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## Product Review

### Zandèn Audio Systems 2500S CD Player

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For many audiophiles, Zandèn Audio Systems' 2500S CD player will seem a bizarre device. It uses 16-bit DACs, does no oversampling or upsampling, plays only CDs, has one digital output, and none going in. That sounds like a 25-year-old player, but here's the icing on the cake: It costs \$22,000. Kazutoshi Yamada, Zandèn's owner and designer, has unique ideas about how audio products should be engineered, look, and sound, and the 2500S is no exception – it's quite unlike any other player I've reviewed. Its price means that only well-heeled buyers can even consider buying one, but its technology made me scratch my head: Just who the heck *is* this player designed for?

#### Description

The 2500S is superbly built, and is the best-looking CD player I've ever seen. Kazutoshi Yamada knows how to finish a component from head to toe to make it look elegant and distinctive – even the rear panel looks nice. If more companies put this sort of emphasis on appearance, you'd see more high-end products in extravagantly decorated homes.

The base of the 2500S is machined from a solid block of aluminum and has a champagne finish. Attached to the base is a polished, stainless-steel subchassis that's mostly concealed by a cover of frosted acrylic, which drops down over and surrounds the base. The metal subchassis supports all the circuitry; the acrylic cover holds the transport mechanism (a Philips CD-Pro2M), which is surrounded by an all-metal, gold-tinted "dish." With many top-loading transports, you have to put a little puck on the CD to hold it in place, then close the lid. The 2500S has a beautifully machined, all-metal circular lid that matches the dish and has the little puck attached to it – you just place the CD on the spindle, close the lid, and you're ready to play music. On the cover's top front edge are the Standby, Play, Stop, Pause, and Track Skip buttons.

You'd expect impeccable workmanship at this price, and that's what you get, with lots of little details that complement the appearance. For instance, a small, deliberate gap of about 1/4" between the acrylic top and the aluminum base allows you to see the subchassis, and thus forms a stripe that runs around the

entire player. The acrylic is cut away in back to reveal the rear panel, on which are the main power switch, one pair each of single-ended and balanced outputs, and an RCA-based S/PDIF digital output. The various materials, colors, and textures work fabulously together. Visually, the 2500S isn't just a CD player but a masterpiece of industrial design – something that can't be said about most audio components, even the really expensive ones. Move over, Bang & Olufsen.

Little technical information about the 2500S was provided (and there was no easy way to get inside that I could see), but Zandèn does say that the 2500S uses vintage Philips TDA-1541A "single-crown" 16-bit DAC chips, which they feel are the best around; they're legendary in hi-fi circles, though nothing I've read clearly states *why* they're so good. Philips began producing this chip in the late 1980s and stopped making them in the mid-'90s. The "single-crown" chip has a higher production tolerance than the regular TDA-1541A, and the "double-crown," which Zandèn uses in their 5000-series D/A converters (and of which I've reviewed two models), has an even higher tolerance. There's no "double crown" version of the 2500S, though the Zandèn 2500 has a "crownless" DAC and sells for \$1000 less – but I can't imagine anyone willing to spend \$21,000 for a CD player who won't also be willing to fork over a mere \$1000 more for something purported to be better.

Like Zandèn's well-known 5000-series D/A converters, the 2500S employs no oversampling or upsampling; instead, it uses what Zandèn describes as a "patented analog filter with superior phase characteristics." The 2500S also has a Sylvania 7308 tube in its output stage, and is said to include the same kind of RF noise-absorption material – which Zandèn calls Safety Wave – as their DSC-1 digital signal conditioner, which I reviewed on *SoundStage! A/V* in June 2008. (Overall, I found the DSC-1 to have a beneficial effect on the sound with the components I used it with.)

Zandèn also supplies a remote control. It does the job, but I think they can do better – given the 2500S's cost, a lightweight remote such as this seems cheap, even if it *is* tinted gold to match the player's accents. I'd like to see not only a more robust remote, but one that looks as spectacular as the player itself.



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## Product Review

### Sound

Nowadays, the sonic differences among good CD players, whether they cost \$1000 or \$10,000, are slight. Mostly, it comes down to resolution and refinement; the basic character is always the same. But the Zandèn 2500S breaks that rule — it sounds as unique as it looks.

The first thing I noticed was that the level of signal the 2500S puts out is lower than the norm — perhaps by 3dB or so. This will be a concern only if the 2500S is being directly compared with another player. Louder, even by 1dB, will usually sound better. If you compare the 2500S with all-in-one players or other transport/DACs, make sure the levels are matched. You can do this with a few upward clicks of the volume control, or an increase in the gain setting for that input (if your preamp has that feature).

