

REVIEW

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YBA

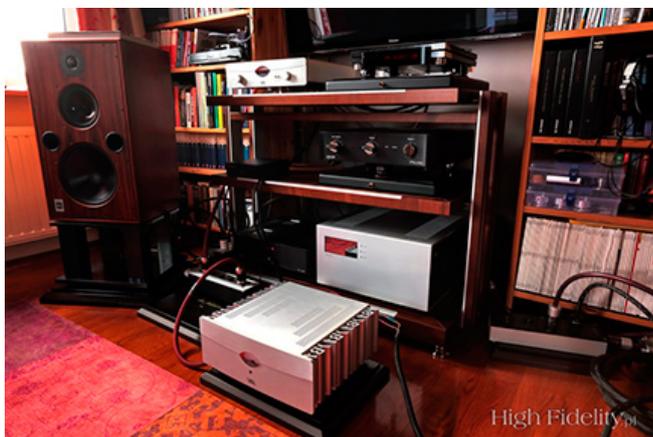
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YBA started in 1981 with one amplifier and one preamplifier. There were companies with even more humble beginnings. Let's take QA/12P for example – a power amplifier from the company later known as QUAD. Or McIntosh presented the same year across the Big Pond, which debuted in 1949 with the 50W-1 power amplifier (followed the next year by the AE-1 preamplifier). And a two year younger preamplifier from Marantz sold under the name Audio Consolette. And, of course, Mark Levinson with its LNP-1 preamplifier launched in 1972 (to relate in terms of time to YBA). Today, all of them are classic manufacturers that offer a whole range of products, including digital components.

This is also the case with the French company. Although at the very beginning it offered classic, analog audio components, its today's product lineup includes CD players and CD transports as well. And its preamplifiers feature D/A converters on board. I just wonder whether Yves Bernard André, the founder and company's "brains," whose initials gave YBA its name, expected such a pretty outcome...

I will refer to only one example, but one that says it all. In the composition *Rachel's Song*, the fourth track on the music score to the movie *Blade Runner* directed by Ridley Scott (1982), you can hear a gentle hum at about 0:20. Evidently, the hum is present on one of the mix tracks recorded by Vangelis. Its volume increases slowly so the hum appears gently, but it is there, nevertheless. On the three-disc remaster, issued for the 25th anniversary of the movie, the distortion is barely audible and on a less resolving audio system it could almost be perceived as part of the sound of one of the electronic instruments. That happens because this particular release, while rich musically, has a rather "thin" and dry sound. We know that we deal with a hum thanks to the Audio Fidelity remaster made by Kevin Grey in Coherent Studio. Its tonal balance is set lower and the sound is much richer in emotions, layers and simply deeper. Isolated from the background, the hum is an obvious sound engineering flaw, a distortion. It is, nevertheless, part of the original recording, part of a "document". The fact that it is clearly audible is the result of YBA's excellent resolution and ability to differentiate (although within the constraints mentioned above). It is just a trifle but the instruments, vocals and details are presented with the same quality. That makes the presentation much more credible and authentic.





The external factors came to help as well. In 2009, part of the company's shares were bought by one of the Chinese companies, a manufacturer of many high-end components. In 2011 Jackie Pugh was employed as part of the management team. She had been cooperating with the founder for quite some time. Those actions allowed the company to reappear on the world audio map. YBA's new face was presented in May 2012. This was when four renewed lines of components went into production, including the Design, Heritage, Passion and the most expensive Signature line. In May 2013 the Genesis line joined the group and the existing products were upgraded. For example, the preamplifier under review now allows to switch off the digital section altogether when using the analog inputs. The Passion line, whose part is the PRE550, now also includes a CD player.

The products of this company cannot be mistaken for anything else. Even if the meters on the front panel are nothing special, those on the YBA faceplate look different, somewhat "sharper" if I may say so. The visual design seems to be an important part of the whole concept, as if the creators worked on the premise that a beautiful interior is not enough to satisfy a discerning and picky audiophile. As if they were true aesthetes in the full sense of the word.

Mr. Yves Bernard André had worthy examples to follow, too. As he discloses in a 2013 interview for "Mono and Stereo," in 1981 he used to work for such iconic manufacturers as Swiss Goldmund and French Audax. We learn from the same interview that the audio components can look this and no other way, without costing an arm and a leg, only thanks to the present business model – they are designed in France and manufactured in China, in a factory with lots of experience in manufacturing audio products. Just have a look at the pair under review and tell if it is not beautiful.

