



Zanden Audio Systems 1200 Signature Phono Stage | REVIEW

April 7, 2024

By Garrett Hongo



(Photo courtesy of Zanden)

Like any self-identifying member of the audio cognoscenti, I got super excited about the new Zanden Audio Systems Model 1200 Signature phono stage (\$29,500 MSRP). It is way up there in the category of high-end gear and a significant re-design from prior models in the already successful Classic line of Zanden electronics.

Since the inception of his company over thirty years ago, President Kazutoshi Yamada has been celebrated for inventive circuits, assiduous care for extraordinary high quality, the superb

sound and sumptuous visual appeal of his products, and a deep loyalty to the standard of live music in every unit that leaves his Osaka factory. The new phono is simply the latest in this success story, preserving the same relative size and elegant form-factor as the prior 1200 Mark III—sporting a gleaming chrome casing, the tri-level facing, brushed metal control knobs, and separate tube-rectified power supply—but the inner works have been revamped from single-ended to fully balanced circuits and yet another set of adjustments has been added to the famed variable EQ settings established in models that came before.

Words by Garrett Hongo

Though his university studies were in electronics, Yamada-san is a bit of a lone wolf in audio, never having been part of a corporate design team nor having studied at the feet of a known master. Instead, from the start, he set out on his own, first, after meticulous independent research, creating a tube circuit for a phono stage, then continuing to design circuits for tube electronics throughout his forty-year career. Some ten years in, he came up with tube circuits so unique, they got patented in Japan and the USA, forming the base circuits of all Zanden designs since.



(Photo courtesy of Garrett Hongo)

The new Zanden 1200 Signature is no exception in this, Yamada-san having doubled-down on his independence from most other manufacturers. Whereas most companies produce phono stages dedicated solely to the RIAA frequency curve established as the industry standard in

1954, Yamada has equipped his current line of phonos with five equalization curves intended to address the variable EQs he has found through research to be most common in the production of stereo, long-play recordings. These curves are RIAA, EMI, Columbia, Decca, and Teldec. His incorporation of variable EQ has resulted in a great deal of controversy in the world of audio, and, conspicuously, most reviewers have refrained from citing any observations gleaned from using any EQ other than RIAA in reviewing his phonos. I say Yamada has doubled down because he has added yet another set of variable adjustments to the new Model 1200 Signature—three settings for what he calls “the fourth time constant” to address what he has identified as the three most common cutter-head characteristics used to master stereo recordings.

As excited as I was about this new phono, it took a while to schedule a review after Eric Pheils, Zanden’s North American distributor, first proposed it, as I was in the process of moving from *Soundstage! Ultra* to *Part-Time Audiophile*. Happily, it has worked out that the 1200 Signature phono will be the subject of my inaugural review for *PTA*.

Design and Development of the Zanden Model 1200 Signature

In an email exchange with Yamada-san, I was able to get some background on the development of the new phono. He wrote that while the immediately prior 1200 Mk3 phono had utilized a unique, patented single-ended circuit, he’d meantime developed a new balanced circuit technology for Zanden’s power amplifiers and considered its application to other products as well. By combining elements of both topologies, he’d created a new type of balanced circuit which he felt overcame the shortcomings of both circuits and improved overall sound quality. He intends to incorporate this new topology throughout the product range and the 1200S is now the second to have it.



Another concept he'd been pursuing was the 4th time constant. He'd been convinced for a long time that what he calls the "de-emphasis" (or cut versus boost in the EQ curve) with a 4th time constant was necessary for faithful reproduction of the analog signal. However, due to a lack of documentation and research, previous products only offered a single setting. But after careful research and experimentation, Zanden settled on two additional settings.

Yamada went on to explain that during the development of the 1200mk3, they concluded from past literature that a 4th time constant was required for complete accuracy in the application of the various EQs his unique phono unit offered.

"A maintenance engineer for Neumann cutting systems provided us with specific information about the frequency setting of the 4th time constant. After creating a prototype with the specified 4th time constant, we found that the sound reproduced was much closer to live music. However, we were not convinced that the setting used by Neumann was universal. Eventually, we came across some British literature which documented the frequency of the 4th time constant used by Ortofon. While certain labels seemed to clearly benefit from either the Neumann or Ortofon settings, other recordings still left us a little dissatisfied. These recordings were usually American and mastered using Westrex cutting systems. Through experimentation we eventually settled on a third setting which is the lowest, and we refer to colloquially as Westrex. In terms of the frequency Neumann is the highest, Ortofon is mid, and Westrex is low."

On the five variable EQ settings his phonos have employed, Yamada was very clear, and I quote him directly as there has been so much disputation, even vitriol about this feature:

"It may not be well known, but originally nearly every record company had their own proprietary equalization characteristics. In order to accurately play back mono records from the SP era, it is necessary to have a phono stage with a variety of EQ settings. In fact the major record labels like RCA and Columbia manufactured the electronics necessary to play their records. Although there is little contemporaneous documentation, conventional wisdom insists the RIAA standard was adopted in 1954.

