

PREAMPLIFIER

Solid-state preamplifier with outboard PSU  
 Made by: D'Agostino LLC, Connecticut, USA  
 Supplied by: Absolute Sounds Ltd  
 Telephone: 0208 971 3909  
 Web: www.dagostinoinc.com; www.absolutesounds.com  
 Price: £47,998

AUDIO  
FILE

hi-finews  
OUTSTANDING  
PRODUCT

# D'Agostino Momentum HD Preamplifier

While we await the Relentless Preamp the 'HD' remains D'Agostino's top model, with its Bluetooth remote and raft of subtle enhancements culled from the MLife integrated Review: Ken Kessler Lab: Paul Miller

Ordinarily, I prefer to ignore the vexing topic of prices. My attitude is simple: if I can't afford something, I don't take it out on the world. I can't afford a Bugatti T57SC Atlantic, but I don't hate Ralph Lauren for owning one. So let's get two things out of the way, the first being that the D'Agostino Momentum HD Preamplifier costs £47,998, making it one of the most expensive control units on the planet.

This, however, is totally commensurate with the pricing of the power amplifiers in the D'Agostino catalogue, so it makes sense in that context. Reality check, for as painful as it seems, Extinction Rebellion types are not potential HD owners. Rich guys are. The second is good news, for owners of the earlier Momentum preamp do not have to rail against the heavens about obsolescence. Their units can be updated.

## MAJOR REVAMP

And the updates are extensive. As they're internal, I was confused momentarily when editor PM sent me the HD because I recall that we had reviewed the preamp before, albeit in non-HD guise [HFN Nov '13]. Perfect timing because a day later, a detailed internal memo arrived from the distributor, outlining the modifications, as described elsewhere in this review by PM [see boxout p53 and Lab Report p55]. Thus, unlike second-generation models that have undergone minor cosmetic changes and a tweak or two, this is a major revamp of what was already one of the finest preamps money can buy.

Offered in black or silver, both with the company's distinctive use of copper trim, the Momentum HD is recognisably

**RIGHT:** Mainboard is now shared with the MLife integrated's line section. Volume adjustment is achieved via a relay-switched resistor ladder [centre, with discrete transistor preamp] and note tone PCB [bottom right]

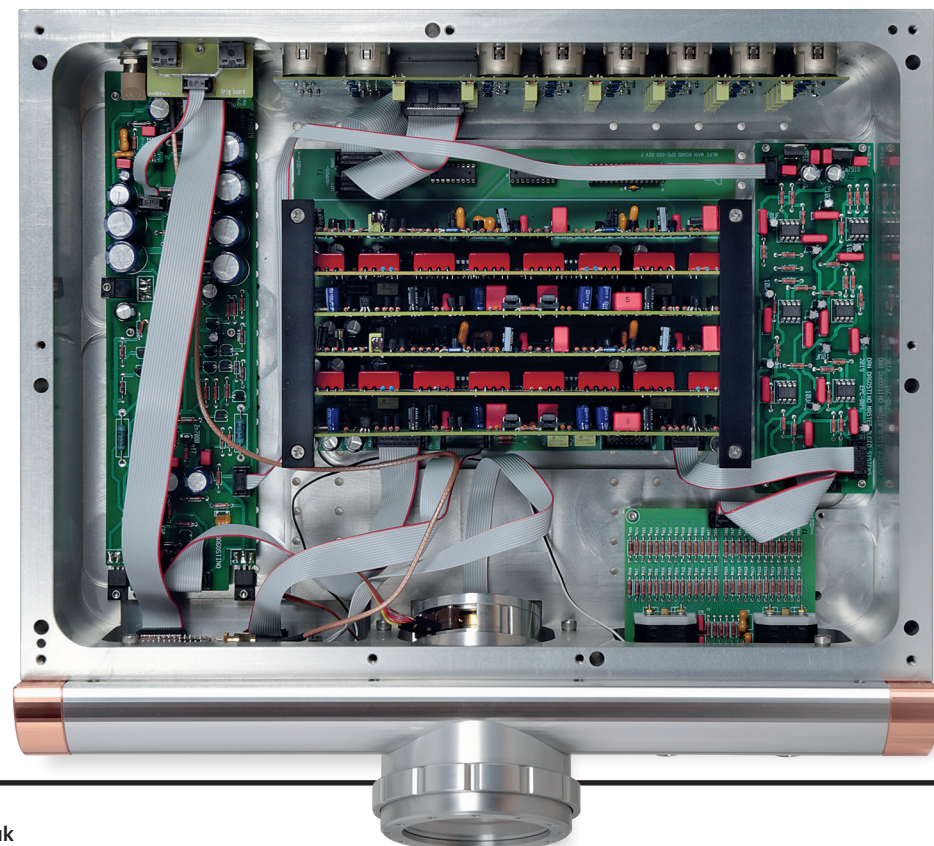
a D'Agostino product, and it looked like it had come home when sited next to the Momentum Stereo [HFN Aug '12]. (At the risk of inciting the Wrath of Dan, I also used it with the Audio Research REF75SE tube amplifier, which confirmed its magnificence.) As this is the top preamp, it will also be used, no doubt, with the Relentless mono power amp [HFN Mar '20].

