

# YBA Design YA201 Integrated Amplifier and YC201 CD player

## Listening with the eyes...as well as the ears

Chris Martens



**T**he French high-end audio firm YBA, which takes its name from owner and founder Yves-Bernard André, has just launched YBA Design—a brand-within-a-brand whose components are performance oriented, yet affordably priced. YBA Design replaces YBA's former Audio Refinement line, offering components developed in France, but manufactured in Asia to hold costs down. In terms of aesthetics and sound quality, however, YBA Design products are significantly more ambitious than the Audio Refinement models they replace. Two great examples are the YC201 CD player and YA201 integrated amplifier—the first YBA Design components to reach our shores.

Even before you hear these units, they make a strong impression with their exotic appearance. All YBA Design components share common chassis sizes and faceplate designs; to add a touch of mystery, YBA deliberately omits traditional silk-screened product names, model numbers, and switch-function labels. Powered down, the units look nearly identical, with nothing to detract from their sculptural simplicity save for the logo, a stylized letter “Y.” Once the units are powered up, their normally blacked-out display windows are bathed in soft blue-gray light, with graphics and text that make component identity and control-button functions clear.

The designers at YBA clearly burned midnight oil to get the appearance of its components just so, an effort the firm's Web site explains through this slogan: “We also listen with the eyes....” When I first saw the YC201 and YA201, I found them so beautiful (and beautifully made) that I thought they surely would cost a small fortune. But they don't. Selling for \$1649 apiece, both are highly credible mid-tier offerings. Over time I've come to perceive the amp as the stronger performer of the two; but let's start by discussing the CD player, since its sonic strengths form the core of what is also special and right about the amplifier.

The YC201 is a 24-bit/192kHz upsampling CD player whose most distinctive characteristics are terrific midrange finesse and liquidity—a certain smooth, urbane, soulful sound that sweeps listeners into the flow of the music. The player is so beguiling, I would sit down planning to listen for just a few minutes, only to look up and realize I was halfway through a disc and

completely engrossed in the music. Interestingly, the YC201's midrange strengths are not born of exceptionally high resolution. Oh, the resolution is certainly good, perhaps very good, but it is not the main event. The midrange excellence flows from an elusive combination of factors, including timbral accuracy, tonal richness, a hint of warmth, and the ability to allow sounds to emerge from and recede back into a quiet noise floor in a strikingly realistic way. More than many players in this price range, the YC201 reminds listeners that air is a fluid medium, in which the reverberations of various instruments interact in complex ways, much like the ripples generated when a handful of pebbles is thrown into a still pool. Put all these qualities together and you have a player whose sound is sumptuous and seductive.

This is quite clear on a high-quality recording of complex orchestral material, such as David Chesky's *Concerto for Violin and Orchestra from Area 31* [Chesky]. The first movement starts with a complicated rhythmic theme carried by tympani, handclaps, and a celeste, and then unfolds into an angular and yet strangely sweet opening statement from the solo violin. The YC201 would highlight, in turn, the earthy punch of the tympani, the sharp “pop” of the handclaps, and the mysterious ring of the celeste, and then shift gears to nail the incisive sound of the violin. At the same time, it did an excellent job of portraying the decay of the various instrumental voices within the reverberant recording venue, and an exceptional job of reproducing soundstage depth cues, so that the soundstage seemed to extend far behind the loudspeakers,

almost making me feel as though I could get up from my chair and walk out into the stage.

My favorable assessment was tempered by two small but noticeable sonic

acoustics of the recording space became clear and the guitar seemed almost eerily present. Increased volume levels also made for clearer low-level dynamic contrasts, and an across-the-board

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shortcomings. First, the YC201 lacks a bit of the resolution that today's best mid-priced CD players achieve. Rega's sub-\$1000 Apollo, which I had on hand for comparison, retrieved significantly more musically relevant information. Second, the YC201 slightly softened details and dynamics at the frequency extremes—a characteristic that may be part of the player's almost eerie smoothness, but that was not, strictly speaking, accurate. Neither of these is a damning flaw by any stretch of the imagination, but together they made me think the YC201 was leaving some sonic potential on the discs unfulfilled.

