

OLYBA
Connoisseur 4-2P



high

low

mc-cartridge



equalizer

- decca
- col
- riaa

Zanden
A P O M A
phono mc

A Nice Pair...

The Zanden Model 1200 Mk.2 and Lyra Connoisseur 4-2P SE Phono-Stages

by Roy Gregory

Each time I revisit the whole issue of phono-stages I discover anew just how critical they are to system performance – and just how breathtakingly wonderful a really good one can be. Faced with the double challenge of being first up in the electronic line of fire as well as having to deal with signals that can be 1000 times smaller than any others in the system, the humble phono-stage faces a hard time. But the greater the challenge, the greater the opportunity, and the best phono-stages have the chance to move you closer to the music than any other single unit in your system; even closer than the record player itself, because as hard as the turntable, arm and cartridge have to try and as critical as they are of set up, it's the sheer fragility of the signal they produce that constitutes the system's greatest stumbling block. A great phono-stage can produce astonishing results from even a run of the mill turntable (so long as it is functioning properly). Try feeding the signal from a £10000 turntable into a basic phono-stage and take a listen to what comes out of the other end... You'll soon get the point I'm making.

To date, the best phono-replay systems that I've heard (by some margin) come from Lyra Connoisseur (reviewed in Issue 16) and Kondo Japan (reviewed in Issue 43), the latter a complete electrical chain from stylus tip to line-stage inputs, involving a cartridge, cabling, step-up transformer

and tube MM stage with RIAA equalisation. Of course, Connoisseur users also enjoy the potential benefits of a "matching" cartridge in the shape of Lyra's Titan-i (or Olympos), although this doesn't come close to the continuity of having exactly the same conductor throughout the chain, including transformer windings!

Well, now there are three: a new stellar performer has appeared on my radar – and it too emanates from the Japanese high-end. It comes in the elegant shape of the Zanden Model 1200 Mk.2 and, like the others already mentioned, it adopts its own, distinctly individual approach to the problem. It also eschews the help of partnering elements, at least upstream of its inputs, and represents a genuinely standalone, universal solution – although it clearly represents a key element in the complete Zanden amplification chain. But perhaps most interestingly of all, it is rated by Yamada-san, its designer, as his finest work – a mouth-watering prospect given my ongoing love affair with his CD transport and DAC.

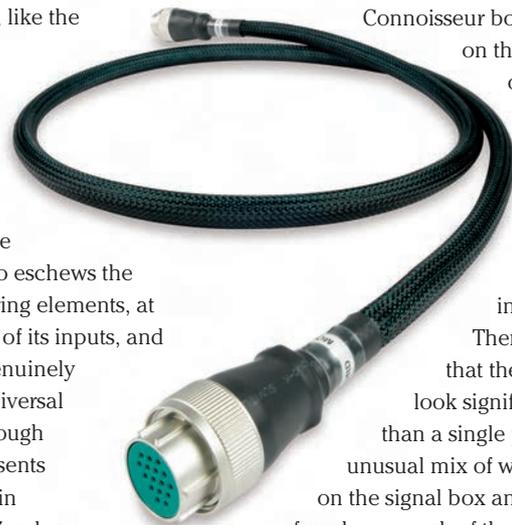
The Kondo is fixed firmly in recent

memory; not so the Connoisseur, which is one whole listening room as well as umpteen equipment changes (and its –2 and SE updates) in the past. With that in mind I started what was to become a fascinating process by extracting the latest version from importer Symmetry. When it comes to extreme personal gratification I'm not proud and I feel no need to defend the combination of cajoling, wheedling and veiled threats this entailed. The ends more than justified the means, resulting in another pair of

Connoisseur boxes nestling on the shelves of the finite-element rack, beside the 4-2L SE line-stage (also reviewed in Issue 43).

There's no denying that the four together look significantly nicer than a single pair. Whilst the unusual mix of wooden casing on the signal box and the metal faced case-work of the power supply enjoy a surprising visual congruence, adding a matching unit of each type definitely extends the motif and underlines the exquisite fit and finish.

