

The Zanden Model 1300 phono stage

By Roy Gregory

As a reviewer, the equipment in your system becomes an ever-changing landscape. There are products that come and go almost unnoticed, there are those that linger in the memory, some longer than others. Occasionally, a product arrives that leaves a deep and lasting impression, setting a standard against which others are measured. Those products are rare indeed, once in a generation happenings for most companies. But there's one company that's left me with two musical milestones to mark their passage, and that company is Zanden. Not content with rewriting the musical rulebook for digital sources with their four-box, Model 2000/Model 5000 CD transport and DAC combination, the Model 1200 Mk III Phono Stage was just as impressively memorable – and at £23,495 almost as ruinously expensive. So expensive in fact that there was no way that I could remotely afford its purchase – and believe me, I tried. Which makes the Model 1300 phono stage that's currently gracing my system a particularly fascinating prospect. Half the box for a little over half the price, how much of the 1200's magic can it deliver?

The Model 1300 will set you back a still considerable £13,495, but that's a Volkswagen Golf more affordable than its big brother. You lose the 1200's heavy casework, with its slabs of aluminium forming the chassis base and fascia, and you lose the separate, choke regulated power supply, the 1300 being built into a simple, slim-line, polished stainless steel case that's a little deeper than it is wide. But what you keep is essentially the same heart and soul that makes the 1200 so special. Component quality in the flagship product is better and the choke and film-caps in its PSU are larger than the parts used in the 1300, where they are constrained by both space and cost, but otherwise the two units are far closer together than they appear. That means that you get the same 6922 valve-based audio circuit as the 1200; the same Jensen step up transformers and 6CA4 valve rectifiers; the same LCR equalization circuit; the same polarity switch and the same pair of inputs, one for low output cartridges, one for high output models. Most important of all, it means you get the same choice of five different replay curves, covering RIAA, Decca, EMI, Teldec and Columbia – but more on that later.

For listeners used to treating their phono stage as a simple plug-and-play product, possibly involving setting cartridge gain and/or loading on a one-time basis, that probably seems like a daunting array of options and facilities, but it is precisely this versatility that makes the Zanden phono stages so special.

Let's not mince words; the Model 1300 is one of the finest sounding phono stages available. It is audibly and obviously cut from the same musical cloth as the 1200 and has the same almost addictive quality when it comes to listening. But it is also two phono stages in one; which you hear will depend on what kind of listener you are and what sort of record collection you have...

Plug the Model 1300 into your system and you could simply set it to RIAA, sit back and enjoy the excellent sound that results – and it will stand comparison with the serious competition that's out there. Despite the presence of glowing bottles in the circuit, don't make the mistake of assuming that the sound of the Zanden will be overly soft, sweet or romantic. With an engaging sense of energy and presence,



fluidity and timing, it is neither overly warm nor etched. Instead it is all about bringing recordings to life, imbuing them with that sense of purpose and drive, delicacy, poise and collective enterprise that conjures up the elusive quality of human agency. Play an acoustic recording, or a well recorded studio track through the Zanden and it really does sound like people: people singing, strumming, hitting, banging or blowing whatever instrument they're playing. The transformer input offers a fixed gain of 68dB (54dB on the low-gain input) but that is enough for all but the lowest output moving-coils. I ran the 1300 with the Clearaudio Goldfinger Statement, Lyra Titan i and vdH Condor, all without noise or gain problems. Elvis Costello's 'Little Triggers' had just the right combination of presence, impact and brittle anger to reveal the underlying sense of emotional fragility, while the Record Shop Day only Leonard Cohen EP, Live In Fredericton was relaxed, spacious and atmospheric. A recently acquired secondhand King Super Analogue pressing of the Argo Mariner/Academy of St. Martin-in-the-Fields *Strings and Brass* (SLA (A) 1030) is beautifully poised, the contrast of layered tone and overlaid brilliance perfectly balanced, the precise beauty of Corelli's music brought to vibrant, shimmering life. So far so good; if you want to maximize the presence, energy and humanity in your recordings, the Zanden Model 1300 should be at the top of your shopping list. Other phono stages might offer more detail, control or definition, but if it's musical engagement you are after, then the Model 1300 delivers it in spades.

But that's only half the story. As genuinely impressive as the one-box Zanden is as a fit and forget solution, under the right circumstances, it can become an invaluable window into your record collection. It all revolves around those EQ curves

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and whether (or not) you can use them to their best advantage. Their *raison d’être* is to offer optimum replay conditions on a record-by-record basis, the very antithesis of a fit and forget one size fits all solution. But that starts from the assumption that different records demand different settings – and that as a listener, you are going to take the time and trouble to adjust the phono stage accordingly.

Isn't this all a bit eclectic and extreme – the sort of thing that only an obsessive collector of rare records would bother about? Actually, it impacts upon an astonishing range of music and recordings. How about early US pressings of *Kind Of Blue* (1959), or *Dylan’s Highway 61 Revisited* (1965) or *Blonde On Blonde* (1966)? You don't get much more mainstream than that – and you really haven't heard these ▶



▶ THE GREAT ROCK AND ROLL (AND JAZZ, AND CLASSICAL) SWINDLE

The mechanics of record replay demand that bass and treble signals are both rolled off when cutting discs, those roll-offs reversed on replay. In 1956, the recording industry agreed to adopt the RIAA equalisation curve as a *de facto* standard – at least in theory. Unfortunately, common sense, human nature and the all too audible evidence tell us that record companies continued to use existing equipment and their own EQ curves, making non-RIAA discs long after 1956. In some cases, that practice continued right up to the advent of CD and the demise of large-scale record production.

