

ZANDEN AUDIO SYSTEMS MODEL 9600MK2 Review



Zanden Audio Systems Model 9600Mk2 mono power amplifier

by Alan Sircom

There's an 'if it ain't broke, don't fix it' mindset at the heart of Zanden Audio Systems. The Model 9600 has formed the power amplifier basis of the company's line since the turn of this decade. Zanden announced the 9600Mk2 with typical understatement, but "plus ça change, plus c'est la meme chose" doesn't quite apply here. OK, so the exterior remains almost identical, and the basic headline specifications are virtually identical between the two models, but where the first amp was awesome, this new one is 'awesomer'.

Like all Zanden products, it is phenomenally well made. Often boxes come with white gloves, and when you see the ugly tin box of screws and powder coat inside, you wonder precisely the point of them. This is not one of those products. It's like a giant jewel, with its flawless, mirror-like stainless-steel case and a refined, elegant viewing panel for the valves. Everything about the amplifier is refined, restrained elegance, the kind of thing that makes a Savile Row suit look garish. This is somewhat odd, because the almost gold finished aluminium panels on the front section (something close to white gold) could look very tacky, but instead just looks extraordinarily graceful. This is

perfectionism, the stuff of Zanden head Kazutoshi Yamada, and that perfectionism expresses itself in every aspect of the product.

The differences between the original and Mk2 model are subtle and internal. The old and new look identical, but there are changes to the valve complement, improved circuit layout, better power supply, and a new transformer material for both the input and output transformers.

The 9600Mk2 features a cobalt input transformer, Finemet output transformers, and a double-choke valve-regulated power supply. The Finemet transformer is designed by Hitachi metals, this is a nanocrystalline soft magnetic metal, a world first. It combines excellent magnetic flux capacity, high permeability, and electromagnetic noise suppression, making it a popular choice for use in industrial lasers, and particle accelerators in nuclear medicine applications. Zanden first tried this in its 'entry level' power amp, and found it so successful that it was 'trickled up' to the top-line power amplifiers.

Zanden has been having a spot of quiet rationalisation of product lines of late. Regrettably, the digital audio side has now gone away (not least because parts were becoming scarce) as has the integrated amplifier and cables, and now the company has just six products in its electronics line-up; a phono preamp, line preamp, and stereo power amp in the company's affordable 'Modern' line, and a phono preamp, line preamp, and mono power amplifiers in the cost-no-object Classic Line. The rest is a platter mat and vibration absorber. The improvements Finemet brought to the Model 8120 stereo power amp were suitably large enough to warrant investigation in the top products.

The Model 9600Mk2 remains Zanden's flagship power amplifier. It employs two KR845 valves in the output stage, with two 6CA4, two 5R4WGB and two 5687WB, replacing the 5AR4, two 5R4WGB, and three 5687WB in the predecessor. That means a lot more valve rectification. As a result, it succeeds in combining both the high power properties of a good solid-state amp coupled with the tonal beauty of valves. It uses a fixed-bias, completely fully-balanced push-pull circuit and a fully valves-rectified power supply circuit. As a result, there are a total of eight valves per channel, including the aforementioned 845s as output valves. This means they put out 60W in Class A or 100W in Class AB. Although impressive in any valve power amp, to our American counterparts, that seems a little underwhelming, however, in use the amplifiers could drive real-world high-end loudspeakers extremely well. It might not be the first choice for power-hungry loudspeakers that need near infinite power, but neither does it fall into the trap of 'fear the Watt' low-powered designs. And that new output transformer has a great part to play in that sound quality.



Naturally, a power amplifier of this gravity deserves the best, and in particular the best in partnering preamplifiers. It's hard to think of a more deserving partner than the Zanden Model 3000Mk2 line preamplifier, also running in balanced mode. The two share the same gain structure so the output of one almost perfectly matches the input of the other, but there's nothing malign going on in making these too snug a fit. They work well together because they were designed together, rather than designed to dovetail.

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This is the sort of system that focuses your attention on the music in a way that so few other systems can. It's not only about the soundstage properties (which are both uppermost and superb), and not only about the richness and warmth of the sound, it's the way music – even music you know so very well – mesmerises and captivates you.

In fact, 'mesmerising' is perhaps the best description of what the Zanden 9600Mk2 do and what they do to you while listening. Music is not simply good, or exciting, or impassioned. It is all of those things, but more importantly, it is mesmerising... you sit spell-bound in front of your music collection, listening carefully to every piece you play.

In a way, Zanden is like the antithesis to the modern streamed concept. This is a measured, sophisticated, and knowing way to listen to music, rather than an orgy of sound, or a surf through a music collection. Music here has gravitas, and that permeates your listening as much as it permeates your listening tastes with the Zanden.

You find yourself selecting the album you want to hear, you play it in full, then repeat the process a few times, before stopping and taking a break. This is not because the music is at all aggressive or somehow unkempt, it's that the Zanden delivers so much musical satisfaction, you feel no need to binge.

That sense of musical restraint is not a limitation, in fact it's a freedom.

