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REPRODUCING THE RECORDED ARTS

Our favourite products and recordings

# awards issue 2007

Holly Cole  
Interview

Six Systems That Challenge  
The Status Quo



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# hi-fi+

## PRODUCT OF THE YEAR AWARDS '07

As always, we make no claims as to the scientific basis or impartiality of these awards. They represent quite simply, those products that we've got most excited by this year. They might have found themselves as permanent, indispensable parts of our systems. They might have challenged our preconceptions of what is possible, or more likely, what is possible for a price. But all, without exception, have entertained, charmed or astonished us – and may well do the same for you.

If last year saw the Chinese invasion finally gain a serious foothold, this year sees the response, with the old guard rising to the challenge in the best way possible. Faced with imported products able to reap the benefits of massive savings in terms of labour costs, established high-end manufacturers have had to put performance and value first in order to maintain their market position. The result is impressive new products from companies that were founding members of our high-end society. Alongside them comes a wave of designs that combine Western expertise with Chinese manufacturing, finally delivering consistent sonic results to go along with their superb appearance and low prices..

The times they are a changing – and that's no bad thing. Now that we're moving beyond the initial xenophobia that greeted the arrival of the first Chinese imports, we're starting to appreciate both the strengths and the weaknesses of these products. Both customers' and the industry have more realistic expectations and a greater understanding of the inevitable shifts in the hi-fi landscape that are going to result. But the simple truth is that there will always be a place for quality in this market, a fact reflected in the products honoured here. We've lost a settled air of complacency, gone through the panic stage and now we're emerging out the other side, with new horizons and new opportunities. You can embrace the challenge and reap the rewards, or run and hide, but one thing's for sure - it's not the same as it was before: it's called the future and it's looking very interesting indeed.



### PRODUCT OF THE YEAR

As outlined above, these are the solid products that have that little bit extra, that certain something that elevates their performance above (in some cases way above) the norm. Each will be special in its own way but each must also be treated with respect if you are to understand and appreciate just why it excited us in the first place. Reading the original review will give you an idea of what you should be looking for, but also the context in which you are likely to find it. Just remember that it is a lot easier to make any product sound bad than to extract the last ounce of its potential.



