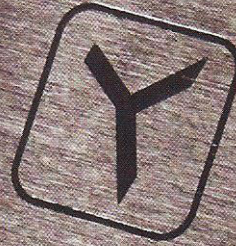


BEST BUY
HI-FI CHOICE
magazine
★



CD
VIDEO CD AUX TAPE DVD TUNER
-40dB

YBA
DESIGN

DESIGN
YBA

Black is Beautiful

An impressive, but affordable boutique-style integrated from the French high-end specialist

PRODUCT YBA YA201

TYPE Integrated amplifier

PRICE £1,290

KEY FEATURES Size (WxHxD): 39x13x39cms

⊗ Weight: 15kg ⊗ Rated power: 100 watts (8 ohms)

⊗ Inputs: 6x RCA phonos ⊗ Outputs: 1x tape, 1x sub

⊗ Triple push technology

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There is a fascinating similarity between the philosophies of the company that produced the loudspeakers used in this review and that of the manufacturer of the amplifier under test. Both place far greater importance on listening to music through their products than they do purely in measurement or technology. Yves Bernard André, the French designer of YBA electronics remarks "Technology is not an end in itself. The pleasure of listening to music must be our only guide." Neat loudspeakers come from a like-minded home: a factory where there's a room full of musical instruments to which the sound of the loudspeakers can be compared rather than hosts of computers and test gear. This *esprit de corps* bodes well for the listening tests...

We've not seen much of the French high-end specialists in *Hi-Fi Choice* – or at all in the UK – for a while, but the company is in the process of re-establishing UK distribution as we write. Until that is finalised, YBA is supplying its UK dealers directly from its Palaiseau headquarters in the suburbs of Paris. From here it delivers CD players, tuners

and amplifiers from its Signature, Passion and the Chinese-built Design ranges.

When we say 'Chinese-built' we are not being in the least derisory. In fact, the YA201 is probably one of the neatest pieces of engineering and industrial design we have seen emerge from any country. For example, most 'affordable' amplifiers invariably use a rubber stick-on foot in each corner. Not the

knobs. Everything, including the precise (128 x 1dB steps) volume control, is operated through a single bank of small push buttons. The result is an unusually tidy looking fascia. The unit was supplied with a system remote control handset: not the usual parts-bin special, but a heavyweight aluminium confection. Unfortunately, several of the codes also operated functions of the Naim HDX, we

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YA201, where instead the chassis is milled away to leave three small flat sections – with rubber inserts – standing proud to support the amplifier. It's a tidy solution and effective on most supports: mind you, the amplifier needs careful placement on our Quadraspire Sunoko Vent stands to ensure that its front foot doesn't drop into one of the shelf's horizontal ventilation slits.

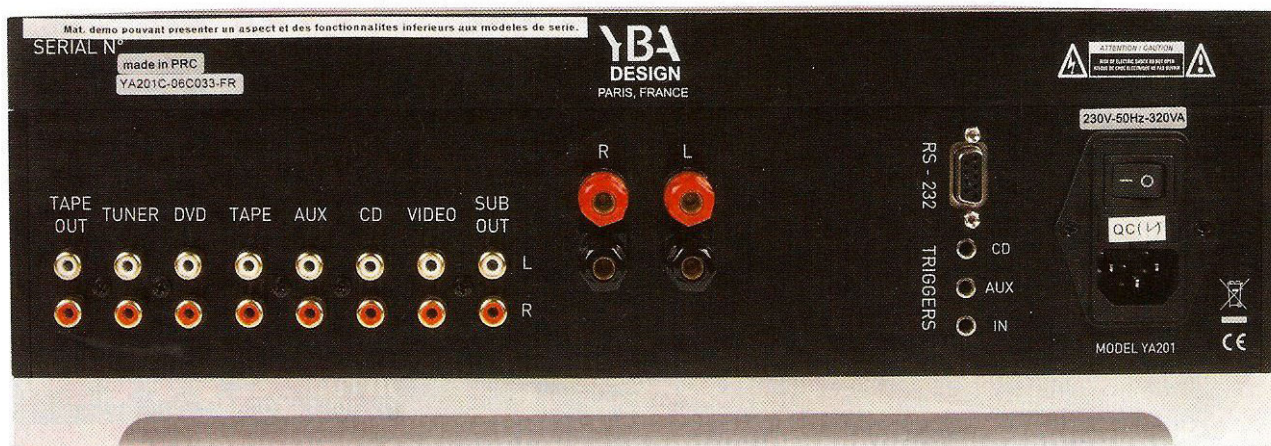
Designed to match the upsampling, 24-bit/192kHz YC201 CD player both sonically and cosmetically, the YA201 stereo amplifier is a 100-watt stereo design using a Triple Push configuration. The amplifier features an oversized linear power supply and short signal paths and provides six analogue inputs along with line-level and tape monitor outputs. In keeping with its CD-matching appearance the amplifier uses no control

were also using. For example, volume down switched the HDX display to 'View by Artist' while volume up switched to 'View by Album' and Mute acted as a 'Back' button.

The YBA was tested driving Neat Momentum 4i loudspeakers, connected with Chord Company Epic cables, a Naim CDS CD player and an HDX hard disk player as source components. The YA201 doesn't have a phono input, so testing with vinyl was not an option here.

