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AUDIO REVIEWS



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ESOTERIC X-05

A SYNDICATED ARTICLE FROM GERMANY

This review first appeared in the November 2008 issue of fairaudio.de and can be read in its original German version [here](#). It is herewith translated and presented to an English-only audience through a mutual syndication arrangement with fairaudio.de. As is customary for our own reviews, the writer's signature at review's end has a link below it to his e-mail should you have questions or feedback you wish to send. All images contained in this review are the property of fairaudio.de or Esoteric. - *Ed.*

Reviewer: Ralph Werner

Sources: *analog – turntable* - Acoustic Solid MPX; *tone arms* - Phonotools Vivid-Two, SME M2 12-inch; *cartridges* Denon DL-103, Ortofon MC Rondo Bronze, Shelter 501 MK II, Zu Audio DL-103; digital - audiolab 8000CD, Fonel Simplicité

Amplification: *integrated* - Lua 4040C, Myryad MXI 2080; *preamp* - Funk LAP-2, Octave HP 300 MK 2; *power amp* - SAC il piccolo monos

Loudspeakers: Audiaz ETA, Volent Paragon VL-2, Sebring S 700/701 SE, Thiel CS 2.4, Zu Audio Presence

Cables: *low-level* - Ecosse Baton + Symphony, Funk BS-2, van den Hul Integration Hybrid, Zaolla Reinsilber; *phono* – fis Audio Phono, WSS Silver Line; *high-level* - Ecosse SMS2.3, Ixos 6006 Gamma, Zu Audio Libtec

Racks & Stands: Creactiv, Taoc, Liedtke Metalldesign Stand

Review component retail: €5000



Is an SACD/CD player like Esoteric's X-05 mostly old-fashioned today? Or is it a machine that, during the great CD Revival Party 20 years from now, will be hotly discussed once we lust again after circumcising CDs and polishing them down with nano cloths before running a DeMag treatment? Will we make peace with coloring 10-terabyte SD cards to tweak mnemonic sonics instead? I haven't the foggiest. I only know that the Esoteric X-05's fighting weight of 17kg makes it a perfectly crafted beast with special emphasis on transport quality. The latter has become a trademark for TEAC whose high-end branch includes four integrated (SA)CD players and three transport/DAC combos. Among their one-boxers, today's review subject is the second from the bottom. Bottom is relative considering the €5000 tag. That's 1700 more than the previously reviewed Esoteric SA-10 but a 'mere' third of the X-01.



According to Esoteric, the X-05 fills jeans from below with genes from above. No doubt there are clear similarities with the SA-10 whose converter section is borrowed. Even the power supply doesn't look much different from the 'baby' machine. On the other hand, the -- alphabet soup alert -- transport sled dubbed VRDS-NEO VMK-5 trickled down from the separate P-05 transport. That commands six-and-a-half large (plus the same for the matching converter). The X-05 is thus the most affordable way to obtain one of those legendary VRDS mechanisms. On which, the NEO suffix didn't exist in the pre SACD era. It points at a more powerful Neodym motor which handles the higher rotational velocities super CD demands. The *Vibration-free Rigid Disc clamping System* concept is older of course. It's a core recipe of Esoteric's disc spinning know-how and clamps the CD to the turntable across the entire surface to eliminate vibrational pollution. This can be observed in flagranti through the X-05's top window as though to flaunt a 'if you've got it' attitude. Since black is the new silver, the X-05 comes in black – but also silver for the old-fashioned among us.



Technically

The VMK-5 transport platter is built up of an aluminum/polycarbonate mix. The concept mirrors precedents in loudspeaker and turntable manufacture where dissimilar materials are strategically bonded to attenuate resonances. Application thereof extends to the typical VRDS bridge which here runs steel and a proprietary polymer. The latter shows up also in the drawer which is reinforced with steel beams from below. To demonstrate, let's change a CD. Push a button and the CD clamp softly releases off the sled assembly. Act Two, the drawer opens, slowly at first, then accelerated, then slowed down gently at the end. This is accompanied by a cat-like purr. That's 1./ completely superfluous luxu silliness and 2/

utterly divine! Let's do it again. Sssssttt. The clamp lowers as does the illumination. Remember, you can peek through the window. But hey, not so fast. Said light doesn't merely extinguish. No, it dims in stages. Yeah, do pimp me a drawer!