The YA201 amplifier is a 100Wpc solid-state integrated design whose sonic strengths parallel those of the YC201, but with two important differences. First, at its best, it offers substantially more transparency and resolution; second, it delivers crisper response at upper and lower frequency extremes. I say "at its best," because the YA201 could sound almost like two different amplifiers, depending on playback volume. At low-to-moderate levels, it sounded pleasing, but overly polite, with tone colors that seemed somewhat washed out. But with the volume turned up, the amplifier's character changed dramatically for the better. With added volume tone colors became richer and more vibrant, and instrumental and vocal timbres were infused with life.


One recording that crystallized this impression was Philip Hii's classical guitar rendition of the Chopin *Nocturnes* [DSG]. At low levels, both Hii's guitar and the acoustics of the recording venue sounded flat and a bit like high-end "elevator music." But with the volume turned up, the

improvement in focus and resolution.

As for tonal characteristics, down low, the YA201 sounded hearty and warm yet clear, though without the last word in low-frequency transient response or "traction" (that is, the ability to control woofers firmly and precisely). Several class D amplifiers I've evaluated lately offer better bass performance than the YA201 does, though I think this amp could hold its own against like-priced integrated amplifiers and separates (e.g., the NAD C 162/C 272 pair). Highs were delicate, sweet, and pleasantly extended, though the YA201 did not provide the razor-sharp treble transient response and transparency that some listeners crave and that certain higher-priced amplifiers deliver. Even so, the YA201's treble characteristics make it somewhat forgiving of overly bright associated components, while still preserving a healthy measure of clarity.

As with the YC201, the broad center of the midrange is where the YA201 shines, delineating layers of musical subtleties in ways that make many mid-priced components sound simplistic. What makes the YBA's midrange special is an extraordinary expressiveness. For example, it reveals how the notes of Paul Winter's saxophone on *Icarus* [Epic, LP] begin with a rise in pressure at the mouthpiece, followed by initial bursts of sound as the reed starts to vibrate, and finally bloom as the air column inside the sax begins to resonate. Granted, many good integrated amplifiers catch these distinctions to some degree, but not with this kind of assuredness on inner details. This midrange sophistication and richness make the YA201 an awful lot of amplifier for the money.

One minor glitch: My review sample came with faulty control logic, making it respond to remote control buttons meant for use with the YC201 CD player. YBA will probably have this problem straightened out by the time you read this.

Summing up, YBA Design's YC201 is a lovely CD player to look at and one blessed with seductive midrange sound. The only thing holding it from class leadership is stiff competition from new mid-priced entries. The YA201 integrated amp, on the other hand, is a class leader because it offers the same midrange magic as the YC201, plus greater transparency and better response at the frequency extremes. Most importantly, these components convey real musical *joie de vivre*. 

### SPECIFICATIONS

#### YC201 CD player

Outputs: One stereo analog (RCA), one digital (coaxial)

Dimensions: 15.35" x 5.1" x 15.35"

Weight: 25.35 lbs.

#### YA201 integrated amplifier

Power output: 100 Wpc @ 8 Ohms

Inputs: Six stereo analog (RCA)

Dimensions: 15.35" x 5.1" x 15.35"

Weight: 33.07 lbs.

### ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

Rega Apollo CD player; Musical Fidelity

Tri-Vista SACD player; Wilson Benesch

Full Circle analog system; Musical

Surroundings Phenomena phonostage;

Epos ELS 303 and Paradigm Reference

Signature S8 loudspeakers; RGPC power

conditioner, Cardas interconnect and

speaker cables

### DISTRIBUTOR INFORMATION

#### AUDIO PLUS SERVICES

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audioplusservices.com

Prices: \$1649 each