Unsurprisingly, there are a couple of quirks wholly consistent with Dan D'Agostino's world view. This is a balanced-only affair, which might prove inconvenient for legacy components that use phono connections but the HD is strictly line-level, so one might presume that those shopping in this price sector can afford to add the matching D'Agostino phono stage. Staying balanced all the way wasn't a chore for

me, as I used the Marantz CD-12/DA-12 CD player and the Otari MX5050 open-reel deck, which provided assessment with both analogue and digital sources.

## COMPLETE CONTROL

Another oddity here – refreshing, if you're of the more-is-more mind-set – is the inclusion of tone controls. These work subtly and proved useful with iffy recordings, eg, if one is found with absurdly overloaded bass, so I am not averse to them as I have no doubt that when they're not in use, they're out of circuit. The tone controls are not accessible from the remote, but that's a minor issue because all of the other functions are, and the remote is now Bluetooth, so you don't need line-of-sight at the unit to use it.



Set-up – the ludicrous weight of the unit aside – was easy-peasy, especially if slotting it into an existing, all-balanced system. Transferring XLR cables? Two minutes maximum. Power on at the rear, press the standby button and you're in business.

The volume control via the signature watch-style bezel around the meter still gives me a kick, what with my horological tendency, and the feel of the buttons' action also reminded me of superior chronograph pushers.

The Momentum HD is everything that I have been screaming about for three decades: a presence so luxurious that the Swiss and the Germans will only be able to look on with awe and envy. So, for the umpteenth time, when you pay this kind of money for hi-fi, you deserve a product that

looks like it was made by a top jeweller, not a travelling basket-weaver.

## RIGHT ON TIME

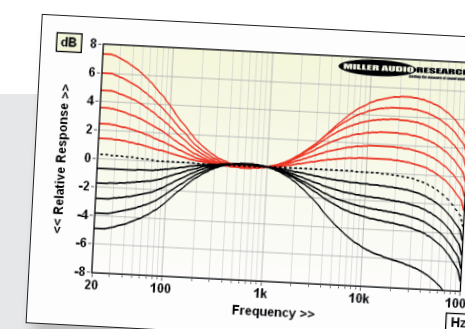
It doesn't take a pair of golden ears to recognise, from the first notes, that the

Momentum HD speaks with unparalleled authority. That Breguet-style meter may seem an odd conceit, but the reference is apposite: Abraham-Louis Breguet was arguably the greatest watchmaker

who ever lived, and his *raison d'être* was a lifelong quest for precision in time-keeping.

Now it starts to make sense, especially if you believe that music is, above all, a function of timing. Not just the correct

*I'm struggling to comprehend how it demonstrates such grip'*



## IMPROVING THE TONE

The HD Preamp's watchface indicates the available preamp gain rather than absolute level with '25' representing -30dB (in/out); '50', -11dB; '75', +5dB; and full volume +12dB or x4, even if the '100' legend is just beyond the arc of the needle. Below about '70' on the display the HD Preamp acts as an attenuator, only offering gain above this position. The control confers fine  $\pm 0.5$ dB steps over the top 42dB of its range with  $\pm 1$ dB steps over the middle 16dB and coarser  $\pm 2$ dB-3dB steps across the lower 30dB. The total useable range is 89dB. The preamp's default frequency response is discussed in the Lab Report [p55 and dashed, above] while the profiles of the six 'boost' (red) and five 'cut' (black) bass/treble tone settings are illustrated on the inset Graph. As a rule of thumb, the boost settings suggest frequencies of 50Hz and 20kHz (ie, +2 equals +2dB/50Hz re. 1kHz) while the 'cut' profiles operate closer to 20Hz and 25kHz (except '-5'). A subtle but broad adjustment is evidently possible using the  $\pm 1$  and  $\pm 2$  settings, allowing a useful tailoring of deep bass and high treble, compensating for room and ancillary equipment the 'old fashioned' way! PM

