

audioMUSINGS

25500 Hawthorne Blvd., Suite 1250<, Torrance, CA 90505-3864, (562) 424-7911 voice/fax (8 am - 5 pm Pacific Time)
audiomusings@earthlink.net <http://www.audiomusings.com>

The Audio Note Zero System includes wiring, electronics, and speakers. by Larry Cox, Francisco Duran and Victor Chavira

All five boxes (amps, preamp, DAC, transport) are the same height and width; the monoblock amps (all of 8 watts!) are deeper. The speakers are floorstanding. It is a pretty cool-looking system, given the mix-and-match look of most audiophile systems. If you want to enjoy music and don't want to chase your tail around the high end, buy the Zero System. It is not the greatest stereo I've heard in overall terms, or in any single respect. However, for about \$6000 you can own a COMPLETE SYSTEM and forget about gear forever, or at least for about ten years, when it will be time to replace the tubes. Stop reading and buy!

Okay, so you didn't stop reading and buy. Let me share my saga. I've shuffled through gear for over twenty years in pursuit of an audio happy ending. For a short while I listened to lady singers twittering like birds and standup bass performed by a "musician" who couldn't play well—extraordinarily well-recorded stuff I now yawn at. I'm smarter now. When reviewing or considering gear for purchase, I listen to the music I'd listen to even if I weren't in pursuit of great sound. For this listener, a "flat to 20Hz" system doesn't guarantee happiness, or even music. Listening to music you like is the path to happiness. For me, the criterion by which a system can be judged is whether you wish you were listening to music on it, right now, no matter where you are. This is different from thinking "I want to get home to listen to music because I wonder what the bass on a particular recording will sound like." This is thinking about your system rather than thinking about music. There is nothing wrong with that kind of thinking, but it is about audio, not music.

My initial impression of the Zero System was not favorable. In fact, when I plugged it in, I thought it really sucked. Forget the pursuit of music. Simone's Sony receiver and CD player and her horrible Bose 101speakers were very little worse, and at about one-sixth the cost of the Zero System. Ray Lombardi, the Audio Note rep, said that the system had been used at CES, so I figured it was broken in. Wrong. While I couldn't find any recordings that sounded good, anything with a full bottom end sounded especially bad—thin, light weight, and lacking realistic timbre. After about three weeks with the system on full time, things were no better. To be fair, I figured I had to keep listening even if the sound was bad, then prepare to either return the product unreviewed or write a negative review. At this juncture I gave up on my music collection and started going through Simone's, hoping to find something that sounded good. Nothing.

I thought, at least I'm discovering what's good in Simone's collection. After a weekend away, I put on Frank Sinatra's Greatest Hits and it sounded pretty darn good—still no bottom end, but vocal richness started to show up. Who else would you expect to exhibit that quality more than Sinatra? Next I stuck in The Cole Porter Songbook by Ella Fitzgerald, and that sounded good, too. I thought, what the heck, maybe it's time to start listening seriously. I then slipped in Israel Kamakawiwo'le's Facing Future, my reference for sweet, natural sound. Wow, Israel's emotional intensity was amply demonstrated. Then, Pink Martini's Sympathique showed up as even more emotionally engaging, and I loved that, but even tracks like Donde Esta Yolanda? with its driving rhythm, and Amado Mio with its BIG sound were wonderful, full, and rich! With that, the break-in of the Zero System was apparently complete, and the onslaught of a love affair commenced. Once it broke in, the Zero System's performance was astonishing, but way different than my system's. Mine, when properly powered, does macrodynamics way better than every other system I've heard. The Zero System has very little deep bass. It starts in the midbass region, where it is overblown and flabby unless the rear-loaded horn speakers are up against the back wall, where they are designed to be placed. The Zero System may not offer deep, thumping bass, but the rhythm of music—meaning meter—is present. Music is reproduced with an

excellent sense of swing, and this listener was moved. An overarching feature of the sound was coherence. The system moves on a dime. Despite the absence of heft, everything moves together so well that even orchestral pieces or tight rhythmic groups move as one, so that you get a sense of the musicians playing together. The melody of music is all the more discernible because the timing and rhythm are delivered intact. If you compartmentalize the sound of the Zero System, you're likely to be unimpressed. It is hard to identify where the sound is outstanding, even in the midrange, typically the domain of tubes. No portion of the audio spectrum leaps out. Don't get me wrong, the midrange was very nice, but in terms of "liquidity" or three dimensionality, it wasn't a match for what is available for a higher tariff. What it did do, however, was present music coherently, with an evenness of weight and balance, so that no instruments stood out. The Zero System conveyed music with so much of the delicacy, warmth, speed, and lightness of touch that occurs with the real thing that I am forever changed as a listener.

