Then we build the board, and then we listen to it. That's exactly what we did with our new Relentless preamplifier, which will perhaps ship in September. It makes an extraordinary difference to have someone who understands circuitry working with you. I had 11 engineers at Krell, but none was as keen on circuits as Burhan."

What about the conundrum of D'Agostino products that many, including myself, believe sound great yet which do not yield stellar measurements on Technical Editor John Atkinson's equipment? While the D'Agostino website claims that the Progression's "distortion, signal/noise ratio,

channel separation, and bandwidth measurements have all improved," that doesn't guarantee that JA1 will find the M550's measurements even close to superb.

Dan responded, "What I always say is that our equipment measures adequately. The measurements are good and respectable. But we're not looking for measurements.

"I use the same Audio Precision gear that John does—mine may be bigger—but I certainly don't use it for listening. Believe me, if I want to make low distortion, there's a whole lot of things I can do. However, in my experience of 40 some years, low distortion never makes it sound better. Ever. Obviously, if you're way high in distortion, it won't sound that good to your ear. But I'm not sure that high distortion measurements have anything to do with anything other than bad sound. The M550s will measure better than the original Progression monoblocks, but just by happenstance. As Burhan will tell you, we use test equipment as a reference, but it's to make sure that the circuits we design work within their envelope completely the way we intended them to."

What the good man intended and what I did

Visually, the biggest change between the old and new Progression is more compact and elegant internal sinks that lessen chassis weight by 10lb. The width is virtually the same, but the M550 is 1.5" longer and 3" taller. The power on/standby switch remains hidden on the bottom front

measurements, continued

As with the earlier amplifier, I examined how the THD+N percentage varied with frequency at a high level, 28.3V, which is equivalent to 100W into 8 ohms, 200W into 4 ohms, and 400W into 2 ohms. (The front-panel meter's needle lay just above "500" at this level.) The results are shown in fig.6: The distortion and noise remain low over most of the audioband into the higher impedances with only a minuscule rise in the top octave. (This graph confirms the test results sent by the manufacturer.) However, when I examined the waveform of the THD+N at 100W into 8 ohms after notching out the fundamental (fig.7), I saw spikes in the residual waveform (bottom trace)

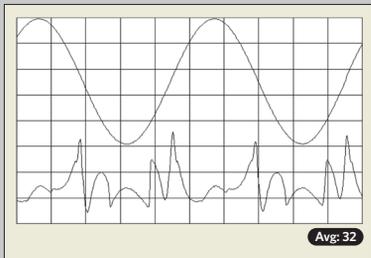


Fig.7 Dan D'Agostino Progression M550, 1kHz waveform at 100W into 8 ohms, 0.062% THD+N (top); distortion and noise waveform with fundamental notched out (bottom, not to scale).

that coincided with the zero-crossing points in the signal's waveform (top trace). This behavior indicates the presence of crossover distortion.

Fig.8 shows the spectrum of the amplifier's output while it drove 50Hz at 100W into 8 ohms. The subjectively innocuous second harmonic lies at -74dB (0.015%), but a regular series of high-order harmonics can be seen, which correlates with the waveform of the spurious shown in fig.7. The harmonic spectrum was very similar with the amplifier driving 50Hz into 4 ohms and 1kHz into 8 ohms at 28.3V (not shown). At 1W into 8 ohms, the second harmonic was still the highest in level but lay at -60dB (0.1%, not shown) and

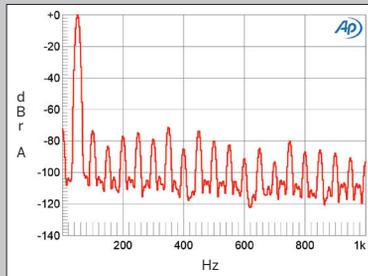


Fig.8 Dan D'Agostino Progression M550, spectrum of 50Hz sinewave, DC-1kHz, at 100W into 8 ohms (linear frequency scale).

was still accompanied by higher-order harmonics. Fig.9 shows the spectrum of the M550's output as it drove an equal mix of 19 and 20kHz tones into 8 ohms at a peak level of 100W. While the difference product at 1kHz lay at an okay -73dB (0.016%), there are also many higher-order intermodulation products visible in this graph.

