

Zesto Audio Andros Deluxe II / Phono preamplifier

Analog sound for the digital age!

I guess the name of Zesto Audio has something to do with the Greek words "zesti" which means "warm". That's because the owner and designer of the California-based company, firstly, is a firm believer in tubes and secondly, he has Greek roots, from the beautiful island, Andros!

BY YANNIS KAMARINOS





His name is George Counnas. And he succinctly explains that he is a musician, a sound engineer and a producer. He was also an electronics

engineer, with a stint in research and circuit design for the British DECCA Navigator, for use in the military planes of the British Royal Air Force! A firm believer in analogue sound, when he "came home", as he says, meaning the turntable and records, he found that devices promising top performance didn't satisfy him. So he decided to make his own! Using tubes and his accumulated experience in implementing high-precision electronic circuits.

"I started studying old tube designs, reaching for the original RCA circuits of the 1930s. [...] These classic designs were the starting point. But I had the advantage of CAD software to simulate the analog circuits," he says on the company's website. In its range we currently find three phono stages, a step-up transformer, a preamplifier and two power amplifiers, with all devices following common design and aesthetic principles.

He was primarily concerned with phono preamps, as he believes that they are the most sensitive part of the (analogue) reproduction chain. We had the opportunity to listen to his latest achievement, the Andros Deluxe II phono preamplifier and we convey our impressions.

Born in the USA

The present model is the improved version of the Andros II and continues the tradition that began with two models that made the company known to the American public. The discontinued Andros 1.2 and the flagship model of the range, the Tessera Reference, which is also considerably more expensive.

The Andros Deluxe II is an interesting case, with the front panel developed in two levels. In the lower part we see the decorative aluminium parts. In the upper section, an aluminium surface is placed, which acts as a reflective surface, which follows a characteristic curve as it grows from left to right, creating space for the four tubes. As you can see in the photos, the enclosure that surrounds the structure follows the curve of the front panel, departing far from the logic of parallel surfaces. The whole is characterised by harmony and lends visual lightness to the construction.

The on/off switch is located on the left-hand side and is easily accessible. On the rear panel we find discrete per-channel switches for grounding, XLR and RCA pairs for moving coil heads and a per-channel selector for impedance adjustment (from 50 to 1000 Ohms, in ten" steps). Next are the selector switches between MC and MM heads, the RCA inputs for moving coil heads, a common switch for gain selection (High and Low gain) and the signal output pairs, one balanced XLR and one single-ended RCA.

Two tubes are used on each channel. One is the familiar in place of the 12AX7 preamplifier, followed by a 12DW7. That's four in total, rather than the six you'd expect in a design that doesn't include a single solid-state component. The 12DW7 is referred to as "half 12AX7 and half 12AU7". Both tubes come from the JJ Electronics range, are characterised by their low noise, and "click" on ceramic bases with gold pins.

The RIAA decoupling circuit is passive, two-stage and the only sub-circuit implemented on a PCB board.

The architecture of the device is dual mono, with a study in phase management, but what is important to emphasize is that the Andros Deluxe II offers a true balanced path from input to output, for MC heads and turntables (with arm cables terminating in XLRs) that support this increasingly popular, in the higher end, feature. The "half" 12DW7 (as 12AU7) is what drives Jensen's output transformers, so through the appropriate topology the balanced signal (true floating ground balanced output) is provided, as the manufacturer states. This topology has been developed for the superior Tessera model and is admittedly one of the notable technical features of the preamplifier.

In addition, the Tessera also owns the step-up circuitry for the signal from the MC heads, which is implemented using high-quality shielded transformers, also from Jensen. Zesto



Audio reports that in its design it does not use negative feedback (due to the passive RIAA circuit). Great attention has been paid to the grounding at each stage that the signal will pass through, with different treatment for the three inputs, while the Ground On/Off option, discrete for each channel, plays an important role in this very sensitive area, which will rid the signal of annoying loops.

Inside, components and cables are of high quality (polypropylene capacitors, 1% metal film resistors), worthy of the price class and the high quality workmanship becomes obvious.

There are two objections one can raise. The first has to do with the installation of the regulators on the back, so access may be limited depending on placement. The second has to do with the lack of capacitance adjustment, for MM heads, which comes fixed at 220pF. Finally, note that if you want to connect two heads at the same time, one must definitely be MM, since two MCs cannot co-operate as Balanced and Single-Ended.

The construction, which is made in the USA, is rugged, with a rigid chassis and plenty of screws to enhance stability.

Hearings

Using the 12AX7 is a solution that promises quiet output, speed, and transparency, without pretentious coloration. We have heard it in phono and line preamps in all price ranges. Its presence alone, however, does not guarantee a successful result. It requires circuitry that can "get" one hundred percent of its performance, or else the problems begin. Imagine the Bucks, with Johnny but without Middleton! Based on the details of the build, in the case of the Andros Deluxe II, expectations were set before it even came out of the box.

