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French fancy

French hi-fi company YBA returns to the UK with a new DAC

PRODUCT YBA WD202
TYPE DAC
PRICE £590
CONTACT ☎ +33 01 60 12 51 00 🌐 www.yba.fr

It's been almost a year since we last reviewed any YBA products in these pages (HFC 316: YA201 integrated amp). The brand goes back a long way, though, to 1981 when Yves-Bernard André set up the company that bears his initials. His past included work with some of the classics of French hi-fi, including Goldmund and Pierre Lurné (both among the most rarefied names in turntables), but his own company has been his main focus since its foundation.

The range currently includes CD players and amplifiers – integrated and pre/power separates – and has recently been extended to incorporate this, the first YBA DAC, as well as a matching receiver and CD player. Unlike most other YBA products, however, they are made in China, but are still designed at the French headquarters.

The design offers a tempting array of features. Obviously there are S/PDIF inputs on both coaxial and Toslink connectors, but also the professional-style AES-EBU on XLR and a USB socket for computers. Audio outputs are both unbalanced and balanced and a headphone socket on the front makes this potentially a one-stop-shop. Volume control is provided and this is separate for headphones and line outputs (and can be disabled entirely for the latter). There's even a remote control, something of a rarity with DACs.

Construction is to a high standard, with a smart and well finished solid-aluminium case. An array of familiar integrated circuits inside handles the usual functions, including upsampling to 192kHz, while good quality op-amps look after analogue output. Technical performance is to a high standard, with excellent rejection of jitter, including via USB.

SOUND QUALITY

We had some very satisfying times with this DAC, which seems to be an assured and confident all-rounder. If it has a weakness, it's very bright and busy music, which sounds like

“Midrange is particularly beguiling, with some very nice distinction between the timbres of different instruments.”

a close-miked orchestra or jazz with a lot of wind instruments. With such material the sound can be just a touch on the strident side and a little detail is sacrificed in both treble and midrange.

Otherwise, there's a great deal of poise and insight in the sound. Midrange is particularly beguiling, with plenty of detail but also some very nice distinction between the timbres of different instruments. This makes it uncommonly easy to follow what each instrument, or indeed voice, is doing in a complex piece of music and if one prefers to listen to the overall soundscape rather than its constituent parts it is perfectly possible to do so.

There's also some fine rhythmic integrity and

drive. It would be an exaggeration to say that this is the most foot-tapping piece of audio kit we've ever encountered, but for a component that offers such fine melodic flow it is unusually persuasive in terms of timing. Playing an assortment of more-or-less funky tracks quickly convinced us that this DAC understands how to make a rhythm communicate.

Part of that must be due to the particularly tight bass, which extends well but never loses grip. It's also tuneful – sometimes this is less apparent than the grip, but it's still there and prevents low-lying melodies from becoming an indistinct dull thud. Jazz fans will

appreciate that, as it makes the old jazz favourite of the walking bass line much easier to follow and we enjoyed a similar benefit with piano recordings, especially those of works that exploit the bottom register of the instrument. At the other extreme, the high treble is clear and open, though as noted above it closes in slightly when there's a lot going on. It's nothing short of gorgeous with subtle, small-scale recordings.

We would be unkind if we neglected the headphone output, which is clearly no afterthought: it is a very capable addition to the unit and gave excellent results with various models of cans plugged in. It has enough output to drive moderate-impedance headphones quite loud and maintains a high degree of control which makes for very satisfying listening. **HFC**

Richard Black



VERDICT

SOUND



FEATURES



BUILD



VALUE



CONCLUSION

A winning combination of timing, bass and melodiousness, puts this DAC in a class of its own. Very slight treble congestion is its only (mild) vice.

HI-FI CHOICE OVERALL SCORE



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Gallic flair

Reinvented for the noughties, Micromega is back once more...

PRODUCT Micromega CD-10

TYPE CD player

PRICE £799

KEY FEATURES Size (WxHxD): 43x 7x25cm

⊙ Weight: 4.6kg ⊙ Analogue Devices D/A convertor AD1853 using internal digital filter and 8x oversampling ⊙ Electrical digital output (switchable)
⊙ CD Text

CONTACT ☎ 020 8971 3909

🌐 www.micromega-hifi.com

The real surprise here is the fact that the CD-10 exists at all. Micromega has had a fine reputation, in particular for its range of CD players. Since its first outing in the late 1980s, the range has included what is claimed to be the first top-loading CD player, (the CD-F1 Hightech in 1987) and in the following year the first separate two-box transport/DA converter combination, though we are not convinced of the veracity of either of these claims. From this reviewer's memory, we thought both Philips and Meridian had prior claims to top-loading players and one of the early iterations of Cambridge Audio was surely the first with a two-box player?