SOUND QUALITY

The attractive minimalism of the YA201's appearance seems to extend to its performance. Regardless, there is nothing cold or clinical about the sound: rather it has markedly crisp definition that appears to be completely devoid of any added romance ■

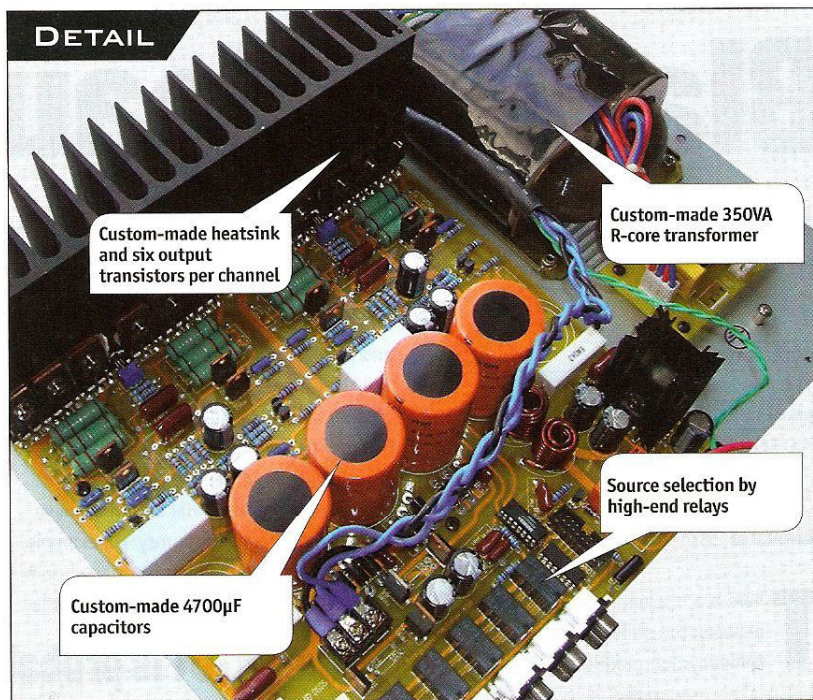


or undesirable warmth. This ascetic quality seems to increase the listenability of the 50 transcriptions on the two compact disc set, Bob Dylan's *Theme Time Radio Hour*, many of which sound less than wonderful through other amplifiers (the recordings can span eight decades in the space of three tracks).

Helping the amplifier deliver such a 'neatly scrubbed' portrayal of music is an equally abstemious tonal balance that does not artificially boost the frequency extremes, the lows in particular. When genuine bass is present the amplifier lets you hear it: at other times that region is left vacant. Some listeners might argue that this amplifier sounds lean but it's more accurate to say that this controlled presentation and lack of LF bloom gives the YA201 a heightened sense of transparency and insight into timbre and dynamics. All of which result in a performance that is as musically informative as it is cosmetically appealing.

The amplifier really shines brightly when fed with well-balanced, uncluttered, clean recordings, especially those that have not had all the life and dynamism sucked out of them with compression, as seems to be the trend with many current recordings. The opening tracks on the first disc of the eponymous *Nils Lofgren Band Live* CD give the YA201 a chance to demonstrate all its adroitness communicating music. It closely approaches putting you on stage with the band where you can sense and feel every nuance in their playing along with the interaction and accord between the players.

The YBA also demonstrates flawless leading-edge definition and dynamics, which help it create accurate note shape and thus accurate timbre. The mix of instrumentation on the Vivid Curve album *Live at Edgefield* – guitar, percussion and didgeridoo – enjoys a magnificent, almost valve-like, richness along with an invigorating sense of presence. Interestingly, without over-stating the instrument's contribution, the YBA seems to maintain the didgeridoo's low-key presence in the mix better than many amplifiers.



“The YBA demonstrates flawless leading edge definition and dynamics, which help it create accurate note shape and timbre.”

On tracks such as 'Hundred Naked Kangaroos', its subtle contributions are rendered consistently and the instrument never seems tempted to withdraw into the back of the mix.

The extreme definition of the YBA makes its presence felt most strongly with discs such as the Naim recording of the RPO Chamber Soloists playing Mozart Wind Serenades. The amplifier positively scavenges information and presents an exceedingly finely etched portrayal of the ensemble, its instrumentation and playing.

Things become even more interesting when you feed the amplifier with hi-res material; in this instance a 24-bit/88.2kHz version of the same Mozart recording and a similar Naim hi-res disc of cellist Tim Hugh playing at Wigmore Hall. The instruments

immediately acquire a depth and solidity that greatly enhances the life-like quality of the piece along with the amplifier's ability to convey subtle musical details. The added insight the hi-res performance gives and the way the YBA reveals this makes the music appreciably more entertaining, meaningful and enjoyable.

Overall, the performance of the YBA YA201 is nothing less than bewitching: musically persuasive and sonically as near transparent as any integrated we've heard, this amplifier is in a league of its own. **HFC**

Malcolm Steward

VERDICT	
SOUND ★★★★★	PRO The YA201 is a brilliant package: built like a tank but with supermodel looks. It also provides exceptional performances with all manner of music from Albinoni to AC/DC.
FEATURES ★★★★☆	
BUILD ★★★★☆	CON The amplifier is stylish, but the casework's sharp edges are not very child friendly. The remote control's interference with the HDX is a nuisance.
VALUE ★★★★★	
CONCLUSION The way this amplifier – indeed, range of products – has been styled is admirable and its musical performance is quite exceptional. At its modest price, it becomes even more remarkable and recommendable.	
HI-FI CHOICE OVERALL SCORE ★★★★★	
URL www.techradar.com/483558	