

Vive la difference

When chic French design meets Chinese manufacturing, you get YBA's Heritage 100 CD player. *Savoir faire* Jason Kennedy listens in!



At the High End show in Munich this spring, Creek's former press relations manager (among other things) Jacki Pugh was to be found on the YBA stand with a business card giving her title as CEO. Not a bad career move you have to say. The French company sold a significant shareholding stake to Shanling in 2009 and relaunched with no fewer than twenty seven products made up of four ranges.

These start with the Design series of compact components then work up through Heritage, Passion and Signature ranges. The company's original founder and designer, Yves Bernard André remains as the creative force behind the new YBA, but manufacturing of all but the Signature models is now at Shanling's plant in China.

The YBA CD100 is the CD player in the three-strong Heritage range, this also includes an integrated amplifier

DETAILS

PRODUCT: CD player
ORIGIN: France/China
TYPE: CD player
WEIGHT: 5.7kg
DIMENSIONS: (HxWxD) 118x430x372mm
FEATURES:
 • digital inputs: coax, USB
 • digital output: coax
 • analogue outputs: RCA phono, XLR balanced
 • D/A convertor: Wolfson WM8740 24/192
 • input sampling rate: 44.1, 192 kHz/24 Bit
 • output level: 2V single ended, 4V balanced [quoted]
DISTRIBUTOR: Zepher Audio
TELEPHONE: 0845 519 8823
WEBSITE: zepheraudio.co.uk

called A100 (£1,300) and a 'Media Streamer' dubbed MP100 at £1,500.

The new CD100 is a rather nicely executed player, showing the sort of design flair that we've come to expect from French companies. The CD player, as an object, is so familiar these days that it's never easy to be pleasantly surprised by the design, ergonomics and/or style of one of these devices, but the YBA managed this nevertheless. Manufacturers often underestimate the importance of these facets of the overall design, but should never do this...

The Heritage 100 is distinguished by a slick slot drive and novel toggle switch controls – they take a little bit of familiarisation but are nice to use. After a while you also realise that the stop switch initiates eject, which is handy as that word is missing from the front panel! Unboxing the player you also notice that it has three feet and that two are tipped with rubber and the third with metal, suggesting that thought has gone into resonance tuning – YBA has a reputation for taking such matters seriously.

converter. The actual chipset is Wolfson's popular WM8740, which is capable of handling signal up to 24-bit/192kHz, and you can choose to upsample to this point or not via the front panel and remote handset. The latter is a particularly attractive example of its ilk, albeit one that doesn't have an obvious 'firing end', in other words it takes a while to realise which end to point at the player. It's a system remote with quite a few keys that don't relate to the player but most of those that you do want, including eject. The only option I missed was display dimming or defeat, the orange on black display is very clear but when the lights are low it would be nice to be able to calm it.

Yves Bernard André has always stuck to basic principles with his designs, and one of the core ones is symmetrical operation, also known as balanced operation. Many products feature XLR output sockets but it's usually only the more expensive ones that actually contain balanced circuitry to go with this. It is for example almost *de rigueur* in high end circles to incorporate this approach, although not everyone agrees that it's beneficial. It should reduce noise in the circuit and is used in pro audio because there are often very long cable runs. However I have heard many fabulous audio components that are devoid of XLR connections or balanced circuits, so it's by no means essential for good sound.

Sound quality

This is a full-bodied and unerringly powerful sounding player, thanks to solid control of low frequencies allied to a little Gallic *je ne sais quoi*. There have been many charming French CD players over the years, from the likes of Micromega, Helios and Cairn to name a few, and this YBA also has an undoubted appeal that goes beyond that which you might be able to measure in the lab. It translates into an ability to engage the listener, to make you pay attention and become involved with the music. It's a quality that's not obvious when making simple AB comparisons, but one that doesn't take long to notice when playing familiar

music. With the CD100 you want to hear the end of the track because it's more than just good presentation – it's good timing, dynamics and musical drive too. This was apparent fairly soon after I slipped Antonio Forcione's *A Meeting In London* in the slot. It wasn't as subtle as the 192kHz music file that I usually use, but it had a sense of purpose that is rare with computer audio.