This is a two-piece amplifier and DAC in one. The digital module is to be found in the PRE550 preamplifier, although its official name "Pre Amplifier" does not implicate that. Even though the company has a lot of experience with digital sound processing, its founder is a hard core analog fan who owns 5,000 LPs.

The power amplifier looks traditional, although there are eye catching details like the power output meter on the front panel or the radiators shaped into the company name. I saw similar ones in Italian amplifiers from Pathos. The components rest on three feet; one in front, two in the back, which is also the company's trademark.

SOUND

Albums auditioned during this review

- Billie Holiday, *Billie Holiday*, Clef/UMG Recordings UCCV-9470, „David Stone Martin 10 inch Collector's Selection", CD (1954/2013).
- Charlie Haden & John Taylor, *Nightfall*, Naim Label naimcd077, CD (2004).
- Dominic Miller & Neil Stacey, *New Dawn*, Naim naimcd066, CD (2002).

One of the bonuses that we receive together with the PRE550 is a complete, fully-blown DAC. As we will soon see, it is a totally independent, complete component, placed in the same enclosure with the preamplifier. And, which can be said straight away, it sounds very nice. The sound is very similar to that offered by my Ancient Audio Lektor Air V-edition. It is therefore open, with a good balance and without sharpening, but it is not withdrawn. That is great, because we get a good, genuine sound both from the computer via a USB cable and from the CD transport via RCAs. It may have slight less vividness and depth and shallower soundstage compared with an external CD player. Yet I would not expect miracles from the built-in DAC; what it does is done very well.

Conclusion

It is with great ease that the system transfers us into the atmosphere of the recording. Actually, irrespective of the recording, the sound is deep and strong, with great lower midrange and large phantom images. The resolution is particularly good. It manifests itself in excellent differentiation of musical planes and the sonic character of individual instruments, and a good insight into the recording. But without getting overly detailed, because the selectivity is not so exceptional. The lower bass is not as well controlled as in my reference system. But what is above that range, as the bass drum, can be surprising with great dynamics and excellent liquidity.

The French system looks great, the workmanship is perfect and it comes from a "cult" audio manufacturer. It employs best quality passive and active electronic components. The preamplifier is a joy to use and it brings in a super-bonus: a DAC with AirPlay. All in all, a dense, "warm" sound with a highly energetic and sweet-sounding treble.

DESIGN

The components in the Passion line share the same visual design concept, with a front panel milled in such a way that it seems to consist of two overlapping surfaces. The design is shared by the Signature, Passion and Genesis lines. The Heritage line has its simplified version and the Design line a completely different one.

Both components feature a display in the center of their front panel. The preamplifier's is a pretty OLED screen that displays the name of the selected input and volume level, while the power amplifier sports a power output display screen. The enclosures of both units are made of aluminum. They rest on three feet, one in front and two in the rear. The feet are aluminum cylinders with the semi-circular pads. The ones under the rear feet are made of rubber and the one under the front foot is aluminum-made. The units are available in natural aluminum or black anodized finish. The mains power switches are hidden from sight on the bottom panel, right at the front edge.

The machines come with a remote control unit that controls the preamplifier and certain functions of the power amplifier. It can also control the CD players that sport the Philips CD-Pro2 drive, including my Lektor. Moreover, it is the first remote I have come across, which is capable of controlling the output level of the

- Eric Clapton, *Journeyman*, Warner Bros. Records/Audio Fidelity AFZ 180, „Limited Edition No. 0281”, SACD/CD (1989/2014).
- Guru Guru, *Live in Germany '71*, Cleopatra Records CLP 6844-2, CD (2011).
- Jerzy Milan Trio, *Bazaar*, Polskie Nagrania „Muza”/GAD Records GAD CD 017, „Polish Jazz vol 17”, CD (1069/2014).
- Kenny Burrell, *Soul Call*, Prestige/JVC JVCXR-0210-2, XRCD2 (1964/?).
- Martin Kolbe, *Blue Moment*, Stockfisch SFR 357.1021.2, CD (2014).
- Ornette Coleman, *The Shape of Jazz to Come*, Atlantic Records/ORG Music ORGM-1081, SACD/CD (1959/2013).
- Ted Sirota's Rebel Souls, *Rebel Roots*, Naim naimcd014, CD (1996).
- Vangelis, *Blade Runner Trilogy: 25th Anniversary*, soundtrack, Universal Music K.K. (Japan) 550689 4, 3 x CD (1998, 1991/2007).
- Vangelis, *Blade Runner*, soundtrack, reż. Ridley Scott, Atlantic Records/Audio Fidelity AFZ 154, „Limited Numbered Edition No. 2398”, SACD/CD (1982/2013).

