



Mighty Zee

Parasound has launched its new Z Custom Series audio units designed for the home.

Neville Roberts checks it out

For those that love music, there are going to be times where you want to hear it in other rooms apart from the listening room. One solution is to have extension speakers wired up to the main system, but that means running speaker cables everywhere. It also means having your system running full tilt when all you want is some background music in your kitchen. A better solution is a completely separate, standalone system that doesn't take up too much space and won't break the bank. Enter the Parasound Z Custom Series.

The series comprises a range of ultra-compact audio separates that

enables a complete system to be assembled to suit your requirements. The units reviewed here can form the basis of a good quality CD-playing separates system that can be added to if requirements change in the future. The units are the Zcd CD and MP3 player, the Zpre2 preamplifier and the Zamp stereo power amplifier.

The silver finish is for home use but black pro versions are also available. They have automatic control features that allow them to be left plugged in and run in standby mode when no audio signal is present, thus requiring a minimum of manual control.

Starting off with the meaty end, the Zamp power 'Zone' amplifier claims

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Parasound Zcd,
Zpre2, Zamp

ORIGIN
USA

TYPE
CD player, preamp
and power amplifier

WEIGHT
Zcd: 2kg; Zpre2:
2.1kg; Zamp: 3kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD) All models:
241 x 40 x 254mm

FEATURES

- Digital and analogue outputs
- MP3 file support via CD-R and USB memory stick
- Auto power on/off feature
- Auto input select

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to deliver up to 60W RMS into a 4ohm load – more than enough for a domestic living room. If, however, only mono operation is required, such as in a public area, the Zamp can be switched to bridged mode enabling it to deliver 90W RMS into a single 8ohm loudspeaker. Note that the amplifier can only drive an 8ohm speaker or higher when bridged.

The Zamp can be turned on manually via a push-button switch on the front panel, or automatically either via a 12V trigger input or when the amplifier detects an audio signal on the left or right channel inputs. The 12V trigger signal can be supplied from the preamp, which allows for remote turn on via a remote control if required. The amplifier has a 3.5mm headphone socket on the front panel for personal listening without disturbing others.

There are also individual gain controls on the rear panel. This permits adjustment of the Zamp to suit a wide range of inputs from devices other than the Zpre2 in order to minimise background noise – a process known as 'gain staging'. This may be of use in a more commercial

environment when the amplifier has to interface with other feeds, including public address systems.

The next box to consider is the Zpre2 Zone preamplifier, which forms the heart of the system. This unit is supplied with a remote control for controlling the preamp inputs, volume and various operating modes. It can also control other devices connected to it via the 12V trigger signal. The 'zone' feature allows the remote to be paired with one Z Series system without interfering with another system in the vicinity – useful if you have more than one system in a public environment. Four different zones are supported.

The front panel has all the usual array of manual controls, including bass, treble, volume, balance and a push-button input selector. The Zpre2 has four line-level inputs, with input 1 having an optional Priority Auto Select feature. This allows the Zpre2 to switch over to input 1 whenever it detects an audio signal on that input. It also selects the video 1 channel at the same time, allowing the preamp to automatically switch to a DVD player, tuner or satellite receiver in a bedroom, for example. The preamp also has a 3.5mm headphone socket on the front panel.

The rear panel has the four sets of gold-plated RCA phono sockets for the audio inputs, along with two video inputs and video output. Two audio outputs are provided – one at a fixed level (useful as a record output) and the other variable for connection to the Zamp. There is also an RS232 DB9 serial port connector to allow

computer control of the Zamp's power, input and volume – nice!

