



Gallic charmer

YBA is a distinctive French hi-fi marque that doesn't follow the fray. Its new WA202 is proof positive of this, says **Malcolm Steward...**

America was the country in which the receiver – the combination of an integrated amplifier and a radio tuner – always seemed most popular and best accepted by hi-fi enthusiasts. The receiver never took off in the same way in the UK, yet the model we have here has an interesting background.

The YBA WA202 is designed in France and built in China, and represents a third of the company's Design range, YBA's entry-level package that features the WM202 CD player and WD202 DAC.

A little background before we move on: Yves Bernard Andre began designing audio in 1971 with companies such as Goldmund, Pierre Lurné, and Vecteur and subsequently founded his own company, YBA, ten years later. His design philosophy has stayed constant virtually throughout his many years as a respected and distinctive designer. For example, he believes that signal paths should be as short and uncluttered as possible and he is not a believer in ramping up amplifier power unnecessarily: he does acknowledge however, that current output

► DETAILS

PRODUCT: YBA Design WA202

ORIGIN: France/China

TYPE: integrated amplifier/tuner

WEIGHT: 6.7 kg

DIMENSIONS (WxHxD): 32cm x 11cm x 28cm

FEATURES:

- 50W (into 8Ω)
- AM/FM with RDS bandwidth
- 80 presets (40AM and 40FM)
- inputs: four RCA phono
- USB connection: Type B, 5V, 600mA maximum

DISTRIBUTOR: Zephyr Audio

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capability is vital – the ability to deliver power into the complex, low-impedance loads that some loudspeakers present. Those ideas, and several others, mirror the thoughts of Naim Audio's equally pragmatic founder, the late Julian Vereker, and there are some strong similarities in the sound of the electronics the two companies produce.

The YBA Design range offers buyers distinctive styling, which is unusual for a 'starter' range. The casework is not the usual 43cm wide, but is more compact at 32cm. Rather than being supported by four rubber feet attached to the base of the casework, as are most conventional units, the Design electronics use tiny flat casework extensions fashioned from their fascia and side panels, giving three-pointed support, which you can bet was chosen as a result of listening tests – the way Andre selects pretty much everything. These can even be accommodated on the slotted tops of Quadraspire Sunoko Vent supports, provided you are careful about the placement of the fascia 'foot' to make sure it doesn't fall into a slot aligned in the same lateral direction.



The receiver is reasonably well equipped and includes features such as a remote control handset, and push-button fascia controls – only four – beneath its discreet display panel. All these buttons have different functions when the RDS AM/FM tuner input is selected. From left to right the buttons are – when a source other than tuner is selected – Source, Function, Volume down, and Volume up. To the far left of these controls, underneath the YBA logo, is the final button, which controls power

on/off. This minimalist approach makes operating the WA202 a breeze, even the multi-function nature of the controls is something that can be quickly worked out without recourse to the instruction booklet.

Other inputs include RCA phonos for CD, video, aux and iPod, with a USB power connection for charging the iPod either with a YBA dock or the original white USB lead supplied with the iPod. The fifth pair of phonos is the pre-out connection, which is suggested for users wanting to connect a separate power amplifier, subwoofer, or active loudspeakers.

Sound quality

I regularly find I have trouble listening to amplification that is overly transparent, because aspects of its presentation distract me and I wind up listening to individual facets of a performance, rather than the music as a complete entity itself. Somehow the scrupulously see-through sound of the WA202 generally managed to avoid this distraction, even though it possesses outstanding transparency and openness, especially for such a relatively inexpensive – £849 – device. The receiver displayed a revealing, fastidious character that deftly uncovered the finest of details and nuances while also disclosing the flow of the music along with any emotional luggage it happened to be carrying.

I offered the YBA all the help I could by partnering it with components known and respected for their musicality. Naim Audio's HDX-SSD hard disk server and n-DAC convertor powered with an XPS2 power supply as a front-end wired to the WA202 with an Atlas Equator III interconnect, and Neat Acoustics Petite loudspeakers, singled-wired to the receiver with TelluriumQ Ultra Black speaker cables.

