

28.06.11 by Roberto Rocchi

## Zanden 3000 preamp



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Even though preamplifiers with input and output transformers have always been built - one only needs to think of Audio Tekne and Sun Audio - most designers and manufacturers haven't followed this technology, though. The relative culture and use habit therefore have been lost. Actually, nothing happens by chance. In the hi-fi world, the transformers represent - better, they used to - one of the weak points of the amplification chain. The sound rendering is in direct ratio to the quality of the transformer which depends on the refinement of the materials that have been used, on the design accuracy and parameters calculation and on the core hysteresis phenomenon (that is the delay in reacting to the electric signals and in general it converts itself in a decay of the dynamic response to transients).

This is probably the reason why, during the years of the transistors' boom, the presence of the transformers has been cut down as much as possible, mainly along the signal course.

Besides, the entry of the digital sources in the audio systems has brought about a quick decline of the analogical



source and above all of the low output MC cartridges which need a step-up transformer to adapt the feeble electric output and make it suitable for the subsequent amplification.

In brief, in the last five-year periods we have lost track of the transformers and that has been a real pity, I would say. Lately, however, there's been a revival not only of the analogical source, but of the low output MC cartridges and relative step-ups: systems that are so difficult in tuning but so exceptionally compelling that passionate are very interested in, beyond every trend, in the awareness of the high sound quality of this kind of sources.

Thus, some firms have resumed - or never given up - the realization of the transformers preamplifiers. As I said before, this technology was quit to give room to the transistors technology capable of improving the lab technical performances but, at the same time, of penalizing the listening test performances. Hence, I think that the technology which employs the transformers in the preamp section, both in and out, is today better practicable thanks to the technological progress which involves the right calculations and the quality of the materials and allows, but it's only a personal opinion, the overtaking of the counter-indications which had caused its abandonment.

### Let's come back to our tested object

One of the labels that strongly believe in using the transformer in the preamp phase is the Japanese Zanden Audio System based in Osaka. The Model 3000 is the sole preamplifier they build. By the way, have you noticed that I've

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never define the Zanden Model 3000 as a tube amplifier, haven't you? I'm quite sure, without interviewing or e-mailing Yamada san, that he has decided to project principally a transformer preamp and I wouldn't be amazed in receiving such an answer.

The design of the Zanden Model 3000 is extremely refined, original and elegant, in a word unique. The chromatic contrast between the mirror finished stainless steel and the champagne aluminium opaque satin finish is with no doubt the result of study and thought. The case is the synthesis between art and technique, an example of architecture that relates somehow to the past, with a breathe retro represented by a series of regular parallelepipeds which smoothed corners flank and

support themselves and are also propped up by a heavy solid plinth serving as the base of the entire apparatus. In the rear panel you can find the typical connectors usually employed by who has principally thought about well reproduced music. I'm not talking about the quality of the connectors (by the way they are excellent indeed) but about the double outputs, both balanced and unbalanced, which satisfy who needs the bi-wiring. Additionally there's also a balanced input.

Also internally the Zanden Model 3000 is a continuous surprise! Around a single vacuum tube – a 5687 Philips triode driver, produced in the US and run through by the signals of the two channels – several identical signal wires (8N pure copper solid core) twist themselves connecting the transformers which are covered by a fine and mysterious white rubber-like panel, maybe a dumper to control the vibrations or an electric shield.

The capacitors are shielded with a black adhesive tape which protects also the vacuum tube enclosed in a cylinder made of the same material. I want to stress out three times the beautiful and very expensive double armoured Alps potentiometer, the selectors with silver contacts and the high quality connectors. Also the chassis makes no exception. It has inside the separate power supply section, maybe more traditional in the design but not inside where there's a unique stabilizer vacuum tube 6CA4, well protected and shielded and all the solutions in order to avoid vibrations and electromagnetic interferences. As a technical choice, the number of the components has been cut down. On one hand this pays with a transparent and direct sound but on the other hand it makes more complicate the fight against ground noise.



### Beautiful and impossible

I want to tell you right away: I am in love with this preamplifier. With its appearance but most of all with its sound. Unfortunately it's a hopeless love! Its retail price - eighteen thousand EUR in Italy - is a hurdle hard to overcome. Well, I told you anyway. For me the Zanden Model 3000 is an absolute reference among the preamplifiers that use input and output coupled transformers. If I had any means I would buy it, I would chose it as preamp for my reference system, I would cherish and care it all day long because it generates the sound I like, the music as I like it. By and large I would be satisfied without looking for something else in the long period. With the Zanden my music is so beautiful that I wouldn't wish more. Having said this, let's move on. The Model 3000 is not an easy gear. First of all, if you are not getting used to the sound of the transformer preamplifiers, the life together won't be trouble-free. The handling of the potentiometer and volumes will be quite different from the traditional technology and you could be puzzled seeing the notch of the volume 'round midday. It has to become a habit. Besides the Model 3000 doesn't love power amps too much sensitive and high efficiency speakers. The best matching is with low sensitivity solid state power amps, that means with a high volts value and medium efficiency speakers. Also important is the output source. If too high and plugged in this contest, it could be harmful in the achievement of the inter-transient silences, which are so important to enjoy the listening. By the way, I'm used to the sound of the preamp with coupled transformers: my Antique Sound Lab Flora, modified with Mundorf capacitors and NOS vacuum tubes is a tenet in my reference system. This technology is an amazing experience, but not for everyone because the sound reproduction is not striking but substantial. The Zanden doesn't turn out with special effects. It reproduces the signal like never heard before. If you cannot recognise the slight nuances of the timbre or the outlined harmonics, the utilization of this kind of preamp could be not only useless but detrimental. If you want to catch the nuances and the outstanding parameters such as the harmonic rendering, the timber and

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tone correctness, the soundstage reconstruction, maybe a transformer preamplifier could be the panacea and, in the case of the Zanden Model 3000, the end of all games. You can't just start all over again!

Connecting the Model 3000 in your own system - whether the synergy works - means getting a sound which is totally different from all the sounds listened before. Focus on two parameters: image and rendering of the harmonics. The image is wide and enlighten but not bright. I mean it's the light that illuminates the stage and not the stage that illuminates the spectator. At the same time you can then enjoy transparency and resolution of the harmonics that are all the info

"around" the note emitted by the instrument. If listening to Miles Davis' trumpet you can detect the sound of the brass, the fingers on the valves, the artist' breath, even the saliva inside the instrument.

A unique listening sensation, a magic in front of us and inside our soul, a fulfilling and engrossing listening experience.

You can maybe find several faults – many summed in its price – but this Zanden Model 3000 can make sound and music exploded. If able to express itself it can materialize a dream. I suggest, by the way, using high capacitive signal cables.

It's hard for me coming to the end of this review. I have to take into account the price very expensive. But if you want to get an exclusive object you must be disposed to pay for it. I hope that the passionate who buys the Zanden is also a profound connoisseur of hi-end and of the countless wariness, electric and not electric, necessary to obtain an excellent sound that, speaking about the Model 3000, must be considered "magic".

### **Official technical specifications:**

Input impedance: XLR 7k $\Omega$ , RCA 100k $\Omega$

Output impedance: 150 $\Omega$

Analog inputs: 3 RCA, 1 XLR

Analog outputs: 2 RCA, 2 XLR

Tube complements: 1 5687WB, 1 6CA4

Dimensions: main 398x103x254mm, power 155x163x336mm (WxHxD)

Weight: 9.0kg (main), 5.5kg (power)

Official Italian dealer: to the Audio Point Italia website

Official current price in Italy: 18,800.00 EU