Decca and EMI continued to use their proprietary curves well into the 1970s, while DGG seem to have never adopted the RIAA standard. Examples of post '56 non-RIAA pressings from other sources such as Columbia, Atlantic and Impulse abound, covering every genre from rock and pop through jazz and classical. And just to really confuse things, occasionally even the serial dissenters produced an RIAA compliant pressing.

But do you need to worry about replay EQ? If you solely listen to 180g audiophile or current pressings, the answer is no. Everything produced these days is RIAA compliant – the standard that's built into every non-switchable phono stage. But, if you have an extensive collection of 60's and 70's pressings, if you buy secondhand records and especially if you are a collector of older, first pressings, then the answer is definitely yes. RCA pressings were always RIAA, but those pricy Decca SXL wide-bands you've shelled out for, all the collectable EMI classical discs, a lot of jazz (especially the preferred mono pressings) and a surprising amount of pop music will only sound at its best if you've got a switchable EQ facility. Oh – and it's essential to make just about anything from DGG even remotely listenable.

The good news is that the adjustment itself is child's play. The Zanden offers a simply five-position rotary switch and a separate switch for absolute phase. The manual contains a crib sheet for guidance, but 'suck it and see' works too. The differences are far from subtle, with the correct EQ delivering not just a sense of tonal rightness, but a rhythmic poise and sense of performance and drama that's unmistakable. In fact, it's remarkable just how quickly you come to recognize correct (and incorrect) replay EQ. If you are serious about getting the best out of older records, a phono stage with switchable EQ curves is essential. Like everything else, the simpler the process, the more you'll use it – and musically, the results speak for themselves.



records until you replay them with a Columbia EQ curve. How about the famous Zubin Mehta *Planets* on Decca (1973)? Perhaps best of all, what about Karajan's 1963 Beethoven cycle, surely a cornerstone of any classical record collection? What makes this whole issue even more interesting is the existence of modern, audiophile re-pressings of many of these recordings. I've lost count of how many 180g, 200g, single-sided, non-groove-guard or 'special vinyl' versions of *Kind Of Blue* exist. And that's before you start including the speed-corrected editions. All of those will be RIAA. Compare them to an original pressing, using the RIAA curve and the audiophile versions stand up pretty well. But as soon as you switch the original to the Columbia curve the improvement is dramatic, the immediacy and sense of purpose, the clarity and transparency that comes from first pressings elevate the performance to a whole new level.

Likewise the Karajan Beethoven discs. The whole '63 cycle was recently released by Speakers Corner, who have done their normal excellent job. The 180g version of the Fifth Symphony makes the original pressing sound sluggish and bloated in the bass, thin and screechy in the highs. In fact, all the reasons that DGG records have such a poor reputation despite a stellar cast of recording artists. But switch the replay curve to Teldec and reverse the absolute phase for the original pressing and parity is quickly restored, the Speakers Corner offering quieter surfaces and a solid sense of presence, but the DGG now offers more life and energy, a greater sense of control and drama and a more palpable acoustic. Suddenly Karajan seems like a genuine musical giant, the Berlin Philharmonic a fantastic orchestra. Indeed, each time you do

► these comparisons, almost regardless of record, the results are the same, differing only in degree.

For the listener who wants a plug and play phono stage the Zanden Model 1300 offers an enticing solution. Its combination of life, presence and engagingly musical presentation puts it right in the front rank of current analogue options. It's also compact, elegant and capable of accepting most cartridges available today. Yes, there are stages that offer more detail and some that deliver greater definition, but I've yet to hear one that delivers more music, and in that regard the 1300 follows firmly (and surprisingly closely) in the footsteps of its bigger and significantly more expensive brother, half its price yet delivering the lion's share of its performance. But combine that musical quality with the ability to switch EQ and absolute phase, as well as the option to connect a second tonearm (probably running a mono cartridge) and for the serious record collector or the listener who simply wants to wring every last ounce of performance from their recordings, the Model 1300 becomes the benchmark object of desire. With the best pressings of the best records, those adjustments really do make the difference between great sound and music that's stop you in your tracks spectacular. But the best news of all is that if aspiring to own the Model 1200 was a little like looking up at Everest, at least the 1300 is more like Mont Blanc! +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: One-box vacuum-tube phono stage

Valve Complement: 4x 6922, 2x 6CA4

Inputs: Low output MC (68dB gain) High output MC/MM (54dB gain)

EQ Curves: RIAA, Decca, Columbia, EMI, Teldec

Output: 1pr single-ended RCA

Output Impedance: 3kOhms

Dimensions: 343 x 96 x 430mm

Weight: 8.6kg

Price: £13,495

Manufacturer: Zanden Audio Systems Ltd

URL: www.zandenaudio.com

UK Distributor: Audiofreaks

Tel: +44 (0)20 8948 4153

URL: www.audiofreaks.co.uk

