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Esoteric

K-01

Top of the line integrated disc spinner to coax a choir of angels from your music collection

Over the years, TEAC's high-end offshoot Esoteric has been responsible for a series of players which stretch the meaning of terms like 'state of the art' and 'cost no object' to breaking point. Its latest and best one box player is the K-01.

It is fabulously well-built. This is an SACD player, which also plays CDs and the usual recordable and rewritable variants – CD-R and CD-RW. It is an outrageously heavyweight design which tips the scales at 31kg, making it one of the very few one-box CD players that is in effect a two-man lift. The player's internal, catchily named VRDS NEO VMK-3.5-20S transport mechanism on its own weighs in at an almost unheard of 5.2kg.

This new version of the well-known VRDS mechanism is fitted with two 32-bit monaural D/A converters with eight parallel-differential DAC chains per channel. The K-01 has four onboard power transformers, including one per channel dedicated to the D/A converter. The icing on the cake is the USB Type II input which can be driven by a PC or Mac, asynchronously if desired. Unfortunately, this part of the player requires considerable care and time to set up optimally, and it was not possible to make best use of this capability in the time available for this review, so system interconnections were limited to single-ended and (better still) balanced mode (XLR) inputs.

The player's mechanism uses TEAC's customary high-precision turntable, rare-earth-magnet coreless three-phase brushless spindle motor and shaft-sliding pickup, based on previous Esoteric practice. The player has a silky smooth slot-loading mechanism, with a built in shutter for environmental isolation. The D/A converter, is based on the D-01 and specifies Asahi Kasei top-end 32-bit AK4399 D/A chips.

In common with some previous Esoteric players, the K-01 includes facilities to upconvert PCM signals from their original sampling frequency. Four separate output digital filters, including short delay and FIR filters, to reduce pre-echo and ringing, can be selected, or bypassed altogether. DSD (SACD's native data format) and PCM (CD) formats can be converted directly to analogue. PCM can be converted to DSD which is said to have some advantages for jitter suppression. The player has three inputs which can be used with external sources – USB II including asynchronous as noted earlier), optical and coaxial, each of which supports clock rates up to 24-bit 192kHz. A high-precision 32-bit digital attenuator (volume control) variable output is included, so the player can be used as a high-performance digital preamplifier.

Other features (leaving aside the leather-trimmed remote control) include an onboard crystal oscillator specified at 0.5ppm accuracy (well within the domain of high-end external clocks), though – as usual with Esoteric – there is the possibility of an external, even higher-precision master clock generator, including an improved version of the G-Orb rubidium master clock, which now includes a 10MHz sync frequency.

By any standard, the player is elaborately constructed, with liberal use of superbly finished anodised aluminium, smoothly

rounded edges and corners and an internal construction that includes five separate isolated compartments for the various circuit blocks.

SOUND QUALITY

What's left then is the bottom line: how does it sound when playing music? For this, we wired the player up to a Denon PMA-SA1 and a pair of MartinLogan's outstanding (but not absurdly expensive) ElectroMotion floorstanders.

Naturally, we paid some attention to how the player compared with the Krell 525a CD player. The answer is that the Krell shows signs of being ultimately the better CD player by a very short margin, but, when the chips are down, the Esoteric K-01 is arguably the better music player. It is SACD-capable after all, which the Krell isn't.

With players like the K-01 – and in particular taking account of the complexity of the set up options – not all of which could be explored in this case, not least because an

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external master clock and a computer with an appropriate high performance USBII interface were not available, there is a limit to what this review could accomplish in the limited time available. Even the decoding options such as the various filters and the ability to convert PCM to DSD, add a layer of complexity to the players set up which could not be fully explored.

But limiting the final remarks to the native DSD (unconverted) replay of SACD material, bypassing all filters or extra processing, there is a rightness about the K-01's sound quality that is very rare. The passion you will hear in the best recordings simply can't be denied.

Stereo soundstaging and space are painted with a three-dimensional flourish and a lack of artifice we have rarely experienced elsewhere, with this brand of players or any other (offhand this reviewer would say that EMM Labs and Krell come closest, with a similar dynamic quality and resolving ability). There is nothing soft or overtly analogue about the way music is presented, but there is nothing obviously digital about it either. It just makes music – and it does so superbly.

Alvin **Gold**

