

“Harmonically rich, solid and expressive”

■ **Esoteric K-05** SACD/CD player

■ **£7495** ★★★★★

It took just five seconds of Beethoven's beautiful *Moonlight Sonata* for the Esoteric K-05 to show that it's a brilliant disc player. In fact, it's not strictly just a CD player: it's capable of spinning high-resolution SACDs and has a full range of digital inputs too.

Ordinary CD players tend to struggle with complex instruments such as pianos, but the K-05 sets up a convincing three-dimensional acoustic space and plants the piano firmly in the middle of it. The instrument sounds harmonically rich, solid and dynamically expressive.

Move on to SACD and things get even better. We listen to a range of discs, from a live recording of The Police to the large-scale, dramatic *Carmina Burana*, and the Esoteric doesn't let us down.

With the Police's *Roxanne*, the K-05's presentation positively brims with energy. There's plenty of slam to the

drums, not to mention a rhythmic coherence most players - no matter how expensive they are - rarely hint at. There's a real sense of drive here, and a superb ability to convey momentum. Sting's vocals are as hard-edged as they should be, and cut through the hectic musical backdrop with ease.

Carmina Burana lets the Esoteric show off its sonic authority and its ability to render a huge soundstage with class-leading precision. The sound is convincingly layered and displays an Everest-like stability, even during the highly charged crescendos.

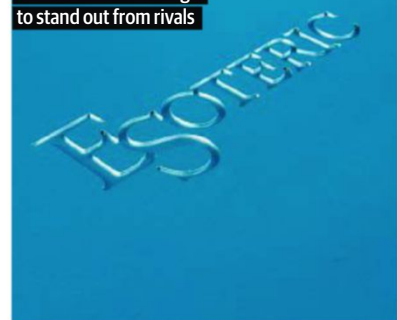
Delicacy with power

Listening to our range of SACDs makes us a little sad, too. It's a shame this format didn't gain true mass-market acceptance; through a quality machine such as the K-05 it can sound truly

TECH SPECS

Type SACD/CD player
Inputs USB, Coaxial, digital, optical digital
Outputs Coaxial, digital, optical digital, XLR, RCA
CD text No
Memory Yes
Remote control Yes
Finishes 2
Dimensions (hwd) 13 x 45 x 36cm

The brand name implies exclusivity, and the K-05 does more than enough to stand out from rivals



Round the back

1 Digital inputs These let you connect other digital sources to benefit from the K-05's top-drawer DAC. The USB input has a range of options; the basic setting allows a wide compatibility but is limited in resolution to 24-bit/96kHz. We

used the most capable setting, which is asynchronous and accepts signals up to 24-bit/192kHz.

2 Analogue outputs The RCA and XLR ports are switchable. The player can control volume too.

3 Clock input As befits a player of this quality, the K-05 has a high-quality internal clock to govern its digital circuits, but if you want to improve its performance further by adding an even better clock, here's where you connect it.



lovely, both delicate and relentlessly powerful at once if required.

There's never a guarantee that a fine disc player will also make for a good DAC, but in this case the Esoteric is a talented number-cruncher too. The machine's USB input can be configured in a number of ways, with differing compatibility and resolution limits. We went for the most capable option, which is asynchronous and supports 24-bit/192kHz data streams.

The sound through USB - using an Apple MacBook as source - is excellent, retaining all the stability and composure we heard through the integrated disc transport. High-resolution recordings such as Mahler's *Symphony No 4* (24-bit/192kHz) and Dire Straits' *Brothers in Arms* (24-bit/96kHz) are



The sound through USB is excellent, retaining all the composure of the disc transport

a real treat to listen to, delivering plenty of detail, great dynamics and real punch. We're also struck by the K-05's bass clout. It's rich and weighty without any sacrifice to precision and agility.

The story is similarly positive through the optical and coaxial inputs. Both can support 24-bit/192kHz data streams.

Digital customisation

If you like to tweak then you're in for a treat. The K-05 has a range of digital filters - we preferred the one marked 'S_DLY1' (which has no pre-echo with an impulse function). It produced the most expressive and entertaining sound. The K-05 also lets you adjust the amount of upsampling that goes on internally.

Straight from the box it's clear that the K-05 is a thoroughly engineered piece of

kit. It feels solid enough to make even a bank-vault feel insecure. From the quality of the parts to the standard of the finish, everything is geared towards maximising transparency and reducing distortion.

The K-05 is without doubt a great machine, but it's not quite flawless. It's a little dim-witted in use and doesn't respond to commands with the swiftness we'd like. Given a little patience everything works fine, though.

If you've spent years upgrading your hi-fi and are now in a position to buy your final disc-player, the Esoteric K-05 is a great place to start. It's built to last a lifetime and sounds good enough to make us want to keep it that long. Yes, it's expensive, but if you have a large disc collection and a decent library of music files the K-05 is sorely tempting.

Even for this price, the quality of build and finish on the K-05 is uncompromisingly high

Profile

Consider if you want a high-end SACD/CD player that also has digital inputs - this will do the job very nicely.

Highlight We love the K-05's sound, but it's the deeply impressive mechanical engineering that impresses most.

Rating ★★★★★

FOR Transparent and detailed sound; excellent dynamics and fine timing; class-leading sonic stability; powerful, articulate bass; superb build

AGAINST Not the most responsive player we've ever used

VERDICT Looking for your final disc player? This Esoteric is as good a place to start as any