The Dan D'Agostino Master Audio Systems Progression M550 is a powerful amplifier indeed and will not be fazed by being required to drive low-impedance loudspeakers. However, the presence of what appeared to be crossover distortion, which suggests insufficient output-stage bias, is puzzling.—John Atkinson

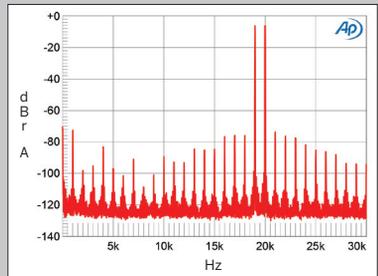


Fig.9 Dan D'Agostino Progression M550, HF intermodulation spectrum, DC-30kHz, 19+20kHz at 100W peak into 8 ohms (linear frequency scale).

edge, below the large power meter which has adjustable and defeatable green illumination, and the rear panel contains the same 20A power inlet, main-power toggle switch, XLR input, 12V trigger, plus binding posts of different design. The feet are still big, round, gray, easy-to-remove rubber thingees.

When Bill McKiegan, Dan D'Agostino Master Audio Systems president and Dan's long-trusted associate, arrived to help set up the M550s, we placed them on the Grand Prix Monza stands I used for the original Progressions and attached the same Nordost Odin 2 20-amp power cables, XLR interconnects, and speaker cables. I'd previously had long discussions with Dan about power and knew from prior experience that, in my system, amps sound best when plugged into the high-current outlets of my AudioQuest Dragon-powered Niagara 7000 power conditioner.

After a brief listen, Bill encouraged me to try setting up the Progression M550s and Momentum HD pre-amp the same way they're set up at D'Agostino's Arizona factory, with the electronics resting on their attached rubber feet. I'd always preferred the effects of aftermarket supports to those rubber feet, but those that sounded best had been discontinued and returned to the distributor. I was curious to learn if returning to the rubber feet might help address some longstanding issues in my system.

During my first listens after Bill departed, I discovered that the lower midrange had lost its customary focus. Thinking back to my chats, at T.H.E Show 2021 in Long Beach, with Norman D. Varney of A/V RoomService, I decided to try his EVP (Equipment Vibration Protectors) under the Progression M550s. Varney, who subsequently paid a visit to Port Townsend after spending time at NWAA Labs in Elma, Washington, designed the electrical grounding/isolation setup for George Lucas's Skywalker Ranch Scoring Studio and touts accredited acoustic lab measurements to back up his claim of the positive effects of his EVP's effectiveness at isolating equipment from vibration.

The A/V RoomService EVPs, together with the HRS DPX-14545 Damping Plates I'd used on the original Progressions, did more than resolve all lower midrange mush; they also helped smooth out some longstanding rough edges in my system without adding brightness, glare, or other coloration. I've continued to experiment with ideal placement of the EVPs, which I use on many components, digital and analog, that are not supported by Wilson Audio Pedestals.

Time for listening

Once those setup issues were resolved, I was a happy camper as I noticed at once the M550's ability to convey subtle details. In-breaths were more evident on Rickie Lee Jones's marvelous take of the Stones' "Sympathy for the Devil" (Tidal, 16/44.1 FLAC), from her album *The Devil You Know*, and the transition from soft singing to whisper was more impactful. On the line, "I killed the Czar and his ministers,"



Timpani sounded clean and strong, and the lowest-pitched lines of the double basses were clear, solid, and substantial.

I discerned a sly change in tonal color that had never come through before—nor had I noticed places where RLJ intentionally lags a bit behind the beat.

On the fabulous Catherine Russell and Wynton Marsalis take of "Make Me a Pallet on the Floor," arranged by Marsalis for the movie *Bolden* (24/96 FLAC, Qobuz), I heard more subtlety and shading to the cello—more of the stuff that distinguishes a rendition as special. On a very different recording, of

the significantly higher-voiced and radiant Elly Ameling sparkling her way through Schubert's "Die Sterne" (The Stars) with Dalton Baldwin on piano, from *The Artistry of Elly Ameling* (Tidal and Qobuz 16/44.1 FLAC, Philips 473-4512), the voice floated in space like I'd never heard it before, and the bass line of the accompaniment, which isn't superbly recorded, was clearer. Similar distinctions of detail and presentation surfaced on Mahler's anything-but-subtle Symphony No.3 performed by Iván Fischer and the Budapest Festival Orchestra (Channel Classics DSD128). On this recording, pitches were clearer on divided horns, and the "burr" on horns was more discernable. Timpani sounded clean and strong, and the lowest-pitched lines of the double basses were clear, solid, and substantial.

Another big ear-opener arrived when I transitioned between files of two recently reviewed DXD recordings: Sono Luminus's *Northscapes* from pianist Ieva Jokubaviciute and 2L's *Solacium* from Trio Mediaeval. The latter is encoded in MQA, but I believe that different environments, microphone placement, and engineering accounted for 2L's markedly lower noise floor. I listened intently when I reviewed both these recordings with the original Progressions, but I'd never heard such huge distinctions in background noise.