### DISCOVERY

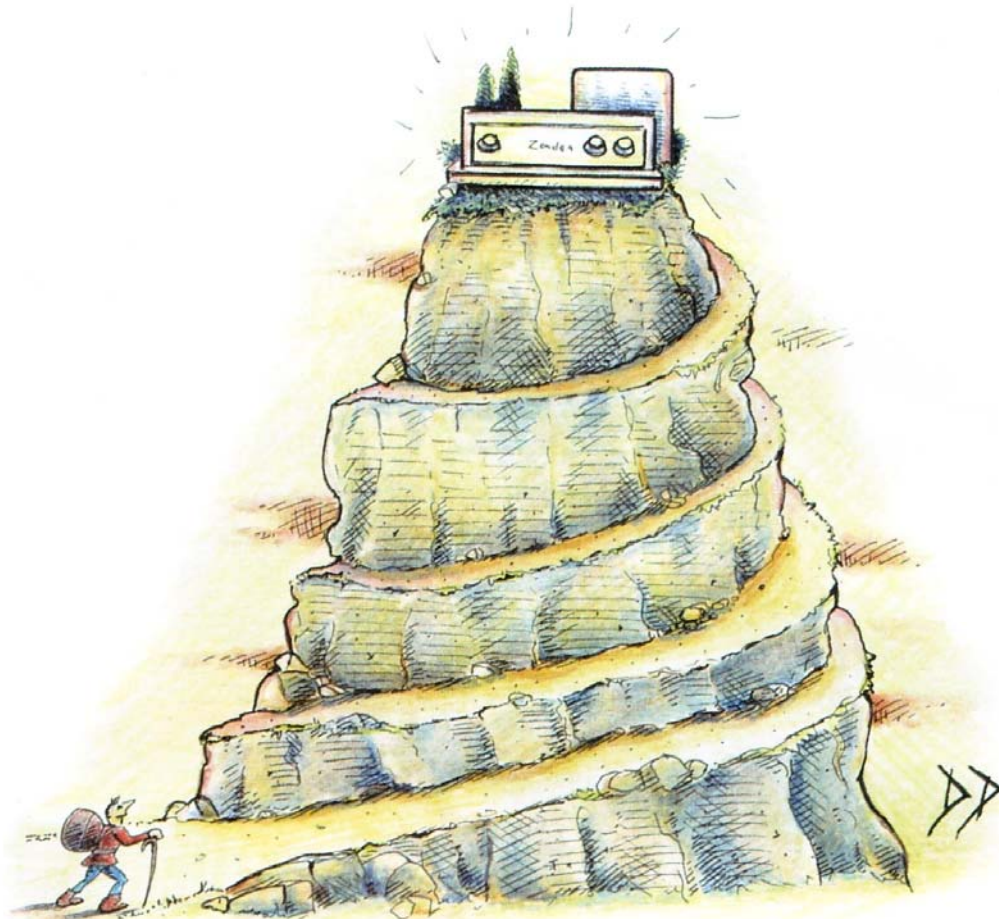
This designation rewards exceptional performance in products from emergent companies. Whilst the sonic rewards should never be in doubt, you need to be aware of the vulnerability of start-up enterprises. A little research into the background behind the designer/manufacture as well as an appreciation of second party serviceability will reap dividends, especially where these products are exotic or expensive. So, approach with the appropriate caution, but do approach: advice that applies to just about any piece of hi-fi now that I think about it!



### LEGACY

The Legacy award recognises not just the excellence of an individual product, but also the consistent performance and longevity of the company behind it. In many ways this two-tier commendation is the nearest thing we can give to a blanket endorsement. Normal caveats regarding equipment and system matching apply, but these products come with the imprimatur of an excellent company reputation and proven record of support behind them. It's no trivial consideration, contributing directly to the likelihood of you realising the best, long-term performance from the unit as well as the best return should you decide to sell it. These are products you can consider with confidence.





## ZANDEN MODEL 1200 MK.2 PHONO-STAGE



Not so long ago I'd never even heard of Zanden, a small, ultra high-end manufacturer from Japan. Then I was exposed to the company's four-box CD player, a product that sounds as exquisite as it looks and which completely rewrote my expectations of the silver disc. Suddenly the horizon tilted and the hi-fi world looked like a different place. Such paradigm shifts are rare indeed but it's a fool who tries to ignore them.

