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# Test Report: Parasound Zphono-USB Phono Preamp

An advanced tool for ripping your vinyl records into MP3s.

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## Parasound Zphono-USB

### Key Features

- RCA phono input, (2) RCA line inputs
- RCA line output, USB output
- 3.5mm headphone output
- USB level control
- works with MM and MC cartridges
- switchable 100 $\Omega$  or 47 K $\Omega$  MC cartridge loading
- RIAA EQ on/off switch for USB output
- 2 x 9.5 x 10 in (HxWxD); 5 lb.

There's some debate among vinylphiles about whether USB phono preamps need to exist, but I for one am glad they do. When I bring home my latest haul of vinyl from [Amoeba Records](#), I love being able to plug a laptop straight into my [NAD PP 3](#) to make quick MP3s of albums I like so I can listen to them on my smartphone. (Sacrilege!) It's easier than making an analog connection, and it bypasses the lousy analog-to-digital converter built into my laptop.

With the [Zphono-USB](#), Parasound brings new versatility and features to the USB phono pre concept.

A USB gain control with clipping indicator makes level setting easier. A bypass switch for its RIAA record equalization circuitry lets you do the RIAA EQ with your recording software if you prefer. Selectable loading (100 ohms or 47 kilohms) lets you get the best sound from your

moving-coil cartridge. A rumble filter button removes low-frequency vibrations. There's even a 3.5mm headphone jack on the front for convenient monitoring while you're making dubs, although there's no level control for the headphone output.

The back panel includes a phono input, two line inputs, a USB out, and a line out. Unlike many relatively low-priced phono pres, the Zphono-USB has its power supply built in — it doesn't use a wall wart. I don't need the line inputs, but they'll come in handy if you want to, say, convert some of your old reel-to-reel or cassette tapes into MP3s.

There's no question that the Zphono-USB is one of the most feature-packed phono pres ever made. The question is, do all those features really add anything?

## The Knob is King

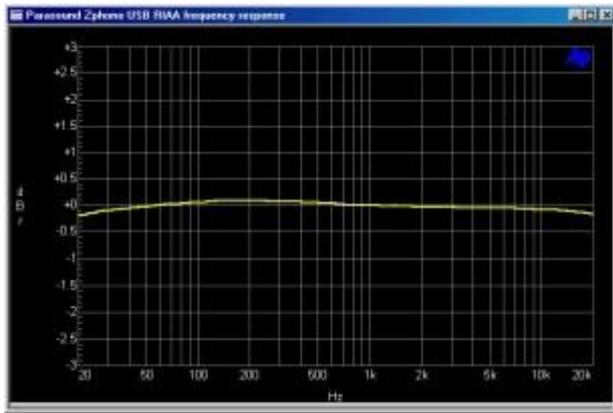
I tried the Zphono-USB with my own [Pro-Ject RM-1.3](#) turntable, using two different cartridges: a Denon DL-103 moving-coil cartridge and a Sumiko Pearl moving-magnet cartridge. I also tried it with the [Rega RP6](#), using a Rega Exact MM cartridge. I used two systems: a Krell S-300i integrated amp with Krell Resolution One speakers, and a HiFiMan EF-6 headphone amp with HiFiMan HE-6 headphones.

Hands-down, the best part about the Zphono-USB is that USB gain control. I loved being able to put my Sony Sound Forge software into record mode, then watching the onscreen meters while I turned up the USB gain for just the right recording level. You can do this through your computer's own audio control panel or recording software, but it's so much easier just to twist a knob.

I have to confess I really didn't much need all those extra features, although I'm sure they could come in handy if I had, say, a more esoteric MC cartridge that required a high load impedance, or if I had mono records. And if I still lived up on 108th Street and Central Park West in Manhattan, four stories above the 8th Avenue subway line, I'm sure the rumble filter would come in handy. Although I haven't been doing RIAA in the digital domain, in the computer software, it's great to know I can turn off the Zphono-USB's RIAA EQ if I ever want to upgrade my computer recording rig.



## Test Results



I ran a quick measurement with my Audio Precision System One to see how accurate the Zphono-USB's RIAA equalization circuit is. It's pretty accurate (see chart). The company specifies an accuracy of  $\pm 0.5$  dB, but my measurement (with a 5 mV signal and the MM input, normalized to 1 kHz) shows +0.09/-0.2 dB. Not much reason to defeat this for recording, unless you just really want to get those analog RIAA filters out of the chain.

## USB? You tell me!

When I compared recordings made from the Zphono-USB with recordings made from the NAD PP 3, I heard ... well, why not listen for yourself? While we're at it, let's make it a blind test.

Here are two 20-second snippets recorded from a couple of LPs. You'll hear each selection first with one of the phono pres, then with the other one. Both files are in uncompressed WAV format recorded at CD-quality 16 bit/44.1 kilohertz, using my ProJect RM-1.3 turntable with the Sumiko Pearl cartridge.

[Here's selection one](#), a snippet of "Moment of Truth" from big band composer/arranger Gerald Wilson's album of the same name.

[Here's selection two](#), a snippet of "My Life Is Rich" from Big Star's *#1 Record*.

Made your decision? OK, [click here](#) to find out which one is which.

Did you hear what I heard? 'Cause I didn't hear much difference. Maybe the Parasound gave me a slightly more vivid midrange in the Gerald Wilson tune. Maybe it gave me slightly more midbass punch on the Big Star tune. Maybe the NAD gave me a tad more treble detail. Regardless, we're really splitting hairs here. There's no question that both units can make a nice-sounding dub from your turntable.

Surprisingly, I noticed a bigger difference in sound quality when I used the Zphono-USB and the PP 3 as straight analog phono preamps, plugged into my systems. The Zphono-USB had, to put it simply, more kick. Willie Wilcox's snare on Utopia's "Love in Action" from *Anthology* (1974-1985) had more snap and impact through the Zphono-USB, and I felt a little more drive in the midbass from Kasim Sultan's bass lines. On Larry Coryell's *The Restful Mind*, the acoustic guitars played by Coryell and Ralph Towner benefitted from that same extra oomph in the midbass; I got a better sense that I was hearing the acoustics of the guitars' sound chambers.

Some of this may have to do with the fact that the gain from the analog output of the Zphono-USB is much higher than the PP 3's — from the MM inputs, it's a whopping 11.8 dB increase. I compensated for the level difference when I did my comparative listening, but it's quite possible the Zphono-USB's extra gain just got better performance from the downstream gear.

### **Bottom Line**

The Zphono-USB is quite a nice phono pre for \$350. The USB gain knob alone may win it fans among people who do a lot of vinyl ripping. The sound quality — using either the analog outs or the USB out — is great. And even if you don't need all those extra features today, they'll be there when you do need them.