Japanese CD editions are available from 

It has been a long time since I last saw any audio components from YBA. My last contact with a view to a review took place in 2005, when I reviewed the Passion 600 preamplifier for the Polish magazine "Audio." And honestly speaking, I only have a vague recollection of that. Reading through my notes and finding references to it in my reviews of other components that have since been published in "High Fidelity", it is not hard to figure out that I made a good impression on me, because I used to often refer to it, and used it as an auxiliary component in several other reviews.

One thing that I remember very well from that time was a great organization of the sound, provided by the PRE600. It was a disciplined, very "orderly" sound, in the sense that everything in it had its own place.

The PRE550 paired with the AMP650 repeats that experience, if not with a certain "twist," moving the sound in the direction of vividness and fullness. The sound of the combo, mated with KLB mains power accessories and Acoustic Revive cables, seems warm and dense. I would not exaggerate with the "warmth", and will shortly talk about the treble, but the "density" is perfectly spot-on. The components seem to have a boosted lower midrange. I have no doubt about it, especially after auditioning tonally neutral recordings, like Charlie Haden and John Taylor's *Nightfall*, but also after listening to albums with electronica, which I know perfectly well from other performances, such as Vangelis' *Blade Runner* featuring the soundtrack to the film of the same title.

Every aspect of the music reproduced by YBA comes to us "wrapped" in something extra, which gives the effect of sound's presence and meatiness. It can be best heard in the sound of acoustic and classical guitars. I know *New Dawn* from the duo Dominic Miller and Neil Stacey through and through; I have had it for years and still listen to it both for pleasure and during my reviews to audition various audio components. The sound engineer (not Ken Christianson this time; the disc lacks any information on who is responsible for the sound) made sure that both musicians' guitars sound "big," but without exaggerating with their thickness. The YBA followed suit and brought them out of the background even more, with every phrase having its weight and "presence." And "presence" is another thing that distinguishes the French system from others. The sound it offers is at a hand's reach. But it is not pushed out in front of the speakers, let alone thrown at a listener's face. The YBA make the instruments materialize in front of us, but if you want to "touch" them, you need to reach out to them, rather than expect the sound to "reach out" to you.

Perhaps because of such a character, or for some other reason, most of the time I spent with the YBA system was occupied by jazz recordings that made for a majority of CDs I was fetching from the shelves. Let me emphasize it here that it was not because others sounded worse. It is rather that a specific set of sonic

Polish CD player! The remote is made of aluminum, and looks solid and pretty. And it is quite handy. To select the unit to be operated one needs to press the corresponding button. A slight problem, for me, was that the same button is also used to switch off the power. It was therefore necessary to press it in such a way that the component did not "see" it. The remote lets you dim the display screens, or switch them off. You can also set a "base" output signal level that is present on each power on, or to which we can return with another button. It is a really handy feature. This is certainly one of those remote controls that come handy in daily use.

PRE550

In addition to the window with the display screen, the front panel catches our attention with two small knobs. One of them is a volume knob, the other one being input selector. The volume knob, although coupled with an encoder rather than potentiometer, moves with a perceptible resistance, as in classic volume regulators. Apart from the two knobs, the only other components on the faceplate are two toggle switches. One is used to absolute phase change, and the other one to mute output. The switches are equipped with accompanying LEDs.

The rear panel is solid. It is a combination of a thick aluminum "frame" and polished metal sheet, with all input and output connectors bolted to it. One of the "windows" groups analog connectors: the balanced XLR input and two unbalanced RCA inputs. It also features three preamplifier outputs: one balanced XLR and two single ended RCAs.

