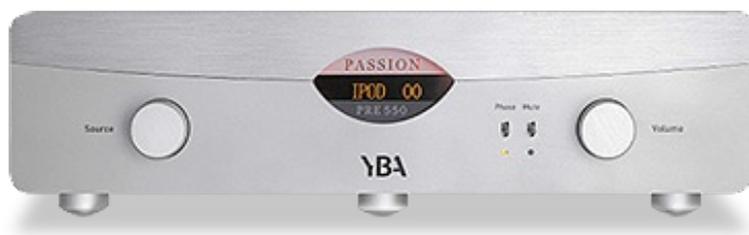


## YBA Passion 550 DAC-Preamplifier

Written by Aron Garrecht

Category: Full-Length Equipment Reviews

Created: 01 November 2013



Yves-Bernard André, founder and lead designer of the company that bears his initials, first became aware of his passion for high-fidelity audio at the age of 16, while practicing his oboe alongside his father's violin. After putting himself through school and then becoming a well-respected professor of electronics, André worked for companies such as Goldmund and Audax, earning several patents along the way. In 1981, deciding it was time for a change, he brought to market the first amplifier and preamplifier to bear the YBA label. Designed and built from the ground up by André himself, YBA products didn't take long to gain traction, or his company's name to be uttered by many audiophiles.

After growing and enjoying considerable success through the 1980s and '90s and well into the 2000s, YBA caught the eye of Shanling Audio, one of China's largest high-end audio manufacturers. In 2009, Shanling became one of YBA's largest stakeholders, yet waited nearly two years before relaunching the company internationally -- they understood that reintroducing YBA would be a delicate move. To help facilitate the process, Shanling appointed Jacki Pugh as the new CEO in late 2011. Pugh had considerable experience in the audio industry, and was believed to be well suited to lead the company alongside Yves-Bernard André. YBA was officially relaunched at the High End show in Munich in May 2012, where several new YBA models were introduced, including the subject of this review, the Passion 550 DAC-preamplifier.

### Design

YBA now makes products in four strata. At the top is the Signature line, and below that the subtly less exotic Passion line, followed by the Heritage line and, finally, the aesthetically independent Design line. When I first saw the Passion 550 DAC-preamp at the 2012 Consumer Electronics Show, I was immediately impressed by both its build and tactile qualities. The Signature and Passion models were positioned side by side in a silent display; I found the lines so similar that it took me a few moments to discern the subtle differences between them.

The Passion 550 (\$8000 USD) arrived in a substantial box, supported on each side by wood braces. The YBA measures 17"W x 4.6"H x 16.25"D and tips the scales at a stout 27.5 pounds. The overall aesthetic is one of quality, simplicity, and luxury. The faceplate measures 1/2" thick at its center and tapers to about 3/8" thick at its edges, and is milled from a solid piece of aluminum. On the face are two heavily weighted knobs, for Source (input selection) and Volume; between them are a dimmable OLED display and toggle switches for Phase and Mute. A finely milled-out area on the rear of the fascia houses all of the associated circuitry.

I asked Yves-Bernard André why he'd included a Phase switch. "About a third of the audio media sources available are in one phase, while the rest are in the other phase," he said. "Therefore, if the recording is out of

phase, your system will reproduce a depression. The Phase switch helps in correcting this.” In my listening sessions I generally left this switch in the off position, but with certain recordings I did notice a clear improvement in image focus, instrument placement, and bottom-end assertiveness with Phase switched on. The downside of having a Phase switch *only* on the front panel was that I had to get up each time to toggle it on or off, which made A/B comparisons less instantaneous. A Phase button on the remote control would be very handy.

The chassis is a 1/4”-thick plate of solid aluminum, and the rest of the case is equally impressive: a single curved piece of 1/8”-thick brushed aluminum serves as the top and side panels, presenting the illusion of a two-piece case. On the Passion 550’s underside are three support feet, the single front foot made of a harder material intended to simulate an earth point to evacuate vibrations. André told me that the Passion 550 is particularly sensitive to the type of surface on which it’s placed. He said that wood or soft carpet was ideal, but didn’t recommend glass because it can induce ringing. I placed my review sample on a 1”-thick slab of granite.



On the rear panel of the Passion 550 are polished, McIntosh-like input and output panels housing top-quality connectors and an IEC power receptacle. There are three analog inputs (one balanced, two unbalanced) and seven digital inputs (I<sup>2</sup>S, AES/EBU, Optical, Coaxial, BNC, USB, iPod), with AirPlay as an option. These are complemented by single XLR and S/PDIF outputs and a pair of RCA outputs. Each section -- input, output, and power -- has its own inset panel of brushed aluminum, making the rear of the Passion 550 as attractive as the front.

