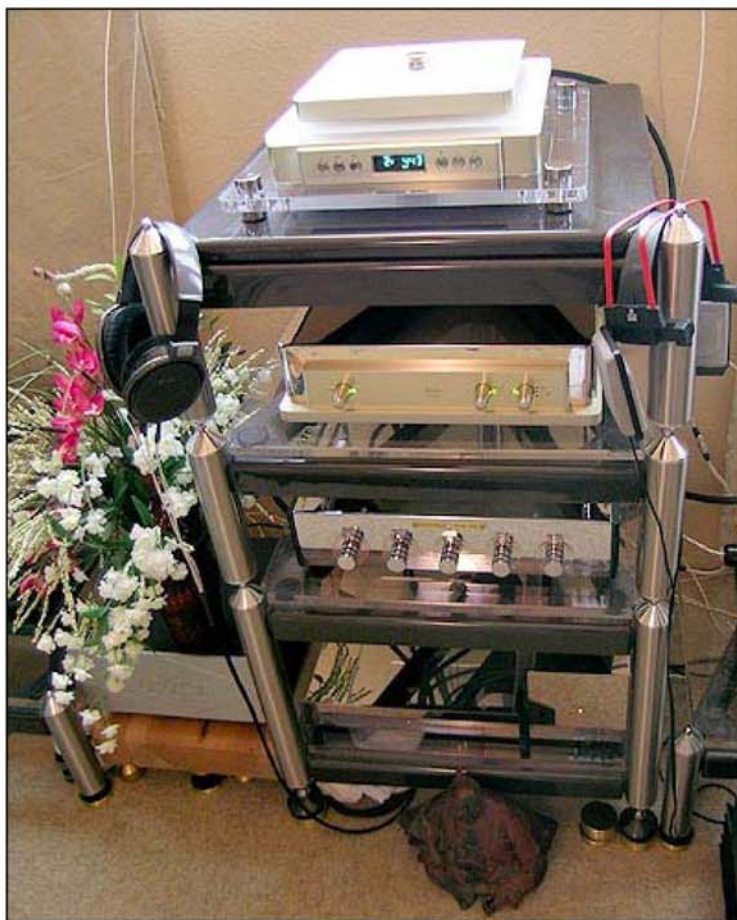




Heart Space Stuff

How do you define, or better yet, *describe* naturalness? In the esoteric wisdom traditions, one Japanese Zen master cracks up laughing like a madman when he rediscovers his 'original face' (that's how their language refers to permanent enlightenment - becoming yourself). He sees how ridiculous his entire search had been, for something that was already the case all along. The searching itself had covered it up. Others talk about how mountains become mountains again -- referring to a state of ordinariness that sees things as they really are but is nevertheless always fresh, always tacit, always thrilling -- or joining the market place to abandon the incubation cell of the monastery. The search had been for the extraordinary, the psychic, the samadhis and satoris and unusual powers or siddhis. Alas, the final realization goes beyond all that. It shows the intermediate displays of otherness to be extreme breakthrough manifestations similar to fasting - you deny yourself long enough and something's bound to give. Stare at your navel long enough and you'll have visions of the extraordinary. But what if you eat when you're hungry, sleep when you're tired and fornicate when you're hot - *after* you've expanded your scope of perception through exploring the extremes for decades of introverted practices and purification rites?



The traditions are filled with glowing attempts of explaining this state. Yet anyone who falls in sync with it confesses how the living reality and the descriptions are worlds apart. To some, this dichotomy is so overwhelming that they simply practice silence thereafter - or laughter. All this by way of hinting at the strange double nature of naturalness. It's ordinary and extraordinary simultaneously. In audiophilia, the search for aural nirvana revolves around siddhis as well - extraordinary bass, otherworldly treble, heavenly soundstaging, magical attributes that all lack staying power because they're ultimately unsatisfactory. They get boring to those who have them but maintain a nearly hypnotic allure to those who don't. Seeing auras, having predictive dreams, healing over the distance, knowing things, going into ecstasy, communing with higher beings ... if the esoteric accounts of those who've travelled the whole distance are to be trusted, these flashy attributes are still *modified* versions of reality. Unusual, addictive even but not the final cigar.

In audiophile terms, anything flashy, extreme and readily qualified or explained smacks similarly of intermediate and short-lived fascinations with secondary stuff. The proof that the *attainment and embrace of ordinariness* isn't merely putting up with leftovers lies in its ongoing transparency to freshness and true nourishment. When something becomes truly satisfying, day in day out, it undermines the fascination with the extraordinary and becomes - normal. It's normal in how it rests in equilibrium, free of striving, free of the need to impress, free of the desire to be a big deal. But there's magic aplenty in how it regenerates deep satisfaction in all the ordinary attributes of living a simple life. That's its self-validating proof - nourishment, satisfaction. Translated into audiophile terms, you no longer need to play things loud. You're no longer interested in analysis. You no longer take things apart. The music hooks up with you to create a loop of emotional energy and you come out refreshed without any notes on how this came about.

Needless to say, the closer a system delivers this state, the less you can talk about it in the usual ways. Those ways all center on extraordinary attributes that make the outcome -- listening -- *different*. Different you can weigh and measure. But what to say when all those differences relax and begin to dissolve and lose shape and substance? What's the opposite of difference? Not indifference! This is a constant well of rejuvenation you step in to *forget* your differences. When you come out and feel one again, you've really lost anything detail-centric to talk about. That's why the wisdom traditions all stress that real realization speaks for itself without words. Those living it teach through their presence. Words become entirely superfluous. When in their presence or energy field, you either get some deep soul nourishing beyond explanations or you walk away shaking your head in complete miscomprehension what all the love-struck accounts by others were about.



