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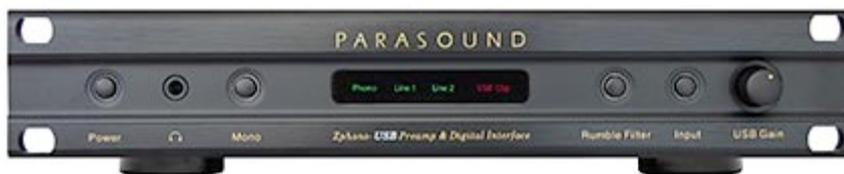
Parasound Zphono USB

For the music lover who wants to record their LPs.

Review By Rick Jensen

The Parasound Zphono USB (hereafter the "Z") is a stunning little component that will likely be unjustly overlooked by the vast majority of audiophiles. While

I may not enjoy the privilege of soaring daily in the audio ionosphere, I would guess that many people like me, who search for "reasonably priced" high-end equipment, might never make the acquaintance of the Zphono USB (hereafter the "Z"). First, what does it do? The Z does two things. It is a phono preamp. And it is an A-to-D encoder. That means that while playing an LP, it will also encode a digital representation of the analog signal.



So, who might use the Z? Clearly, devotees of SkyMall will never be the target market, since they already have access to \$139 USB turntables. (Sorry, I could not resist!) But among the rest of us, those who wish to archive some or all of an analog collection in digital form for future use and reference may find the Z very interesting. That is exactly what brought me to the Z. With about 2500 LPs, some of which I might like to have in digital form (for background listening through an all-digital chain), I sought a solution.

Most of the answers were too dear. Even more, they were too involved. Though I count myself an audiophile, I do not wish to spend countless hours poring over each LP to achieve a semi-perfect digital copy. No, I would prefer merely to make a very good CD-level copy of what I want to really hear, listen to the LP when I want to listen attentively, and have it available when I am not in my listening room. Thus, such a component needs to do a couple of very different things. First, it needs to be a classic (phono) preamplifier. Today, as many listeners, particularly younger ones, find their way back to analog, they need a good but well-priced phono preamp. There are many very listenable units available for under \$500 – and some far less than that. Second, and equally difficult, it needs to convert the analog signal to digital and output a reasonably intact facsimile to be stored elsewhere..

Design

Those who follow audio know that Parasound can be counted on for well-made products that always sound good and almost never exhibit any notable flaws. In addition, they represent great value for money. That is consistent with the goals of the company in general. Per Parasound's CEO, Richard Schram, they always look for a high performance level and at the same time take a pragmatic approach to business. Richard has been in the business "for 45 years" (though he retains the enthusiasm of a 25-year old) and says that his products have to "sound good and measure good".

As for the phono preamp, Richard said that two things were primary in Parasound's objectives: low noise, both in the absolute sense and as to the noise spectrum, and no hum. Pretty simple, basic stuff – but as someone who has suffered from both noise and hum in the phono part of the chain, I can

vouch that those are the elements I care about. Richard recalled that in the "olden days" turntable hum was an omnipresent problem, and AC polarity was most often the culprit. So the Z has a switch for polarity – an easy fix to a common problem. Separate power transformers are used for the analog and digital sections, again to keep the noise as low as possible. This was most surprising to me in such an inexpensive product, but as this was Parasound's first "computer-related" component, they thought it important to get it right.

On the digital side, I noted that the Z has an adjustment for the USB output level (the signal going into the A-D). Note that the recording software will of course supply adjustment of the level to optimize for noise versus overload. But the Z allows you to make an easy one-time adjustment for each LP, and then monitor it with the digital software. Finally, another interesting design note is that Parasound added two line inputs to the Z, just in case you want to record from other high-level sources. Again, this is another bit of flexibility that is unexpected in a unit with high-end pedigree at a low price.

Operation

The Z is a compact unit. Anyone can hold it easily in one hand. Still, it is full of features. The front panel has a display that indicates the input, surrounded by controls for power, mono/stereo, a rumble filter, the input selection, and aforementioned USB gain switch.