Putting on another track that was burned from a hi-res download, Samuel Yirga's *Habasha Sessions*, revealed a strong sense of the body of the instruments, double bass in particular was physically palpable and it was clearly 'walking' in a way that had not previously been apparent. The YBA also has a feeling of directness, of being definite which probably stems from the power and precision of the bass. An orchestral piece lacked some of its finer details, the frills if you like, but it drew me in without trying and before I knew it five minutes had

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evaporated. This is a good sign, one that attention is being diverted from the sound to the music, something you might hope that all good systems could do, but don't!

Its imaging is also very strong when there is something to work with in the material, sometimes it seems not to have as much scale or depth as it might do, but switch to another piece and the room is full of sound. This is a differentiation that suggests considerable transparency to the music, as the music isn't being artificially augmented. The gusto that it brings to the musical experience is also rather inspiring, Dave Holland and Pepe Habichui's flamenco work fills the room with atmosphere and musical thrills, it's not hard to hear why several companies at the last CES show used it for demonstrations. The sense of immediacy was unusually good with this track as well

The CD100 has both single-ended and fully balanced analogue outputs, the latter being a rare feature at this price point. Whether it's of real use will depend on your set up but should you want to have the player over a few metres away from the amplifier it will be a bonus. There are also both coaxial and USB digital inputs so you can hook up your PC and stream hi-res formats via the player's digital to analogue

CONNECTIONS



Q&A

JASON KENNEDY SPOKE TO JACKI PUGH ABOUT THE YBA BRAND AND WORKING IN CHINA...



JK: What was your position at Creek?

JP: I was responsible for the company's Sales & Marketing.

What's it like going from Creek in England to YBA in China?

Different! At Creek I was working very closely with Mike Creek on a daily basis, whereas at YBA I do not have close contact and therefore have to rely more on my personal knowledge and assessment of situations.

Is there a big difference between British and Chinese operations?

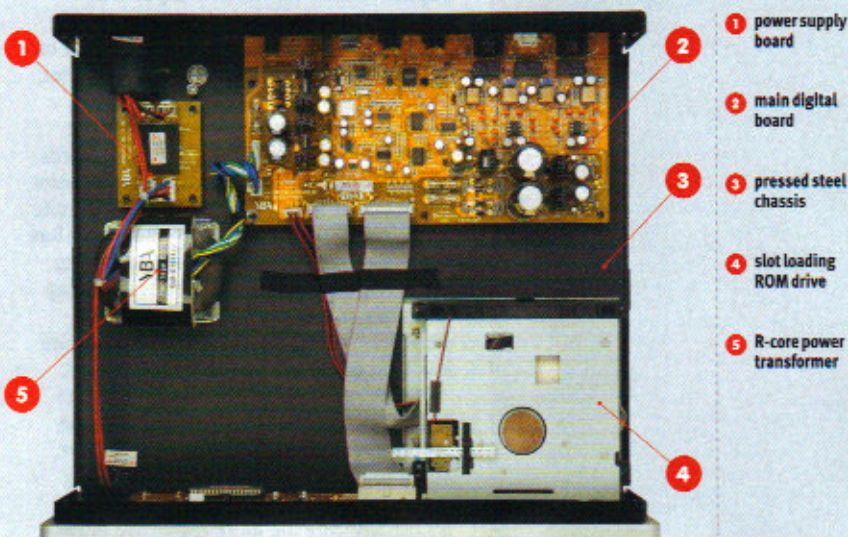
Yes. The British are more passionate whereas the Chinese are more methodical. With passion, of course comes emotion and protection. The Chinese have systems they work by and if something goes wrong, they follow a very clear and definite path to correct it. That is quite gratifying and I am happy I can lend the emotional side to that process.

