

YBA Passion PRE550/AMP650

Combining simplicity with flexibility, this pre/power combination from one of the best-known names in French hi-fi has much to offer – including the odd quirky feature...

Review: **Andrew Everard** Lab: **Paul Miller**

Like some other French audio companies, Yves-Bernard André's eponymous brand has hovered on the periphery of UK hi-fi enthusiasts' perception. But the company has been on a mission to change all that, taking a more global view with a lineup extending to no fewer than five product ranges. The Passion models, represented here by the £6750 PRE550A preamp and £5750 AMP650 power amp, sit near the top of the pile.

A FRENCH FLAIR

Although the majority of its products are built by Shanling in China [see boxout, p47], they still retain a French flair – or should that be idiosyncrasy? – for which past YBA products have been known. While the PRE550A may follow a familiar 'modern preamp' pattern, with both digital and analogue inputs, the digital implementation is atypical and eschews the ultra-high-resolution formats highly fashionable at the moment.

Yes, there's an asynchronous USB input here, but it's limited to 192kHz/24-bit files, the tried-and-tested Cirrus Logic CS4398 DACs being fitted with additional vibration-damping measures. All incoming digital signals, whether via USB or coaxial/optical S/PDIF, are upsampled to 192kHz and a digital output, if required, is offered on a single coaxial socket.

Meanwhile, and perhaps more unusually, there's an Apple AirPlay module slotted into the rear panel, with not a hint of Bluetooth capability, along with a USB Type A port labelled for use with an iPod. There's Ethernet for network connection, providing a rugged wire link to the AirPlay module, while a second RJ45 socket allows the transmission of digital data in the IP2S format, with its separate clock signal.

YBA offers several players and transports with this connectivity, the most obvious

RIGHT: A large frame transformer sits beneath a mirrored top plate, the PSU supporting three pairs of ON Semiconductor power transistors per channel. The 'YBA' heatsink extrusions are very effective as the amp barely warms up!

match for the PRE550A being the £3950 CDT450. An interesting addition here is a little flip-switch on the rear panel of the preamp [see p49] allowing the digital section to be shut down when not required, for the best possible signal purity in the analogue section. That analogue department is relatively simple, with just one set of balanced XLRs and two sets of RCA inputs, one having a switchable volume bypass feature, so the PRE550A may be used in tandem with an AV processor or receiver.

There's no phono stage here, either built-in or available as a fittable option. Instead you are guided to YBA's own Passion series phono preamp, the £4250 PH150. As an aside, it would be useful if

the somewhat minimal manual were more forthcoming when it comes to the use and purpose of some of these facilities. For example, it depicts the network connection and analogue bypass function, but doesn't illustrate what they might offer the user. There's a little too much assumption of knowledge.

'Passion by name, they are passionate by nature'

Front panel controls extend to no more than source and volume selection, plus switches for phase and muting, the long and hefty metal-cased remote handset adding some niceties such as display dimming and storage/recall of a volume setting. However, either the 'angle of view' of the remote sensor on the preamp is rather narrow, or the remote's



LEFT: Fuss-free layout distinguishes the YBA pairing: the preamp has source and volume controls, plus flip-switches for muting and phase, while the power amp is even simpler. Power switches are under the fascias

infrared output a bit weak, meaning the handset had to be used quite close to the PRE550A to ensure a response.

The internal layout of the preamp is entirely logical, with the digital and analogue sections separated to the point of individual PSU transformers, and the whole plot sitting on a hefty aluminium chassis. The design eliminates passive components in the signal path, in the quest for signal purity, and most of the parts are sourced in France.

LETTERED FINS

Output from the PRE550A is provided on two sets of RCAs and a single pair of XLRs, while Yves-Bernard André also explained to *HFN* that he prefers the RCA connection over XLR to the partnering AMP650. While this might seem to fly in the face of perceived wisdom, it's less puzzling when, as PM discovered when lifting the lid, you realise that the amp's 'balanced' XLR input

is wired in single-ended guise. Otherwise, the AMP650, while not huge by the standards of some high-end rivals, is plenty big and heavy enough, tipping the scales at some 25kg.

A notable feature here is the 'YBA' detailing in the hefty heatsink fins either side of the amp – a neat touch, setting the styling apart. The other major contributor to its mass is the large transformer, which plays a major part in the output, a claimed 200W/8ohm [see PM's Lab Report, p49].

Like the PRE550A, the power amp sits on a trio of feet (two compliant, plus one metal for 'mechanical grounding'), ensuring it sits stably on a shelf. In case you were wondering – as I was, having set the two up before consulting the manual – the power switches are hidden under the units, to the left of the fascia.