We have become too accustomed to the musical world fed through Tidal and Roon. These two products combined are wonderful and allow a music lover to discover untold greats that you might never have discovered without these two titans of the post-physical digital music world. But not everyone wants to be so 'dunked' in different music. Bizarrely, in the time before Roon and Tidal, we used to choose a piece of music and listen to it, then maybe do the same to the next record, and then stop for the evening. In a way, this is respecting the recording. The Zanden's musical approach is so mesmerising (that word again) that you can't help but respect the recording, and that imposes a limit on playing time. You walk away from a Zanden-based listening session composed, refreshed, and musically satisfied enough to want to repeat the experience regularly. But that audio cliché of discs strewn round the room (which does happen, despite it being a cliché) is not what happens here.

This mesmerising property of the Zanden is simply that it's impossible to break past the music and into the audio aspects, because your mind is drawn back to the music. So I play a piece of music designed specifically to focus on bass – 'Chameleon' by Trentemoller [The Last Resort, Poker Flat] for example, and you forget about the bass and focus on the gestalt of the piece. Put on the next album to evaluate soundstage – 'Memphis Soul Stew' by King Curtis and the Kingpins [King Curtis at Fillmore West, ATCO] and the same happens.

It's mesmerism at its best.

Eventually, after a protracted listening session, those cognitive powers begin to take hold, and you get past the sheer enjoyment music has on the Zandens, and focus on individual attributes of audio performance. This is very definitely an amplifier that leads from the midrange out; the vocal articulation and image solidity within that midrange is world leading. This extends up into the highest registers, but in a very elegant, never forced, never pinched, and never sharp manner. And it extends down into the bass, which is both cavernous and extremely well ordered. Bass can be a problem with valve amps because they lack the damping factor to really control the bottom end, but in this case, the loudspeaker feels like it's being driven by a solid-state amplifier. All of this combines to make a sound that feels remarkably natural, and one that goes for richness of tonal palette rather than starkly etched details. In fact, the 9600 is extremely detailed, it's just that it's not 'excessively' so, unlike so many more immediate sounding devices.

There's one important aspect of the Zanden sound that few systems do well, and it's 'beauteousness.' We get so wrapped up in quantum of musical performance, we often forget how good or bad the overall sound can be. I've often heard extremely well liked products that somehow fail to make the cut because they work well when highlighting individual aspects of performance, but these individual components do not combine well sonically. The Zanden is the diametric opposite to this type of presentation. The way things sound on this system are always beauteous and refined. Not to a fault, but when you sit back and listen to a piece of music it just sounds so, well, beauteous.

In writing this, I'm detecting a sense in my own writing that could be seen as saying the sound lacks some guts and drama. That's not entirely the case. Zanden is probably not the first choice of the hardcore death metal or dance music fan, because they are likely to go for something more immediate and more overtly dynamic than the 9600Mk2. But for those of us who don't have such exclusive tastes, the elegance and approachability of the sound wins out, and wins big.

The result is – purely and simply – one of the best amplifiers I have ever heard. This is one of those career defining moments for me, like the brief time I had an Audio Note Ongaku at home when it was the most expensive thing on the planet. Or when I got to experience the Wilson WAMM Master Chronosonic in the late Dave Wilson's own home. It's both a humbling experience and a level resetting experience. You now know what good audio is capable of, and it's not something you can come back from. On a very basic level, that audio reset button applies to valves specifically, because I have never heard a valve power amp sound this quiet and this capable before.

But absence of 'valve rush' alone does not make a good audio product. What sets the Zandens apart from the morass of good amplifiers keeps drawing me back to the music. It's all about the music, and making that music sound more approachable, more accessible, and – yes – more musical. That happens the moment you turn them on until you turn them off. Virtually whatever the music, the Zanden rises to the challenge.

The Zanden's limitations are few. Yes, this will not find favour among those wanting to cram as much top end energy as possible into every musical experience. And if you play this into difficult loudspeakers in a huge room, and then deluge it with heavy opera, the Zanden will eventually run out of puff. The valve regulation, however, seems engineered well enough to withstand complex themes without folding up and compressing the midrange.

You know you are onto a winner when a brand is spoken of in hushed tones. Zanden Audio Systems is one such brand, and the 9600Mk2 is part of the reason why those hushed tones are uttered. Of course this amplifier deserves world-class partners and that makes it extremely expensive in context, but it defines a musical performance the likes of which you simply don't get from other

components. That doesn't just put the Zanden in the audio A-List, it turns out to be Audio Royalty, and you want that music in your life more and more.

The crazy thing about Zanden is no matter how good you might think a pair of very high-end, practically bespoke mono amps from Japan might be, in reality they are much, much better. Hands down, this is one of the most real musical experiences you can get from audio. Aficionados who take their audio extremely seriously have to try Zanden. It really is that good.

Purely and simply – one of the best amplifiers I have ever heard. This is one of those career-defining moments for me.

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Mono valve power amplifier (all specifications per channel)

Tube complement: 2 x KR845, 2 x 6CA4, 2 x 5R4WGB, 2 x 5687WB Power output: 60W (class A)/
100W (class AB)

Input: XLR

Input impedance: 7.5kQ Output impedance: 2Ohm/4Ohm/ 8Ohm Frequency response: 6Hz-50KHz (-3dB) Dimensions (WxHxD): 32 x 44 x 45cm Weight: 42.5kg