"One of Zanden's earliest products was a mono phono stage with separate settings for turn-over and roll-off, the primary settings required for de-emphasis or equalization of records. This unit allowed me to evaluate the effects of equalization on playback of recorded music. Obviously, music played with the correct EQ setting is more natural, closer to live music and therefore much more compelling. The experience of having developed and extensively used a mono phono stage greatly influenced and informed my critical listening skills regarding the playback of analog records.

"With few or no exceptions even the most seasoned reviewers or audiophiles cannot claim to have extensive knowledge of the effects of EQ on playback. Everyone starts with the assumption that a record is recorded using the "standard" RIAA characteristics. If a record doesn't sound good or pleasing, they conclude that it is a poor recording. However, on many of my stereo records I could hear the same artifacts that I heard when playing mono records on the incorrect equalization setting. The principles are the same, as are the easily

discernable effects. It soon became apparent that there were certain patterns, and stereo records tended to sound better on their pre-RIAA standard EQ settings. I also concluded that while it might be theoretically necessary to have more settings to properly playback all mono records, nearly all stereo records coalesce around the five EQ characteristics incorporated in the Zanden model 1200 Signature. In fact most mono LP records can also be played accurately using just the five settings.”

Many smaller and independent labels relied on the manufacturing infrastructure of the major recording labels to produce their records. Let me add that in my early years I was extensively involved with live music as a coordinator. I worked over 500 concerts, which were primarily classical and jazz, just in my capacity as a live coordinator. When I say the sound is more natural and closer to live music, this is my reference.

In addition to these fascinating features of the balanced circuit, variable EQ, and the 4th time constant, Zanden has adopted a new Finemet core power transformer which eliminated the need for a choke transformer in the design. Yamada claims this results in greater transparency and clarity, with better reproduction of transients so the overall sound might be both vibrant and highly resolving out of a noticeably quiet background.



(Photo courtesy of Zanden)

Description of the Zanden 1200 Signature

As with all electronics in Zanden’s Classic series, the control unit of the 1200S is simply gorgeous—sleek, eye-catching, but also understated in its overall visual appeal. The uncommon look—signified by its gleaming chrome casing, brushed aluminum faceplate (with inset LED pin

lights), tapered control knobs, and a heavy baseframe—was achieved at the inception of the Zanden brand—the goal, according to Yamada, being elegance with flowing, graceful lines unobstructed by visible screws. The 1200S control unit measures 15.67" W x 15.9" L x 4" T and weighs almost 20 pounds.

I'd described the frontal view as tri-level. What I mean is, aside from the four control knobs, there are three pieces that come together to create the distinct Zanden "look" of a three-piece frontal presentation. First, at the bottom, there is a $\frac{3}{4}$ " thick silver powder coat metal base plate that undergirds the 1200S's gleaming chrome casing. The $3\frac{1}{4}$ " tall casing is rounded at the corners and vented with a double row of slotted heat dissipation holes at the top center. At the front, the base juts forward about $\frac{3}{4}$ " from the casing and just over and $\frac{1}{8}$ " on each side. Along the front of the casing, fitted directly above the base and less than $\frac{1}{4}$ " short of its front lip, is a beveled bar of brushed aluminum about $\frac{1}{2}$ " thick and $2\frac{1}{4}$ " tall. It has a deep natural color with an attractive sheen that can seem silvery in a certain light but glow with an understated golden color in another. It covers an area an inch narrower from each corner of the casing and shorter by almost an inch from the top of the casing, giving a look of elegant layering to the front panel as though a chamfered Italian doorway crowned with an unadorned, Modernist lunette.

Finally, the four control knobs are mounted two on the left side and two on the right, each about two inches apart from their center lines, with the Zanden insignia and "Signature" designation label between them in the middle of the bar. The whole unit sits on four fairly stiff but compliant feet that lift it approximately a half-inch above a shelf.

Outside the circumference of each control knob, there are pinhead-size LED indicator lights. The knobs turn with a pleasing and smooth resistance that comes to a sensuously satisfying stop. In keeping with the sleek visual style of the 1200S, the feel of working its controls is definitely that of luxury here, like turning the instrument switches on a prized legacy automobile. The far left knob turns between Standby (red glow) and On (green glow), the second from left switches between Reverse (red) and Normal (green) polarity.

The far right knob alternates between low (green) and high (yellow) MC cartridge output. The second right selects among the five EQ curve settings—RIAA (green), Teldec (red), EMI (yellow), Columbia (green), and Decca (red). With a gentle push from your fingers or thumb, this same knob switches the 4th time constants, labeled with a "t/c" on the lower right—LED off for the frequency position of 55KHz (Neumann), red for 45KHz (Ortofon), and green for 42.5KHz (Westrex).

