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One Of A Kind...

The Zanden Model 2500S CD Player

by Roy Gregory

It's no great secret that I'm a huge fan of Zanden's four-box CD transport and DAC. It is the best balanced, most accomplished, most engaging and most musically satisfying player I've ever spent time with. It is also pretty much the most expensive, teetering on the brink of £38K! Even so, the amount of time spent debating (along with an extremely enthusiastic Mrs. Ed.) the practicality of committing the necessary funds to make it a permanent addition to the household should give you some idea of just how deep an impression this machine made. In the end we decided that it was a (financial) step too far and we needed a purpose built listening room rather more – but a key consideration in that choice was the knowledge of a one-box player just over the horizon. If only we'd known quite how far away that horizon was... Well, three years down the road and a couple of false starts later, the Model 2500S CD Player is finally upon us. The question is, was it worth the wait?

Now, if the world was a simple place I could simply write the word, yes, add the specs and that would be that, job done. Indeed, in one sense, things really are that simple because there's no doubting that this is a very special player indeed. The problem is that it's also very different – at least different to the four-box anyway. If it was simply a case of 90% of the performance for 50% of the price then everything would be in its place and the world would be a happy place too. Unfortunately (but somewhat reassuringly), what makes the four-box machine so special just can't be replicated at a lower

price level and within the constraints of a single chassis. Where the tonality, resolution and coherence of the four-box player makes it unfailingly and effortlessly natural in its musical delivery, allowing it to make more sense of the signal, more of the time, it soon became apparent that the 2500 needed to adopt a more studied approach – combined with a little sonic sleight of hand. There really is such a thing as “too much information”, not in terms of detail itself – more in terms of what the player can or can't do

with it – and just how obvious that becomes. The other thing that's changed is the appearance of the product; always exquisitely presented and produced, the new single-chassis design sets new standards even for Zanden. This is without doubt one of the most elegant and attractive products I've ever dealt with. And for once my approval seems to be in step with the general public. Every single person who has seen this player has spontaneously commented on its appealing looks, a combination of beautiful execution and timeless simplicity.

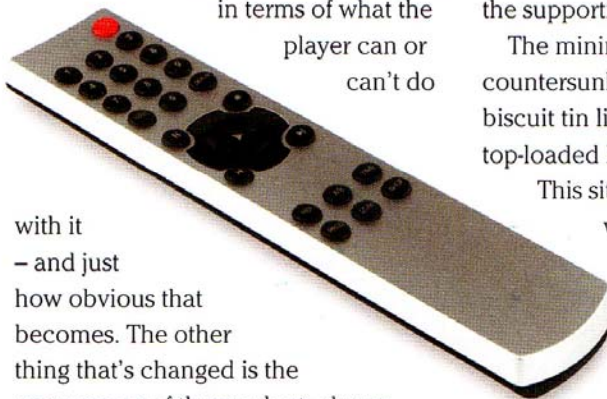
Actually, referring to the 2500S as a one-box machine is slightly misleading, as the chassis actually comes in two parts; the frosted acrylic top box encloses a chromed steel case which drops around 15mm below the Perspex

shroud. It even has feet on its underside and can be used in this form. But you also get a heavy, aluminium plate frame in the Company's trademark champagne finish, which lifts the player clear of the supporting surface thanks to its four cylindrical feet with their soft rubber interfaces. Be warned; these feet are so sticky that they'll easily lift a loose shelf along with the player, grabbing it just long enough to drop it (edge first of course) on to your unprotected feet. When moving the 2500S, free it from the supporting surface first!

The minimalist chassis offers just six countersunk controls and the familiar biscuit tin lid for the customized and top-loaded Philips CDM PRO2 transport.