But even when its level was matched to that of my Simaudio Moon Evolution SuperNova (\$6500), the 2500S had a character of its own. Its bass was deep, full, and rich, though not as visceral or as rock-hard with impact as I'm used to from the Simaudio, which I reviewed on *SoundStage! A/V* some time back and keep on hand as a reference for its exceptional performance. The 2500S produced a touch more bloom, emphasizing fullness and heft over impact and all-out depth — not unlike the Blue Circle Audio BC501 DAC, which I reviewed last month. Likewise, the Zandèn's highs, while extended and superbly refined, were slightly reticent, not only in comparison with the SuperNova, but against every other digital source I have. There didn't appear to be a loss of resolution up top; it was just down a notch, so that cymbals, while sounding exceedingly clean, also sounded a touch subdued.

Where the 2500S knocked my socks off was in the midrange, where it sounded smooth and rich, with a vibrant tone that made voices smack-dab gorgeous. As I listened from start to finish to Willie Nelson's *Stardust* (CD, Columbia/Legacy CK 65946), I realized that I'd never heard his voice sound so good. The 2500S had striking presence, a hint of richness that never went overboard into bloat, and an overall sense of ease to the sound that was entirely intoxicating. Like many CDs, *Stardust* can sound a touch steely up top; the 2500S's softened high frequencies tended to take the hard edge off this recording and make it sound, overall, better.

Mark Knopfler's new album, *Get Lucky* (CD, Universal 2708671), is a great-sounding recording with tremendous vocal presence that, through the 2500S, had the same kind of richness, texture, and overall ease that made this player exceedingly easy to listen to. There was never anything thin or lifeless about the 2500S's sound; instead, there was a touch of majesty that made music come alive.

The Zandèn's resolution was excellent — just a hair short of the ultra-resolution of the Moon Evolution SuperNova, which extracts from a disc every bit of information. The 2500S didn't quite do that. In the soundstaging department, though, I had nary a complaint: The sense of space the 2500S created with *Get Lucky* was excellent, and I particularly liked the way it handled soundstage depth — not only did the recorded space seem to extend past the front wall of my room, but the instruments and cues occupying those faraway spaces were easy to pinpoint. Often a player will render depth well, extending the performance beyond

the front wall, but what happens way back there can sound confused and indistinct. The 2500S had an uncanny way of keeping things precise and focused, even into the farthest reaches of the soundstage.

That easy-to-listen-to character had a lot to do with the character of the bass and the highs that I described, and gave the 2500S's sound a uniqueness with which some will fall in love. Others, however, won't be so keen. In fact, the 2500S was something of a conversation piece, polarizing visitors to my listening room. No one denied that the Zandèn is beautiful to behold, but everyone noticed that its top end was slightly subdued. Those who like sparkle and incisiveness at the top consistently found the 2500S too tame, preferring some of the less expensive players I had on hand — such as the Simaudio SuperNova, which has a more typically "forward" CD sound yet is still very refined. Some listeners even preferred the sound of the 2500S's transport driving the Benchmark DAC1 HDR (\$1895), because the Benchmark, too, has a livelier top end and punchier bass. If you want that sparkle and excitement up top, along with the resounding *slam* down low that CD can deliver, the Simaudio and Benchmark are better picks than the Zandèn 2500S; the sound of the latter is simply more subtle and gentle.

But everyone also noticed one other thing: Whereas the SuperNova, and particularly the DAC1 HDR, can sound hard and brittle enough with CDs that have an overemphasized top end that either can, over time, be irritating enough that you want to hit Stop, the 2500S rarely did. For example, one day we played John Mayer's *Where the Light Is: Live in Los Angeles* (CD, Columbia 8869722665) and found that, through the Benchmark, the audience's applause could sound like frying bacon, and the top end of the guitar was objectionably steely. Similarly, when I listen to Bruce Cockburn's "Grim Travellers," from his *Humans: Deluxe Edition* (CD, Virgin 90567-2), the DAC1 HDR rendered the cymbals with splash and what I call "fuzz," which sounded quite artificial — to the point that I thought the speakers' tweeters might be fried. This track even sounded that way through the SuperNova. Through the 2500S, such recordings were more palatable — not perfect, but there wasn't the same temptation to hit Stop. People can argue for hours — *days* — about which sound is truer to the recording, but in terms of what sounded *better*, at least with these discs, the Zandèn's politeness won out.