Around back of the control unit are all the input, output, and ground hookups as well as the connector receptacle for the umbilical cable from the external power supply. Going left to right, there are a pair of balanced high MC cable inputs, a ground pin, a pair of balanced low MC cable inputs, the pair of balanced outputs, a toggle for switching between the high and low inputs, a pair of RCA outputs, and the power input connector on the far right.

The low MC input impedance setting is 35ohms and 480ohms for the high. Difference in gain is negligible. Output impedance is 300ohms. Inside the unit are six 6922 signal tubes, essentially long life and ruggedized 6DJ8s.

The power supply is a rather largish, chromed aluminum box, a bit taller than wide, and very long. It measures 6.1" W x 13.2" L x 6.4" H, and weighs 17.6 pounds. Its chromed front plate is a bit wider and taller on each edge than the main casing and sports the Zanden insignia and a pinhead LED indicator that flashes green when connected to power.

The chromed casing has a largish double-row of heat dissipation slots on each side and three rows of them on top. Mounted on the backplate are an on-off rocker switch in the upper right, a ground terminal on the middle left, a fuse-holder on the right just below the rocker switch, the connector for the multi-pin power umbilical to the lower left, and the IEC receptacle for a power cable on the lower right. Inside the box are one 6922 signal tube and two, high-quality 6CA4 rectifier tubes. Like the control unit, the power supply sits on four compliant feet.



(Photo courtesy of Zanden)

Installation 1 of the Zanden 1200 Signature

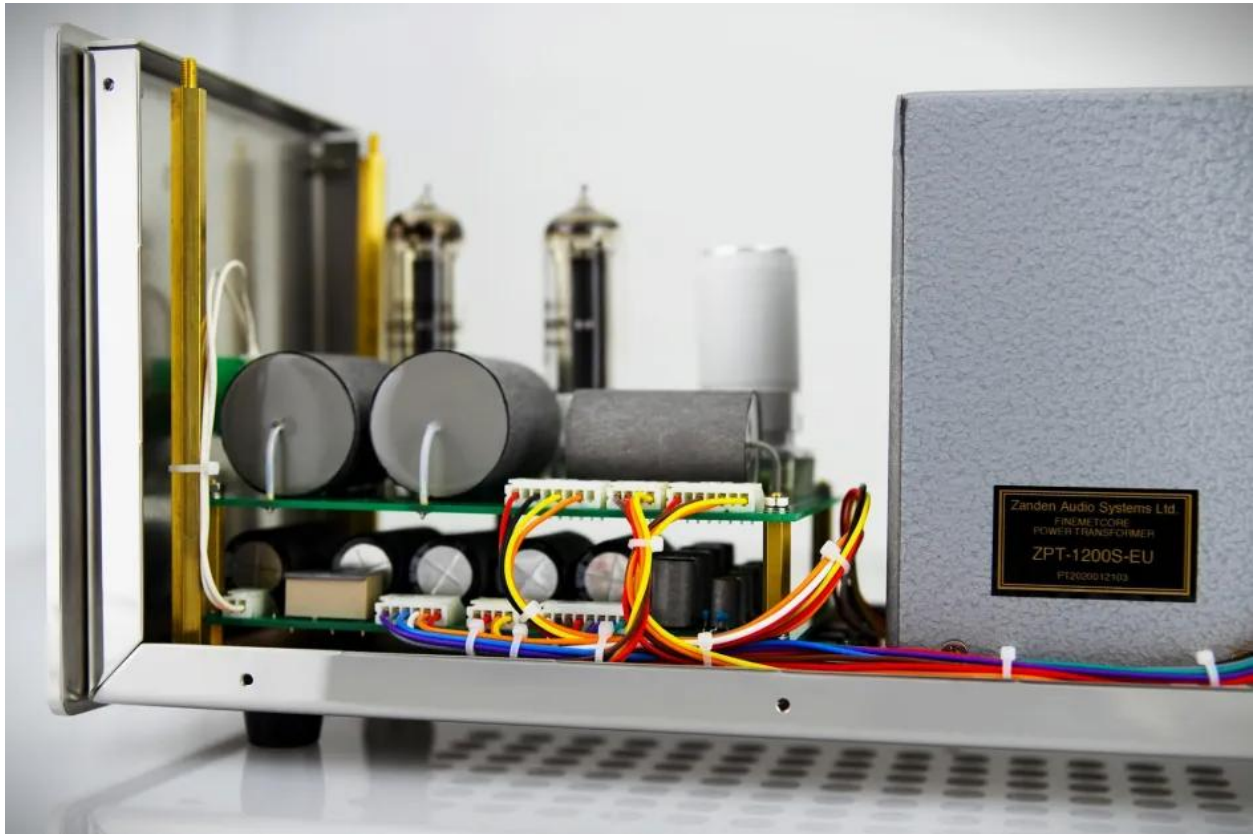
I have two different turntables on separate racks—a TW-Acoustic Raven AC on top of a 5-shelf Box Furniture rack and an Helius Viridia turntable on top of a 5-shelf Salamander Designs Archetype rack. The Raven is an unsuspended table and the Viridia is suspended. I used the Zanden 1200S in both systems, so that meant two separate installations. I'll describe the first install, then give my listening impressions, followed by the second install and my impressions thereafter.