Collectively, CT and I have spent considerable time on the philosophy that underpins the unique



► construction of the Lyra Connoisseur products. Despite the stratospheric pricing, the original 4.0 units represented an earnest attempt to make production more manageable and the cost more attainable. To that end, both the line-stage and phono-stage employ the same basic, hand-built, air-dielectric gain blocks, one per channel in the line-stage, two per-channel in the phono-stage, a configuration that carries over to this latest iteration. Whilst this used to result in a slightly unusual gain structure if you employed the units in isolation (too much gain in

the line-stage, not enough in the phono section) this has been corrected in current versions, with a far more normal 11dB in the line-stage and 69dB in the phono-stage. There are no loading options and no gain adjustment, so you are stuck with the 10kOhms input impedance, although at least this is lower than the 4.0's 47k! But what hasn't changed is that the essentially identical circuitry used throughout the Connoisseurs means that the benefits of using them in combination are exponential, the whole becoming considerably greater than the sum of the parts. For the purpose of this review this is how they were predominantly used, in combination with the Lyra Titan-i cartridge, although the VPI JMW 12.5 arm also allowed easy exposure to other pickups, including the Mysonic

Eminent and vdH Condor. The excellent ARC LS26 was also on hand to help gauge the 4-2P SE in isolation, as well as in the context of its family group.

Which brings us finally, to the Zanden Model 1200 Mk.2. Built into the same beautifully crafted casework as the Zanden Model 3000 line-stage, this hybrid tube/transformer design is also a two-box unit with a separate choke input, valve rectified power supply. Zanden actually produce three visually and topologically similar phono-stages

to its power supply. The circuit is a zero-feedback, constant impedance bridged-T type, based around a trio of carefully gain-matched 6922 twin-triodes. Like all Zanden products, the 1200 relies on the refinement of a fundamentally superior circuit to achieve its performance. Whilst the internal components are selected with an obsessive attention to detail, those looking for name-brand audiophile parts and "silver-bullet" solutions will be disappointed. This is all about attention to detail, so the critical inductors for the bridged-T networks are wound in-house, the point-to-point wiring is ultra-pure single-strand copper and a PCB is employed to keep signal paths as accurate and short as possible.

Where the Zanden gets really interesting is on the front-panel. As well as the on-off switch and low/high gain control, there's a third, three position rotary knob that allows the user to select different replay equalization. It's a long forgotten fact, preserved on the fascias of vintage valve pre-amps, that each record label or country tended to have its own preferred replay curve for micro-groove LPs. It was a practice that long survived its inclusion on hi-fi equipment and helps explain why certain labels (Philips and DG being the obvious examples) have long been held in such low esteem by record collectors; we're replaying them wrong, with incorrect balance at the frequency extremes! Some phono-stages, like the FM Acoustics 222, have long provided the necessary adjustments, but they are a distinct minority – and obtaining correct information about the curves used by different labels at different times can be a complex and frustrating affair.

Zanden adopt a simpler approach to the problem, by providing three generic curves that mirror the most popular and important historical ►



of which the Model 1200 is the dedicated, low-output MC compatible version. The Model 1000 is optimized for MM replay, while the 1100 is a specialist mono stage with all the necessary rumble and roll-off adjustments for that purpose.