The sound of the new monoblocks was in the same family as the original Progressions but warmer, with a subtle glow and smoother finish that produced rounder images. There was an unmistakable similarity to the beautifully finished sound of the *other* amplifiers I've reviewed with either pure class-A or significant amounts of power in class-A, notably the Pass Labs XA 200.8 monoblocks, Gryphon Essence monoblocks, Krell K-300i integrated, Audio Research REF 6SE, and Doshi Evolution monoblocks. You may not be surprised to learn that these are the best-sounding amps I've reviewed over the past half-decade.

When I reviewed the relatively low-powered Gryphon Essence monoblocks, the recording that allowed them to steal my heart was the late Lorraine Hunt Lieberson's mesmerizing live rendition, with pianist Roger Vignoles, of Mahler's "Ich Bin Der Welt Abhanden Gekommen" ("I am lost to the world") from the Five Rückert-Lieder, as preserved on *Lorraine Hunt Lieberson: Mahler, Handel & Lieberson* (Wigmore Hall Live, Tidal 16/44.1 FLAC). It's a remarkable recording—one that makes Wigmore Hall sound much better than the two times I sat in the hall's less-than-prime seats during a 2019 trip abroad.

Listening through the D'Agostino Progression M550 monoblocks, what impressed me most (besides the beauty of Hunt Lieberson's voice and her total identification with music and text) was the Progression M550s' ability to convey the inner warmth and depth of someone transported. I was equally struck by the clarity of a piano recorded in a surprisingly quiet and exceptionally dimensional acoustic. The silence was as astounding as the heart that shone through this great artist's voice. When an amp can deliver all that from a simple performance with voice and piano, it's a great amp.

Progress(ion) report

With my assessment presumably complete, I implored husband David and audiophile buddy Scott Campbell to help me move monoblocks back and forth for direct comparisons.

On my trusty deep bass electronically hyped standby, Boris Blank's "Electrified II" from *Tøy* (24/48 MQA FLAC, Tidal), the original Progressions sounded splashier on Malia's vocals. There was less color differentiation, soundstaging was less awesome, and the presentation seemed plainer, flatter, and less muscular and dynamic. Returning to Elly Ameling's smaller-scale recording, her voice seemed to lose some warmth and radiance. There was less silence around the voice and less three-dimensionality. Listening was less involving.

One of my go-to recordings for color, depth, microscopic detail, expansiveness, and dynamic contrast is Anna Thorvaldsdóttir's *Metacosmos*, performed by the Iceland Symphony Orchestra on Sono Luminus's *Concurrence* (24/352.8 WAV, DSL-92237). Thorvaldsdóttir places great significance on the emotional impact of a single instrument, briefly singing its own song like a bird in the distance as many dozens of others issue their own calls. The original Progressions smudged such details with clatter, occasionally burying them entirely. When everything started going at once at higher volume, they struggled to separate one instrument from the other. They also sounded less rich, with less gratifying inner warmth and contrasting colors.

In addition to their far blacker space between notes, greater resolution of small details, and natural-sounding illumination, the Progression M550s consistently wowed me with their dynamic mastery. Early in *Metacosmos*, where low bass rumbles are suddenly interrupted by a loud, sharp crackle, the familiar entry was so powerful that it startled me. Later, when every instrument and its mother started playing at once, the M550s nailed the brutal force and savagery like no other amp I've ever heard in my system. The original Progressions struggled to separate one instrument from the other, and small details were buried amidst the din. I was shocked by the cumulative impact of the differences between old and new Progressions.

ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

Digital sources dCS Rossini DAC and Clock and Transport; Synology 5-bay 1019+ NAS, Roon Nucleus+ music server, Uptone Audio etherRegen, Small Green Computer Sonore opticalModules (2) and Deluxe opticalModule, Linksys routers (2), and Arris modem, all powered by HDPLEX 300 four-component linear power supplies (3) and HDPLEX 200 LPS; Apple 2017 iPad Pro and 2017 Macbook Pro laptop with 2.8 GHz Intel i7, SSD, 16GB RAM.

Preamplifier Dan D'Agostino Momentum HD.

Power amplifiers Dan D'Agostino Progression monoblocks.

Loudspeakers Wilson Audio Specialties Alexia 2 with Acoustic Diode Spikes.

Cables Digital: Nordost Odin 1, Odin 2, and Valhalla 2 (USB); Frey 2 (USB adapter); Wireworld Platinum Starlight Cat8 (Ethernet) and OM1 62.5/125 multimode duplex fiberoptic cables. Interconnect: Nordost Odin 2. Speaker: Nordost Odin 2. AC: Nordost Odin 2, AudioQuest Dragon, Dragon HC, and Thunderbird. Umbilical cords from HDPLEX LPSs: Ghent Audio Canare and copper.