In early January, the Zanden 1200S arrived via FED-X in a large 27.5" L x 22" W x 12" T box. It weighed 57 pounds. Inside was a second box, insulated from the first with ¼" thick Styrofoam sheeting. Opening it up, I found three layers of dark grey cutouts of rectangular foam separating various elements of the phono. On top were the owner's manual, a parts list, a curve list that was guide keying each record label to its recommended EQ and 4th time constant settings, an umbilical cable with ring-lock terminations, and a stock power cable (which I didn't use). The middle sheet was for separating top and bottom layers. On the bottom was the cutout for the control unit and power supply, separated from each other with a border of compliant foam. And over the front of the control was a stiff Styrofoam block with cutouts for the four knobs, protecting each one. Each unit was bagged in plastic and neatly sealed with tape. I took care to remove things, setting out each element on the Chinese rug of my listening room before assembly.

The procedure took about thirty minutes. After various switch offs, I disconnected and carefully lifted my Esoteric K-05x SACD player from the four Modrate foQ isolation feet on the third shelf of the Box rack and set the player aside. I placed the Zanden power supply next to my Audience aR6-T4 line conditioner on the bottom shelf. Then I lifted the heavier Zanden 1200S control unit onto the iso-feet on the shelf vacated by the Esoteric player so that it was directly below the control unit of my reference Pass Labs XP-25 phono. Hookups were a cinch, though I had to use Cardas Clear RCA-to-XLR adapters for the low MC balanced inputs for the captured phono cables of the TW-Acoustic 10.5 arm of the Raven table as they are single-ended. To connect the phono to my Zanden 3100 preamp, I used a pair of Audience frontRow balanced interconnects. Finally, once all that was done, I connected the power umbilical at both ends, leading from the power supply to the control unit. The connectors nested in perfectly and tightened easily with their aluminum ring collars. After all that, I flipped on the breaker switch of my Audience conditioner, the green light of the power supply winking on and the red LED of the control unit showing it was in standby mode.

Listening with the Zanden 1200S

After I switched the Zanden phono out of standby, I put my ear up to each midrange driver of my Ascendo System M speakers. Things were dead quiet with no tube rush at all. This continued throughout all my listening. The music emerged out of a deep black background of silence.



(Photo courtesy of Zanden)

At first, I made some comparisons switching between RIAA EQ with normal polarity and the recommended curve/time constant/polarity settings for each label of the records I played. In most every case, the RIAA setting produced a sound that may have been “firmer” but less nuanced and without the subtleness or same degree of expressiveness in timbral and dynamic shadings. For example, “Limehouse Blues” on the Cannonball Adderly Quintet’s *Live in Chicago* LP, a 180g re-issue (of Mercury SR-60134) from Acoustic Sounds (Verve B003688832-01), had a penetrating, bluesy sound in the ornamental flourishes of John Coltrane’s tenor and Adderly’s alto, the long sustained notes clear and pleasantly piercing. But on the recommended EQ and 4/t setting (Columbia/low 4th/reverse polarity), there were bigger tonal contrasts between Coltrane’s tenor and Adderly’s alto, a much more forceful sense of air being pushed through their instruments and into space, more muscular slurs and slides in their playing, and greater articularity in the presence region.

Likewise, on “Acadian Driftwood” from The Band’s *Northern Lights, Southern Cross* (Capitol ST-11440), though standard RIAA produced a brighter, more forward sound with defined images, and the voices of the three singers (drummer Levon Helm, pianist Richard Manuel, and bassist Rick Danko) leaping forward in the soundstage with bite and agility, the shape of their vowels quite sharp and harmonies blending well, the EMI/low/reverse setting produced more subtle resonances in the drums, fiddle, and strummed acoustic guitar, the weave of voices and instrumental lines nearly as penetrating but more delicately distinguishable with distinctive individual timbres shimmering through the tactile welter of The Band’s sound. Vocal and instrumental accents and timbral characters stood out from the homespun musical tapestry. It all felt more emotional, and I lived in each note, each thump of Helm’s drumming, each squeeze

of Garth Hudson's accordion, each mournful moan of Danko's turn at the ending verses of the song.