As you'll have gathered by now, the 1200 is a transformer coupled design. There are actually four separate, encapsulated transformers arrayed along the back of the PCB, providing two different gain settings for each channel. These offer either 68dB of gain (with a 4 Ohm load) for low-output cartridges, or 56dB of gain (with a 40 Ohm load) for higher output devices. As well as the two sets of inputs you get a single pair of single-ended outputs and an earth post. Oh, and a heavy duty, multi-pin umbilical which connects the signal circuitry

▶ examples. As well as the now dominant RIAA curve used by the majority of US pressing plants and labels (and now by the whole industry) there are also two other options labelled 'Decca' and 'Columbia'. These reflect the alternative curves selected by various European and American labels. There's a listing in the manual that breaks your record collection down by label and country of origin and then recommends the appropriate curve. So, for instance, the list separates UK and US pressed Deccas, recommending the 'Decca' setting for the former, RIAA for the latter – which helps explain the fierce controversy amongst collectors when it comes to the question of the relative sonic merits of Wide-bands versus Blue-backs. Is the list exhaustive? Far from it, and nor is it sub-divided by age – which is actually the point. It's only intended as a guide. With three options to select you can simply click through them and which ever sounds best is best. You'll soon get the hang of it, the thumbprint of the different curves becoming quite recognisable over time especially as the "right" setting is so obvious.

The key performance attribute of the Zanden phono-stage is its naturalness with acoustic recordings. When you listen to a live acoustic performance, be it classical, folk or jazz, one of the qualities that is immediately apparent (and which separates it from the vast majority of hi-fi systems) is the absolute clarity with which you can hear each instrument, loud or soft, regardless of pitch. It's especially true at low frequencies, where most speakers really struggle to separate instruments and hold them in space, cushioned by the air around and beneath them. Just listen to double bass live, be it a jazz band or an orchestra and appreciate the ease

with which you can hear what's being played and the vital importance of its relationship to the performance as a whole. This in turn reflects the holistic quality of what you are hearing; the fact that it really is a single performance in a single space – and a world away from the muddy, confused and subdivided effort presented by most hi-fi systems. The Model 1200 gets you closer to that sense of coherence and clarity than any other piece of hi-fi I've ever used. I'll go into greater detail in a moment, but first, let's just appreciate the contribution the switchable replay curves make to its performance.



In order to appreciate what these curves do you'll first need a selection of older, original pressings (180g re-issues will all be RIAA, as a quick listen with the Zanden will confirm) from various labels. I armed myself with various DG, EMI, Decca and Columbia classical pieces, as well as Verve jazz and Reprise pop albums. Sitting down for what I thought would be a bit of a chore – after all, systematic comparison is hardly commensurate with musical enlightenment – I was astonished to discover how obvious and musically important the differences were. Far from weighing heavy, the "exercise" became a voyage of (re-) discovery. I've never had much time for Karajan (opera aside) although I've accumulated a fair collection of his

records. Surprise, surprise – play his early Tulip label DG pressings on the Decca setting and the tubby thickness in the bass and piping treble that you expect, the mechanical tempi and stolid structures you've got used to all disappear. Instead you hear a single, seamless whole, tonality restored, with natural instrumental weight and a wonderfully coherent soundstage. But best of all, suddenly the poise, drama and humanity of the performance are back. Astonished, I reached for later pressings with simple White Ring labels.

Exactly the same result: where the RIAA position gave a lumpy, disjointed and frankly tedious presentation, switching to the Decca position restored the tonal quality and musical coherence of everything from the *Brandenburg Concertos* to the *New World Symphony*. And the opera recordings that I've always enjoyed? They were made for RCA who adhered to, you guessed it, the RIAA standard.

Results are just as impressive whether you look at Decca, EMI or Columbia. A favourite performance of the Penderecki *Violin Concerto* (Stern, Skrowaczewski and the Minnesota) whose dreadful, murky sound had failed to stifle the magnificence of the reading, was transformed into a dramatic and moving emotional tour de force – exactly as it should be. No more apologies for sound quality here – this was breathtaking music beautifully captured. The impact ▶

► on the rhythm, pace and chemistry of jazz recordings was similarly impressive, while even Neil Young gained a spring in his step. Finally, old favourites like the Decca *La Fille Mal Gardée* became even more impressive, the balletic fireworks bound tighter to the melodic themes, bringing greater structure and coherence to the performance – more real music, less sonic spectacular.