While I've heard sweet systems before and will again, what is often present in such systems is a syrupy sound, one that obscures detail. These systems frequently have a slightly ponderous quality. At the other end of the spectrum, I've heard many systems that sound more "transparent than the Zero System, but which are on the border (or over the border) of being edgy and bright. I've heard systems with more drive, but frequently that demonstrates itself like the difference between a power boat and a sail boat, the latter having a grace and elegance that the former will never have.

If you are someone that wants to hear the weight of a Holst symphony, or you listen to alternative music with techno bass, you'll be unimpressed by the Zero System and should look elsewhere. This system doesn't have impressive weight or drive, yet there is that quality of ineffable grace, delicacy, and the power of the wind behind the music that brought this listener closer to the sound of real music. This extraordinary system inserts few "errors" into the reproduction of music. You get a full snapshot of the musical event. For the cost of some single components, you get a full impression of music, from the color of the sound to the rhythm of the beat and the emotion of the message. Highly, highly recommended.

Larry Cox

When a whole slew of gear came my way from Audio Note, a company that has a reputation for musical-sounding products, I was delighted. The gear in question is Audio Note's "Zero System," no less than five separate components, a pair of speakers, and the wire necessary to hook everything up. Audio Note's web site has many interesting articles in addition to information about their equipment. I especially liked reading "ARE YOU ON THE ROAD TO AUDIO HELL?" Another thing of interest to me was a price list for circuits, valves, solder, wire, and chassis, among other things. You can buy enough parts from Audio Note to build your own components or customize existing Audio Note gear. This I really liked.

Before hooking up the complete system, I tried each component by itself. I first tried the transport, which sounded smooth and well-balanced, though I preferred my Pioneer/Musical Concepts DV414 DVD player (used as a transport). The DV414 sounded more full and handled dynamics with more authority. Nevertheless, with all kinds of music, from my Muddy Waters, Folk Singer CD on Mobile Fidelity to Metallica and Eliades Ochoa, the Audio Note DAC Zero had that liquid midrange sound.

Next came the P Zero amps. They were a big surprise, because I didn't expect 8-watt monoblocks to push my Response 2s to very high levels. Well, folks, I sat back on my couch just staring at those little amps in wonder. The P Zeros sounded as if they were more like 100-watt amps. Not only did they drive my speakers with ease, but they proved to be a very good sonic match. Next up was the M Zero preamplifier, which proved to be one nice unit. It has enough extension at both ends of the frequency spectrum to bring a full picture to orchestral music. The sound had a slight warmth that was inviting in my system. I didn't try the AZ Two speakers in my system because I couldn't wait to hear the entire Audio Note system. The speakers can be bi-wired, but they came without jumpers and I was supplied with only one run of speaker cable. Instead of jerry-rigging my own jumpers, I used one pair of my JPS Superconductor+ for the bass.

Before I go on I need to register two minor complaints. One, the binding posts on the amps and speakers tend to work loose after a while, no matter how hard I tried to tighten them. This was a slight annoyance. Second, and this is partly due to the budget price of the M Zero, the RCAs on the back are too close for comfort, at least for the macho American interconnects that I first tried. Admittedly, I had no trouble using the Audio Notes cables, as they have thin-barrelled RCAs. Finally, with the entire Audio Note system hooked up and playing, I got a nice sense of balance. The sound was not too liquid or euphonic, but had just the right amount of sweetness and detail. Music did not sound too thin or too bright, too dull or too thick. There was an even tonal balance and musical timbres were just right. This equipment has a very good balance of bass, treble extension, and midrange rightness. On went Metallica, which had fast transients along with a powerful, dynamic sound. On Muddy Waters Folk Singer, the quality of the recording was obvious. I heard background details and musical nuance that sounded natural.

On the Eliades Ochoa CD, the bass was very tuneful, with a nice rhythm. This system shows off acoustic music well, with nice texture and the right amount of bloom from bass instruments. (Those tubes, perhaps?) The upper bass showed speed and snap when called upon. My UB40 discs had good weight in the low end. On this system, you could definitely tell that these discs were not as well-recorded as the other CDs I tried. The midrange showed a bit more glare than you'd want. There was full, deep bass on their Greatest Hits II CD, but the bass never sounded out of synch.

