



Knuth Zensen

## Esoteric K-05XD

Tatami or: Japanese engineering in the form of an aluminum block called Esoteric K-05XD

The K-05XD CD/SACD player doesn't make the slightest "esoteric" impression on me. The solid aluminum block, crafted with the precision of a Japanese swordsmith and jam packed with high-tech components, testifies to the rather sober skills of a huge development team.

The components – more appropriately described as “juggernauts” – from Esoteric have long fascinated me. Their superior appearance in combination with the uncompromisingly technological approach hit my high-end nerve. The SACD drives in particular, designed with unprecedented effort, inspire me. Unfortunately, until now it has remained a longing that now has finally been answered: Enfin la voilà – the Esoteric K-05XD is sitting on my rack and I can't help but grin with satisfaction!

The haptic impression surpasses my expectations and raises my hopes for the sonic performance. Esoteric's unmistakable design language is characterized by its sleek solidity. The cuboid housing is stripped of any clunkiness by generous vertical roundings that organically merge into horizontal chamfers. Perhaps I am interpreting too much, but one could draw parallels with traditional Japanese architecture. The houses with rectangular tatami geometry appear less austere due to their curved roof constructions. If this is a mystery to you, tatami are mats made of rice straw that are used as flooring in traditionally designed rooms in Japan. However, they also serve as a surface measure and basis for architecture: in the Tokyo region, they measure 88 by 176 centimetres.

The differently polished aluminum surfaces are the visual icing on the cake: they make the housing change its appearance depending on the incidence of light and support its sculptural character. This

design concept is taken to the extreme in Esoteric's "Grandioso" top line. But I like the somewhat simpler shapes of the 05 series just as much.



The dimmable/switchable display is set into the solid front panel, which also houses the CD tray. The buttons for drive control and menu settings are located to the side. The round metal buttons are recessed in circular indentations and have gray symbols or text on them. The Esoteric lettering is engraved above them. All in all, a discreet but elegant affair that does not counteract the monolithic design of the player.



The comprehensive analog and digital inputs and outputs are clearly arranged on the back. The option to connect an external master clock goes beyond the usual standard, as does the earthing connection. According to the manufacturer, the latter, when connected to the amplifier, can improve the sound in some cases.



The K-05XD follows in the footsteps of the 05 SACD series, but is a completely new development that has inherited some of the components of the Grandioso series. A glance at the inside of the player confirms that nothing has been arranged by chance here either. Everything is clearly and perfectly laid out, and there is a technical aesthetic that makes the product philosophy clear.



The VRDS-ATLAS 05 specially developed for the K-05XD is a mechanical marvel of a drive unit. The rock-solid, elaborately manufactured hybrid construction made from aluminum and polycarbonate

is designed to ensure undisturbed readout. Before spinning up, an aluminum disc is lowered onto the (SA-)CD and helps achieve perfectly smooth rotation. This also enables the laser to scan the much faster rotating SACD without errors. This massive unit is mounted on a five millimeter thick steel plate, which is anchored in the middle of the base plate, which in turn is also made of steel.

The separate power supply units with the generously dimensioned toroidal transformers for analog and digital are housed on both sides. A third EI transformer is exclusively responsible for the control unit. That's what I call a thorough approach to the subject of power supply!

In order to make effective use of the volume of the well-filled housing, a two-layer design was chosen. The discrete DAC and the master clock generator, which can also be accessed from the outside, are derivatives from the Grandioso series. They are mainly responsible for the improved sound performance compared to the previous K-05Xs model, as the manufacturer's website explains, which I have to trust as I don't have the predecessor at hand for comparison.

Another example of the uncompromising nature of the development is the acoustic fine-tuning of the enclosure. The cabinet, which is already resonance-inhibiting thanks to its multi-layered construction, is optimized by using connections of varying rigidity. Jasper Bol, Business Manager at Esoteric, explained to me in conversation that the perfect tightening torque of the screw connections was chosen "by ear" through a series of tests. The mix of rigid and "soft" connections can be seen from the outside thanks to the floating top plate (they didn't forget to tighten the screws here) and the patented spike construction, which only stabilizes under the player's own weight.



Before I answer the crucial question of whether the enormous technical (and not least financial) effort is justified by a corresponding sound performance, I would like to shed some light on the

aspect of “usability”. Let’s take a very “official” approach: According to DIN EN ISO 9241-11, usability refers to the extent to which a product can be used by specific users in a specific context of use in order to achieve specific goals effectively, efficiently and satisfactorily. For some developers, this is obviously not on the agenda, which I find extremely annoying. I was all the more impressed by the quality of the Esoteric player in this respect.

From “unboxing” the K-05XD to installation and initial commissioning, handling was uncomplicated and intuitive. I was able to remove the transport locks in a few simple steps, the rear connection sockets are sufficiently spaced apart and were easy to populate. The CD tray opens and closes smoothly without the slightest jamming.