But from the outset Micromega had a real cachet for sound quality, but some of its models were hit by reliability problems with the Philips-sourced mechanisms, which was surely not Micromega's fault, but eventually led to the company's demise – temporarily anyway.

And now, after a gap of several years, the company is back with a reorganised leadership and design team, a new range of products and new UK distribution. The company, still based in Paris, is now headed by one-time motorcycle-racing champion Didier Hamdi, whose other interests include the company that provides the very impressive lighting for the Eiffel Tower. He has since reconstituted the design team under the company's original founder, Daniel Schar. All this came to light on

a recent visit to Paris, where the reconstituted company was formally announced.

Here in the UK, distribution is now in the hands of Absolute Sounds, the company that handles many of the most prestigious audiophile companies including Krell, dArtZeel, Wilson Audio, Koetsu, Sonus faber, Audio Research and Magico.

Another surprise is, that at the tail end of the most severe economic recession in recent times, Micromega's focus has been on the affordable end of the market, the sector that has suffered most during the recession. Most of the new components, which include amplifiers, CD players and tuners, cost less than £2,000, while the entry-level award-winning CD player tested here costs just £799.

“...the company is back with a reorganised leadership and design team, a new range of products and new UK distribution.”

A price which puts it in line with counterparts, from the likes of Rotel and from the mainstream end of the Marantz and Denon range. This is virgin territory for Absolute Sounds, which makes the new distribution deal all the more intriguing.

As for the bits you don't see from the outside, the CD-10 is built around an R-core transformer, chosen for its narrow bandwidth, which is said to be superior in current-limited situations to the more usual toroidal solution, because it provides higher levels of interference rejection.

The linear power supply is constructed in several stages to mitigate crosstalk between digital and analogue circuits. The digital section provides sufficient current to power the CD drive and the user interface – the display and associated logic. The analogue section is optimised in a different way. After rectification

and filtering, a high-impedance, low-noise power section is combined with tracking regulators, in a design with a rejection level higher than 100dB. The digital section of the D/A converter has a constant power source and a very low noise shunt regulator.

The disc drive in this player is a DVD-type, chosen because this kind of mechanism, is produced in very large quantities at low prices and with extremely high levels of reliability, a subject that Micromega is understandably sensitive about.

The mechanisms are the latest-generation Sony KHM3413 and Sanyo SFH8450, with error correction algorithms of Micromega's own making, which are optimised for audio applications – in most cases DVD mechanisms

are optimised for CD-ROM – and without some of the strategies that are not appropriate when reading single-speed CD-DA discs.

SOUND QUALITY

It didn't take long to recognise that the CD-10 is a high-quality product and for the price, represents exceptional value for money. It just doesn't have the less desirable qualities of some other similarly priced players. There is no hint, for example, of the rather heavy-handed feel we expected, while the level of detail the player lifts off the disc easily surpassed expectations.

In fairness, the baby Micromega doesn't quite manage to tick all the boxes. It is not a true heavyweight. Its bass is deep enough and powerful enough for most situations, but it doesn't have the devastating authority of the very best, but then it doesn't even come close to costing what you'd expect to pay for ▶



the very best either. It is a fine, detailed, and unusually lively player and it has the rare ability to resolve instrumental and vocal detail that is simply not fully audible, using many otherwise comparable players.

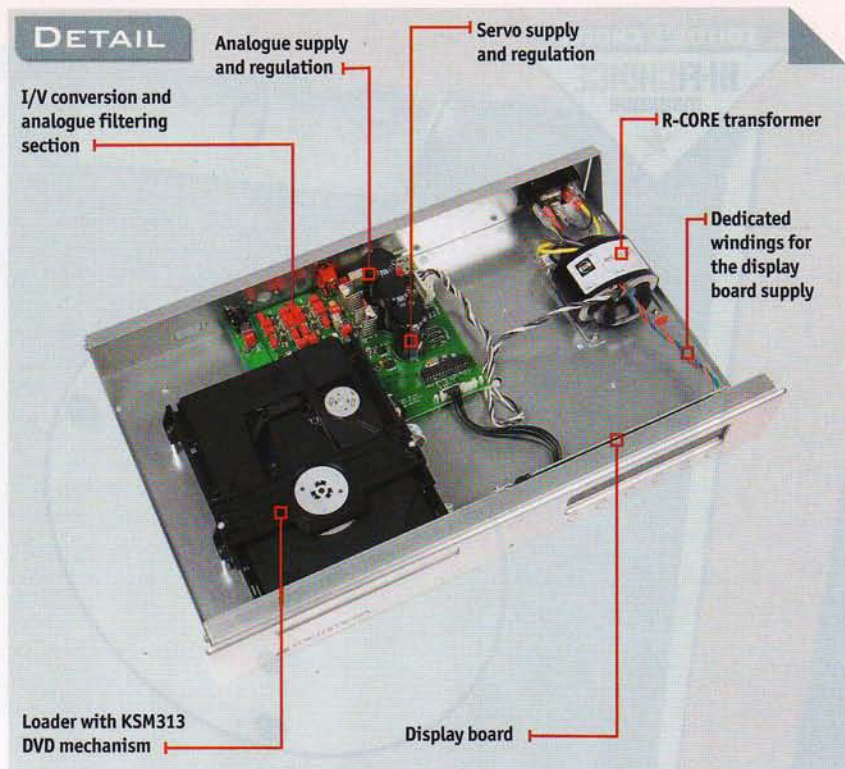
If there is one word that sums this player up, it would be texture. The detail is there and the bass depth and weight is creditable, though no more than this. But the sound has an unusually tactile quality, it really does seem capable of resolving the texture of some of the recordings on test. Examples being the gravelly strings and woodwind in the Castrol GTX theme from the second movement of Mahler's 7th Symphony (Mariss Jansons/Oslo Philharmonic on Simax), and the exquisite opening Allegro from Brahms Clarinet Quintet (Fitzwilliam String Quartet and Lesley Schatzberger (clarinet) on the Linn label (the CD layer, not the accompanying SACD one, of course).