Even with such musical partnering equipment there were recordings where the hi-fi characteristics tried to dominate the proceedings. Take, for example, the Anna Calvi track *Rider To The Sea* from her eponymous debut album, where, before the

amplifier had fully warmed through, I felt as though my head was inside the pick-up covers of her Fender Telecaster, so graphic and fiercely vivid was the metallic tonal colour the receiver delivered. It was not unlike viewing a painting by Kandinsky, while standing with your face pressed against the canvas, giving your brain one of those 'too much information' events.

The not wholly warmed receiver also seemed a trifle uneasy with my 24-bit/96kHz rip of Jaco Pastorius playing *Portrait of Tracy*, where the succulent tonal colour of the abundant harmonics he played seemed almost to be battling with the overall progress of the composition. Again I had the feeling of practically being inside his bass guitar. This sense disappeared subsequently when I played the track *Donna Lee*, where a proper sense of perspective was restored; partially thanks to the introduction of a percussion element, an 'external' instrument to discourage my

The WA202 possesses outstanding transparency and openness for such a relatively inexpensive device

attention from focussing solely on the sound of Pastorius' seductive, de-fretted, 1962 Fender Jazz Bass Of Doom!

Other jazz artists' music fared far more successfully with the YBA, especially once fully up to operating temperature. Guitarist Joe Pass and saxophonist Art Pepper both wrought spellbinding performances from the WA202. The 24/96 rip of the Pepper album *Meets The Rhythm Section* won the highest praise by managing to sound nothing at all like a recording. The WA202 rendered each instrument in such a believable, lifelike manner and conjured so accurate a soundstage that it was child's-play to suspend your disbelief and imagine that you were in the studio with the band in 1957 and luxuriating in

CONNECTIONS



Q&A

Jackie Pugh
CEO, YBA



MS: Is the recently launched Design series fulfilling its aims of bringing new customers to the established YBA marque?

JP: Yes, it is most definitely bringing new customers to YBA – on several fronts. One, of course, is the price which is truly remarkable given the features the range has to offer. Secondly, the design itself coupled with the exceptional build quality has proven to be a big plus, and attracts a broader audience where looks are so important. It is, for example, having a much larger appeal than I ever imagined to the interior design world! But most importantly is the way it performs. It has a sonic signature which is very 'YBA', albeit not as dramatic as the larger ranges such as the Passion series. It is extremely satisfying to see the look of what is best described as genuine surprise when people start to listen.

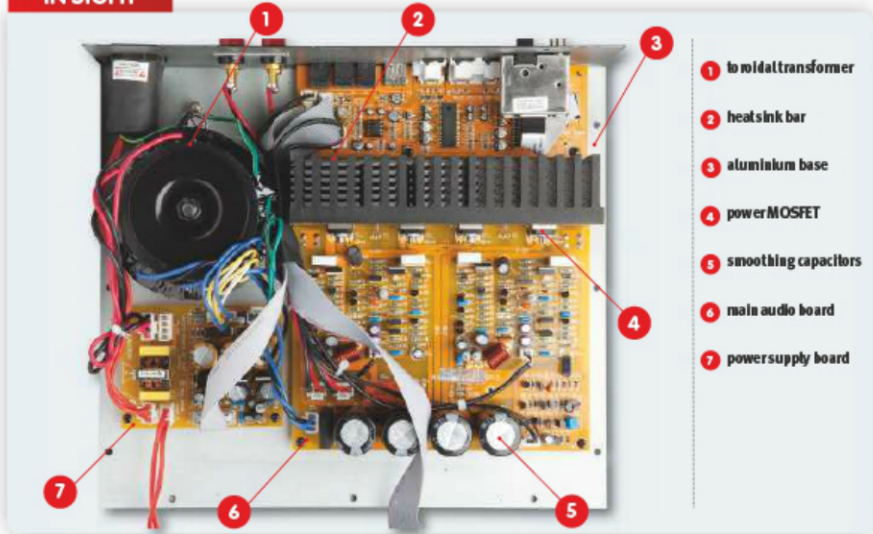
MS: Are there any plans to expand the range as a whole?