Completing the lineup is the Zcd player with MP3 playback. This is supplied with a similar remote control to the Zpre2 with the same array of features, including the trigger output, RS232 control and fixed/variable outputs. It also sports coax and optical digital outputs for connection to a DAC, such as the Parasound Zdac that is available separately. In addition, the Zcd has a USB socket that will accommodate a USB memory stick for playing MP3 files. Note that only the MP3 format is supported, so WAV, WMA, FLAC etc files will not work with this device. MP3 files can also be played from a

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CD-R. A particularly useful feature is the ability to navigate MP3 files on the Zcd via a television screen connected to the video out. The front panel has the usual track display and basic CD controls. The CD mechanism is a neat slot at the top of the panel, rather than a slide-out tray.

The three components can be stacked elegantly to make a very smart domestic system, or can be configured to fill two 1U rack spacings (such as in a computer patch-panel cabinet). Suitable brackets and blanking panel are available separately.

Sound quality

After connecting up the three units to each other and to my loudspeakers, I post a CD of Vivaldi *Violin Concertos Op.6* into the Zcd, set the bass and treble controls to the mid position and press the play button. There is certainly plenty of volume available and I have no problems filling my listening room with sound from my floorstanding transmission line loudspeakers. The Parasound system delivers a full sound that is clear and easy on the ears. The strings do sound a little squeaky at times, particularly during crescendos, but on the whole, the system gives a very convincing performance across the spectrum.

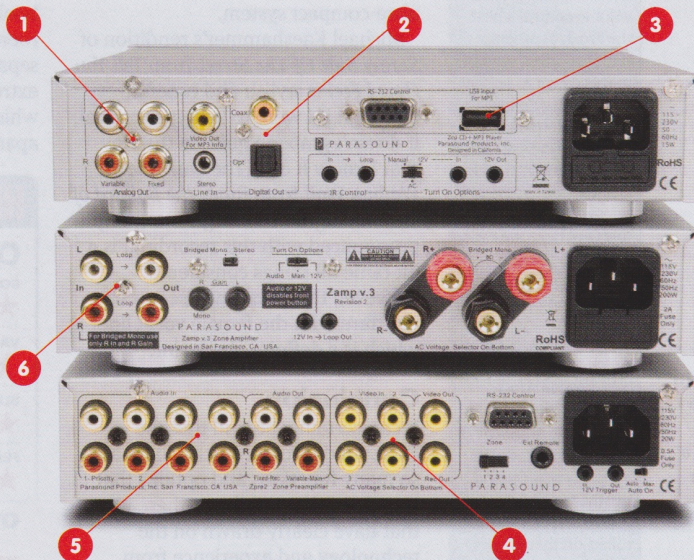
Not wishing to give the Parasound an easy ride, I next insert a CD of Cecilia Bartoli (*The Vivaldi Album*) for some extreme vocal excursions. I must say that it performs surprisingly well and some of Cecilia's vocal gymnastics certainly have me sitting up and listening!

Moving to something a bit more modern, Gordon Giltrap's guitar playing on *Airwaves (La Cooca Ratcha)* produces a very open performance on the Parasound. However, the guitar is a little set back into the accompaniment making the sound a tad two-dimensional and there is evidence of bass roll off at the very low frequencies, but this is not out of keeping with any system at this price point.

For some jazz, I first listen to the Oscar Peterson Trio playing *You Look Good To Me*. The melancholic opening sequence on the solo piano is quite moving and captivating and when ▶

The system can be upgraded with the Zdac or Zamp Quattro for multi-room audio

CONNECTIONS



- 1 Fixed and variable analogue outputs
- 2 Optical and Coaxial digital outs
- 3 USB input
- 4 Video inputs
- 5 Audio inputs
- 6 Power amplifier audio input and loop output

Q&A

Richard Schram
Parasound ceo and founder



NR: The Zcd player only supports MP3 file playback. Do you have any plans to add support for WMA and WAV or other format files?

RS: We did not want to over complicate the Z series in terms of features and functionality as that would detract from its simplicity and ease of use. MP3 remains the most common transportable file format so we took the decision to focus on getting the very best from MP3 rather than implementing WMA or WAV. We're watching to see how the market develops so my prediction of which formats future Parasound products might support would be rather premature.

