

Zanden 1200 Mk III Phono-Stage

by Roy Gregory

Fourteen or so years of *Hi-Fi Plus* embrace an awful lot of products (especially if, like me, you were wearing both the Editor's and the Principal Reviewer's hats for a goodly part of that time). Throw in a policy of selecting review products that

we liked, had confidence in or found particularly interesting, and the range of individual units clamoring for attention could easily get out of hand. Except for one thing: while a lot of those products seriously extended my musical expectations and altered my understanding of just what each part of a system might contribute, only one totally changed my perception of the audio landscape. Products like the Connoisseur phono and line-stages, along with the Berning Quadrature Z mono-blocs, have become as near to permanent partners as any reviewer ever gets. The Avalon Isis (still) casts an incredibly long shadow, while my system has never been without a VPI turntable. But if push comes to shove there's always another great turntable line-stage, amp or speaker out there.

In some respects, the same is also true of the Zanden 1200 phono-stage, which has recently been extended in its Mk III guise. As beautifully crafted and effortlessly stylish as all of the Zanden products, this is to my mind, Yamada-san's masterpiece. A two-box unit, it shares that innate understanding of the physical and mechanical aspects of

product design that seems to come so effortlessly to the great Japanese designers, combined here with a carefully honed tube circuit teamed with transformers to boost the MC input. Sonically, the units are noise and trouble free. In fact, they are ghostly quiet for a tube design. Musically, the results are quite magical. The sense of instrumental colour, presence, acoustic space and separation are so natural as to pass almost unnoticed. The dynamics are emphatic and the pace and timing equally fluid and uninhibited. By any measure, this is an exceptional phono-stage.

That's hardly surprising when you consider just how seriously Zanden takes record replay, with dedicated MM and even mono versions of the 1200 available. Which brings us directly to the singular feature that set the Zanden apart from all preceding phono-stages (at least the ones to actually grace my system). Audiophiles and record collectors (predominantly but not exclusively Japanese and Korean) have long been aware of the issue of differences in or deviations from the standardised RIAA record replay EQ curve. In theory, pretty



much all the records made after 1956 should conform to the RIAA standard – meaning that all records should work with all replay electronics. That should be good news for everybody, especially as it effectively pre-dates the introduction of stereo records. So, if you are playing a stereo disc and your phono-stage conforms to the RIAA replay standard, everything should be fine.

The fly in the ointment is those two little words, “In theory...” What becomes apparent, if you dig a little deeper, is that many record labels stuck with their own EQ curves for some considerable time before adopting RIAA. Some seem never to have adopted it. The same Japanese collectors who pushed the price of early pressing stereo records through the roof also demanded phono-stages that could offer optimised replay for their precious discs. The first such phono-stage I ever encountered was the FM Acoustics 222, a slim, fully balanced design with continuously variable EQ parameters. But the Zanden was the phono-stage to find its way into my System, because it was the first that offered push-button selection of different, pre-determined EQ curves. One listen in my own home and, more importantly, with my own record collection and the world was never going to be the same again.

The original Model 1200 we tested only offered three curves (RIAA, “Columbia” and “Decca”) whereas the current version offers five (adding “Teldec” and “EMI” to the mix). Ever wondered why DGG discs sound so bad? Why all their conductors sound mechanical, their orchestras sound constipated and their performances ponderous and graceless? That would be because they didn’t use the RIAA curve. Switch to Teldec EQ when playing a DGG disc of almost any age and the musical improvement is huge. This is no subtle tonal trimming or “bit of added warmth”. This is so slap you in the face obvious that you’d have to be wantonly obtuse not to hear it. Likewise early Decca pressings, which gain, body, presence, rhythmic integrity, drama and a

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remarkable sense of acoustic space – once you replay them with the correct EQ curve. This isn’t just about tonality; it’s about the whole energy spectrum, the sense of musical pace and dramatic shading, coherent space and coherent playing. Optimising EQ delivers better musicians delivering a better performance – and in the case of the Zanden (and a few other models) it really is as simple as pushing a button or turning a knob.

Which leaves me all the more bemused that record replay EQ is such a violently contentious subject. Never mind all those Japanese, Korean and European listeners who happily use this facility to increase their listening pleasure. Never mind those manufacturers who go to the not inconsiderable trouble of engineering the capability into their phono-stages (surely the most fragile of electronic designs). There is a small group of aggressively vocal EQ fundamentalists for whom RIAA is the word of the Lord and 1956 – or ’55 depending on who you listen to – was the Year Zero. EVERY record made after that date conformed to the RIAA standard – AND YOU’D BETTER BELIEVE IT! The problem is I don’t, and nor do a lot of other people. Not only was this particular bit of record industry bureaucracy virtually devoid of proper oversight (it covered literally dozens of separate and distinctly individual labels), the record production process itself is such that no individual is party to every step of the chain, or the technology employed, making the anecdotal evidence trumpeted so



► loudly by the EQ Ayatollahs about as substantial as the hot air they expel when voicing their dogma.

Frankly, I couldn't care less about the arcane debates regarding the date that this or that happened, or when that this or that label did what. I don't need to, because I've got the only historical artifacts that matter to me – the records in my collection. When I play them I demagnetise them, de-stat them, use a clamp and adjust the VTA on a record-by-record basis. If the phono-stage in the system (not a choice I always get to make) offers adjustable EQ, then I select the appropriate curve and listen. If there's any doubt I can select an alternative – normally RIAA. I mention this because part of this equation is what kind of listener you are. If you just want to put on a record and get on with it; if you own mainly post CD pressings or modern 180g audiophile discs; if you don't bother with older or second-hand records – then you probably don't need adjustable EQ curves.

But, if you own a large collection of older records (which I do); if you habitually hunt out early pressings (which I do); if you listen to a broad range of music, but especially early stereo recordings, be they classical, jazz or pop (all of which I do) then you owe it to yourself to investigate the issue of record replay EQ. Only you can decide whether it matters to you – and that is as much about who you are and what's in your collection as it is about the clearly audible benefits. But for me, it represents a rotary switch that transforms

the musical virtues of around 40% of my record collection (Decca, EMI, DGG and Columbia) and that's not something I'm going to willingly forego. The real beauty is that it's a simple case of trial and error. Pick up the record you want to play, try it on one setting, try it on another and pick the one you prefer. Occasionally, you might need to try three different curves (a case in point being an EMI UK pressed Columbia SAX – where I tried RIAA, Columbia and EMI to be on the safe side – before settling on the expected EMI setting) but the preference will always, in my experience, be abundantly clear. No clutching at straws here, hit the correct curve and the music just sounds right.

The ability to really optimise record replay EQ has literally transformed my listening, opening the way to a whole host of artists and recordings that were previously unremarkable at best or so unrewarding as to be unlistenable at worst. It's a huge musical bonus from the collection I already own – not to mention the opportunities it unveils for future secondhand purchases – and I have Zanden and their 1200 MkIII to thank for that revelation. Thank you Yamada-san. Thank you indeed. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

EQ curves: RIAA, TELDEC, EMI, COLUMBIA, DECCA

Inputs: Low impedance MC cartridge x1

High impedance MC cartridge x1

Input impedance low: 36Ω, hi: 470Ω

Output impedance: 3kΩ

Gain Low MC: 68dB (1kHz, RIAA)

High MC: 56dB (1kHz, RIAA)

Frequency deflection: 0.5dB (20Hz - 20kHz) max

THD: 0.1% @ 300mv RMS output, 1kHz

Signal to Noise: -70dB (IHF-A, 5.0mv RMS)

Tube compliment: 6922 x4, 6CA4 x1

Price: £25,300

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