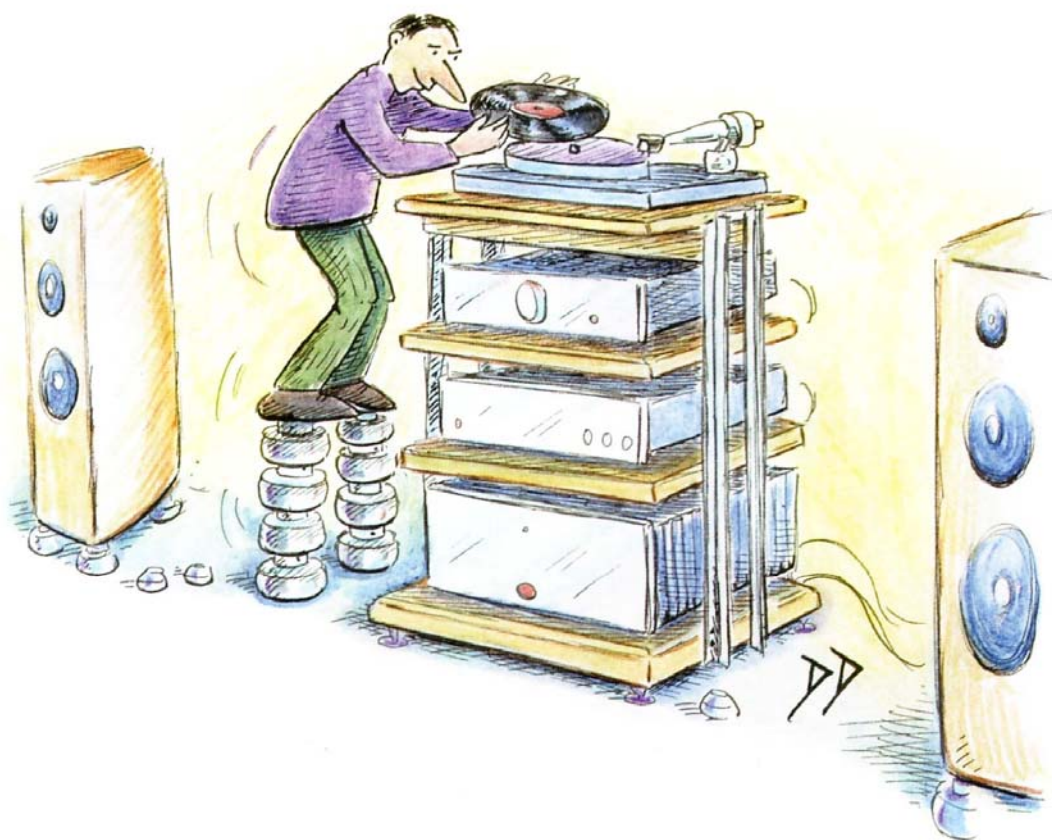
Zanden products employ novel circuits refined to the nth degree through mechanical layout and component selection. The immaculately finished and proportioned casework is far more than a pretty face, establishing effective mechanical grounding and isolation for the active components. The end result is a holistic approach that gets the listener closer to the core of the music.

Could the Model 1200 Mk.2 phono-stage (there are three different versions dedicated for MM, mono and MC cartridges) perform the same trick as the CD player? Not quite, but then it's up against stiffer opposition. Nevertheless, its transformer inputs and valve circuitry delivered a combination of clarity, instrumental separation, dynamic authority and spatial coherence that put me closer to the live acoustic event than any other phono-stage I've used. Add a supremely elegant three-position switch to adjust the equalization curve, and for any serious collector of pre-80's vinyl the Zanden becomes a "must hear" product; you simply won't believe what you've been missing. Designer Yamada-san considers it his best work; who are we to disagree?

Price: £13950

UK Distributor: Audiofreaks  
Tel. (44)(0)20 8948 4153  
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## FINITE ELEMENTE SUPPORT SYSTEMS



Whilst the finite elemente racks have received several reviews in the magazine, along with the various other isolation products they produce (CeraBalls, CeraPucs and CeraBases) their true quality is reflected in the way they've become an ever-present part of the review process, a fundamental element to be relied on to extract the best possible performance from the equipment in use. More than just a pretty face, the various racks and isolators represent a carefully structured and layered defense against the deleterious effects of vibration on fragile electrical components, whether they come from within or without the system. The parasitic resonators used in the HD Master Reference racks are carefully tuned to dissipate mechanical energy according to the resonant modes within the structure itself, making the rack's framework and shelves an incredibly efficient sink for vibration. The various ceramic couplers, varying in size and load capability, provide an efficient exit route for internal energy that otherwise cannons around inside electronics, feeding it into the "ground plane" provided by the rack. The result is noticeably more even and tonally natural than other approaches as well as maintaining a wonderfully fluid and coherent sense of pace and rhythm, allowing the system and thus the music to speak for itself.

With a range of rack heights and shelf configurations, heavy-duty options, amp stands and couplers, finite elemente deliver a sophisticated, elegant and versatile solution to supporting high-quality electronics.

Price: Various

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