

Zanden Audio • Model 3000 Preamplifier

The refreshing sound of nothing at all.

by Marc Mickelson | November 28, 2009

When you consider its design and user features, the Zanden Audio Model 3000 appears to be a rather conventional high-end preamp, albeit an expensive one at \$17,250. It uses tubes and has a separate power supply that's connected with a removable umbilical. Its gleaming chassis looks the part for a product that costs what the Model 3000 does. Inputs and outputs are nothing out of the ordinary, and the only uncommon feature is the absolute-phase switch.



Price: \$17,250
Warranty: Two years parts and labor.

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This is where the Model 3000's nod to convention ends, however. While it does use tubes -- plural -- there are just two of them: one in the main chassis and one in the power supply. And neither is common or a substitute for one that is. The 5687 in the signal path is a twin triode that is said to outperform the more familiar 6SN7. The actual tube used is new old stock, a Philips JAN 5687. The 6CA4 in the power supply is a full-wave rectifier tube, and it reveals that the Model 3000 employs tube rectification, which is not common, even among rarefied preamps. The internal wire is a special high-purity, solid-core copper with Teflon insulation, and there is liberal use of two different noise-absorption materials inside both chassis, including the patent-pending Safety Wave material Zanden uses in its other products. This comes in sheets of less than .2mm thickness, but it provides the shielding of 30mm of aluminum.

The Model 3000's volume control is a top-line and very expensive ALPS RK50, whose solid-brass machined casing gives it a rather large footprint. Thus, the Model 3000 eschews the use of a stepped attenuator, and the ALPS pot is not motorized, so there is no remote control either. The front-panel rotary switches engage high-quality relays with silver contacts, a purist way to handle on/off, input selection, and absolute phase that puts no switches in the signal path. The audio circuit is fully balanced, although only one set of inputs is balanced, while two sets of outputs are. Single-ended inputs and outputs are also included.

Using the Model 3000 is straightforward -- just connect your other electronics and have at it. If you use the single-ended outputs, however, be absolutely sure to insert shorting pins into the XLR outputs (ground

to hot) to reduce noise. The power supply is the size and shape of a loaf of bread, so it fits nicely in a few inches of unused shelf space or on the floor.

An internal phono stage is not an option for the Model 3000, and for good reason: Zanden offers three outboard phono stages, each with its own power supply. Add one of these along with the Zanden Model 2000P transport and Model 5000S DAC, which also have separate power supplies, and you'll have to make room for eight separate chassis, with a pair of the Zanden Model 9600 mono amps providing two more very large shining masses. This is high-end audio at its most extreme, and most room-filling -- in more ways than one.



A side shot of the Zanden Model 3000.

Water, anyone?

The role of the preamp is literally central within an audio system. It's the intersecting point for sources and amplifiers, and gives users control over volume and source selection. Among the highest compliments that can be paid to a preamp is that it is utterly transparent, displaying a sonic character that is, well, characterless -- like water. This poses a vexing paradox for audio writers. We *need* pieces of equipment to have strong sonic personalities that are easy to hear and even easier to describe, yet with very good preamps, we often have little to say because of their very nature.

From the start, however, I expected something different from the Zanden Model 3000. Generally, there is sonic resemblance within a product line -- a company's preamps sound like its amps, which sound like its CD players. I know very well Zanden's amps and digital products. I've heard them in my system and written extensive reviews of them, more than one review of some products, because of sonically important changes in their circuits. Thus, from the Model 3000, I was expecting some of the natural, analog-like retrieval of detail of the Model 2000P transport/Model 5000S DAC combination, along with the midrange richness and overall spaciousness of the Model 9600 mono amps. Instead, the Model 3000 displayed very little sonic personality of its own, performing its central role in that oft-considered ideal fashion. It literally let the components in front of and

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behind it exert their influence to full effect. It was as neutral as Switzerland, offering an unfettered view of the recordings and other equipment.

For more than a decade, I listened exclusively to digital sources, but that changed when I purchased my TW-Acoustic Raven AC turntable two years ago. Since then my listening time has been more balanced between digital and analog, but it's now out of whack in the other direction, at something like 80/20 in favor of analog. With any of the phono stages I used, the Model 3000 seemed like it was absent from the signal path. The Lamm LP2 was exceptionally quiet and matter-of-fact in its tonal presentation -- no sweetening nor bleaching. And it was as if I could walk around within the Audio Research PH7's huge, billowy soundstage. In both cases, the Raven AC's luscious textures and weighty imaging showed through. Changes in loading with the PH7, never easy to detect in the past, were more apparent, and I was able to settle on one setting (500 ohms) with both Dynavector XV-1s stereo and mono cartridges. So evenhanded and unwavering was the Model 3000's sound that it didn't seem like its "sound" at all.