Trying to describe the Zanden Audio Model 2000p/5000Sig tethered together via Yamada-San's unique I-squared-S cable with locking modem-like connectors is like entering these strange realms of religiosity. They are obvious to the one enjoying the experience yet become excessively laborious, wordy, esoteric and 'other' in the verbal descriptions. The most honest way seems to describe *physical* reactions in the listener more than attempts to dissect things into external sonic constituents. Something inside relaxes. Attention remains with the music without effort or doing. The need to mess with the volume just so to lock in the magic goes away. A little louder, a little softer - the emotional feeding doesn't care or distinguish. Mental attempts to understand the process are like cloud shadows when you're out in the hammock sunning. They diminish the experience and you let them drift away because they disturb. That's pretty strange New Age Dada language for an audio performance review, isn't it?

But think about it. In the end, *that's* the proof of the pudding - emotional satisfaction free from the feverish tension of infatuation, free from the pathological need to hunt and chase, search and experiment, fret and be concerned over. It's like the quiet contentment of a mature marriage. It's deeper than young love; more normal but still very self-evident to outsiders.

Because I'm blessed with just such a marriage, I asked Ivette to read the above. "Leave it and don't say anything else," she advised. "It's like a perfect painting - you no longer worry about the matching frame." Hmm. Somehow I doubt that most readers will leave good enough alone and not insist on additional - well, differences and the explaining thereof. Alas and to have my cake and eat it, too, I've decided to leave this stand as is and under the appropriate header of *Heart Space Stuff*. Those readers who want some extrapolations on this theme may enjoy the following paragraphs from my review of the Stealth Audio Indra which belongs into the same -- exceedingly rare -- class of components that prompted this type of reaction from this listener:

"... Inserting one lone 1m pair between my Zanden DAC and Orthospectrum buffer, the Indra differences were neither subtle, tonal balance-oriented or merely different-but-so-bloody-what. In one fell swoop, the Indra changed the entire *gestalt* of the presentation in such a way as to be patently audible even to my wife in the upstairs area. Forget bass, midrange, treble. Far more importantly, insertion of the cable removed electronic tension and effort. When you make a fist and press hard, the musculature constricts. Though your hand doesn't look edgier, it feels that way even to an onlooker. I'm using the word 'edgy' not in the tonal domain of treble forwardness. I'm not using it in the domain of image outlines either. I'm using it to describe a very tangible feel in which the music now propagated unfettered, through the air and into the listening room. It no longer felt as though being pressed through electronic piping in little bits and pieces of data.



Remote in champagne metal with sand-blasted acrylic casing



When you review on a daily basis for a few years, you start to trust the process implicitly. Sometimes you take impressions to bed and wake up with a fully digested conceptual expression ready for the keyboard. No matter, you stop to question *how* you do it and just do your job. Previously, only the Indra and DeVore Fidelity Gibbon 8 have caused this particular reaction. Two Indras are still in my system today and, if anything, probably now compound the contributions of these Zanden pieces.

I certainly don't consider this short chapter a complete review by any stretch. Accept this then as an initial -- unpremeditated, un-analyzed -- description of my experience with these two very unconventional components. I'll screw on tight my analytical reviewer's cap in short order to report on the quantifiable and measurable. I'll simply step back from the optimized I-squared-S interface to explore what collapses or diminishes, then substitute individual boxes to break down things even further and hopefully help describe the thing in the negative. Simply put, what's above is the best I can do in the positive. For now, I simply want to leave you with this: Just as I have spent years doing the guru/meditation thing, I've spent years doing the audiophile thing. And just as the former has benefitted from experiences, insights and a slow maturation of understanding what it's really about, something similar has influenced the audiophile journey. My recent digital get-to-know opportunities encompass the Resolution Opus 21, the Ensemble separates, the Einstein CDP, the Audio Aero Prima DAC [review underway] and the Accoustic Arts Drive-1. They're all exceptionally fine examples of the art and though certainly different from each other, all highly commendable and sure to please.



This Zanden combo operates in a different domain. Since I've owned the DAC in MkIV guise for quite a while, I suspect the Signature is incrementally better but *not* the one responsible for this shift in gestalt. It's gotta be the transport. If so, it's the diminishing of jitter to mathematical degrees that seem ludicrous when related to human ability to perceive. Still, de Lima's TimbreLock is readily audible over its adjustment range even should actual measurable THD reduction turn out to operate in the fractional percentage range. Likewise, Yamada-San's recipe to jitter reduction is patently audible even though we're talking so many 0s after the decimal point that it seems outright silly to believe a human brain could distinguish between 10-to-the-eighth power [Model 2000 standard] and 10-to-the-10th-power [Model 2000 premium]. I'm not sure what the jitter rating of my Accoustic Arts Drive-1 is but it's using the same Philips

CDM12PRO2 transport mechanism (albeit modified by Zanden). Everything seems to point at jitter then. Not being an engineer, I can only speculate why further reductions to infinitesimal amounts would move performance sideways into an altogether different *feel* rather than just concern themselves over the usual grocery list of aural attributes. I'll leave the head scratching to the engineers and shall continue with *Ear Space Stuff*.