

Esoteric K-05 CD/SACD Player & USB DAC Review

By: Greg Petan | March 2014



When presented with the opportunity to review the Esoteric K-05, I was hardly in a position to say no. My Behold front end had failed and I had to fill in the gap quickly. I had my reservations however. The K-05 CD/SACD player is the mid-level one-box solution from Esoteric. Like many audiophiles I strive for reference level gear whenever possible, and based on past experiences with mid priced digital gear, or the red headed step child of the product line as I refer to it, I had anticipated a listening experience fraught with compromise. What it would evolve into would be a great educational experience, going a long way in answering the question, “What is the state of digital in the sub-\$10K price point?”

Not much to say about functionality other than that the K-05 is as mechanically sound a product as I have ever used. The remote responds when asked, and the transport, talk about a smooth operator! The thing is whisper quiet and quite a bit sturdier than most other transports. Using the VRDS-NEO VMK-5 Super Audio CD transport mechanism, the Esoteric K-05 embodies the fine lineage of TEAC. The Esoteric K-05 is essentially an update of the X-05 SACD/CD player. Built with many of the same features that made the X-05 a popular player, the K-05 includes a 32-bit dual mono D/A converter combining multiple DAC circuits, high sampling rate digital inputs and USB input supporting asynchronous transmission at 24 bits/192 kHz, as well as a cutting edge high-precision clock circuit.

After a couple of months of promising casual listening, I got down to brass digits. As I sat and listened to Yes’ “Fragile” through the K-05, I realized [past tense] I was enjoying the experience,

tremendously. This is not the kind of recording that usually rewards the listener to this degree. This recording can be bright, a bit flat and splashy in the treble. However, through the K0-5 there is warmth, texture, dynamics and above all, a lack of added grain to the treble, giving much of the recording a supple, natural buoyancy. Vocals are rounded and vivid, with no etch any were to be found, I mean this thing is clean as whistle all through the treble. Compared to my Behold transport, the K-05 is more forgiving yet nearly as informative. This scenario played out over and over from disk to disk.

I am not a soundstage freak; though I do appreciate a well-delineated stage, I prefer to zero in tonality as the ultimate test of a piece of gear. That said, presenting everything in its place, the imaging offered up by the K-05, is stellar. With the help of the Pass XA200.5 for which this player is a perfect match and the outstanding Skogrand interconnects, images appear as dynamically and texturally expanding and contracting within space, giving the image a lively rendering, no flat, cut-out imaging here. Cymbal crashes such as those from "Heart of the Sunrise" from Fragile, loses nearly all the "whiteness" resolving texture and color, the cymbals stay planted yet simply explode from the stage. Steve Howe's guitar fades in and out with a dewy harmonic richness. Chris Squire's Bass is highly resolved, though perhaps favoring a touch of warmth over absolute transient fidelity and tonal neutrality. But don't get me wrong; the bass is really fast and resolved. Every transient, every shift of air from the bass region, from the deepest to the upper mid bass comes through the mix. This track will tell you a lot about the bass performance of your system. There are several upper bass licks as well as low bass foundation throughout. The K-05 gets all so right. Or try Lyle Lovett's Joshua Judges Ruth, "She's already made up her mind." The bass is liquid, quivering with resonance and absolutely huge in impact and reach. This track should waylay whatever fears one may have of a possible compromise of the nether regions as delivered by the K-05.

Discs like the Outfield Voices of Babalon with its 80's pop vibe along with some pretty well thought out guitar playing, benefit so much from the K-05. Gone to a great extent is the edge and the thinness. Again, there remains great soundstage placement and instrumental texture. Dynamics are just outstanding, giving each song a great pulse and forward thrust.