The Model 3000's power supply.

Things went much the same way with digital. The Model 3000 displayed the sonic differences between the Audio Research Reference CD8 and Ayre C-5xeMP through its XLR inputs, and the astonishing ease with which musical detail is rendered with Zanden's own transport/DAC combo via the single-ended inputs. It was hard to imagine a better mate with the Zanden digital separates than the Model 3000, which let this stellar digital front-end cast its musical spell in a more elemental fashion. R.E.M.'s early studio albums were far from sonic marvels. In fact, their murky sound intensified the mystery surrounding Michael Stipe's lyrics. It was clear that he was singing words, but it was nearly impossible to figure out what they all were. With the two-disc, remastered "Deluxe" editions of *Murmur* [Universal Music B0012251-02] and *Reckoning* [Universal Music B0013032-02], the murk hasn't been banished, but the Model 3000 made it all the more obvious that it's an emblem of the band's individualism -- and an authentic artifact of alternative rock's rise to prominence in the early 1980s. That is what transparency can do -- lay bare recorded detail in a way that helps you better understand the music's intent.

Bass was quick off the mark and very well controlled with the Model 3000, though with digital, and the Audio Research player in particular, I did note a touch of leanness in the midbass that reduced the bouncy

power of CDs like Jenny Lewis's *Acid Tongue* [Warner Bros. 508668]. But the vivid sound of this indie-rock/folk melange benefited from the Model 3000's own vividness, the immediacy of the singing on "Pretty Bird" giving way to some impactful drumming that had me playing this cut a few times in succession, just to revel in the transient snap that lesser preamps can reduce to a small or large degree.

The Model 3000's inherent out-of-the-signal-path neutrality didn't come at the cost of a stark, colorless presentation or ramped-up treble that gives the music unnatural, and unneeded, sparkle. I've never understood how such sound can be (wrongly) considered neutral. I suppose it imparts a false sense of detail that some listeners think must be on the recordings to begin with. When I listen to the CD [Blue Note RVG 724349900523] and LP [Blue Note/Music Matters MMBST-84182] of a great Blue Note release like Wayne Shorter's *JuJu*, the Model 3000 made it plain why the LP sounds better: a wider lateral spread of the soundstage, more realistic dynamic scaling, and more accurate rendering of the instruments' tonality. In short, the Model 3000 simply got out of each recording's way, which only made what emerged from the speakers sound more pure and true. While I don't accept the dogma that a preamp *has* to achieve an exceedingly high level of transparency in order to be musically valid, I recognize that the Model 3000's sonic invisibility is the dominant ingredient in its performance, and it is a boon with a wide array of partnering equipment.

Even so, the most memorable listening I did with the Model 3000 was when it was part of a nearly all-Zanden system -- digital separates and mono amps, along with interconnects, speaker cables and power cords. There was high resolution to be sure, but also a relaxed sonic perspective that was completely natural. Digital sounded like analog, mimicking its ease and continuous musical flow, while the silky treble and hear-through midrange of analog were especially seductive. I've achieved such rousing synergy with other products from the same maker, namely Audio Research, but a common sonic point of view unified the outcome. In contrast, the Zanden electronics get along like members of a family: Differences exist, but shared traits and points of view lead to a collective complementariness. It would be nice if such a system didn't cost what does -- a six-figure outlay -- but very good things in the audio world rarely come cheap.

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Compared to...