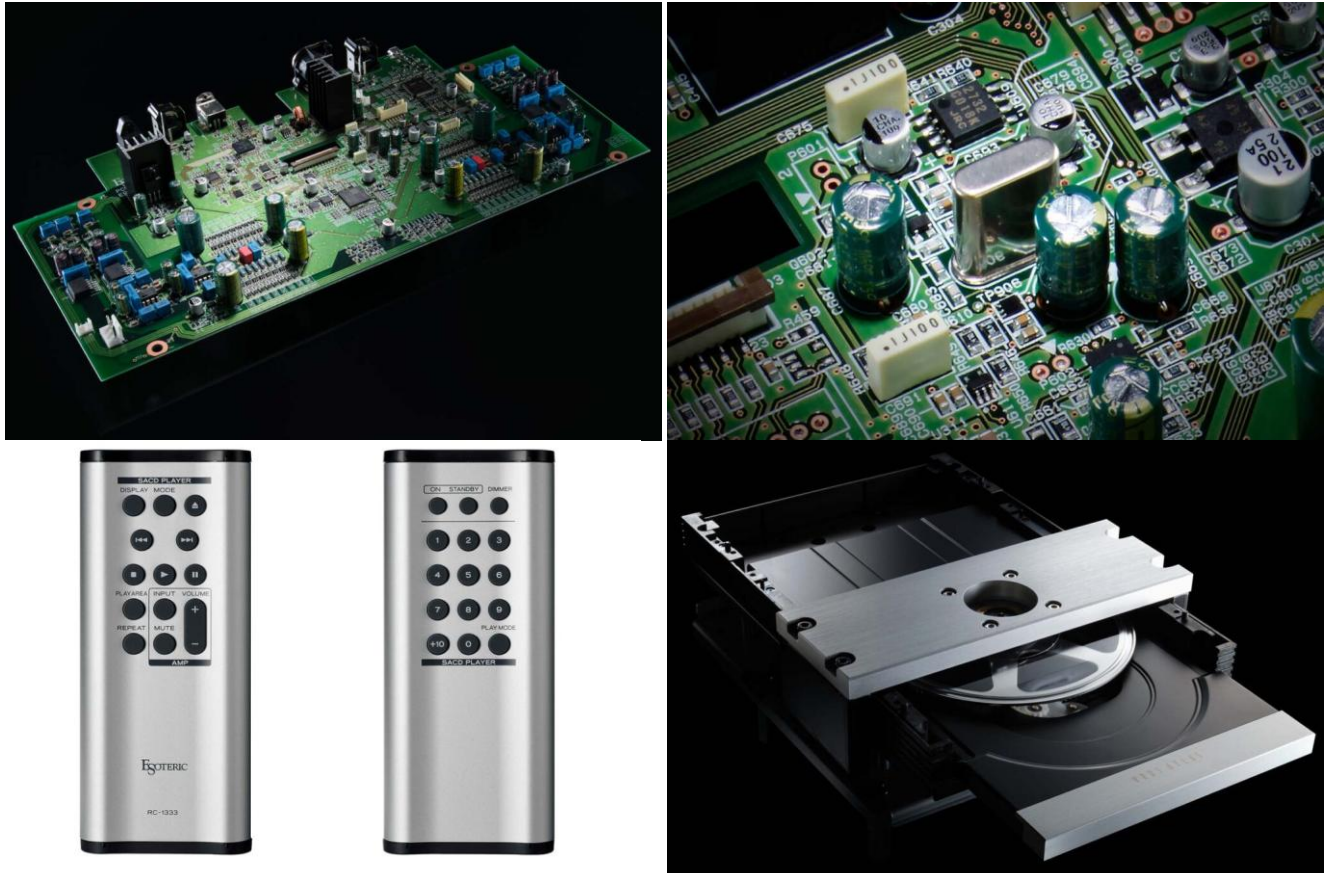
The loading process takes around seven seconds, which is pleasingly fast for an SACD. The drive is absolutely silent during operation. The remote control, which is predominantly made of aluminum and which I initially viewed somewhat skeptically due to its key blocks on both sides, also proved to be very usable after a short period of familiarization. The drive’s error correction was also astonishing. Silver disks that I had already consigned to the “no longer playable” section because small scratches prevented the reading process or frequent dropouts were annoying, the K-05XD played effortlessly. This shows the thorough development behind the player, even taking into account supposedly peripheral characteristics.

But back to the essentials and the answer to the question announced above, which could quite simply be: Yes, and how!



After just one day of continuous operation, the brand new player sounded very promising. An exceptionally open, transparent sound filled my listening room, seemingly without any reference to

the speakers. After a few days, an addictive smoothness was added, which in no way should be translated as a grinding down of the detail reproduction. On the contrary, the resolution is sensational. In conjunction with the spatial representation, which has no limits but always remains realistic, the various sound sources are coherently embedded in the sound stage. I find the transmission of the entire frequency range to be absolutely straightforward. The lower registers are carried through to the deepest abysses without any increase in the fundamental range. At first you get the impression of a slim bass range, but you'll be proven wrong when you hear a heavy and rhythmically refined bass drum. The beats are tonally differentiated, deep, hard and fast.