The first stage of testing evolved in the personal listening system, (DPS1 platform, with the "made up" Rega RB250 boom arm, Hana EL head). I stopped counting hours of hearing, enjoying a crystal-clear signal, with unprecedented smoothness of flow, rich timbres, and great ease in delivering melodies and rhythmic bases. I wasn't thrilled, however, as I was with the Echo Diastasis PH-79v2 in the previous issue. Mostly, I wasn't satisfied with the moderate level of emotional charge I received in works like *The Heretics* by Rotting Christ. Or the *OST Chariots of Fire*, by the recently deceased Vangelis Papatthanasiou. Of course, it wasn't Andros Deluxe II's fault, it was my

system's fault! It was "swallowed" by the preamp, showing that this is an implementation that both raises demands on accompaniments and is so detailed that it easily "outlines" the weaknesses of the source. Even with the AudioQuest cables provided by the domestic dealership (FireBird power, ThunderBird interconnect), some points were altered to the most impressive (bass, transparency, harmonic richness, etc.), yet the change of environment was deemed imperative!

Thus, the Zesto Audio phono stage was connected to the EAT Forte S platform, with the same manufacturer's arm and VDH Frog head. The Musical Fidelity MX8 integrated finally sent the signal to a pair of ProAC K6s... The sonic landscape changed completely. The instruments gained verisimilitude thanks to large, clear dimensions and precise placement in the room. Human voices were rendered with warmth and a well-rounded, well-shaped body. And then, a very important feature: the Andros Deluxe II does not discriminate in repertoire! It becomes very mellow with Ahmad Jamal's atmospheric jazz on *Alhambra* (Alto). Fast and edgy with the *Symphony Orchestras*, as was the case with Dvorak's work, *Symphony of the New World*, with the NBC Symphony,



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conducted by Arturo Toscanini (RCA Victor). Challenging with rock and metal, as Rammstein's title track demands. Nothing to do with the snobbish and laid-back attitudes (not to write anything worse) that for some incomprehensible reason we have come to associate with devices that cost so much or more money. Very good and deep bass, with a strong sense of rhythm and ease in making clear which instrument is playing what.

I was impressed by the separation between electric bass, bass drum and synth on Dos Dedos Mi Amigos of Pop Will Eat Itself I. Extremely rich in the high range, it contributes greatly to the blending of the bodies of the high-pitched instruments and also to the "feel of the mix".

The test could have ended here. But there was more! EAT Fortissimo S platform, with Ikeda 407 arm and VDH Colibri XGW Stradivarius head!!! A combination that might be over 20 thousand euros. How did our preamp react with this source? I'll describe what I consider the most impressive part, on the VDH-produced album A Sound Connection with a small jazz ensemble. If with the first combination, the instruments possessed strong independence, delightful tones, and tons of detail, with the second we went to another level. It became for example very easy to distinguish the individual resonances of the saxophone, separating those of the room from those of the metal tube! And this, while further enhancing the verisimilitude of the timbre, the texture of the outgoing air of the instrument and ultimately the melody itself!

Passive-Aggressive!

If anything cannot be disputed "at the end of the day", it is the fact that George Counnas knows the object in depth, what it takes to deliver the maximum return and finally delivers! The Zesto Audio Andros Deluxe II is a machine of outstanding qualities on the sonic level, with a memorable

ability to integrate individual information into the musical content and ultimately the emotional load. I'm personally convinced that this is what caused the goosebumps, as the hours passed, it became more and more obvious that the preamplification stage was present-absent in a... passively dynamic way.

The Andros Deluxe II now requires a five-figure acquisition price, but even so we still mark it down in our recommendations for listening, even if you are one of the lucky few who at times like this can afford to spend even triple the money to fill that key rack position. In any case, this is the apotheosis of analogue reproduction.

Note: many thanks to my friend who contributed to the listening process. He wishes to maintain his anonymity. **YB**

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OVERVIEW

Zesto Audio Andros Deluxe II

Description: phono MM/MC preamplifier

Inputs: 2xPhono RCA (MM,MC),
1xPhono XLR (MC)

Outputs: 1x Single Ended (RCA),
1xBalanced (XLR)

Input impedance MC: 1000, 800, 700,
600, 600, 500, 400, 300, 200, 100, 50
Ohms

MM capacitance: 220pF

Output Resistance: 150 Ohms

Gain: 45/50dB MM Low/MM High &
63/68dB MC Low/MC High

Noise Level: -90dBv

RIAA equalization accuracy: +/-0.5dB
from the standard RIAA curve

Dimensions: 430x 304x127mm (WTB)

Weight: 9.53kg

Price: €10,700