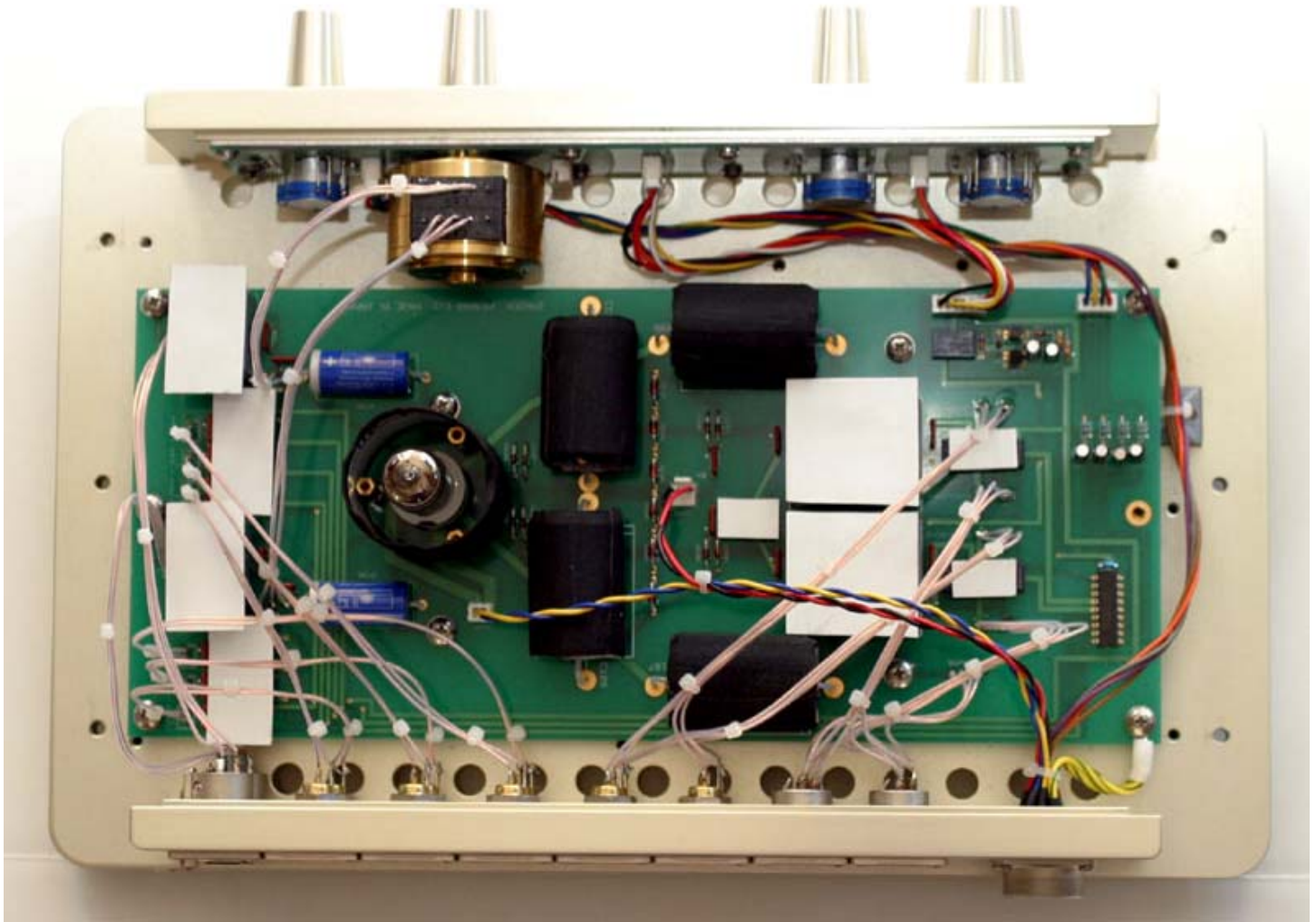
The Convergent Audio Technology SL1 Legend costs a cool \$19,950, and it's worth every penny. It's a full-function preamp, a phrase that we veterans know means that it has a phono stage. And not just any phono stage -- the Ferrari of internal phono stages, sporting a custom step-up transformer. I am convinced that the Legend's phono stage could command a five-figure price if it were housed in a separate chassis. You can buy a line-stage only SL1 Legend for \$16,950, but the \$3000 addition gets you something very special. Even if you're not into analog now, buy the Legend with phono in case you change your mind. The phono stage will also make your unit much more saleable if you decide to go in another direction with your system.

There are differences between the CAT Legend and Zanden Model 3000 other than the former's phono stage, like the Legend's very heavy, well-damped chassis, and there are a couple of striking similarities as well, such as the separate power supplies and lack of remote control. There's also a similar aim for both: to pass the signal in as unerring a fashion as possible. They both succeed with, as you might expect, a few points of sonic divergence.

What sets the sound of the SL1 Legend apart from that of almost every preamp I've heard is the acute way it separates instrumental lines while remaining absolutely coherent and whole. This is a real achievement. The CAT preamp sounds both highly detailed and very liquid, and its bass has honest heft, not a false perception of such caused by midbass bloat. Instruments at the other end of the frequency range display solidity, the opposite of a light airiness that borders on disembodied. The CAT Legend has great presence, but it doesn't achieve this at the cost of excessive warmth.