Quite a few audio writers have declared the variable EQ feature, either politely or vehemently, a kind of gimmick, a coloration and manipulation of tone, and a damnable transgression against the engineering of all stereo recordings, that even citing its effects on listening is to promote error and audio heresy. I'm not with the hating, frankly. So, for most of my listening, whether spinning combo jazz, rock, classical orchestral and choral music, or opera, I followed Zanden's extensive chart of EQ/4t/polarity settings and just rolled with it.

I loved the way the 1200S reproduced voices from Joni Mitchell to Renée Fleming, from Donald Fagen to Carlo del Monte. Joni's wide-ranging alto-to-soprano voice on "Big Yellow Taxi" from *Miles of Aisles* (Asylum Records AB 202) had a gorgeous top register while still sounding big and airy amidst the mostly electronic instrumentation of Tom Scott's L.A. Express behind her. Renée Fleming's voice on "Depuis le jour..." from Gustave Carpentier's *Louise* on the album entitled *The Beautiful Voice* (Decca 2LP 483 3191) was exactly that, a gorgeous liquidity to it, the French lyrics clear and comprehensible (my notes say, "perhaps a benefit of the 4th time constant?"). Fleming's coloratura here was plush, sumptuous, and intricately textured, the difference in their vocal characters rendered with great and subtle distinction. I'd never much appreciated this recording, full of arias from the French repertoire, but via the 1200S, there was a freshness I'd missed before, the music not only delicate and replete with filigrees of ornamentation I'd once deemed fussy, but delivering great swells of drama and emotion in fine gradients of

dynamic and timbral shading that awakened in me a new appreciation for French operatic tradition.

The controlled and oddly attractive whine of Donald Fagen’s voice was also capably rendered by the 1200S. On “Aja” from the album of the same title (ABC Records AB-1006), Fagen’s distinctively thin timbre was rendered with more dimension and inner texture than I’d been able to recognize before. Somehow, his vocal shadings sounded wittier, so much more deliberate and used for punch, irony, or affection, the shifting textures he used revealing more of his humor, his alacrity, and just plain weirdness. It helped that the soundstage was so wide and deep—about four feet outside the edges of my speakers and about the same measure of depth, able to present the luscious timbral scope of so many instruments (xylophones, electric guitar, piano, tenor sax, synthesizer, and drumkit).



Carlo del Monte’s tenor was superb on “Libiamo” and “Un di felice, eterea” from Giuseppe Verdi’s *La Traviata* (Angel Voices AV 34040). Backed by robust strings and an airy chorus, del Monte sounded forceful, his vocal image solid and stable, befitting his character Alfredo’s youthful sincerity as he professes undying love to the seemingly frivolous courtesan Violetta. One can hear the slight clenches of emotion as del Monaco sings, the burnished notes twisting in air, saturated with tonal color and feeling. The Zanden 1200S seemed to me an electronic instrument more worthy in the reproduction of the human voice than any other I’d heard.

I want to illustrate the fine way of the 1200S with instruments by citing recordings of both acoustic and electronic music from a variety of genres. Ry Cooder made a famous recording with some of my favorite Hawaiian musicians on *The Gabby Pahinui Hawaiian Band* (Panini

Records, WB BS 3023). You can hear the virtuosity of Pahinui's zither-like strumming on guitar meld intricately with Cooder's mandolin picking on "Ku'u Niki Ka Hele." You can feel the beginning of Cooder's picking a doubled mandolin string, that slight hesitation as his pick engages the strings, the strings holding the tension just for an instant, then, once Cooder plucks through, the strings' slightly damped vibrations sing out. *Ooo*, I said aloud, marveling at the refinement of detail and the tactile stages of the music's timing.

Likewise on "Yet to Be" from Rhiannon Giddins's *You're the Zone* (Nonesuch 075597907483), I could simultaneously enjoy both the group's collective momentum and isolate on hearing each instrument—Giddins picking a Celtic-like rhythm on a nylon-string guitar, while the drums and bass kick hard and a steel acoustic guitar got strummed emphatically, voices harmonizing dreamily on the choruses, while a flute played grace notes on top of the rootsy mix. As for imaging, it couldn't have gotten better than on Steely Dan's "Aja." There was a richness and complexity of instrumental textures from xylophones (a damp wood resonance) and crisp temple bells, to slinky electric guitar and chiming acoustic piano, a drumkit's crash and ride cymbals, punchy sax and toms, and the tasty rattle from a synthesizer accentuating the punch of the eccentric beat. But more than these, the layering was captivating too—the chorus of voices spread out in the rear behind the front line of guitar, Fagen's vocal, and sax, the drums, xylophones, and piano at mid-stage, the electric bass in a low, ambient line at the somewhat permeable bottom edge.

