

Category Winner: Hi-Fi Component System

YBA DESIGN YC201/YA201



YBA Design, or just YBA, is a French manufacturer of high fidelity audio 'instruments.' Its range includes seven specific series, each YBA says with its own very specific characteristic. Admittedly, owning a YBA system has meant membership of quite an exclusive club in the past - its instruments are definitely a considered purchase and can often be considered as being priced out of the range of the some equipment buyers. With its new Y Series, YBA has never been more affordable and it brings its products in line with more mainstream competition, such as Arcam, Quad or Musical Fidelity. For music lovers this is great news as if you're unfamiliar with YBA it engineers, designs and builds its hi-fi instruments to a fastidiously high standard.

Previously reviewed in *Audio & Video Lifestyle* magazine (issue AVL-153) was YBA's Passion 100 Intégré amplifier - a \$5,500 integrated that was awarded a resounding full five stars for its performance. Here we have both the new YA201 integrated amplifier and YC201 CD player, which combined cost less than the Passion 100. The YC201 CD player retails for \$2,200 while the accompanying YA201 integrated amplifier costs \$2,500. With quality such as is offered by these pair and at the price being asked it's little wonder that the VC201 CD player and YA201 integrated amplifier rate amongst this year's *Audio & Video Lifestyle* Best Buy Awards winners.

For YBA, instruments this level of pricing has never before been achieved.

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Combine these with a suitably revealing and capable pair of loudspeakers (for around the same price as the amplifier) and you can put together a seriously exotic slice of European music-making equipment for very reasonable money.

YBA stands for its creator’s initials - Yves-Bernard André and it has been his individual passion since starting out in 1981 that had led the company to where it is today. It has really been his single-minded vision that has put YBA on the international audio map. However its path has definitely changed after the introduction of the Y Series. One thing that hasn’t is the superlative build quality and the design work that’s gone into this product is clearly obvious to the beholder. I love the look and feel of these two components. Both share the same very cool looking aesthetics and chassis, but there’s more than just visual appeal built into these two.

The Y Series chassis is made from ‘space-grade’ aluminium because of its anti-vibration and antimagnetic properties. A usual no-no with separate hi-fi components is to stack them because of both these reasons, but it’s okay to do so with these YBAs - up to three high. The rigid chassis also has just three feet - another favourite isolation technique and they provide a very stable base even when stacked. The use of aluminium continues in the rest of the exquisite casework; even the back panel, though never visible, is finished to the same high standard. Head-on the pair present a united front with a minimalist presentation. Both use the same blue LED display below which a number of small silver buttons correspond to basic operational commands. A fully functioning system remote, which is also machined from aluminium, does everything else.

Outwardly beautiful, what’s going on on the inside would be equally attractive to an audio engineer and the componentry in both all contribute to the end goal - how well these two play music. The YC201 CD player uses a 192kHz/24-bit digital-to-analogue converter (DAC)

with high resolution upsampling which, YBL claims, gives standard CDs a performance boost approaching the sound quality of Super Audio CD. Jitter is also kept to a minimum so that more of the CD’s music is processed rather than the distortion that jitter creates by mistiming of the bits in the digital bitstream.

The YA201 integrated amplifier offers six line-level inputs, without any provision of a phono stage, and like it’s Y Series CD partner it’s been designed to make the most of the music’s electrical signal. Internally the signal path is as short as possible and with an oversized power supply the YA201 is able to generate a very healthy 100 watts per channel. It’ll drive just a single pair of loudspeakers and, of course, tone controls - sacré bleu, not on your life! Once again the row of small buttons correspond to the display and operating this amp is as straightforward as it gets. Turn it on, select the input and adjust the volume. The only sign that there’s more to it than this can be found on the back and actually both products have an RS232 port and 12V triggers for custom installation and/or firmware upgrades.

I wasted no time in hooking up the YBLs and getting a system up a running. As per usual I had my three favourite speakers at hand to partner the electronics and threw them in at the deep end from the off by hooking up my Ambience Reference 1600 ribbons. Both CD player and amp had been previously used so apart from warming up, no run-in period was required. The Ambience let you know in an instant what sort of calibre electronics are fronting them and I immediately liked what I heard.

The key to sonic success with any system is synergy - if components don’t gel or one link of the system is letting the others down, you’ll hear it. These YBAs definitely work together as one and create a balanced sound that’s pitched just right - it’s precise but not too clinical, dramatic but never goes over the top. This means the pair work well with a variety of music and have plenty of scale and bite to

separate the meshed guitar riffs and rhythms of Rage Against The Machine, while with more sedate musical forms the YBAs switch roles with an effortless sweetness. Jeff Buckley's *Lilac Wine* proves a suitable palliative to the 'Rage and the YBAs capture the details of the mix superbly, highlighting instruments with plenty of space around them, yet with a pleasant and easy to follow timbral character that creates a fulfilling musical experience.

I then switched speakers to the KEF iQ9s - another speaker that thrives on the end of quality electronics. With these in tow, the YA201s power output specs sound realistic. The amp has plenty of power in reserve and isn't afraid to use it. The KEFs are an easy load but don't mind motoring hard with the right sort of amplification. Spinning Leftfield's *A Final Hit* these electronics really bring it to life with ample attack and their talent for dynamics. The dense rhythms are driven along with real purpose and there's plenty of attack of the drums while heavily processed vocals come through loud and clear.

But it's with the classics that this pair impresses the most. Play the dramatic choral scoring of Orff's *Carmina Burana* and the pair deliver the massive crescendos with upmost confidence. There's no restraint of dynamics as the music grows from quiet chant to full-blown explosion of instruments and massed voices. Stereo imaging is also excellent with the choir being placed in a very believable sounding church acoustic. Close your eyes and you're there.

These two components ooze class, refinement and musical ability. What's more given you'd expect a price tag double what it is, they represent something of a bargain as well.

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Ancillary Equipment: Quad 11L loudspeakers, KEF iQ9 floorstanding loudspeakers, Ambience Reference 1600 ribbon speakers, SAP Relaxa 1 isolation platform, Wasatch Cable Works interconnects, Nordost Silver Flatline loudspeaker cables, Concorde and U-Build equipment supports, Black Box mains conditioner

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Specifications:

Product Type

CD player and integrated amplifier system

Frequency Response

YC201: 20Hz-20kHz

YA201: 0.5Hz-30kHz

Signal to Noise Ratio

YC201: more than 100dB

YA201: 100dB

Digital to Analogue Conversion

YC201: high resolution, ultra low jitter, 24-bit/192kHz with upsampling

Input Impedance

30Hz-44kHz

Sensitivity

91dB at 2.83V, 1m

Impedance

YA201: 10 ohms, line-level

Inputs

YA201: 6 x line-level

Power Output

YA201: 2 x 100 watts RMS (8 ohms)

Dimensions

390 x 390 x 130mm

Weight

YA201: 15kg, YC201: 11.5kg

Price

\$4,700 complete

"These YBA's definitely work well together as one and create a balanced sound that's pitched just right."

Reviewer:

Nic Tatham

All specifications and recommended retail prices were supplied by the distributor at the time of original review, and may now be subject to change

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