Sounds like a love affair so far, right? Well, it did not start that way. There is a nit or two to pick. The first unit I received seemed to have a hollow character in the midrange; I immediately suspected something was amiss. After just a few discs I felt the need to contact Esoteric to request a replacement. A new unit arrived immediately and I feel confident I had called it right. The replacement sounded far more closer to neutral and even-handed through the upper bass and midrange. However, like the first unit, the replacement was pretty sensitive to scratched discs. What is a bit frustrating is that when there is a blip or a skip, the K-05 does not search the nearest clean spot to skip to, say, in a linear fashion, but rather it skips to random points on the disk usually close to the end of the disc. This proved to be a minor frustration, and an indictment of how poorly I have treated my discs, no doubt. That said, I would gladly re-purchase whatever disc I needed in order to live happily on the K-05 's terms.

The experience of needing the help of the distributor and having my concerns so thoroughly and quickly resolved, I am hoping Esoteric would extend the same courtesy to a paying customer. This is no small issue. Esoteric has the backing of TEAC, a huge corporation by high-end audio standards. In direct contrast is dealing with “boutique” manufacturers and importers that can often prove less than competent in times of crisis.

Enough soap boxing, back to the sound. The mid band follows suit perfectly, shooting for truth of timbre and robust instrumental color in contrast to over etched, forward- thrust of detail or excessive airiness, which is usually the result of a thin tonal palette. The K-05 really shines through the mid band, that is for sure. Vocals, in particular, sound thoroughly human; organic is another way to put it. Rich but not overly opaque, there is real meat on the bones. This is the most important aspect of the K-05. Whatever compromises there may be, very few if any I can detect, are not found in this region. Listening to “Sunrise” from Grateful Dead’s Terrapin Station, the female voice is as right as I have heard from this disc, and this is a disc — and track in particular — I have been using for years to evaluate all manner of gear.

The K-05 is a full-function DAC that offers SACD playback as well. Offering three digital inputs (Coax, Optical and USB), the K-05 is ready and able to get down to its digital business. I confess I do not have a great collection of SACD’s but what I have sounds great. Starting with the Velvet Underground, “Avalon” is chocked full of some very cool songs and the production values suits the content perfectly. Lots of reverb creates an airy, slightly dark overall balance, but very believable nonetheless. It seems as though SACD as presented by the K-05 resolves a great deal of space. My Sampler from The Absolute Sound has the air and space in spades.



Using the DAC proved to be a deal sealer. Utilizing the digital(!) output on the Behold Phono stage, I was able to run it into the Toslink input on the K-05. Switching from a \$3750 Clearaudio Stradavari cartridge to a \$2200 Ortofon Cadenza Black cartridge was also interesting.

The sound turned out to be just fantastic. Outstanding bass reach and control. The lush, slightly recessed mid and upper mid band were fleshed out very nicely once the cartridge was burned in.

Most of all, the overall sound was so musical, with just a touch of let down from such a high-end cartridge being laid to rest. Otherwise, I plan on keeping this combo running for a while.

The few areas the K-05 falls down to earth is in keeping extreme crescendos perfectly in focus and grounded in instrumental separation. Things can get just a tad bit messy when the going gets really really tough. The good news is that it does not unravel completely, just a touch so the spell of lifelike dynamics and image separation is not broken. The other questionable area may be in the heart of the treble. Nothing offensive, actually, just the opposite. The mid treble is very easy on the ears. Compared to Behold which really resolves treble information to a great or prominent degree, the Esoteric can sound a bit recessed or soft, perhaps not quite as tangible as the \$75K behold transport and DAC preamp combo..

Conclusion

This has been a humbling yet informative experience. It turns out my tangled need for the priciest reference gear has been unraveled by the knowing musical fingers of the mid priced Esoteric K-05. Here were few if any moments where I felt I needed more of anything-resolution, dynamics, truth of timbre, natural warmth, frequency extension on either end of the spectrum, they are all there for the enjoying. Never forward or etched, unless the disc is recorded that way; even then, the steadfast imaging and slightly forgiving nature of the K-05 creates the perfect launch pad for all sorts of great musical moments. My hope is the K-05 gets the all attention and credit it deserves. A reference level digital product at a fair price- how refreshing!