Is this a make or break facility when it comes to record replay? Despite the impressive musical results, the

may well do the same with Zanden's equalization switch. But adjusting replay curves is just like arm height (and record cleaning) – the easier it is the more likely you are to do it, and it doesn't get easier than this. Classical or jazz fans, especially those who attend regular live concerts, will find this facility a revelation – and once discovered, one they'll be reluctant to do without. Given the price of the Zanden phono-stage, just how relevant is it? Few will be lucky enough to own a unit as exquisitely



answer has to be no. After all, set the switch to RIAA and leave it and you're no worse off than the vast majority of your fellow humans. But it does make a real difference and in the case of acoustic recordings in particular, that difference is significant: the difference between enjoying a brilliant performance or having it submerged beneath the limitations of the storage and replay systems. For those with an extensive collection and who love to explore the older repertoire, be it classical or jazz, early blues or rock, this facility will further broaden the musical horizon. If you hear changes in VTA between records, you'll use these curves as an essential part of playing records. If you simply set your VTA and leave it then you

engineered and presented as this, but adjustable equalization is also available at lower price levels. What the Zanden does is put it firmly and resolutely on the agenda. Hear the results and it may well be on your agenda too...

Of course, all the adjustments in the world are useless if the product can't perform its basic function, but have no fear, Zanden's Model 1200 is a genuinely world class performer. I said earlier that it can take you closer to the experience of the live event than any other unit I've used and I stand by that statement. It puts you in the audience and it does it through two means; its clarity and instrumental separation and the coherence of its stereo perspective, both of which are astonishingly natural. I've already described the way in which it holds instruments apart from each other,

irrespective of size or level; the second part of that equation is the way in which it manages to preserve the positional and musical relationships between them. After all, the last thing we want is for it to dismantle the piece as a whole. The Zanden presents a wonderfully holistic soundstage, a single coherent acoustic space, with definite boundaries and within which the instruments are naturally and effortlessly arrayed. So much of what this phono-stage achieves is down to the sheer ease with which you can hear what is happening within the recording. In turn that depends both on the extraordinary separation and the fact that instruments are placed exactly where they should be, a factor which is reflected both in the coherence of the acoustic and the ease with which your brain can detect and define it. Thus the physical spacing of the instruments adds to the experience rather than becoming another obstacle to decode and overcome.

Switching to the Lyra Connoisseur after listening to the Zanden provides a fascinating contrast. The 4-2 SEs are pretty much as straight-line as electronics get, devoid of every adjustment save volume and input select. Yet in its own way the Connoisseur phono-stage is as impressive as the Zanden, with its own particular realm of excellence, the portrayal of the musical dynamics and energy spectrum of voices and instruments. Compared to the transformer/tube Model 1200, the all solid-state Connoisseur greets the listener with a dramatic sense of presence and immediacy, life and vitality – in fact, the very attributes I'd normally associate with a really good tube amplifier. After the 4.0, the deeper bass and increased authority of the 4-2P SE comes as a bit of a shock. The dynamic expression is that much more emphatic, the player's technique both more grounded and more definite. But don't get the idea that this is all ►

► wham-bam energy. There's a subtlety and finesse coupled to the explosive dynamic capabilities of the Lyra that endow it with an extraordinarily expressive quality. Rhythms are infectious, changes in pace, the natural momentum and tension that hold live music together beautifully revealed.



It tracks micro-dynamics better even than it used to, based on the firm foundation of its low frequency authority and stability, the same bedrock that provides the launching pad for sudden, wider shifts in level. It's this combination of capabilities that gives the Connoisseur its peerless physical and tactile substance, its pace, agility and vivacity.