**ABOVE:** Fabulous casework oozes luxury. Rotating the outer ring of the watchface dial adjusts volume; defeatable bass and treble controls (right) offer subtle tonal adjustment

time-aligned delivery of the signals in the manner of angled-baffle speakers, but of rhythm, of all the elements in a band or orchestra working in perfect concert. Blow me down, does this unit take control of the entire proceeding, neither adding nor removing anything. It is so revealing that it smacks of laboratory hardware.

With 'Muskrat Ramble' from *The Best Of The Dukes Of Dixieland* [Audio Fidelity AF 1962 7 1/2 ips open-reel tape], the clarinet had a gorgeous woodiness and richness so mellifluous that I did more than one double-take – you know, those momentary flashes of being fooled by the system. The piano stage left had a wonderful honky-tonk roundness, the percussion – especially the woodblock – was as crisp as a Frito and the audience sounded so genuine that I had to reassess my list of Top 10 tapes. Then again, it did this to everything I played...

## READY TO DAZZLE

Soundstage recreation was so glorious, so open and so spatially convincing that I found the Wilson Sasha DAWs [HFN Mar '19] to be even more dazzling than I had previously realised. The HD is like a makeover – that feeling when you've had your car serviced to perfection and you just want to head out on the open road.

Take, for example, Buffalo Springfield's 'For What It's Worth'. I've heard this song more than any other in my entire library, even Beatles tracks. I played the best version in my possession, from the Atco compilation *Smash Sounds Vol 2* [ALC8188]. It was like hearing it for the first time. Which I can actually remember. ☺



## LAB REPORT

### D'AGOSTINO HD PREAMPLIFIER

Comparisons with the original Momentum Preamp [HFN Nov '13] reveal a series of subtle differences not reflected in the general description of the updates. For example, the application of the finest  $\pm 0.5\text{dB}$  volume control increments has been extended from the top 35dB to the top 42dB of its dynamic range [see boxout, p53] while the overall gain has been boosted from +8.2dB to +12dB in the HD Preamp. Maximum output has increased too, from 20.5V to a massive 26.5V, so the HD Preamp will drive any likely power amp into clipping – including any of the Constellation power amps in their reduced-gain 'Direct' mode [HFN Oct '19]. The A-wtd S/N ratio is proportionally lower, however, from 96dB to 92dB here (all re. 0dBV) although the residual noise is still vanishingly low at  $-98\text{dBV}$  ( $13\mu\text{V}$ ). That outboard PSU clearly confers benefits...

The preamplifier's output impedance is unchanged at 38-39ohm (20Hz-20kHz) but the response, previously extended to within  $\pm 0.02\text{dB}$  out to 100kHz, now features an ultrasonic roll-off amounting to  $-0.18\text{dB}/20\text{kHz}$  to  $-3.5\text{dB}/100\text{kHz}$  [not unlike the Relentless power amp – HFN Mar '20]. The broad subsonic boost of  $+0.4\text{dB}/20\text{Hz}$  and  $+0.78\text{dB}/5\text{Hz}$  is unchanged and also remains unaffected by the Tone in/out setting [see Graph 1 below]. The profiles of the 11 bass/treble tone settings are discussed in my boxout [p53]. Distortion is now more consistent between L/R channels and still very low at  $<0.0005\%$  from 5Hz-5kHz but, along with the mildly tailored response, THD also increases at HF up to 0.002%/20kHz and 0.01%/40kHz [see Graph 2]. We saw the same from the MLife preamp board, upon which the HD Preamplifier is based [HFN Apr '17]. PM

**ABOVE:** Fed via a short umbilical from its outboard DC PSU (doubling as an isolation platform), the Momentum HD Preamp offers six balanced inputs (inc. an HT throughput) and two parallel balanced outputs. Remote is now via Bluetooth control

Reviewers often speak of being able to 'listen into' a performance. The HD accomplishes this by applying to the sound of a speaker-based system the sort of focused, almost forensic experience of using headphones. Cans achieve this by isolating the listener from external distractions. The HD? I'm struggling to comprehend how it demonstrates a grip that redefines the old name for the product genre of which it is a part: 'control units'.