The AMP650A offers two sets of speaker outputs per channel, shrouded in removable red and black plastic covers, the

upper pair of each coupled via an inductor, the lower direct. Yves-Bernard favours the upper option, which will certainly improve stability with some cable/speaker combinations, and I concurred, finding it delivered a shade more detail with my Chord/QED cables and PMC OB1 and little Neat Iota Alpha speakers [*HFN* Oct '16].

SWEET AND RICH

While the AMP650 may be bridged into a 600W monoblock, you'll not be hankering for extra power any time soon, for the (stereo) AMP650 shows admirable drive and grip, pushing the speakers hard without really betraying much effort. Moreover, when it's partnered with the PRE550A it delivers a sound that's certainly characterful, but entirely entertaining.

The balance here is sweet and rich, but with no shortage of impact and drama when required – the duo can hit hard, whether with music played in through the analogue inputs or fed via its range of digital connections. I hooked it directly to my Mac mini via USB, using Roon as the player [see p50] and also used my Naim NDS as both an analogue and digital source. I also tinkered with AirPlay music from my computer, but quickly dismissed it as the least satisfactory way to deliver music to these YBAs.

The somewhat anonymous AirPlay sound aside, the YBA pairing impressed with its combination of smoothness and slam, powering out the drums on Japan's 'Visions Of China', from the *Exorcising Ghosts* compilation [Virgin VGDCD 35 10] and evoking the melancholia of 'Night Porter' with a fine combination of ambience and instrumental focus. The sound is full and

YBA'S CHINESE CONNECTION

YBA describes its products as 'Designed in France, made with Passion', a novel twist on the 'Engineered in...' labelling seen on so many hi-fi products today. For though the company traces its history – and its name – back to its foundation by Yves-Bernard André in 1981, these days it's effectively owned by the Chinese 'Shenzhen Shanling Digital Technology Development Company', and in fact all its products, apart from the flagship Statement range, are made in China. André maintains a strong level of involvement with the brand, the 2009 deal which saw Shanling take a majority stake being intended to offer stability and an enhanced manufacturing capacity. The YBA brand was effectively relaunched in 2012, under the guidance of CEO Jacki Pugh (ex-Creek and Epos), and has grown to include the Design, Heritage, Passion, Signature and entry-level Genesis ranges. There are now no fewer than 18 models in the YBA catalogue, from amplification and CD players/DACs to phono stages and streaming products. To cap it off, YBA even has partnering 'Glass' and 'Diamond' interconnect and speaker cables.

LAB REPORT

YBA PASSION PRE550A/AMP650



ABOVE: Novelties are revealed to the rear: preamp [top] packs an Apple AirPlay module to the left, below which are network and I²S digital connections on RJ45 sockets. The 'extra' mono XLR input on the power amp is for bridged operation

warm, yet with high levels of detail and no blurring or overt smoothing of the treble to spoil things. It's worth noting that, if you should find yourself only using the analogue inputs, switching off the digital section brings a worthwhile, if relatively subtle, gain in clarity.

LAYERS LAID BARE

With the infectious early '90s Brit-house of M People's *Elegant Slumming* set [Deconstruction 74321 16678 2] the AMP650 lays down the rhythms with total conviction, while also allowing Heather Small's vocal's to soar out of the mix. Bringing things bang up to date with Moby's soulful *Everything Was Beautiful, And Nothing Hurt* [Little Idiot IDIOT 60CD] shows the pairing's ability to reveal the layers of dense electronica in a recording.

This is one complex set, but the YBA pre/power rises to the occasion with an immersive wash of sound in which every element is clearly apparent. The bass has admirable conviction, whether with the pulsing rhythms of 'Like A Motherless Child' or the great sweep of 'This Wild Darkness', with its near-choral backing. The French amplifiers – or should that be Sino-French? – draw you into the music with their generous, captivating sound, being both supremely easy to enjoy and entirely rewarding.

Strip things down to trio jazz from the Espen Eriksen Trio, with their *You Had Me At Goodbye* album [Rune Grammofon RCD 2096], and the delicate touch here is much in

evidence on a track such as 'In The Woods', where each note of Eriksen's piano shines radiantly, decaying into the acoustic as the next rolls over it, while the understated bass and drums are persuasively placed in a crisply resolved soundstage. That blend of warmth and clarity does a fine job of creating the impression of a very real and palpable performance in the listening room.