D/A CONVERSION

The D/A converter is the Analogue Devices Delta Sigma AD1853, which Micromega rates as amongst the best in its class, as well as being extremely affordable. While the design of the power supply stages – with its constant current source and shunt regulators – is to maximise immunity from external disturbance, while the local decoupling provided by the low-inductance, low-series resistance capacitors helps guarantee better signal integrity.

The converter uses an 8x oversampling filter, with better than 115dB out of band rejection, which should effectively suppress images from the digital filter. The D/A converter analogue output is extracted in differential mode which improves signal/noise by 6dB, and common mode rejection is virtually eliminated when the two phases are added. The analogue stage uses SMD (surface mount) devices, and a third-order Bessel filter, with a cut-off frequency of 75kHz chosen to ensure close to constant phase operation within the 20kHz nominal operating band. A capacitor-less feed is included to eliminate DC offsets, presumably a DC servo, though Micromega doesn't specify.

There are plenty of other examples that could be given, but the basic aural feature of the player is that it has an unusual sensitivity to recorded textures and to the reproduction of fine detail generally, which helps ensure a more credible, colourful and a more lifelike, expressive quality from the discs it was fed. The Brahms recording, in particular, has a lightness of touch and an agility, a sense of life you will rarely hear in this work which can sometimes sound rather heavy-handed



USER INTERFACE

The player is fabricated from well-finished anodised aluminium panels (for 'elegant soberness' in Micromega speak), with a ten-segment blue dot-matrix display, which shows all the usual basic information and can be switched to show a CD Text display, which will scroll if necessary to display all the available information.

Although Micromega has concentrated on a subset of interface features that will serve general applications, including a well endowed (if rather plastic) generic system remote control, the CD-10 is better equipped than quite a number of its peers. As well as the usual basics, the player has a full roster of repeat modes (track, whole disc and A-B), track programming using the remote control, intro scan and random play. The display can also be turned off. You can even alter the speed of the loading drawer and the digital output can be enabled or disabled – leave it disabled when not needed. One slightly esoteric option for you AMX and Crestron users out there is the ability to add an RS232 control interface to the rear panel of the player.

– though in fairness, this is more than partly a function of this particular recording.

The Micromega is also more effective than most at suggesting the scale and sound of the space in which recordings are made, which in effect means it is better than most with small groups of instruments recorded

in limited spaces. The subtleties of such recordings often escape lesser CD players.

Although the CD-10 misses out on some of the weight and sonorities of certain CD players, it is correspondingly more than usually capable at the opposite end of the spectrum. The fine detail has already been alluded to, but what has not been emphasised sufficiently is the CD-10's very fine sense of control and inner colour, which put us in mind of the kind of quality that SACD is often much more capable of reproducing, than a conventional compact disc.

A very good, expressive and subtle-sounding player, the CD-10 easily lives up to and arguably exceeds expectations, based on the reputation of earlier models from this famous Parisian manufacturer. **HFC**

Alvin Gold

VERDICT

SOUND



PRO

Agile, expressive sound quality, high levels of detail, and a fuller specification than you might expect. It's all at a very reasonable price, too.

FEATURES



BUILD



VALUE



CON

The agility is achieved at some cost to weight and sonority in the lowest octave. Plastic remote control looks and feels dated.

CONCLUSION

Overall an excellent proposition, the cheapest Micromega in the new range has clearly been thoughtfully designed, and fine tuned to please the audiophile who wants the best at a relatively modest price.

HI-FI CHOICE
OVERALL SCORE



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