In addition, there is a headphone jack for monitoring or just plain old private listening. The rear panel has three inputs, the phono and two line level. It has a three-position switch for cartridge loading (MC 100 Ohms or 47 kOhms, MM 47 kOhms); the user manual provides a simple guide for which may sound the best for a given cartridge. There may be too few choices for the highest-end user who might want precise loading of the cartridge, but that is not the target customer here. There are line outputs to the main preamplifier, and the USB output for the digitized signal. There is also an on-off switch for the RIAA EQ that affects only the USB output, for those users who might want to use RIAA equalization in the recording software. I left it in the "on" position, as I did not want to deal with the EQ any more than that. The polarity switch, a ground terminal, and the power cord take up the rest of the rear panel. Speaking of the power cord, the voltage is switchable between 110 and 220 – more flexibility.

Setup is a breeze. Just connect the Z to the preamp like any other phono unit. The USB output would go to your computer or whatever is managing the recording software. I used an ordinary laptop PC running Spin It Again, which costs \$29.95 and is idiot-proof. I had also used the free Audacity software that many people like very much; it is very flexible and works well, but I just found Spin it Again so easy to use that it was worth it for me. Once you hook the Z up to the software, you can leave the Z alone and it will do its job. Just be sure to adjust the output level for each record, and it works quite well.

Sound

For this review, I decided to depart a little from the usual survey of sonic characteristics (bass, highs, space) and to focus on three recordings that I know pretty well, in the hope that I would get a representative idea of how the Z sounds. I listened to the LPs and made notes as to the sound, and then listened to the digital files and made similar notes. This process didn't allow for side-by-side comparisons, but I believe I did glean the essence of the sound. And it wasn't overcomplicated, in keeping with the ease of use factor that brought me to the Z in the first place. Note that the Z was played at all times through my usual system (Linn/Ittok, Sumiko Celebration, conrad-johnson Premier 17, Music Reference RM-9 Mk II, Ars Aures Midi-Sensorial II, and my new Wyred 4 Sound DAC-II).

Art Pepper Meets The Rhythm Section [Analogue Productions APJ-010]

Analog: The first two cuts were unruffled and relaxed, with a very smooth tone from Pepper's smooth sax. The attack and detail of the string bass was not quite as detailed as with more expensive phono units (like my conrad-johnson Premier 15, which is unfair!) but it was quite comparable to the Lehmann Black Cube SE and my modified vintage NYAL Superit – Ok, a little less tubey than the Superit. Soundstaging was good, and the instruments were all placed nicely, neither too wide nor too constricted. The stage was a little flatter than with the c-j, but that is to be expected. The Z was very good-sounding at low volume. In this I got to appreciate how superb my new Ars Aures Midi Sensorial Mk IIs are at low volume – and it was the Z that made me pay attention to it. Even playing softly, there was no loss of detail and it retained good balance, which the Art Pepper recording has in spades.

Digital: The output was done in WAV 16-bit/44.1kHz format and recorded, as noted, using "Spin it Again". I have to state that I was stunned at how faithful a recoding it was; I guess I just didn't expect it to be so good. Spatially, the digital version was indistinguishable from the analog. The piano tones were a little brittle in comparison to the LP, with maybe a little extra ringing, but for me that is what I often hear from standard digital compared to analog. Pepper's sax was clear and balanced, quick on attack and with a natural decay. It was maybe just a hair thinner than the analog as well. I did notice that on "Straight Life", the piano, which is at the rear of the stage, was a little muted compared to the LP, but the difference is minor.

On the whole, it sounded excellent and faithful to the (very fine) recoding.

Al Stewart *Modern Times* [Janus JSX-7012]

Analog: This is an original, unfancy LP that I have played hundreds of times. It is also a little bit of a challenge because the recording was done in an English castle and it sounds it – it is bright and sibilant with quite a bit of reverberation. "Carol" was sharp and reverberant, as it should be and Stewart's melodic nasality quite in evidence (I just saw him recently, and he still has the same tone, albeit a little lower). Tonally, it seemed spot on, and the dynamics were good. I noted that the Z seemed to like rock music; it captured the jangly guitars on both channels and the drive of the music. That is not to say that it is a "rock" sort of component. In fact, it is detailed but calm in how it handles any music, so there is nothing extra thrown in. Still, Tim Renwick's great solo was livelier than via my conrad-johnson, only lacking a little body. *Modern Times* can sound too trebly on equipment that doesn't capture the richness of music in general, but the Z handled it well. On the song "Apple Cider Reconstitution", which can sound terrible on poor equipment, the strings were pretty and sweet and the guitar once again silky.