Finally, I need to cite the spectacular spatial representation of choral and solo voices on Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's *Requiem K. 626* (Harmonia Mundi HMM 332292) as performed by the RIAS Kammerchor and Freiberg Barockorchester under the direction of Rene Jacobs. There was an attractive choral bloom throughout but also a fine spatial differentiation between the male and female choruses that at times mounted to grandeur at others sounded sorrowful and majestically aggrieved. Voices rose from different positions in the soundstage—choirs from mid-stage left and right, soloists in the forefront. All the instrumental sections were distinct in their traditional positions as well. Because of the clarity and drama of this consistently superior rendering, I'd an unflinching emotional response to whatever music I played.

Comparison with the Pass Labs XP-25 phono

The Pass XP-25 phono (MSRP \$10,600) is a two-box unit like the 1200S but has solid-state active gain and costs less than half what the Japanese unit does. While there are no variable EQ or 4th time constant settings, it has numerous options for capacitive and resistive loading, gain (53dB, 66dB, and 76dB), and a high-pass filter as well. The settings for resistance loading are, in ohms, 30, 50, 100, 160, 250, 320, 500, 1k, and 47k. That's a lot. For capacitive, mainly for MM carts, settings are, in picofarads, 100, 200, 320, 530, and 750. Also, a lot. For the MC cart I use most regularly for stereo, a Kiseki Purpleheart N.S. (0.48mV, 400ohms recommended loading), I settled long ago on settings for 76dB and 500 resistive loading.

I found the XP-25 nearly as pleasing as the 1200S but it wasn't consistently as robust, and its soundstage was a touch more recessed with smaller images. For example, on "Limehouse Blues" by the Adderly Quintet, neither Coltrane's tenor nor Adderly's alto were as clearly

defined either in image or in the notes they played, which weren't as dimensional, expanding within a shallower soundstage than with the Zanden tubed phono.



(Photo courtesy of Garrett Hongo)

The sound was slightly flatter and less dynamic, with less air around the images. On Mozart's Requiem, the XP-25's presentation was likewise more recessed, giving a mid-hall orchestra view rather than one closer in (tenth row?) as with the 1200S. Timpani strikes were looser, and there was a touch of hardness at dynamic peaks. On the other hand, I called it a tossup on The Band's "Acadian Driftwood" and Steely Dan's "Aja," the Pass Labs unit possessed of great timing, punch, and clarity, the vocal tones beautiful and emotive, all instruments clear with distinguishable timbres and unique textures. Soundstaging and layering were superb with these latter two and I'd say the XP-25 could also sound chunkier, meatier on rock recordings in general. Cooder's mandolin plucking and Pahinui's guitar strumming might've been livelier too, pulsing with solid images, lifelike attacks, sustains, and tones via the XP-25. Voices varied in comparison, Mitchell's with a light and airy top on "Big Yellow Taxi," Fagen's agile and snarky on "Aja," del Monaco's strong and clear without haze or breakup on "Un di felice, eterea." On "Despues le jour..." though, while her vocal came through without strain at highest volume or pitch, there was less inner detail and stylistic nuance in Fleming's performance. It was "good" but not glorious.

Overall, I preferred the spendy 1200S over the XP-25 as the Zanden phono created more air and space within a deeper soundstage, was more robust with consistently finer-grained vocal and instrumental presentations, better dynamic shadings, and, at least on classical recordings, tighter bass.



(Photo courtesy of Zanden)

Installation 2 and comparison with the Zanden 120 phono

For another test, I compared the 1200S to my other reference, the Zanden 120 which, like the XP-25, is a two-box solid state unit but uses step-ups for its first gain stages. Part of the lower-priced Modern line from Zanden, it has the same variable EQ options, reverse and normal polarity settings as the 1200S but without the 4th time constant. My particular custom unit is equipped with only single-ended hookups (standard inputs are one pair of XLR and one pair of RCA) but has similar gain settings (63dB and 75dB) and loading options for high and low MC impedances. When last available, it cost far less than either phono (MSRP \$7,500).