Accessories Grand Prix Monza 8-shelf double rack and amp stands, 1.5" Formula platform, Apex footers; Symposium Ultra Platform; Nordost QB8, QX4 (2), QK1, and QV2 AC power accessories, QKore 1, 3, and 6 with QKore Wires, Titanium and Bronze Sort Kones, Sort Lifts; AudioQuest Niagara 7000 and 5000 power conditioners, NRG Edison outlets, JitterBugs; Tweak Geek Dark Matter Stealth power conditioner with High Fidelity and Furutech options; Ansz Darkz T2S resonance support feet; Wilson Audio Pedestals; A/V RoomService EVP Equipment Vibration Protectors; Resolution Acoustics and Stillpoints Clouds (8) and Aperture 1 (2) and 2 (2) acoustic treatments; HRS DPX-14545 Damping Plates; Stein Music Blue Suns, Blue Diamonds, and Quantum Organizer; Bybee Room Neutralizers; Absolare Stabilians; Marigo Aida CD mat.

Room 20' L × 16' W × 9' H.—Jason Victor Serinus

From great to "gaahh!"

With the Progression M550s back in place, all notes taken, and my listening presumably complete, I set about enjoying myself. Everything was smooth sailing when Daryl Wilson emailed that he finally had enough stock of the new Wilson Audio Acoustic Diode Spikes (\$3200/set of eight or \$3000 when ordered with current speaker models) to send some to try under the Alexia 2s. The Acoustic Diodes (AD Spikes), which come standard on Wilson's Alexx V loudspeakers, were designed with the same laser vibrometer testing equipment that was employed in the development of the Wilson Pedestal equipment supports and benefited from the research that was essential for the Pedestal's creation.

I then enlisted the assistance of Gary Brustle, one of Definitive Audio's speaker setup wizards, to help attach Acoustic Diodes to the Alexia 2s. Since that required releveling the speakers, I felt that the significant changes I'd made to electronics, acoustic treatment, rack, and supports since the Alexia 2s arrived years ago mandated a reassessment of speaker position.

Keeping the speakers in their original position, we installed the Acoustic Diodes. The soundstage widened, detail and texture became more discernable, and bass grew clearer and more defined. The impact of better amplification and

superior loudspeaker spikes became evident on the Kronos Quartet's performance of Terry Riley's *Sun Rings* (24/96, Nonesuch 587972), which I wrote about for My Back Pages in the August 2020 issue. Even though I thought the recording pretty damn special to begin with, I heard a wider and more coherent soundstage coupled with more far more detail, layering, and silence. At the risk of sounding like an infatuated teenager, the sound was awesome. No wonder Leslie Ann Jones and her fellow engineers won a Grammy for this recording.

Next, we repositioned the speakers several inches closer to room center while keeping them the same distance from the front wall. And that's when we discovered that left and right channels sounded different from each other. From the left came warm, color-saturated, extended sound; the right sounded surprisingly flat and rolled off on top. Given the large opening to the hallway on the left side of the music room, I'd expected some differences between channels, and measured the same during my Accuphase DG-68 Digital Voicing Equalizer review. Was that what I was hearing, except far more clearly now that the speakers had been repositioned?

After lots of cable and channel swapping, and many left/right balance checks while playing part of Hindemith's *Symphonic Metamorphosis* on a brightly recorded Mercury Living Presence monaural CD compilation featuring Antal Dorati, Rafael Kubelik, and the Chicago Symphony Orchestra (16/44.1 WAV, ripped from Mercury 289 534 397-2), the evidence was incontrovertible: I had two very different sounding M550s. As confident as I was that the more extended and tonally rich amp had determined the majority of what I'd heard during my evaluations, something was clearly amiss.

Following late-night phone consultations with Editor Jim Austin, I awoke to speak with Bill and Dan about the possibility of delaying the review and sending the amps back to



Arizona for repair. Dan, though, was certain that the amps were fundamentally sound. He thought the discrepancy was caused by a shift in biasing, which presumably happened during shipment.

Two tension-fraught days later, Hans Brackmann, Definitive Audio's store manager, drove to Port Townsend to rebias the amps. All D'Agostino dealers are prepared to rebias the M550s whenever necessary.

Sure enough, rebiasing was called for—just that, nothing more. By the time Hans left, both channels sounded the same (save for minor discrepancies caused by room imbalances), and I heard even more of the beautiful, smooth, finely detailed, impeccably controlled, remarkably dynamic, slightly warm and glowing sound that had made me fall in love with the Progression M550s.

So.

Once the Progression M550s were optimally set up and biased, love at first listen morphed from an infatuation into a relationship.

For anyone who values colorful and glowing amplification that brings natural timbre and the subtlest of details and dynamic shifts to the fore while supplying a breathtakingly full measure of big-picture dynamics, slam, and top-to-bottom frequency response, the Progression M550s must be heard. They are wonderful amps. ■