Digital: There is not a lot to say here because the digital version is so close to the analog. This may be due in part to the nice job done by the Z and in part to the Wyred 4 Sound DAC, which has made every CD and digital file I have sound better than I ever knew. I noted that "Carol" had a little less weight but it rocked. The echo and the sense of space were very much in evidence and the guitar matched what I had heard through the Z in analog mode. In addition, the louder parts of the title cut, which can sound congested, had plenty of breathing room. Overall, the sound was quite good, and it handily met my own objectives – a fine-quality digital file from my LP.

Elgar *Coronation Ode* [EMI ASD-3345
Ledger/New Philharmonia]

Analog: On "Britain, Ask of Thyself", male voices betrayed no boominess and sounded maybe a touch mellow. The Z outlined the space of the hall well, though it seemed not quite so full as with the c-j. I noted that there was good space among the instruments albeit a little less than I am used to. Female voice on "Land of Hope and Glory" lacked a little shimmer but were clear and composed, conveying the grandeur



that the piece aims for. The EMI recording retains a natural "reserve"; this was made clear in the massed voices in the song. All the horns in the march had good texture, never thin. On the whole, the Z made me feel English as I listened to it – a high compliment!

Digital: I noted that the digital version was very close to the LP, showing just some more edginess in male voices on the "Britain" cut above. Still, I described the digital copy as "harmonious, melodic, and musical" – all fuzzy terms that mean to convey that it sounds like the real thing. The big finale of "Land of Hope and Glory" did not disappoint either and demonstrated that the Z did not compress the space in any real way. If the perceived space among the voices at the end is smaller, it is only in comparison to great analog sound. Once again, I was pretending that I was a Brit for a day.

In Sum...Wow!

The Z is pretty darned remarkable, and a sensational value. On the absolute scale, it sounds very good as a phono preamplifier. I compared it to a \$4000 preamp and it was not embarrassed. While I was happy to go back to my Premier 15, I was quite content to play music through the Z and still am. But that is just the half of it, of course: this box also gives you a very good digital file to put on your storage medium of choice in your format of choice (limited of course to 16-bit/44.1kHz). Again, I sought out the Z because I hoped that perhaps the Z could fill a real function for the true audiophile, with a particular set of objectives in mind: to make copies of some LPs and have them available in an easy digitized form, but to retain the LPs for "serious" listening. I would say at the same time that the Parasound Zphono USB should also be considered by the music lover who wants to record *all* his or her LPs. It does a terrific job, as long as one is not shooting for the perfect digital file. I cannot say how much of a difference a cost-no-object unit might make; I have not heard one. The Z manages to play records very well and to give you a very fine digital copy with a minimum of fuss. A terrific product at a great price!

Specifications

Type: Analog solid-state MM/MC phonostage with USB

Frequency Response: 20 Hz to 20 kHz (+/-0.5dB)

Total Harmonic Distortion: < 0.1% at 20 kHz

S/N Ratio MM: > 74 dB, input shorted, IHF A-weighted

S/N Ratio MC: > 63 dB, input shorted, IHF A-weighted

S/N Ratio Line Inputs: > 103 dB, input shorted, IHF A-weighted

Output Impedance: < 100 ohm

Phono Input Impedance:

MM setting: 47 k ohm

MC setting: 47 k ohm or 100 ohm

Input Sensitivity, 1 kHz:

MM: 5 mV in for 1.1 V output

MC: 0.5 mV in for 1.1V output

USB Analog To Digital Converter: 16-bit/48kHz

Dimensions: 9.5" x 10" x 2" (WxDxH)

Weight: Net: 5 lbs.