Believe it, Esoteric applies yet greater mechanical finesse to its dearer sleds - precision ball bearings, Magnesium platter, massive steel elements and what else I'm not certain, just that it's over the top. Well, I didn't sign up to pen an essay on precision mechanics. Let's merely add that the transport module sits dead center on this machine, with the power supply to the right (of course with discrete sections for transport, digital and analog circuits) and off to the left toward the rear are the converter and output stage boards. The latter are built up dual mono to improve channel separation and hence, soundstaging. The analog output can be tapped via RCA or XLR; digital is available on coaxial S/PDIF or Toslink sockets.

Going in digitally is possible too but sadly only via external clock, not music signal. Truth be told, that's too extreme and insufficiently flexible. Do they dare pitch a luxury player but block access to its

upscale converter yet an atomic clock for a few more thou may be strapped to it via word-sync link? Hmph. Above a certain price, I simply expect the option to convert an integrated CD player into an outboard DAC. Heck, today I'd do easier without a digital output than a digital input! In fairness, that complaint doesn't address just Esoteric. It's aimed at the majority of vendors.



That Esoteric's commitment to quality mechanics doesn't stop at the sled shows in the enclosure. It perches on three footers whose integral ball bearings decouple them from the supporting surface. The bottom steel plate is 5mm thick as are the aluminum side panels and top. The front grows to nearly a thumb's width. Everything is solidly bolted together for eternity to make a truly fine machine. Ditto for the metal remote wand. The only complaint there, should you be so inclined, is its rather stout size.

Sonics

Esoteric's X-05 looks and plays massive particularly in the soundstaging and bass disciplines. One of the core virtues is the deposit of a grand stage in your living room, with performers unambiguously localized, stern control applied to prevent any drift or wander. This already was convincing with the SA-10. It's geared up now to an even more mature degree if I'm not mistaken. The X-05 doesn't miss a thing, be it quieter voices under louder eruptions, focus, what happens during silence or locking onto the final fire fly of a percussionist's dying cymbal hit. So you insist that such matters belong in the resolution drawer, not soundstaging? Admittedly, the Esoteric's resolving power is extraordinary too. Here I'm commenting simply that even the tiniest of events maintain seat, contour, body, place and address. The matter-of-factness whereby the X-05 sorts and allocates everything in space is simply enormous.



Self-assurance. I think that's what one pays extra for above a certain level. I sadly no longer had Esoteric's smaller SA-10 on hand for direct A/Bs. I'm quite certain though that the X-05 plays more relaxed and suave without relinquishing an iota of precision. What might contribute? Perhaps the presentation over the bigger Esoteric is relatively laid-back, its frontal stage edge a half step behind the line the speakers sit on. Forwardness is distinctly different. More relevant seems that while the SA-10 too does holographic, this very quality in its case (particularly in the 'narrow' filter mode) can quickly turn a bit artificial. I was occasionally precious about that but not with all music.

I nurse a private theory on the matter: Whenever a component is capable of sniper localization precision (true for both Esoterics), the body aspect of sonic events becomes more important, i.e. the three-dimensional illusion of a voice or instrument, its relative depth perspective. When that lacks, precision creates arrangements of flat screens. Should those screens carry sharp edges, things turn artificial (which might sound fascinating or unreal).



While I'm not accusing the SA-10 of pronounced artifice, there is the occasional small tendency to the 'laser show'. That's relevant only because the Esoteric X-05 does not elicit such responses. It's even possible to suspect a small backward step in resolution since vibrating bodies now sport softer edges. But it's more pleasant and self-assured. Tonally, the Esoteric either extends straight down to 0Hz and other players don't; or it sports a small bass bulge. I suspect the former. If the latter, the pulse still quickens! Which is likely nonsense both. A 50-euro special will be as linear as the X-05 but still sound different. It must be the exceptional resolution which is active also in the bass, be that bouncy, growly or agile. But it's never dry as dust since, when called for, the softly buoyant comes to the fore as well; or toughness. In short, highly differentiated. The less self sound a component imposes, the greater the range of possible sounds and nuances it extracts from diverse recordings. Much to my delight, the Esoteric proves this theory even in the low bass.