Why bring so many new products to market simultaneously? Isn't this a little confusing for customers and dealers alike?

Before I joined YBA they actually had a stable of no less than twenty seven products, and while not seen internationally, they were selling to the Asian market. My first job was to take those products and decide which market they would best respond to and how they would be presented. The top of the line Signature products remained as they had always been, however the Passion and Design ranges were significantly reduced. The Heritage range is entirely new.

YBA always had a good level of interest in the past from distribution markets. We therefore took the decision to release the full product line-up in Munich this year, but in a way to make it easy for international markets to accept in these less than favourable economic times. By running four distinctly separate ranges we believed that some markets would respond better to certain range and, therefore, each market could find its own way to build a YBA following.

IN SIGHT



HOW IT COMPARES

THE CD100 HAS A SIMILAR CHARACTER

to Rega's Apollo-R, inasmuch as it can draw you into the music and make you forget about your worries and cares. It's more dynamic and definite than the Rega and probably a little bit more refined. It would be worth putting up against the best machines with prices up to £1,500. For example, the recent Cambridge Audio 851C at £1,195 has more features and a better USB DAC, but it would be a close call when it comes to core silver disc spinning skills. It's fair to say that the YBA has a little more character, which will work better with some systems than others, while the Cambridge's solid neutrality is more honest and revealing.

One of the most solid contenders at this price point is Naim's CD5i, which eschews niceties like digital inputs in favour of maximum CD sound quality. It too has the power to engage and this combined with the brand's strength in the market is very hard to beat at the price if sound quality is your sole criterion.

and it is this important quality that is the root of its ability to engage.

As with every modern silver disc spinner these days, the Heritage 100 CD player also sports a USB input. Hooking this up my iMac delivered a more sophisticated and revealing version of events to the spinning disc even with regular, Red Book material. This means that the atmosphere crackles with electricity on *Keith Don't Go* for instance, making it that much more palpably live and exciting. True, the image could have a little bit more precision, but there's still no getting away from the thrill power. The *Habasha Sessions* file sounded calmer but no less vital, with the bassline remaining as definite as ever and providing the music with its own distinctive swing. Throughout the duration of the audition period, I kept coming back to the pace that this machine displays. It's a clear strongpoint, and is something you notice even more with lively music like Cornelius' *Fit Song*, a track that reveals all of its dynamic energy thanks to that fast, powerful bottom end.

I compared the USB performance with a Cambridge Audio DacMagic Plus and found that the standalone converter with its twin Wolfson WM8740s gives greater low level resolution in the context of a marginally more neutral tonal balance. Still, the YBA came pretty close in terms of imaging and timing however, which is a good result given how much more the casework and transport must cost.

Going back to silver disc, and I was struck by the extra muscle it brings to the sound. It might not have the

finesse of a computer file, but surely makes up for it with a real sense of energy and power that combines to make fine detail seem less essential.

Conclusion

Something of an important juncture for the brand, YBA's new Heritage series just *had* to be very strong across the board, lest its reputation suffer. The new Heritage 100 CD player shows that its quality and performance is as high as ever. Nice to use, impressively styled and well engineered inside, it's also well specified with a decent USB input for your computer audio entertainment.

In the final analysis though, it's more than matters of aesthetics and ergonomics – key to this machine's appeal is its real ability to hook you into the music and keep you listening with a smile on your *visage*. After all, that's why you got into this hi-fi malarkey in the first place, isn't it? If you want to relive the joy of musical enthrallment then it's a top notch device for the purpose. ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★	LIKE: Engaging, musical sound; original styling and ergonomics; USB input
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★	DISLIKE: Lack of source switching on unit
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★	WE SAY: A most enjoyable, tactile and satisfying sounding new silver disc spinner; deserves to succeed
FEATURES ★★★★★	

OVERALL