Which brings me to the Zandèn 2500S's main strengths of smoothness, liquidity, richness, and an overriding sense of ease — qualities often summed up as *analog-like*. Part of the 2500S's analog-like ease had to do with its polite top end, but just as much can be attributed to how smooth and present it sounded through the upper bass and mids. Even Simaudio's Moon Evolution SuperNova, which is richer than most players through the midrange, doesn't handle voices in quite the same way as the 2500S, with quite the same ease. The 2500S wasn't the most impactful and visceral CD player I've heard — that's where the SuperNova wins, hands down — but it was the smoothest and most relaxed-sounding.

The 2500S also possessed a quality that it shared with Zandèn's other digital products — a quality difficult to describe but, once heard, impossible to forget — it had to do with a combination



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## Product Review

of transparency, immediacy, and purity that made me feel as if I were one step closer to the musicians. This wasn't so much about resolution, which has mostly to do with extracting every bit of information from a disc and preserving it throughout the signal chain, but rather about presenting the performance with no sense of "veiling" whatsoever. It wasn't like wiping a window clean, but like having no window at all. It was about sounding not only clean, but very present at the same time — like having real performers in my room. These qualities don't always go hand in hand, which is why I think some CD sources, while sounding exceptionally clean, can still sound mechanical and cold, and therefore less real. The Zandèn digital products I've heard don't get everything right to everyone's taste — some listeners will take issue with the tame top end and the lack of slam and overall weight — but they brought me into the music in a way few components can.

### Conclusion

The September 2009 issue of *Men's Journal* had an article about the Mantide "supercar" from the Italian company Stile Bertone. Stile Bertone took the Corvette ZR1 (\$107,000) and gave it a massive facelift that radically alters the car's appearance and is said to also improve its performance. (I'm sure they did other things to it, too, but that's what you mainly see and what the article focused on.) Only five Mantides will be made, and each will cost \$2 million. Obviously, for many, this is an outlandish thing — can anyone justify spending that much money on what is basically a tricked-out Corvette? But as outrageous as the Mantide sounds to most people, many would dream of owning one, or at least having the means to. I do.

When I read about the Mantide, I couldn't help but think about the Zandèn 2500S on my shelf. Stile Bertone is creating their vision of the definitive Corvette; Zandèn Audio Systems is creating what they feel is the ultimate CD player. These products aren't about mass-market acceptance or sales; they're the opposite of all that. Nor are they about sane pricing — you can buy a Corvette ZR1 for about one-nineteenth the Mantide's price, and you can buy a great CD player for a fraction of what the Zandèn 2500S costs. Whoever buys either product won't care about saving money. Tell them they can buy a car or a CD player that costs a whole lot less and they're likely to say, *Who cares?* They're buying something distinctive and unique — something few other people will have.

But the Zandèn 2500S is something more than an overpriced oddity. After a while, I grew to not only like but love it, realizing that, for a certain kind of CD-loving audiophile, it's not so outlandish after all. Rather, it's unlike anything else on the market — in many ways, a spectacular component that, while scoffed at by those who can't afford it, will be cherished for its many virtues by the few who can.

The Zandèn 2500S is a highly specialized product intended for those who value gorgeous styling and impeccable build quality, aren't concerned with bang-for-buck value, and want that unmistakable Zandèn sound — that *analog-like* sound — from their CDs. Like the Stile Bertone Mantide, the Zandèn Audio Systems 2500S is something only that small group can afford, and even within that group, it's something that only a certain number — those who know and can hear what it does — will appreciate enough to actually buy. I could never afford this player, but I wish I could, and I envy those who can. The 2500S is a high-end-audio CD dream machine.

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### Company Info

#### Zandèn Audio Systems 2500S CD Player

**Price:** \$22,000 USD.

**Warranty:** Two years parts and labor.

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### ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

<b>Speakers</b>	Revel Ultima Salon2, Magico V2, PSB Synchrony One
<b>Preamplifiers</b>	Blue Circle Audio BC3000 Mk.II, Benchmark Media DAC1 HDR, Anthem Statement D2v
<b>Power Amplifiers</b>	Blue Circle Audio BC204, Axiom Audio A1400-8
<b>Integrated Amplifiers</b>	Classé Audio CAP-2100, Zandèn Audio 600
<b>Digital Sources</b>	Simaudio Moon Evolution SuperNova CD player, Benchmark Media DAC1 HDR DAC, Stello DA220 Mk.II DAC, Blue Circle Audio BC501 DAC
<b>Speaker Cables</b>	Nirvana Audio S-L, DH Labs ST-100
<b>Analog Interconnects</b>	Nirvana Audio S-L, Nordost Quattro Fil
<b>Digital Interconnects</b>	Nirvana Audio Transmission Digital, i2Digital X-60