The other "window" groups digital input connectors: USB (24/192), RCA, TOSLINK, BNC, AES/EBU, USB for the iPod and I2S on the Ethernet (RJ-45) port. CD transports and digital players from Ayon and a transport from Pro-Ject feature the same type of outputs. I wonder if they are compatible with each other. Adjacent to the digital outputs is a small plastic "projection" – it is the AirPlay module.

The unit weighs 12.5 kg, which is quite a lot for a preamplifier. Much of that can be attributed to a heavy aluminum "floor", which forms the base for the entire chassis. Quite a lot of weight is added, however, by two really massive transformers. A double-C type transformer powers the analog section, while the other one, most likely toroidal, is enclosed in a shield cup and handles the digital section. Although the PRE550 is called a "preamplifier," these are actually two equal components in one: a preamplifier and a DAC.

The latter is mounted on a large printed circuit board, with a plugged in smaller daughter board. The daughter board houses the USB input circuit and the Bluetooth wireless module. The PCB also sports a USB input and a mini-jack socket, so it looks like a complete module designed for a wide use in digital audio components. The preamplifier can be connected to a home Ethernet network. The electrical inputs are coupled via impedance matching transformers, with wooden cubes glued onto them.

The DAC circuit employs two Cirrus Logic CS4398 D/A converters, one for each channel. The chips have small wooden tiles glued onto them. The same procedure is repeated by YBA in several other places, including the power amplifier, and is intended to reduce chip vibration. Before the signal is sent to the DAC chips, it is first upsampled to 24/192, regardless of which input it comes from. Upsampling is handled by a Burr Brown SRC43821. I/V conversion, filtering and buffering circuits employ International Semiconductor TL072 opamps. Quality passive components are visible throughout. They include polypropylene capacitors and Sanyo electrolytic capacitors, used in the best digital audio equipment. One can also see characteristic resistors with the YBA logo, looking similar to Dale resistors.

The preamplifier circuit is also based on operational amplifiers and integrated resistor ladder networks. The op amps are International Semiconductor TL072, the same as the ones used in the DAC, but here mounted in sockets. Volume control circuit sports two Burr Brown PGA2320 ICs, one per channel. The preamplifier has a fully balanced topology, from the input to output. Near the output are huge polypropylene capacitors from Vishay, most likely used as coupling capacitors.

characteristics and certain design choices made by the designers from the French company, make us interested in the sound of albums we know as well as new ones, but mostly within the jazz idiom.

I have already mentioned Haden and Taylor. The album of the duo, recorded for the Naim Label by Ken Christianson in the True Stereo system, without any further processing, sounds insanely good. Although I have to admit I was once not too fond of it, and it seemed somewhat. With my increasingly better audio system, perhaps combined with more maturity along the years, I came to like it more and more. Now I listen to it for pleasure much more often than I could have imagined. In any case, the system from France showed both musicians in a reliable space, well communicated with each other (they actually stood close to each other during the recording). The timbre of both instruments was dense and seemed to be "warm."

This is the second time I mention the "warmth" of presentation, putting the term in inverted commas, so it is time to explain myself. A fuller lower midrange, which is what we are faced with, sets up the YBA's sonic texture. The sound is based on proximity and immediacy. What sounds most beautiful is the instruments and vocals located in the middle of frequency range. Except that it happens without limiting everything to just the midrange. The treble has an open, strong character, with plenty of energy in the range corresponding to the higher registers of the vibraphone, drum cymbals, etc. That is why the remaster of Jerzy Milian Trio's *Bazaar* sounded so wonderful. The album, with the cover art designed by Marek Karewicz (you can find information about his book *Big Beat* [HERE](#)), recorded by Mrs. Sophia Gajewska, also responsible, among others, for Czesław Niemen's early albums, with vocals by Ewa Wanat from Novi Singers, is just perfect. No wonder it was released in the prestigious Polish Jazz series. The remaster commissioned by GAD Records has been done with great care. Without trying to overcome the dry sound of the instruments – the sign of the time and place where the disc was recorded – it presents them as sounding pretty and deep. It is a great bonus as all discs are played back with punch, without bringing them down.