I yearned for a transparent top panel -- the inside of the Passion 550 is as remarkable as the outside. The cover removed, my eye was immediately drawn to the twin banks of huge, pastel-blue, 4700uF capacitors -- 16 of them. Each capacitor is internally damped and double-crimped to improve fluid retention, and they’re placed in two uniform rows across the width of the chassis, with the exception of a small break about 6” in from the right side panel. In our correspondence, André mentioned that he’d paid particular attention to isolating the 550’s digital and analog sections, and to keeping the signal paths as short as possible to maintain the utmost signal purity. The break in the pattern of the caps noted above is the physical division between the digital and analog circuit boards: 12 caps are dedicated to the analog domain, four to the digital -- impressive. Power is fed to each domain via handmade, independent transformers with double C-cores, and all circuit boards are replete with thick, meticulously laid out copper traces.

Because the traces are so large and the signal paths so short, I was able, in both the digital and analog sections of the Passion 550, to trace a path from input to output. Beginning with any digitally input signal (except the asynchronous USB input, which first utilizes a XMOS module), all signals are initially fed directly to a Texas Instruments digital interface located right behind the far right rear panel. From there, all digital signals are sent to a pair of 24-bit/192kHz stereo Cirrus Logic CS4398 DACs. Each DAC is supported by its own decoupled power supply to avoid L/R channel crosstalk, and is mechanically damped to avoid any vibration-induced distortions. Once through the DAC and converted to analog, all signals are then routed through a buffer stage with specially chosen op-amps, and are finally directed to the analog output stage. On the analog side, signal paths are equally minimal, with all signals entering through a differential input stage. Signals then travel through a series of pre-

driver transistors, and are finally output via high-current (30 amp) output transistors that are equipped with specialized emitter resistors.

But minimizing signal paths is only one way to maintain signal purity. Noise can be introduced into the signal through any number of outside sources, such as heat, vibration, and electrostatic and electromagnetic interference. With this in mind, André implemented a few other clever measures. He specified anti-vibration RCA connectors, also designed and built by YBA, which in the Passion 550 are connected to ground before hot to avoid inducing any noise when connected or disconnected. Damping materials were also carefully chosen according to their application, and oversized heatsinks are used on all transistors to expedite heat dissipation. Even a special carbon paint was used on specific internal components. The combination of all of these noise-reducing measures has resulted in a claimed signal/noise ratio of >105dB and a total harmonic distortion of <0.003%. What impresses me most, though, and what sets YBA apart from many other companies, is that, with the exception of a few resistors, every part used in the Passion 550 was designed and built by YBA, and each unit is hand assembled by a specific crew in a dedicated part of the YBA factory.

## Setup

The Passion 550 was relatively simple to integrate into my system. I began by connecting my Ayre Acoustics C5-xe<sup>MP</sup> universal player to the YBA via Kimber Kable Select 1126 balanced interconnects, and used another pair of the same to connect my Classé CA-M300 monoblocks. I connected my Oppo BDP-103 universal Blu-ray player using an Analysis Plus Digital Crystal S/PDIF cable (I use the Oppo's interface to stream music from my NAS), and the Ayre to the YBA with a Cardas AES/EBU cable, so that I could evaluate the YBA's DAC performance using the Ayre only as a transport. Finally, I integrated the YBA into my home-theater system with Analysis Plus Silver Oval-In RCA interconnects.

Using the Passion 550's home-theater bypass feature (accessed through the dedicated RCA inputs labeled Video) for the first time wasn't exactly intuitive -- YBA's manual is minimalistic, and touches on only the first of three required steps. First, one must hold down the Video button on the 550's remote for three seconds to access the input. Next, the 550's resistor-type volume control must be manually set to its maximum each time this input is accessed, to achieve full unity gain. Finally, unless your 550 is in a cabinet, its display must be dimmed manually by holding another button on the remote twice more for three seconds each. My Classé CP-800 does all this on its own at the touch of a single button.

Even more irregular was the Passion 550's remote. Milled from solid aluminum, it felt good in the hand, is of very high build quality, and responded well to commands. That said, I didn't find the arrangement of buttons or their labeling intuitive, and it has several buttons that aren't used with the Passion 550 at all, as this remote can also be used with other Passion models. Normally this wouldn't bother me, but it's not mentioned in the manual, and at first I was confused. For example, the button labeled Function is actually a default volume-level control that can be manually preset to your liking. My problem with this feature is that the volume can't be independently set for each source. I tried to set up this feature for use with the home-theater bypass input, hoping to avoid having to turn the volume up to max each time I used it, but I became only further annoyed -- I now was constantly turning down the volume for all other sources. Finally, the remote is not backlit, which makes it difficult to use in a darkened home theater, and it lacks a Power button. I found this last omission as odd as the lack of a Phase button -- the only way to turn off the Passion 550 is to flip a switch hidden under the left side of the faceplate.