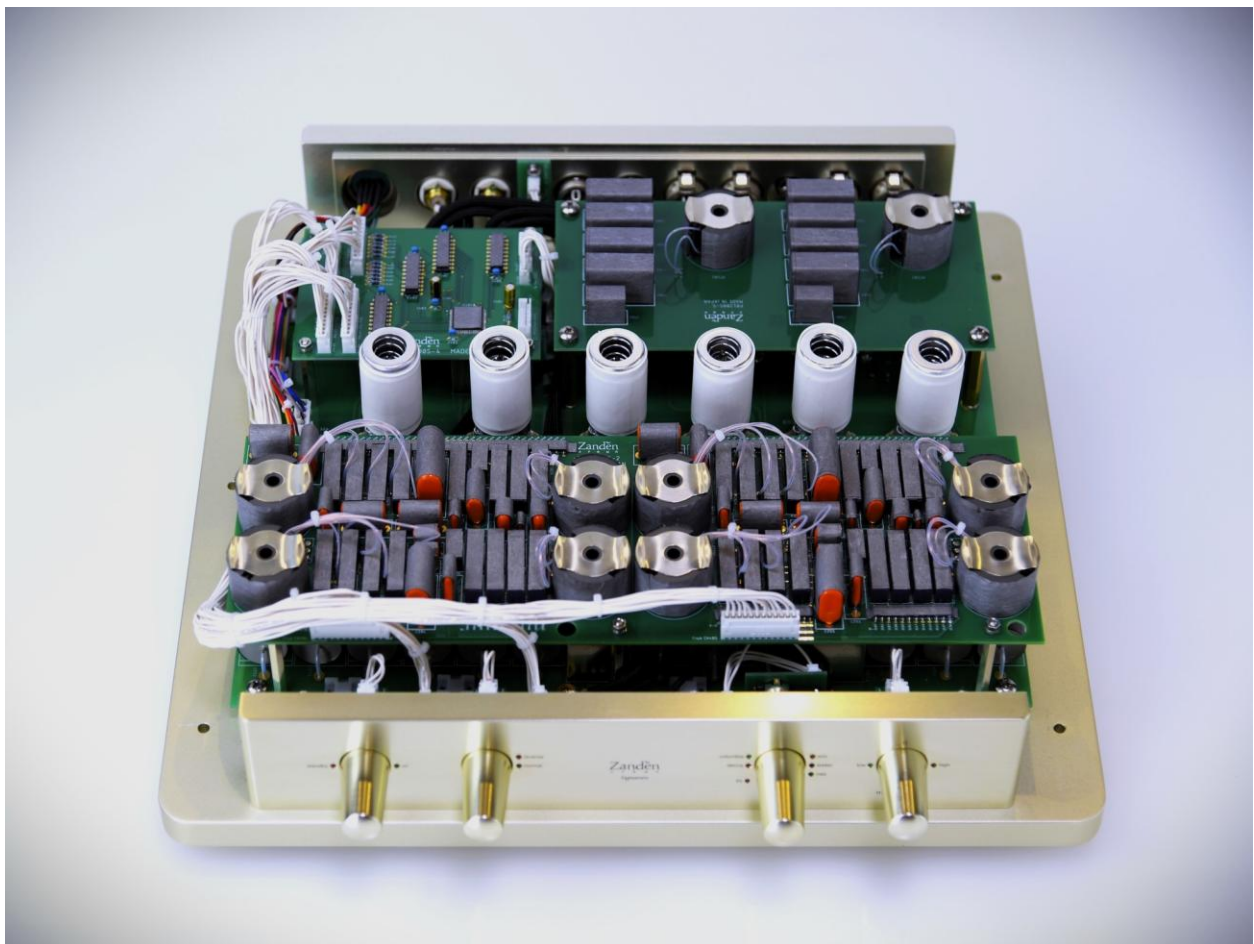
To compare the two Zanden phonos, I placed the 1200S on the third shelf of my Salamander rack just below the Model 120, with the Helius Viridia turntable above both on the top shelf. Partly because it's a suspended 'table, the Viridia is my reference for classical orchestral and most choral and operatic LPs, and I've been long delighted with its sound, especially since I'd outfitted it with a new Koetsu Urushi Gold MC cartridge (0.4mV, 30ohm load recommended) recently. Hookups varied somewhat from placing the unit in the Box rack, as I'd a Zanden RCA-to-XLR phono cable that the company provided me for the run from the Helius Phaedra tonearm's RCA-terminated phono cable and an Audience frontRow RCA interconnect with a Cardas Clear RCA-to-XLR adapter at the preamp inputs.

For comparison, I concentrated on just four LPs—Hector Berlioz's *Symphonie Fantastique* (DGG 2530 358) performed by the Boston Symphony with Seiji Ozawa conducting, Mozart's *Requiem*, Fleming's aria from Charpentier's *Louise*, and the Adderly Quintet's *Live in Chicago*.



On the *Reverie/Largo/Allegro agitato* of the Berlioz symphony, strings were more open with the 1200S than the humbler 120, with sweet and airy orchestral swells, wondrous colors in the jaunty arabesques, and lovely brushstrokes of sound painted within the soundstage. Strings were more opaque via the 120 but bass was bigger, more forceful, and tighter. In soundstaging, the width and depth were comparable, but instrumental section distinctions weren't as clear, horn colors wonderful, but their images not as defined. The 1200S never lost sectional integrity, whereas I was surprised this got occasionally ragged with the 120—something that never bothered me before. And there was a touch of grain in the *fff* passages of choral voices of Mozart's *Requiem* I'd not previously noted. On both LPs, the 1200S exhibited a softer hand and lighter touch with the music, providing more nuanced presentations sensitive to the dynamic and tonal shadings of instrumental and vocal performances. Though both were fine with low-level detail, the 1200S had an easier time with soundstage depth, layering, and *fortissimo* passages.