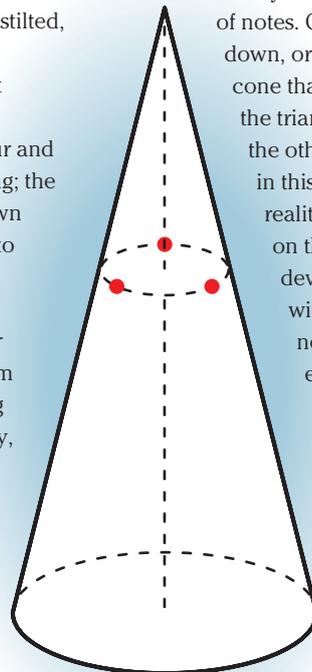
Which brings us to the semantic niceties that separate life from live. For all its appealing energy, the directness of its communication, its sheer musical impact, the sense of real live people and real, vibrant instruments, the Connoisseur can't match the Zanden's ability to recreate the actual event. It's as if the Lyra is concentrating on the sense in the music, the Zanden on the event itself, the Lyra fastening on the way in which the musicians work, the Zanden on their output as a whole. Except that that's a crass over simplification suggestion that one fastens on the individual strands,

the other on the final product. Which isn't the case at all. Either of these two phono-stages will deliver a significantly more convincing musical totality than any other

I've used, save the Kondo. Superb midrange products like the Tom Evans Groove Plus, the ARC PH7 or the Martensen, as good as they are, sound stilted, pale and constricted in comparison. That's what makes the comparison between the Connoisseur and the Zanden so fascinating; the fact that each, is in its own way significantly closer to the holy grail of sonic reality than lesser units, yet they are so dissimilar from each other. Far from performance converging as we get closer to reality, the discrepancies become all the more obvious. The differences here are really quite subtle, their effects are not.

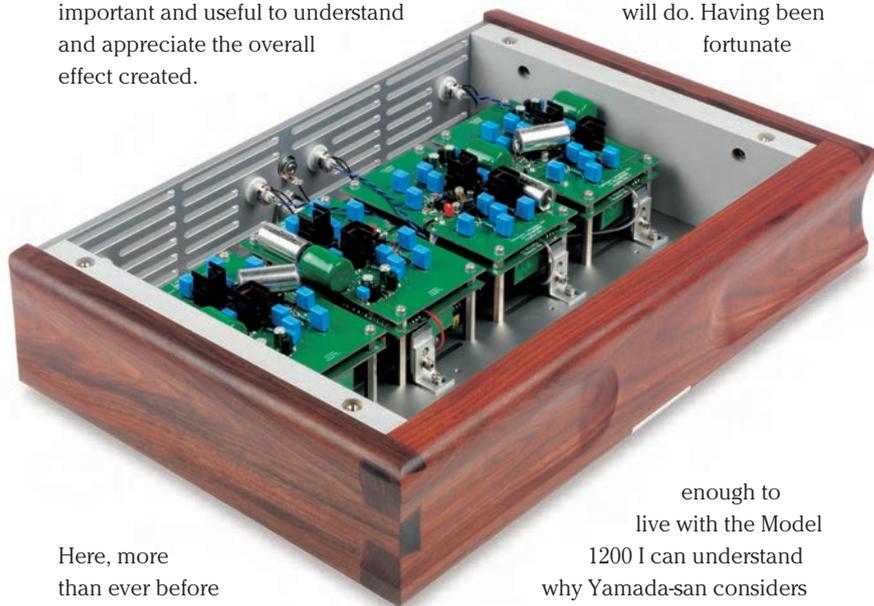
Let's bring the Kondo KSL chain into the equation in an attempt to elucidate. These three approaches are, as I've already said, the three finest phono replay systems I've ever used – the only three that can stand comparison with each other. Now, generally speaking, if a reviewer talks about three products at once he tends to speak in terms of a single continuum, the three units spread along a single line, two bracketing the one in the middle. Well, when it comes to the Zanden, the Connoisseur and the Kondo, that model doesn't apply. Think instead in terms of a triangle, or even better, a three-sided pyramid, its pinnacle being the live event, its height the distance by which the contenders miss the mark, but each with its own distinct performance emphasis that moves it in a particular direction. The