## Performance

Once I'd familiarized myself with the Passion 550's operation, it was time to see if this little beauty sounded as good as it looked. After letting it warm up a few hours, I began my listening by using the Oppo as a streamer and cued up "Turning Tables," from Adele's *21* (16-bit/44.1kHz FLAC, XL), to assess the Passion 550's performance as a DAC. I was immediately struck by the vibrancy and dynamic character of the sound. Adele's voice was positioned center stage with appropriate scale, sounding very unconstrained. There was a sense of liveliness to the entire sound that I was not accustomed to hearing, and that was further supported by a huge soundstage that seemed to extend well beyond the walls of my room. The piano was set back a bit on the stage and slightly off to the right, yet its notes had weight and were well delineated, with no artificial softness or extended decay.

Orchestral instruments sounded equally literal, filling the rear of the stage just left of center.

Using the YBA strictly as an analog preamp and listening to the “Red Book” version of this track via the Ayre, wrought both subtle and not-so-subtle changes in the sound. Focusing on the less obvious, Adele’s voice sounded somewhat softer and smoother, and lacked a bit of the dynamism and vibrancy that had grabbed me with the YBA performing all the digital legwork. I also found piano notes to be a hint rounder, taking on more of a richer, melodic character. It was also immediately apparent that the soundstage no longer extended so far past my walls. The piano now sounded about 2’ closer to Adele, and the orchestra seemed to have moved forward by roughly 10’. My first reaction to this was primarily negative, but as the track progressed and I listened closer, I found these dimensional changes to be not entirely unwelcome. Although now closer together, Adele, piano, and orchestra still had enough air and leading-edge definition between them to keep their sounds from bleeding into each other.

Moreover, despite everything on stage losing a slight bit of textural detail, both instruments and voices seemed to gain a similar measure of focus. What I took from this comparison was that the Passion 550 performed commendably as both a reference-level DAC and as an analog preamp. The changes I heard with the Ayre spinning the disc were due to the differences in character between the YBA and the Ayre, not because of anything the YBA was imposing on the signal. The fact that the differences between the two DACs were so easily heard demonstrated how transparent and resolving the Passion 550 was when used as an analog preamp.



To find out if these observations would prove unique to Adele’s *21* or remain consistent with other recordings, I tried something at a higher resolution. Listening through the Oppo interface to “Too Rich for My Blood,” from Patricia Barber’s *Café Blue* (24/88.2 FLAC, Premonition/Blue Note), right off the bat my focus was drawn to the double bass -- it was conveyed with immediacy and intricacy. The dimensionality and microlevel detail that I could hear from the strings helped provide a decent sense of in-the-room tangibility. Notes from Barber’s acoustic piano were similarly arresting, emanating from an inky-black background with a richness and scale that trumped anything the Ayre could muster from SACD (Premonition/Blue Note SACD 21297 2002 6). Furthermore, Barber’s voice was alluring, so clearly imaged that I could easily “see” her on the soundstage because of the air around her, rather than listening for subtle differences in vocal intensity. This added level of acuity from the YBA drew me into the recording, tempting me to listen more closely than usual to the supporting instruments. Everywhere I listened, there was something new to hear. I found myself wondering if this was a

good or a bad thing -- I couldn't decide if I wanted to dissect the music or revel in it.

Moving my focus to how clearly the YBA could convey the Ayre's playback of the Barber SACD via its analog inputs, the Passion 550 again made quick work of illustrating the differences in character between the two. This time, one of the more notable differences was that the Ayre seemed to have a bit more warmth -- despite sounding less visceral than the YBA, its sound was arguably more inviting. Drums were presented a touch larger in size, but lacked some of the palpability and bottom-end resolution that the 550's DACs were so good at communicating. Cymbals maintained their leading-edge definition and microlevel detail but lost a bit of assertiveness by comparison, and the Ayre struggled to present Barber's voice with the same scale while treading the line between organic and absolute neutrality -- something that the Passion 550 was also good at keeping in check. What the Ayre did provide, and the YBA did nothing to hinder, was an added measure of fluidity and rhythm that allowed the music to flow naturally, and me to simply enjoy it.

## Competition

When I reviewed the YBA Passion 550, the only similarly equipped component I had on hand was my reference Classé CP-800 preamplifier-DAC-processor (\$5000), which I reviewed in February. Comparing their analog performances, I immediately heard the first of several significant differences between them: a vast difference in gain. The YBA Passion 550 could be set to a volume level of -62 to achieve an output level of 75dB; the Classé needed to be set at an alarming -26 to achieve the same output. To ensure a fair comparison, I spent the next hour or so compiling a list of equivalent volume levels for the digital and analog outputs of both preamps. That completed, I was off to the races.