Such shaped sonic characteristic needs to be paid for with something. It may perhaps be even less audible in the flagship Signature line. However, since there is no such thing as a "transparent" system, even the latter have some special features that probably come to the fore. In the Passion line, the downside is that the instruments are not particularly selective and the preamplifier operates with bigger planes, like the whole instrument rather than its particular sonic details. It is audible straight away and does not need to be verified later on – it is simply that way and that's it. The question of resolution is therefore all the more interesting. I think that it is the resolution that ultimately gives the whole a kind of imprimatur, opening up a sound that seems to be "warm," with a full-bodied lower midrange. This is a resolution without hyper-detailness, with the kind of detailness that is actually hidden in the shade of larger presuppositions. It manifests itself in the fact that the sound is very vivid and well differentiated at the same time.

Moreover, the resolution has a positive influence on the listener's involvement in a given recording or album. As I have said earlier,



The power supply is extremely elaborate. It is based on a large 190 W UI-core transformer, suspended on tall rubber pads. The transformer has three secondary windings, separately for both channels and for the microprocessor circuit. The filtering circuit sports no less than 12 large BC capacitors. The power supply circuit also includes polypropylene capacitors from Vishay. A fantastic job throughout!

AMP650

Although a power amplifier is usually just a dull box, in this case care was taken to overcome that by equipping the front panel with a power output meter. It is only for decorative use, though, because it is not even scaled. Just a tip moving against an amber background. The backlight brightness is adjustable in four steps with the remote control unit, and can also be switched off altogether. The amplifier's rear panel sports two pairs of average quality gold plated speaker binding posts (per channel) and five inputs. Two of the inputs are balanced and the other two unbalanced, and they are all used to connect to the preamplifier. The fifth input is balanced only and is used to feed the amplifier with the mono signal when using the AMP650 as a monoblock in a bridged balanced mode.

The entire enclosure is made of aluminum, its most characteristic feature being the massive radiators along both sides, in the shape of the YBA logo.

The power amp circuits are mounted directly to the radiators, from the inside. The output stage feature transistors in a TO-3 type enclosure, these days rarely seen in audio equipment. These are ON Semiconductor MJ15024G + MJ15025G bipolar transistors. The PCB also sports plenty of quality passive components, such as high-precision low-noise resistors and polypropylene capacitors from Vishay. The latter have wooden cubes glued onto them for controlled vibration damping. The power supply is based on a massive 1000 W UI-core transformer, which mostly contributes to the amplifier's considerable weight. The filtering circuit includes eight large capacitors.

Specifications (according to the manufacture)

PRE550

Inputs:

- Digital: I2S, AES / EBU, optical, RCA, BNC, USB, iPod, AirPlay
- Analog: 2 x RCA | 1 x XLR

Outputs:

- Digital: RCA
- Analog: 2 x RCA | 1 x XLR

S/N Ratio: > 105 dB

Frequency response: 20 Hz - 20 kHz (0.5 dB)

THD + N (20 Hz - 20 kHz): <0.003%

Dimensions (W x D x H): 430 x 380 x 118 mm

Weight: 12.5 kg

AMP650

Power Output:

we are particularly drawn into jazz. And that is “a chain of events,” in which we select another CD because it has something in common with the previous one. I started my auditions with *Rebel Roots* from Ted Sirota’s Rebel Souls issued by Naim Label. In the album booklet Ted Sirota, the drummer, refers to Ornette Coleman to explain his choices. And how could I then not listen to the key record of that saxophone player and composer, *The Shape of Jazz to Come*? Especially if I own it in the form of ORG Music release. And from Coleman it is not too far to, still missed, Charlie Haden who took part in the recording of that CD.

I was most impressed, however, with the way the YBA showed the importance of tonal quality in electronica recordings, and how clearly it demonstrated the need for the same approach to remastering this kind of material as to the masterpieces of jazz music.

- Stereo: 2 x 200 W / 8 Ω | 2 x 400 W / 4 Ω
 - Mono: 1 x 600 W / 8 Ω (Bridged)
- Inputs:
- Stereo RCA (pair) | XLR (pair)
 - Mono: XLR
- S/N Ratio: > 95 dB
 Frequency Response: 20 Hz - 20 kHz (0.5 dB)
 Dimensions (W x H x D): 430 x 397 x 178 mm
 Weight: 25 kg



Galeria

Gallery



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Associated equipment

ANALOG SOURCES
 - Turntable: AVID HIFI

HEADPHONES
 - Integrated

CABLES
 System I

ANTIVIBRATION
 ACCESSORIES

Acutus SP [Custom Version]