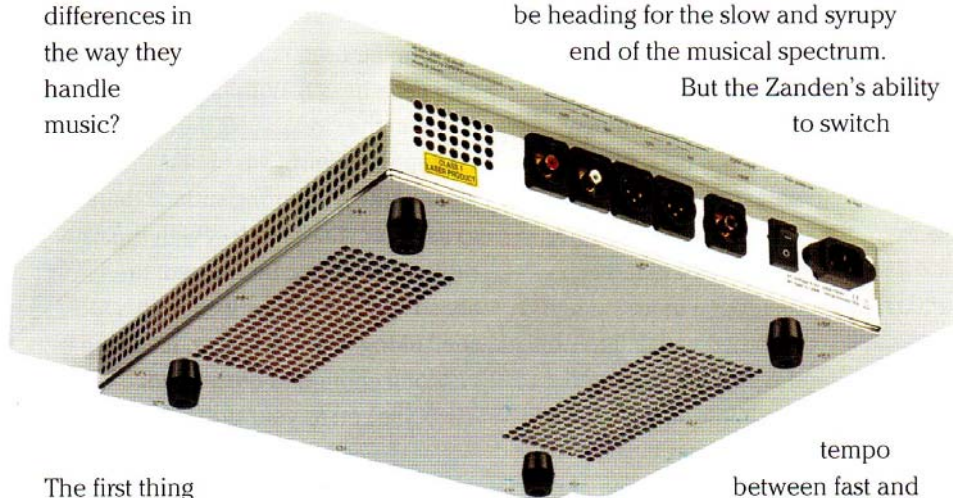
This sits in the superbly finished well, machined from a block of 25mm thick aluminium, the disc held in place by the lid's integral clamp. The DAC is Philips' legendary

TDA1541A S1 Crown chip-set, fed with an I²S feed from the transport and employed in Zanden's standard mode, devoid of filtering. The analogue output stage employs a single 6922 tube and provides both balanced and single-ended RCA outputs. There's also an S/PDIF digital output from a BNC socket (an RCA adaptor is included). Don't be fooled by its slightly ethereal appearance, the 2500S uses the same multi material sandwich approach to mechanical isolation and dissipation as the other Zanden products and at 13kg this is definitely no lightweight. The paucity of controls is made up for by the provision of a slim-line remote that adds direct track access, skip



► and repeat modes and somewhat bizarrely, a shuffle facility. Don't get excited by the display, disc, up or down buttons – they don't do anything.

So much for the obvious mechanical and constructional similarities between this and Zanden's flagship player; how about the slightly less obvious differences in the way they handle music?



The first thing that will strike you about the sound of the Model 2500S is its composed, relaxed quality, so reminiscent of the utterly unforced delivery I associate with the Audio Research Ref 3 line-stage. And just like the ARC, that unflustered, unhurried control is based on the complete confidence of the player – and the resulting confidence it instills in the listener. The calm confidence with which the music is delivered in turn allows you to relax, safe in the knowledge that the player and system aren't constantly teetering on the brink. It's all down to the 2500S's sense of musical flow, its ability to encompass both the dynamic and rhythmic demands of the signal. The result is a fluid, almost sinuous presentation that invites the listener in and holds you there, enthralled.

Listen longer (which is no hardship

in this instance) and you start to pick up on a smoothness that washes through proceedings, a subtle rounding to leading edges that eases the transition between and into notes, the passage through a phrase. Combine that with a rich and complex harmonic balance that gives those notes their true colour and length and you could be heading for the slow and syrupy end of the musical spectrum.

But the Zanden's ability to switch

tempo between fast and slow, the jaunty quickstep of Eliza Gilkyson's 'Borderline' and the measured, almost hymnal solemnity of the next track, 'Paradise Hotel', underlines the player's effortless grasp of pace and just how wide the gap between "unforced" and "slow" really is – and conversely, just how musically



destructive driven, clipped tempi are to musical expression. Instead, the Model 2500S builds its complex and beautifully layered harmonic structures on

What's in an "S"?

Cast around on the internet and you'll likely find reference to both the Model 2500 and the 2500S – or Signature version. What's more, the straight 2500 stands to save you a bit of coin – so what's the significance of the suffix? The S version is defined by its use of that S1 Crown grade, selected chip-set – a rare electronic commodity of near mythical status in certain quarters and one that is increasingly hard to source. The standard version of the Model 2500 reverts to stock TDA 1541A chips; hence the slight saving in cost. Whilst Zanden are constantly seeking new supplies of the premium grade DACs, these can't be guaranteed so the S version will exist only as long as stocks last. Having compared the two different versions, the 2500S more than justified its price premium over the standard unit and I can understand Audiofreaks decision to offer only this version until stocks are exhausted, whereupon they'll revert to the standard machine. In the meantime you can special order a straight 2500 if you so desire.

the superior temporal coherence common to filterless players. Notes and phrases are perfectly placed and weighted, bringing the performers and music both presence and substance, an innate sense of pace and the confidence to breathe.