This ability is maintained even with large-scale orchestral and/or choral works, where the weight of the PRE550A/AMP650 combines with that smooth but never saccharine top-end to deliver real impact. The glorious recent Dunedin Consort recording of Monteverdi's *1610 Vespers* [Linn Records CKD 569; 192kHz/24-bit FLAC] manages to combine a striking sound, packed with ambience and atmosphere, with a beautifully intimate communication with the music, and that's just what this YBA pairing delivers. Passion by name, and passionate by nature! ☺

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

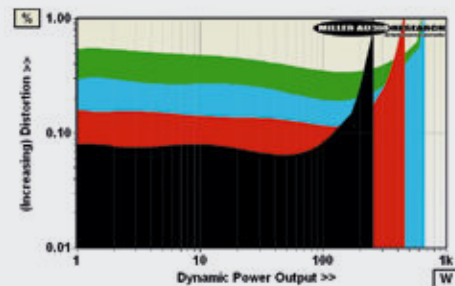
High-end sound with a dose of chic and élan – that's this YBA pre/power in a nutshell. Some might argue with the preference for AirPlay, or the limited hi-res range on offer, but the sound is never less than convincing, combining warmth and generosity with finely-judged detail and ambience. The pre has all the flexibility most will need, while the power amp's grip and dynamics make it a fine partner.

Sound Quality: 84%

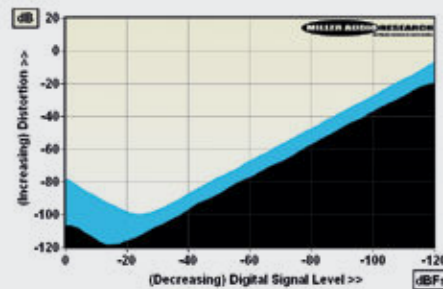


The flame in YBA's Passion duo is undoubtedly provided by the AMP650 which has two outputs – direct (the lower 4mm speaker terminals) and via a series inductor network (upper 4mm terminals). Power output meets the 200W/8ohm spec. at 2x223W/8ohm with sufficient in reserve to accommodate peaks of 252W, 460W, 650W and 628W (protected) into 8, 4, 2 and 1ohm loads at <1% THD [see Graph 1]. Distortion is a very steady 0.07% from 1W to 50W/8ohm but increases thereafter to 0.1%/80W, 0.2%/130W, 0.4%/180W and 0.75%/200W (all 1kHz), and at HF to 0.12%/20kHz (10W). The response is very extended into the low bass at +0.2dB/1Hz up to -0.2dB/20kHz and -3.3dB/100kHz but noise, from the frame transformer is quite high, reducing the A-wtd S/N ratio to just 70.5dB (re. 0dBW).

The partnering PRE550A offers a maximum +6dB gain, with distortion from 0.0001-0.001% (20Hz-20kHz) and a ±1dB bandwidth extending from 3Hz-98kHz (-0.05dB/20kHz). Noise is low and the A-wtd S/N wide at 93.8dB, the maximum 18.9V balanced analogue output delivered through an 80ohm source impedance. The digital board, based on a pair of CS4398 DACs offering 99dB of stopband rejection, peaks at a massive 9.1V output and delivers a resolution good to ±0.3dB over a full 110dB dynamic range. Distortion is 0.001-0.023% (20Hz-20kHz, 0dBfs) and falls to a minimum of 0.0001-0.0005% between -10dBfs and -30dBfs over the same frequency range [see Graph 2]. The response holds to a very flat ±0.03dB (20Hz-20kHz) with 44.1kHz/48kHz media, rolling gently away to -2.1dB/45kHz and -12.2dB/90kHz with 96kHz and 192kHz media, respectively. Jitter is impressively low at <40psec for all sample rates. PM



ABOVE: Dynamic power output versus distortion into 8ohm (black trace), 4ohm (red), 2ohm (blue) and 1ohm (green) speaker loads. Max. current is 25.2A



ABOVE: Distortion versus 24-bit digital signal level over a 120dB range at 1kHz (black) and 20kHz (blue)

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Continuous power (<1% THD, 8/4ohm)	223W / 336W
Dynamic power (<1% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)	252W / 460W / 650W / 628W
Output impedance (20Hz-20kHz)	0.023-0.041ohm (<140ohm, pre)
Freq. resp. (20Hz-20kHz/100kHz)	+0.0 to -0.2dB/-3.3dB (-1.1dB, pre)
Distortion (20Hz-20kHz, pre/power)	0.00013-0.001%/0.065-0.11%
A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBV/0dBW)	93.8dB (pre) / 70.5dB (power)
Digital Jitter (48kHz/96kHz)	40psec / 25psec
Power consumption (idle/rated o/p)	35W / 625W (14W, preamp)
Dimensions (WHD, pre/power)	430x118x412/430x178x397mm