I began by listening to "Nardis," from Patricia Barber's *Café Blue* SACD. The YBA immediately differentiated itself with an openness and directivity of sound that the Classé simply couldn't match. With whatever analog signal I fed it, the YBA maintained more air around voice and instruments, more transient speed, a wider dynamic range, and more transparency. By comparison, the Classé imposed a smidgen of warmth on the sound, faintly rounding out the bass while struggling to communicate the same level of articulation and microdetail that the YBA took in stride. Although the YBA was the superior analog preamp, the Classé maintained equal levels of focus, and was the quieter model.

When I used the two models' digital inputs, the gap between them narrowed significantly. For this shoot-out I cued up "Master's Hand," from Charlotte Gainsbourg's *IRM* (24/96 FLAC, Elektra), a highly dynamic, multifaceted track that has proved to be a torture test for several DACs I've listened to in the past. The Classé initially took me by surprise, proving to be on a par with the YBA in terms of timing, resolution, retrieval of microdetail, and spatial acuity. By contrast, the YBA grabbed my attention with its punchy, vivid, utterly neutral portrayal, which was supported by improved dynamics and more appropriately scaled images emanating from a larger soundstage.

Through the Classé, guitar plucks appeared slightly farther left on the stage than through the YBA, but lacked the surrounding air that the YBA was so good at implying. The out-of-phase kick-drum strokes seemed to extend a touch farther behind my head through the Classé as well, but, again, lacked the YBA's impact and realism. The YBA also excelled at solidly fleshing out Gainsbourg on stage with pinpoint accuracy, all the while implying a larger canvas. So I was perplexed that a DAC as good at fleshing out voices and conveying soundstage width as the Passion 550 struggled with such finer details as delineating the individual beads in the shakers behind Gainsbourg, a detail that the CP-800 communicated quite effectively.

Because of this and the other subtle differences noted throughout this review, I found the Classé DAC to be the more organic, focused, sophisticated, less in-my-face DAC. I also found the CP-800 to sound a smidgen smoother than the YBA, perhaps because of the thin blanket of warmth it seemed to spread over everything. Despite all of these advantages, I still preferred the YBA, and here's why: The Passion 550 presented its ones and zeros in a considerably more neutral manner while exceeding the CP-800 in dynamics, soundstaging, transient speed, and transparency. Further, the YBA presented lower frequencies with greater weight, impact, and articulation; this, combined with the previously mentioned advantages, delivered a more compelling presentation.

## Conclusion

YBA's Passion 550 proved again and again to be an exceedingly transparent preamplifier that imposed little to no sonic signature on whatever analog signal it was fed. Whether I listened to it on its own or in comparisons, the fact that I could hear differences so effortlessly through the Passion 550 is a testament to Yves-Bernard André's achievement in designing and building a reference-quality preamp. The Passion 550's DAC possessed unwavering accuracy, and tended to enhance rather than detract from the presentation, and its arresting dynamism and relentless pursuit of transparency went a long way toward enabling the music to grab me. Finally, I found the Passion 550 to be a force to be reckoned with when it came to conveying the lower octaves as they were intended to be heard. My only gripe concerns its ergonomics, but that's *all* I have to complain about.

If you're in the market for a reference-level preamp-DAC, you need to hear the YBA Passion 550, even if you're shopping considerably north of its price. It's not inexpensive, but considering its build quality, design, and sound, I can say with conviction that the Passion 550 is one heck of a value.

. . . *Aron Garrecht*

[arong@soundstagenetwork.com](mailto:arong@soundstagenetwork.com)

## Associated Equipment

- **Speakers** -- T+A Elektroakustic Criterion TCD 110 S, Dynaudio Confidence Center Mk.2, B&W CWM 7.4 surrounds (4)
- **Subwoofers** -- JL Audio Fathom f112 (2)
- **Amplifiers** -- Classé CA-M300 (2), Halcro MC50
- **Preamplifiers** -- Classé CP-800, Marantz AV8801
- **Sources** -- Ayre Acoustics C5-xe <sup>MP</sup> universal player, Oppo BDP-103 universal Blu-ray player
- **Cables** -- Kimber Kable Select KS-6063 speaker cables and Select 1126 interconnects, Analysis Plus Silver Oval In interconnects, Analysis Plus Digital Crystal S/PDIF, Cardas AES/EBU digital cable, Cardas Clear Blue Beyond power cables
- **Power conditioner** -- Torus Power AVR2 20A

## YBA Passion 550 DAC-Preamplifier

**Price: \$8000 USD.**

**Warranty: Two years parts and labor.**

YBA

E-mail: [international@ybahifi.com](mailto:international@ybahifi.com)

Website: [www.ybahifi.com](http://www.ybahifi.com)