The Zero System made me think of music more than hardware. Two things kept popping up in my mind as I listened. If these are Audio Note's least expensive components, I wonder what their pricier stuff sounds like. I also kept thinking about all you get for around \$5000. This system is fun to listen to, and fun to play around with. What it doesn't deliver in audiophile terms, it more than makes up for in delivering the musical goods. And while it definitely had audiophile qualities such as a good soundstage, detail and air, space, etc., etc., the music it was dishing up made those things relatively unimportant. Music lovers and gearheads alike, take note. Here is a system that serves both of us. Now there is no excuse not to keep fattening up our record collections!

Francisco Duran

Audio Note designs are well regarded for their quality and musicality. The Zero System is Audio Note's attempt to bring their sound to entry-level music lovers, although \$4600 is not exactly my definition of an entry-level price. All of the components are housed in extruded black or silver aluminum chassis. The first component is the Zero M remote-controlled line level preamp. The faceplate has four smooth-turning knobs. Two sets of outputs are included on the back, facilitating bi-amping. Inside the box is a single 6111WA tube. The 6111WA tube is remarkable for its long life of 100,000 hours. That's over eleven years of constant use! The 24/96 DAC-Zero processor and CD-Drive are next in the chain. The DAC also utilizes a 6111WA tube in the output stage. The P Zero monoblock amps are small and light enough to carry with one hand. Each produces eight watts via two ECL882 (6BM8) tubes run in class AB2. Those eight watts power Audio Note's AZ-Two speakers. The AZ-Twos are two-way, rear-horn-loaded designs. Each speaker features a soft dome tweeter and an eight-inch paper-coned woofer. The woofer sports a serious foam surround. However, because of their 93 dB sensitivity, the AZ-Twos don't have to flex too much muscle to produce hefty levels of sound.

And what a lovely sound the system makes! I can sum up the Zero System's sound with four letters: Q-U-A-D. The system was smooth, coherent, musical, and easy to listen to, reminiscent of our esteemed A.D. Banerjee's E.A.R./Quad system. Music sounded organic and vibrant. No region in the frequency range was too aggressive. My CD recommendation for this issue is The Colors of Latin Jazz series on the Concord label. Each budget-priced disc contains music by Concord artists, arranged by theme. My favorite disc is A Latin Vibe. The Zero System produced a rhythmic and dynamic sound. The vibes resonated with clear, percussive attacks. Bass was substantial and well defined. The dramatic force of the speakers gave no indication that they were being powered by a mere eight watts. At one point in the review process, I decided to test their power handling. I was relaxing to the sounds of Natalie Merchant's Ofelia CD. As her lovely voice floated me away to a peaceful place, an idea struck me. If eight watts sounded this good, how much better would forty watts sound? My EL34-based Anthem is a respectable amplifier, but I could not have been more mistaken with my hunch. Volume and dramatic scale were not significantly affected. The foundations of the music firmed up, but at the expense of harmony and delicacy. The musical perspective shifted

away from Natalie's beguiling vocals. The band seemed to step forward and compete for my attention, rather than support the vocalist. With the P Zeros reinstalled, music became easier to follow, and sounded less terse.

Of all the components in the system, the AZ-Two speakers were the most enjoyable. Sonically, the Twos recalled the other horn speakers we've reviewed, the Loth-X Ion 4s. Both speakers produce a warm, coherent, and robust sound. However, the Twos have greater top end extension. I briefly considered keeping them as high-sensitivity backup speakers, but my experiment with the Anthem convinced me that the AZ-Twos and P Zero monoblocks sounded best when used together. (One thing: Audio Note must find something to protect the tweeters better than the salsa cups from El Pollo Loco that I used!) The Audio Note Zero System is one of the most satisfyingly musical performers I have heard in my home. The sound is decidedly non-audiophile. I discovered no new audio treats on my CDs. Instead, I found myself easing into the music and following musical lines and performances. The Zero System may not be much to look at, but its musical involvement is much greater than the sum of its parts. Could I assemble an equally musical system for \$4600? Yes. Starting with the unbeatable MG 1.6s at \$1500, I'd add one of the many fine tube or solid state integrated amps currently available for around \$2000. That leaves about \$1100 for a CD player and cables. Which system would be better for your musical needs? Only you can decide, but seek out the Zero System and give a listen before you spend.

Victor Chavira