- **Cartridges:** Miyajima Laboratory KANSUI, review [HERE](#) | Miyajima Laboratory SHILABE, review [HERE](#) | Miyajima Laboratory ZERO (mono) | Denon DL-103SA, review [HERE](#)
 - **Phono stage:** RCM Audio Sensor Prelude IC, review [HERE](#)

DIGITAL SOUCES

- **Compact Disc Player:** Ancient Audio AIR V-edition, review [HERE](#)
 - **Multiformat Player:** Cambridge Audio Azur 752BD

AMPLIFICATION

- **Line Preamp:** Polaris III [Custom Version] + AC Regenerator, regular version review (in Polish) [HERE](#)
 - **Power amplifier:** Soultion 710
 - **Integrated Amplifier:** Leben CS300XS Custom Version, review [HERE](#)

LOUDSPEAKERS

- **Stand mount Loudspeakers:** Harbeth M40.1 Domestic, review [HERE](#)
 - **Stands for Harbeths:** Acoustic Revive Custom Series Loudspeaker Stands
 - **Real-Sound Processor:** SPEC RSP-101/GL

Amplifier/Headphone

amplifier: Leben CS300XS Custom Version, review [HERE](#)
 - **Headphones:** HIFIMAN HE-6, review [HERE](#) | HIFIMAN HE-500, review [HERE](#) | HIFIMAN HE-300, review [HERE](#) | Sennheiser HD800 | AKG K701, review (in Polish) [HERE](#) | Ultrason PROLine 2500, Beyerdynamic DT-990 Pro, version 600 - reviews (in Polish): [HERE](#), [HERE](#), [HERE](#)
 - **Headphone Stands:** Klutz Design CanCans (x 3), review (in Polish) [HERE](#)
 - **Headphone Cables:** Entreq Konstantin 2010/Sennheiser HD800/HIFIMAN HE-500, review [HERE](#)

COMPUTER AUDIO

- **Portable Player:** HIFIMAN HM-801
 - **USB Cables:** Acoustic Revive USB-1.0SP (1 m) | Acoustic Revive USB-5.0PL (5 m), review [HERE](#)
 - **LAN Cables:** Acoustic Revive LAN-1.0 PA (kable) | RLI-1 (filtry), review [HERE](#)
 - **Router:** Liksys WAG320N
 - **NAS:** Synology DS410j/8 TB

- **Interconnects:** Acrolink Mexcel 7N-DA6300, review [HERE](#) | preamplifier-power amplifier: Acrolink 8N-A2080III Evo, review [HERE](#)
 - **Loudspeaker Cables:** Tara Labs Omega Onyx, review (in Polish) [HERE](#)
System II
 - **Interconnects:** Acoustic Revive RCA-1.0PA | XLR-1.0PA II
 - **Loudspeaker Cables:** Acoustic Revive SPC-PA

POWER

System I

- **Power Cables:** Acrolink Mexcel 7N-PC9300, all system, review [HERE](#)
 - **Power Distributor:** Acoustic Revive RTP-4eu Ultimate, review [HERE](#)
 - **Power Line:** fuse – Nigo (6m) – wall sockets 3 x Furutech FT-SWS (R)

System II

- **Power Cables:** Harmonix X-DC350M2R Improved-Version, review (in Polish) [HERE](#) | Oyaide GPX-R (x 4), review [HERE](#)
 - **Power Distributor:** Oyaide MTS-4e, review [HERE](#)

- **Stolik:** SolidBase IV Custom, read [HERE](#)/all system
 - **Anti-vibration Platforms:** Acoustic Revive RAF-48H, review [HERE](#)/digital sources | Pro Audio Bono [Custom Version]/headphone amplifier/integrated amplifier, review [HERE](#) | Acoustic Revive RST-38H/loudspeakers under review/stands for loudspeakers under review
 - **Anti-vibration Feets:** Franc Audio Accessories Ceramic Disc/ CD Player/Ayon Polaris II Power Supply /products under review, review [HERE](#) | Finite Elemente CeraPuc/products under review, review [HERE](#) | Audio Replas OPT-30HG-SC/PL HR Quartz, review [HERE](#)
 - **Anti-vibration accsories:** Audio Replas CNS-7000SZ/power cable, review [HERE](#)
 - **Quartz Isolators:** Acoustic Revive RIQ-5010/CP-4

PURE PLEASURE

- **FM Radio:** Tivoli Audio Model One

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