#### WHAT A BLAST!

Every instrument, every placement of each sound possessed body, location and scale. That's a verbose way of saying '3D' but I do need to convey how thorough is the overall experience. It is almost impossible to criticise it, let alone dissect it. If anything, I could muster only one tiny concern, and that was down to the power amplifiers... or, to be more precise, tubes-vs-transistors, a feud I'd rather not re-ignite.

There is a point where a hint of coldness manifested itself when using the Momentum Stereo. I detected it with the acoustic guitars in Three Dog Night's magnificent take of 'It Ain't Easy' from the album of the same name [Dunhill X5078; 3 $\frac{3}{4}$ ips open reel tape].

Was it disturbing, a deal-breaker, a point-lowering phenomenon? Not at all: it was no more of a 'thing' than the difference between two top cables. But the absurdity of this is that I am criticising what is actually a strength, a virtue. What it gets down to is personal preference, and I always opt for a slightly softer sonic experience. I like a bit of warmth, even if it is inaccurate.

That's by-the-by. This preamplifier has, to my ears, no rivals in dynamics nor in the bass. The tubas on the various Dukes Of Dixieland tracks blasted from the speakers with all of the force of the Salvation Army Band that performs in Canterbury on most Saturdays. I hear brass bands all the time – the HD put them in my listening room, with the mass, the power and above all the extension of the actual instruments in reality.

There is danger in using the word 'best'. But I can tell you this much: the Momentum HD is one the greatest preamps I have ever experienced. If you own a TechDAS Zero turntable, Wilson Audio WAMM Master Chronosonics, or other components of that elevated calibre, you have to hear the D'Agostino Momentum HD. It's that simple. ☺

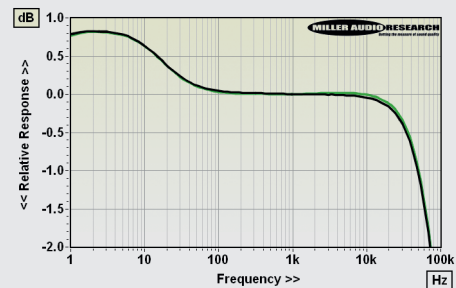
#### HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

There's nothing one can say about gear at this level that isn't a superlative. The D'Agostino Momentum HD is a true *crème-de-la-crème* component, rich with that quality which defines cost-no-object designs: a sense of no limitations, characterised by no compromises, no intrusions. It will challenge everything you own, as it demands sources and speakers in the same league. It is unabashedly magnificent.

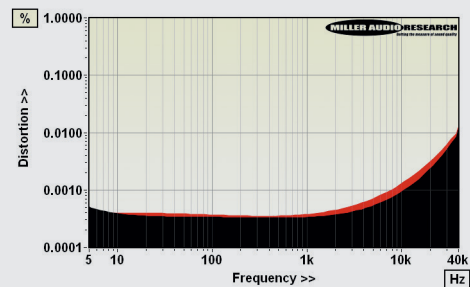
Sound Quality: 90%



**ABOVE:** Machined to match the preamp, D'Agostino's tactile remote is now fitted with Bluetooth. It accesses volume, balance, input but not tone adjustment



**ABOVE:** Balanced line frequency response at 0dBV (tone defeat, solid; tone on at '0', dashed)



**ABOVE:** Distortion versus extended frequency at 0dBV (Balanced in / out; left, black; right channel, red)

#### HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Maximum output (<1% THD, 47kohm)	26.8Vrms (Balanced)
Maximum input level (<1% THD)	>10Vrms (Balanced)
Output impedance (20Hz-20kHz)	38.3-38.8ohm (Balanced)
Frequency response (20Hz-100kHz)	+0.38dB to -3.50dB
Input sensitivity (re. 0dBV)	251mV (Balanced)
A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBV)	92.0dB
Distortion (20Hz-20kHz re. 0dBV)	0.00025-0.0022%
Power consumption	36W (33W standby)
Dimensions (WHD) / Weight (w. PSU)	457x178x300mm / 45kg