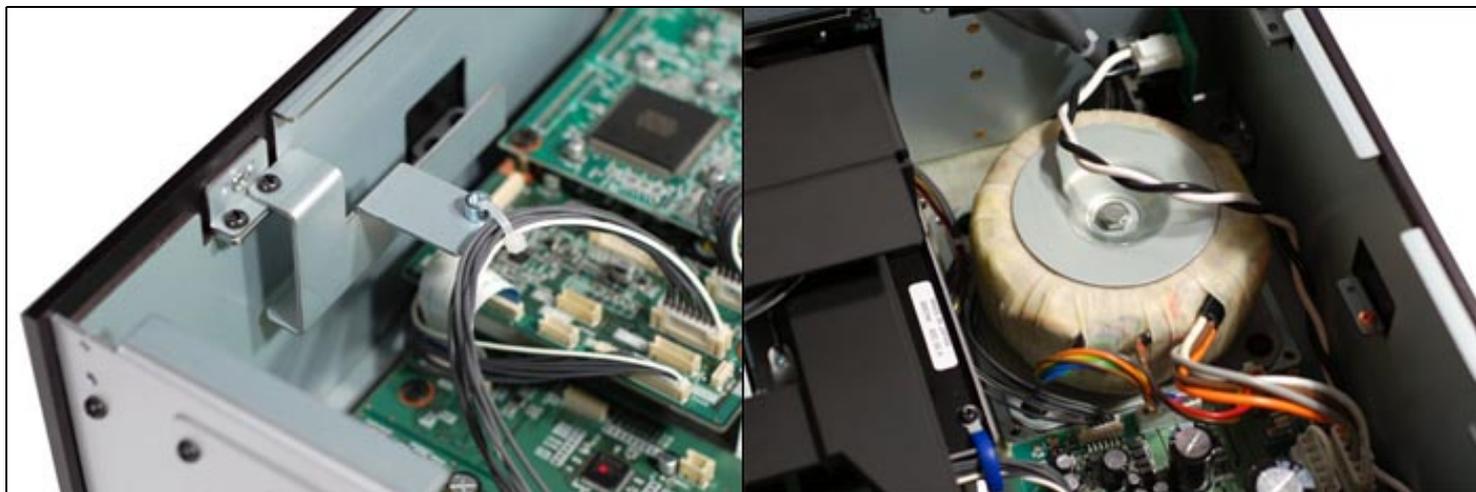
Ditto for the mids and high. But here we enter the realm of personal preference. Certain players inject more sexiness into voices. Whether that's truer won't have many concerned. You simply have to like it. In colleague Jörg's system, his €2000 cheaper Fonel Simplicité shows more midrange color though it's applied with a thicker brush. The exceptional detailing of the Esoteric remains out of reach though as does its virile and more informative bass or ambient recovery. In real life, subjective listener expectations are as important as apparently objective sonic component qualities. Here's a perhaps overly casual wrap to avoid analytical vivisection. If you fancy for an (SA)CD player a charmer with white lily in the button hole rather than a old-fox

reporter, the Esoteric won't be for you. Golden mids, silvery highs? Not. Expect strict neutrality with extreme resolving power and first-rate soundstaging. The joke is that while such a description might reek of pedantry, that conclusion would miss by a mile. Stoic certainty fits better.



Conclusion

Esoteric's X-05 is unassailable on fit'n'finish and appearance. This extends to performance, not because this player will suit everyone but because its solidity and assurance walks the middle path of neutrality. Doubt and nervousness aren't part of the vocabulary. If you value substance and sonic virtues like soundstaging, detail recovery and stupendous bass, a personal audition seems predestined.



Esoteric X-05's in a nutshell:

- The X-05 stages very broadly and deeply.
- Localization focus and image stability are exemplary. Simultaneously, sounds carry believable body.
- Tonally committed to neutrality, with linear extensions into both extremes. No charmer but a straight-line walker. First-class bass insures fun quotient.
- Micro and macro dynamics are plainly mastered.
- This machine is highly resolved. The smallest of details are rendered without haste or jitters.
- Vault-like construction as you should insist on in this league.

Facts:

- Model: Esoteric X-05
- Type: SACD/CD-Player
- Finish: Black or silver
- Dimensions and weight: 443 x 153 x 353mm / 17,2kg
- Other: Analog outputs in RCA and XLR, digital outputs in RCA and Toslink; clock-link word-sync input
- [Website](#)

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