The Zanden Model 3000 is certainly coherent and liquid, and its sound is detailed, though not distinctly so. Its perspective is a row or two back from that of the CAT Legend, so there's a sense of ease that makes

musical detail less immediately apparent. The CAT preamp is more demonstrative than the Zanden preamp, which in turn sounds more evenhanded, even a touch laid-back, in comparison. Down low, the CAT Legend is more showy, due to the weight and muscularity of its bass. The Model 3000 is somewhat demure, though still agile in the way it tracks bass lines in rock or jazz. Both preamps have an extraordinary way with voices, the CAT preamp delivering with roundness that enhances intimacy, while the Model 3000 being more detached, vocals sounding slightly less full and nearby.



Inside the Zanden Model 3000. Notice the two difference kinds of noise-absorption material.

The CAT SL1 Legend has the slightly more obvious sonic character of the two, and this will endear it to some listeners, while making the choice of amplifier a bit more critical than with the Zanden Model 3000. But that's a trifling point. In the end, these are two top-rung preamps, and it's easy to admire either sonic approach.

A glass of water that's more than half full

How you react to the Zanden Model 3000's obvious transparency will depend upon the equipment with which the preamp is partnered. Amps and sources with problems will have nowhere to hide and find no comfort with the Model 3000, but well-balanced electronics and those with musically valid personalities will find the Model 3000's honesty a perfect match. The Model 3000 is far from ruthless in the way it allows the intrinsic sound of the products around it to shine. It's self-effacing, performing the theoretical duty of a preamp to near perfection. In fact, I can't think of a competing product that's as odorless, colorless and flavorless, and this comes as something of a surprise, given the music-gracing personalities of Kazutoshi Yamada's digital gear and amps. But a highly transparent preamp in the middle

of all that makes good sense. At some point, characteristics compound and push the sound into the realm of amusical colorations. Too many flavors will ruin any stew.

High-end audio is dominated by two seemingly opposing disciplines: the continuous forward march of technology that reproduction of music at its very best demands, and the artistic spirit that so many great products display and which gives them their individuality and unique sonic perspective. The Model 3000 is painstakingly designed and utilizes the best that modern technology has to offer, but it is not a mere exercise in audio engineering. It introduces ideas that are artfully individualistic yet help the Model 3000 sound like nothing at all. If you can handle the truth, both from your recordings and partnering equipment, you may not find a better preamp. ☺

Associated Equipment

Analog front-end: TW-Acoustic Raven AC and VPI Classic turntables, Graham B-44 Phantom and Tri-Planar Mk VII U2 tonearms, Dynavector XV-1s (stereo and mono) and Audio-Technica AT33EV cartridges, AudioQuest LeoPard phono cable, Lamm Industries LP2 phono stage.

Digital: Audio Research Reference CD8 CD player, Ayre Acoustics C-5xeMP universal player, Zanden Audio Model 2000P CD transport and Model 5000S digital-to-analog converter.

Preamplifiers: Convergent Audio Technology SL-1 Legend with phono stage.

Power amplifiers: Audio Research Reference 110 stereo amp, Zanden Audio Model 9600 and Lamm Industries M1.2 Reference monoblocks.

Loudspeakers: Wilson Audio Specialties MAXX Series 3, Vivid Audio Giya.

Interconnects: AudioQuest William E. Low Signature, Shunyata Research Aeros Aurora-IC, Zanden Audio interconnects.

Speaker cables: AudioQuest William E. Low Signature, Shunyata Research Aeros Aurora-SP, Zanden Audio speaker cables.

Power conditioners: Shunyata Research Hydra V-Ray Version II, Essential Sound Products The Essence Reference.

Power cords: Shunyata Research Anaconda Helix CX and Python Helix CX, Essential Sound Products The Essence Reference, Zanden Audio power cords.

Equipment rack and platforms: Silent Running Audio Craz 4 Reference isoRack *plus* and Ohio Class XL Plus² platforms (under Lamm amps), Harmonic Resolution Systems M3 isolation bases under digital gear.

Accessories: Boston Audio Mat1 and Mat2 record mats, Harmonic Resolution Systems Analog Disk record clamp/weight, VPI Industries HW-27 Typhoon record-cleaning machine, Loricraft PRC4 Deluxe record-cleaning machine, Audio Intelligent Vinyl Solutions record-care products.