But shaping notes is a risky business and no one ever gets off Scott free.

The gentle rounding of leading edges that so aids the music's easy ebb and flow is paid for not in the pace of progress but in the range of dramatic contrast available, the softening of sudden shifts in level or density, the music's ability to startle or shock. Yet despite this, when it comes to musical expression, the Model 2500S retains the ability to hold your attention and surprise you too. My acid test when it comes to infusing a performance ►

▶ with dramatic tension is Barbirolli's *Tallis Fantasia*. In the wrong hands (or on the wrong system) this music can be rendered twee – even quaint, but Sir John grabs it, the orchestra and the audience by the throat, with a reading redolent with menace and drama, stark contrasts and raw emotional power. Play it on the Zanden and you can't miss the smoothness that takes the edge from some of the more dramatic shifts, but there's also no missing the tension and menace either. The sense of presence is helped by the mid-hall perspective and a more tangible acoustic space than most players manage from this disc; setting the orchestra back behind the plane of the speakers is totally in keeping with the natural warmth of the Zanden's balance. The *pizzicato* phrases from the basses, perched on a central riser are beautifully weighted and poised in space, the texture of the massed strings sustaining the tension which might be robbed by the diminished sense of immediacy that comes with increased distance. The startling swoop that presages the first theme loses impact, but the vibrant instrumental colours and associated emotive sweep carry the day. What you lose in drama you gain in emotional intensity, built on the layered harmonics and colours of the instruments. It's a different reading to the one you'll hear from the likes of Wadia or indeed, the four-box Zanden, but it's no less powerful and has a subtly shaded beauty all of its own.

Other standard discs are handled with equal aplomb, the off-beat staccato chords that open the Count's 'Beaver Junction' might lose a little of their stark, jagged asymmetry, but

that's soon forgotten by the infectious swing of the brass, the easy, loping beauty of the piano solo, the way the parts just fall into place. There's a natural grace and shape to music from this machine that belies the mechanical/electronic complex that produces it. But I'm not using "natural" in



the sense of
"indivisible from nature".

Instead I'm referring to the instantly familiar patterns, pace and emphasis that gives the music shape, that fits the phrases together so perfectly, the way in which they overlap and follow one another. It's a structural clarity, an effortless organization that makes the music easy to read. Zanden's four-box player delivers that message on a note-by-note basis, its overall temporal and dynamic mastery creating a place for everything and keeping everything in its place. The 2500S reaches the same goal by a different route; one that involves less transparency, immediacy and micro-dynamic insight – but then you'd want something extra for your £38K wouldn't you.

Take the Model 2500S's lucid structural clarity and combine that with its rich, vibrant colours and the almost dismissive ease with which it grasps rhythmic variation and vocabulary, and you've got a smart weapon that's targeted on the sheer wonder that's within great music. If this

player has a weakness then perhaps it's an inability to plumb the deeper depths of the musical dark side, an editorial influence that might lead you away from Messian, Cohen or the bleaker Shostakovich symphonies. But then, even old Leonard cracked the odd smile and deep inside I'm still an optimist at heart. If you want music to reach out and wrap you in

the magic of its inner beauty then this player does a better job with CDs than anything else I've used, the message easily transcending the medium. It's both infectious and beguiling and has an addictive quality, a bit like sugar – and just like sugar, the experience is oh so sweet...



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Three-way reflex loaded
Type:	Single-box CD player
Transport:	Philips CDM PRO2
DAC:	Philips TDA 1541A S1 Crown
Sampling Rate:	16 bit/44.1kHz
Valve Complement:	1x 6922
Outputs:	1pr single-ended RCA/phono 1pr balanced XLR 1x BNC S/PDIF digital
Output Level:	2.5V
Dimensions (WxHxD):	428 x 101 x 349mm
Weight:	13kg
Prices –	
Model 2500S:	£17490
Model 2500:	£16750

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