With Fleming's aria from *Louise*, her voice was more recessed via the 120, without as much delicacy or inner detail. Orchestral presentation was also more general—not as sophisticated in painting the evolution of the notes and how the measures hung together, how the theme moved from vocal to instrumental passages. Fleming's voice wasn't as dimensional. The 120 got the notes but the 1200S was exquisite with them, capturing her pulsating vibrato and smooth portamento.



(Photo courtesy of Zanden)

Via the 120, the sax solos on “Limehouse Blues” came through with big tonal contrasts, forceful air that made it so you could feel the muscular push. Yet, tonally dense as was their sound, irresistible as two trains coming, they hadn’t those exceptional touches the 1200S provided—the immersive soundstage filled with finely shimmering details so vibrant they were spellbinding.

Generally, hearing both Zanden phonos in succession, their overall sonic presentations might’ve been more comparable if it wasn’t for all the spaciousness, air, inner details of instrumental performance and textures that the 1200S was able to render. In terms of satellite mapping, it was like the Model 120 was a Garmin and the 1200S the latest Tesla GPS.

Conclusion

The Zanden 1200 Signature phono is a far more sophisticated preamp for analog than I’ve ever had in either of my systems before. It just pulls more sonic juiciness from the impulses of my MC cartridges and does it with fine textural nuances and exquisite touch.

Refined enough for Classical orchestral and choral music, rich and punchy with jazz and rock, and outstanding with solo voices whether folk, rock, or operatic, it excels in the presentation of varied instruments, both acoustic and electronically amplified, and produces a wide soundstage with an uncommon depth and layering and strong and stable images within. There was a bounty of sonic information, more space and specificity in the presentation of images, but, most of all, tremendous instrumental textures and differentiation of tonalities as well as great ease with it all. It gave a good ride. Without sudden electronic-sounding cutoffs, voices can launch, float, and shimmer through their decays in air.



Rich and punchy with jazz and deft with rock, the 1200S excels in the natural presentation of instrumental and vocal qualities. The sophisticated distribution of sonic images across and within the soundstage creates pleasing illusions of bandstands, the recording studio, or, in the case of symphonic music, the orchestra pit and instrumental sections, particular string, woodwinds, and brass sounds rising into prominence as a violin, oboe, or trumpet takes a solo. Without interference from unnatural artifacts or electronic harshness, you can hear deeply into any well-recorded performance, making an emotional connection to the music.

How superb an achievement! This is truly what the high-end is all about. With the Zanden 1200 Signature as your phono, you can be assured that the music will run as from a mountain stream tumbling sweetly through a meadowed field. And it won’t be in your dreams, Holmes, but within your own listening room.

Associated Equipment

- **Analog sources:** TW-Acoustic Raven AC turntable with 10.5 Raven arm and Kiseki Purpleheart N.S. MC cartridge (0.48mV); Helius Designs Viridia turntable with Phaedra arm and Koetsu Urushii Gold MC cart (0.40mV)
- **Digital source:** Esoteric K-05x SACD/CD player
- **Preamplifier:** Zanden Audio Systems Model 3100
- **Phono stages:** Pass Labs XP-25; Zanden Audio Systems Model 120
- **Phono cables:** Zanden RCA-to-XLR, Verbatim Cable
- **Power amplifier:** Zanden Audio Systems Model 8120
- **Speakers:** Ascendo System M
- **Power cords:** Audience frontRow powerChord HP and MP, Audience powerChord SE LP
- **Interconnects:** Audience frontRow (unbalanced), Zanden (balanced)
- **Speaker cables and jumpers:** Zanden speaker cables, Synergistic Research Galileo Universal Speaker Cells with Foundation jumpers
- **Power conditioner:** Audience aR6-T4 with Audience frontRow powerChord and Audience aR2p
- **Record cleaner:** Loricraft PRC4
- **Accessories:** Box Furniture S5S rack and amp stand, Salamander Designs Archetype 5.0 rack, edenSound FatBoy dampers, HRS damping plates, fo.Q Modrate HEM-25B and HEM-25S Pure Note Insulators, ASC SoundPanels, Zanden Audio Systems AT-1 Acoustic Tubes and AP-1 Acoustic Panels, GIK Acoustics 4A Alpha Pro Series Bass Trap Diffusors/Absorbers, Massif Audio Design Cocobolo/Mpingo record weight,
- Winds ALM-01 Arm Load Meter, Audio Intelligent Vinyl Solutions Premium One-Step Formula N^o 6, Mobile Fidelity GeoDisc, TW-Acoustic and Helius Phaedra cartridge alignment tools, Mobile Fidelity Sound Lab record cleaning brush, AudioQuest anti-static record brush, Furutech GTX-D NCF(R) AC duplex receptacles, Oyaide R1 AC duplex receptacles