The atmosphere of the Parisian jazz club “New Morning” is authentically captured on the CD *Manu Katché Live In Concert*. Played back via the K-05XD, I can hear from the first, still timid welcoming applause that this is quite a small club. The stage, which offers little space for the four musicians, is also presented credibly. The Esoteric player effortlessly managed to provide the instruments with sufficient “air” within this spatial limitation and to position them firmly and unwaveringly. When Tore Brunborg moves his saxophone sideways or changes the distance to the microphone, it’s always clearly audible. In the track “Drum Solo”, Manu Katché shows his virtuosity – rich in finesse, precise and subtle in terms of fine dynamics. The timbre of each drum is expressed, the toms thunder springily through my listening room. Katché’s playing is highly recognizable thanks to two tiny cymbals. “Ping, bang, dashhhh!”, the sound bubbles burst in front of me, only to fade away abruptly and give way to the extremely fast and sensitively played bass drum. Although it is only being kicked with restrained force, it sounds richly contoured and powerful. Long standing chords of the Hammond organ always remain clearly audible, even when the music soars furiously. The vocal reproduction also benefits from these characteristics. A good example of this is the 2015

debut of the French trio L.E.J. (Elijay), *En attendant l'album...*: Cover versions of well-known songs as well as original compositions are interpreted almost exclusively a cappella with cello accompaniment. This may sound harmless and nice, but the exact opposite is the case. The three young ladies groove and shred for all they're worth. The excitingly arranged vocals and Juliette Saumagne's at times violently maltreated cello knocked me off my feet with the explosive power of a yokozuna. The very directly recorded production is thrown into the room just as directly by the K-05XD. Encore, totalement ravi!

Now I felt like turning towards early music and thus the SACD section of my collection. After what I had heard so far (CDs only), I could hardly imagine an improvement in sound quality. How wrong I was to be! Whether with Telemann's *Musique de table* (Florilegium, Channel Classics CCS SA 19102) or J.S. Bach's violin concertos (Rachel Podger with Brecon Baroque, Channel Classics CCS SA 34113) – I am always fascinated by the natural purity of the timbres and the open, airy plasticity of the reproduction. When switching to the CD layer of the hybrid SACDs, a small but perceptible proportion of these qualities is lost.



Since I only had modest equipment available as external sources (which nevertheless resulted in astonishing sound qualities), I can only assume that using the K-05XD as a DAC leaves nothing to be desired. Various filters can be switched on via the menu settings, which bring about subtle changes. Which one you choose is a matter of taste and depends on the setup. I liked the somewhat livelier sound without filters best. Meanwhile, MQA-encoded CDs were not available to me, which is probably forgivable given the format's uncertain future.

The Esoteric K-05XD is by far the best digital source I have been able to enjoy in my listening room. It just sounds right, neither euphonic nor analytical, let alone dull or bright. Perhaps neutral, but this expression has the bland aftertaste of “uninvolved”, which is certainly not how I would describe its downright exhilarating performance. In any case, after having spent a lot of time with the juggernaut, I can sense the reference to the origin of the name “esōterikós”, which in Greek means “understandable from within”. Filled with inner values in the form of “top-notch” electronics and the finest mechanics, the outwardly simple aluminum block knows how to portray the emotional facets of music in all its nuances. Normally, I find it difficult to rate something in this price category as “good value” or even “inexpensive”. Thanks to the technological effort and the corresponding sound qualities of the Esoteric K-05XD, for once I succeed effortlessly.

### ***Accompanying Equipment***

**CD player:** Electrocompaniet EMC 1 MK V | **Amplifier:** Electrocompaniet EC 4.8, Electrocompaniet EC AW250R | **Speakers:** Audio Physic Spark on Solidsteel SS-5, customized with Audio Physic VCF II Magnetic plus | **Power supply, cables:** IsoTek Aquarius/Syncro/Optimum, AudioQuest NRG-Z3, Yukon, Zavfino Gold Rush, Kimber 8TC, WBT

### ***SACD player Esoteric K-05XD***

**Concept:** CD/SACD player with externally accessible USB high-bit DAC | **Digital inputs:** 1 x coaxial (RCA), 1 x optical, USB | **Analog outputs:** 1 x XLR, 1 x RCA | **Digital outputs:** 1 x AES/EBU (XLR), 1 x coaxial (RCA) | **Playable media:** Super Audio CD, CD (including CD-R and CD-RW) | **Frequency response (-3 dB):** 5 Hz to 70 kHz | **Signal-to-noise ratio:** 110 dB | **Distortion (1 kHz):** 0.0007 % | **Digital signal processing:** max. 32 bit/384 kHz, DSD up to 22.5 MHz | **Clock input:** BNC | **Other:** external control input (RS-232), Trigger In 3.5 mm jack | **Power consumption:** 25 W; 0.3 W in standby | **Special features:** specially developed VRDS-ATLAS 05 drive | **Dimensions (W/H/D):** 45/16/36 cm | **Weight:** 20.7 kg | **Warranty period:** 2 years | **Price:** around € 13,500

Aqipa GmbH

Möslbich 78

6250 Kundl

Austria

Phone +43 5332 72300-0

info@aqipa.com

[www.aqipa.com](http://www.aqipa.com)