Connoisseur embraces dynamic expression, the Zanden a natural acoustic and stereo perspective. In contrast, and to the same degree, the Kondo captures the harmonic identity of instruments, the duration of notes. Continue a pyramid on down, or turn it instead into a cone that intersects the points of the triangle, and here you'll find the other phono-stages reviewed in this issue, their distance from reality defining their height on the cone, their specific deviations their position within its footprint – the nearer the edge, the more extreme the shift. The point is (if you'll excuse the pun) the nearer you get to the top, the smaller the acceptable footprint becomes, the greater the impact of even subtle changes to the



► musical presentation. Here we see tiny variations in emphasis or distance altering the view significantly but not in simple ways. So the Zanden has phenomenal instrumental separation and clarity, the Connoisseur brilliant dynamic discrimination, the Kondo supreme harmonic complexity and insight: where does one quality stop and the next begin? Rather than breaking down the individual aspects of performance, an act that will in itself tend to exaggerate the degrees of difference, it's actually more important and useful to understand and appreciate the overall effect created.

performers. Used with its matching line-stage in particular, the sense of purpose it brings to performances can be captivating. The Zanden is by far the most versatile unit here (and I'm not just referring to its replay curves but also to its standalone integrity) its clarity and easy grasp of stereo perspective and acoustic detail transports the listener back to the live event; for record collectors with extensive collections who regularly attend orchestral concerts or smaller recitals, I suspect nothing else will do. Having been fortunate



Here, more than ever before in my experience, listening bias or preference will dictate choice. These are all fabulous phono-stages and any of us would be pleased to own any of them – but to move the listening experience from the great to the truly sublime will require a final selection. The Kondo is the most complete chain and also thus the least versatile option, but the coherence of its materials and approach give it a holistic harmonic rightness, a breadth of tonality and complexity within notes that's achingly beautiful. The Connoisseur 4-2P SE almost seems to pulse with life and vitality, presence and energy, commanding attention, thrilling in its dexterity and the dexterity of the

enough to live with the Model 1200 I can understand why Yamada-san considers this his finest work.

Ultimately, whichever of these products appeals, if you value vinyl replay you owe it to yourself to experience just what the medium is capable of. It's a hackneyed cliché to say that we keep finding more and more in those grooves. In fact, we've been getting it out for a while – we've just been losing it between the stylus and the speakers. Hearing these phono-stages, you'll realise just where most of the damage is being done. You could say they make more sense of the signal but I don't think we need to be that specific. To me, for vinyl lovers with deep pockets they just make sense – they no longer seem expensive once you've heard them!



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Zanden Model 1200 Mk.2

Type:	Tube/transformer phono-stage
Tube Complement:	4x 6922, 1x 6CA4
Inputs:	1x high-gain (68dB) 1x low-gain (56dB)
Loading:	4 Ohms – high-gain 40 Ohms – low-gain
Equalization:	RIAA, "Decca" and "Columbia"
Outputs:	1pr single-ended RCA/phono
Output Impedance:	3 kOhms
Dimensions (WxHxD) –	
Phono-stage:	398 x 103 x 354mm
PSU:	155 x 163 x 336mm
Weights –	
Phono-stage:	9kg
PSU:	6.2kg
Price:	£13950

UK Distributor:
Audiofreaks
Tel. (44)(0)20 8948 4153
Net. www.audiofreaks.co.uk

Manufacturer:
Zanden Audio Systems Ltd
Net. www.zandenaudio.com

Lyra Connoisseur 4-2P SE

Type:	Solid-state phono-stage
Inputs:	1pr single-ended RCA/phono
Gain:	69dB
Input Impedance:	10 kOhms
Outputs:	1pr single-ended RCA/phono
Output Impedance:	50 Ohms
Dimensions (WxHxD) –	
Phono-stage:	400 x 96 x 314mm
PSU:	400 x 94 x 270mm
Weights –	
Phono-stage:	5.5kg
PSU:	11kg
Price:	£16000

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