What type of loudspeakers would you suggest for use with the Zamp in the home?

Convenience and ease of integration are key features of the Z series so we developed the Zamp v.3 to work with the widest range of loudspeakers possible. They can drive almost any standmount monitors, floorstanding towers, in-ceiling, in-wall or even exterior loudspeakers. In the Parasound office we have a Zamp v.3 driving a pair of Quad ESL63 electrostatic speakers to demonstrate its wide-ranging capabilities. The superb sound of this unexpected pairing startles our visitors every time.

Who do you see as the typical Z-system customer?

While the Z series components in black are clearly custom install products, the silver models will appeal to anyone looking for the sound quality of a full-size hi-fi system in a compact, stylish and family-friendly format. Just like a full-size hi-fi component system, a Z series system can be upgraded with the likes of the 24bit/192kHz Zdac or Zamp Quattro for multi-room audio. The Z system silver is ideal as the family/second system for dedicated audiophiles or simply as a convenient mini-system for anyone who appreciates real hi-fi sound.

Z units are available in either black or silver finishes



things liven up later in the piece, I enjoy the musicality and excitement. I am left with a feeling that the Parasound seems more at home with this style of music. This is confirmed when I play a new recording of Nigel Kennedy's *Recital*. The Fats Waller track *I'm Crazy 'bout My Baby* has all the magic that is reminiscent of Nigel's past mentor Stéphane Grappelli playing with Django Reinhardt and The Hot Club of France. I find myself transported back to the atmosphere of a smoky French

The system gives a very convincing performance across the spectrum

café in the forties. Not bad for an ultra-compact system.

Michael Kaeshammer's rendition of *Sunny Side Of The Street* from *Tell You How I Feel* is stylish and tuneful, although if I were to be hyper critical, it doesn't grab me quite in the way that I know it can. The bass line on *Wailing Wall* from *Runt: the Ballard of Todd Rundgren*, although extremely pronounced with this recording, is a bit tame all things considered. However, this bass never seems to interfere with the female vocal line, which is a definite plus point.

Conclusion

It can certainly be said that the Parasound is feature rich. There are so many functions and options that have been crammed into these units that have clearly drawn on the technology and experience from several decades of Parasound's

full-size Halo products. There are several upgrade path options that are not usually available with compact systems. These include the aforementioned Zdac, the Zphono phono stage and for those wanting a multi-room setup, there is the Zamp Quattro four-channel power amplifier.

The components of the Parasound Z Custom Series are really well made and have got the styling just right so they will fit in well in both domestic and business environments. The controls are simple and well laid out with all the more technical stuff consigned to the rear panels. The controls on the remotes are set out well and can easily be used by anyone who is familiar with such things.

Sound-wise, the quality is par for the course for a system of this type and will be very satisfactory as a second system, driving some bookshelf speakers in the dining room, kitchen or bedroom. Being a separate system, the configuration is extremely flexible and expandable, which is a real winner and sets it apart from much of the competition ●



The nearest system is the Pro-Ject Box Design Series. Also a compact separates system, the Box Design range includes a CD player, preamp and stereo power amplifier.

The Parasound Zpre2 uses a digital system of volume control whilst the Pro-Ject preamp remote control system makes use of a motorised volume control, which is superior. However the Pro-Ject, whilst having an integrated remote control of power etc, does not have the wide range of options that the Parasound offers, such as the RS232 serial port.

Sound-wise, the two systems are pretty comparable. The bass response of the Pro-Ject is more extended and offers a slightly fuller sound, but the top end on the Pro-Ject seems more rolled-off than with the Parasound.

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



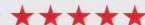
VALUE FOR MONEY



BUILD QUALITY



FEATURES



OVERALL



LIKE: Feature-rich range of products

DISLIKE: Bass a little rolled-off in the lower registers; a slightly squeaky top end with some material

WESAY: A flexible and adaptable compact separates system