JP: There are plans to introduce some further Design products, but they are still in the early development stage and I expect they may be shown at the late spring Munich show for the first time, certainly no earlier.

MS: Given the different proclivities of the North American market, is the WA202 receiver as popular in the United States market as I imagine it would be?

JP: Since the release of the new YBA products in Munich in May of this year, an almost entirely new international distribution network has been put in place. As a consequence, while sales are beginning to flow now it is still too early to say which is the best market for which product. Certainly the US has traditionally been a strong market for receivers, and the enquiry level from that country is growing fast, but this is not only for the WA202. We have found that there is an equal amount of interest in the WM202 CD player and the WD202 digital-to-analogue convertor. Indeed, in some markets, the DAC is attracting the greater interest, we have found.

IN SIGHT



- 1 to mid transformer
- 2 heatsink bar
- 3 aluminium base
- 4 power MOSFET
- 5 smoothing capacitors
- 6 main audio board
- 7 power supply board



THE INCREASING DEMAND for YBA products ultimately forced Yves-Bernard Andre to consider the involvement of a major manufacturing company in order to secure his company's future. This would provide increased financial capabilities and the manufacturing capacity to satisfy the ever growing demand, while retaining the French heritage and design parameters.

In 2009, China high end audio manufacturer Shanling, acquired a significant shareholding in YBA. Already manufacturing for some of the best known and well-respected UK and European companies, Shanling had built an enviable reputation for its quality of product.

YBA was relaunched in 2011 under the aegis of new CEO, Jackie Pugh, who had most recently been involved with brands Creek and Epos, respectively. She is now working alongside Yves-Bernard Andre to position YBA as a market leader in the high-end hi-fi world.

those glorious, colourful musical textures, especially Philly Joe Jones whipping up a dynamic but subtle storm on his drum kit.

On the subject of tonal balance, it must be said that the WA202 was exemplarily well organised in this respect. Its bass was tight, dry and tuneful – powerful but never bloated or fat – and rich in texture and tonal colour. Midband and treble were wholly complementary, being clean, vibrant, and capable of revealing vivid tonal colour when it was present. This honesty was counterpointed by a dynamic compass that seemed entirely genuine and as far from being 'voiced for movies' as one could ever imagine.

The sound of percussion, for example, was totally credible – it sounded like percussion rather than gun-fire. This abundant honesty and candour served the human voice exceptionally well, presenting singers such as Alison Krauss sounding absolutely natural and wonderfully expressive. Listening to her perform on *Forget About It* and *Paper Airplane*, you could be in no doubt about her vocal prowess nor the passion with which she conveyed those songs. Both qualities were lavishly evident, especially the ability she has to lift her voice from a mere whisper to a melodious Blue-Grass roar.

I found the YBA WA202 to be equally compelling with Agnes Obel's *Riverside* from the album *Philharmonia*, presenting her voice as simultaneously delicate yet capable of stunning power, and

her piano as persuasively genuine in terms of pitch stability, tone, note-shape and dynamics. These elements combined to imbue the track with an authentic sense of reality, and a performance that would satisfy most listeners. But the YBA's fastidious nature added a host of detail and nuance to enchant further the truly pernickety and hard to please. This bonus material was reassuringly well integrated with the music's natural progression, and not distracting or defocusing in the least.

Conclusion

YBA's new WA202 receiver is noteworthy for its temporal acuity, excellent timing and speed, and austere – clean but not clinical – tonality and forthright but unexaggerated dynamics. Put together, this is a great recipe for an exuberantly music presentation. Factor in decent build and a fine feature count, and it's a charmer. ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



LIKE: Musically communicative; decent build and features

VALUE FOR MONEY



DISLIKE: Needs partnering with good ancillaries for best sound

BUILD QUALITY



WE SAY: An interesting, characterful product with a rewarding sound at a very reasonable price

FEATURES



OVERALL

