


# Esoteric N-01XD SE Network Player/DAC | REVIEW

By Graig Neville | August 2026

Does controlling every stage of the digital playback chain—from the incoming Ethernet packet to the balanced analog outputs—produce audible advantages that are difficult to achieve by assembling outstanding individual components? Or, once digital playback reaches the highest level, do differences between architectures become matters of presentation rather than outright performance? Those questions became the foundation of this Esoteric N-01XD SE review.

Over the course of several weeks, I evaluated the Esoteric N-01XD SE using CDs, locally stored music, Roon, Qobuz Connect, Esoteric Sound Stream, and an external Aurender N150 connected via USB. Rather than concentrating on isolated sonic spectaculars or dramatic A/B comparisons, I wanted to understand how consistently the N-01XD SE reproduced recordings across a wide range of material, how faithfully it preserved the individuality of each recording, and whether its integrated architecture ultimately changed the experience of listening to music rather than simply changing the sound of a hi-fi system.

As the review progressed, another realization emerged. The most compelling aspect of the Esoteric N-01XD SE was not a particular specification, processing mode, or menu setting. Instead, it was how rarely I found myself thinking about the technology at all. My attention repeatedly shifted back toward the recordings, the musicians, and the performances themselves. In a component built around sophisticated




digital engineering, that ability to draw me into the listening experience ultimately proved more significant than any individual feature.



**Product Overview**

The Esoteric N-01XD SE is a network DAC designed to serve as the digital centerpiece of a high-performance audio system. Combining a network streamer, USB DAC, digital source controller,

proprietary digital-to-analog conversion, and fully balanced analog output stage within a single chassis, it is intended to become the primary interface between today's digital music sources and the rest of a high-performance audio system.

In practical terms, the Esoteric N-01XD SE can replace several individual components. Music may be streamed directly over Ethernet using Roon, Esoteric Sound Stream, Qobuz Connect, TIDAL Connect, Spotify Connect, AirPlay, or locally stored music libraries. It also functions as a USB DAC for a computer or music server while accepting additional digital sources through AES/EBU, coaxial, and optical inputs. Analog outputs are provided in both balanced XLR and single-ended RCA configurations with either fixed or variable output levels, allowing the Esoteric N-01XD SE to feed a traditional preamplifier, integrated amplifier, or if desired a power amplifier directly. For owners building a complete Esoteric system, proprietary ES-Link Analog connectivity and 10 MHz external master clock compatibility provide additional opportunities for system integration.

Within Esoteric's lineup, the N-01XD SE sits below the company's uncompromising Grandioso series, where ultimate performance takes precedence over cost, size, and complexity, while below it are Esoteric's Series 03 and 05 introductory products. Rather than positioning the N-01XD SE as a simplified alternative, Esoteric has incorporated a significant amount of technology and engineering philosophy developed for the Grandioso platform into a more attainable single-chassis component. The result is a product intended to deliver much of Esoteric's flagship thinking without requiring a multi-box digital front end.

The original Esoteric N-01XD, introduced in late 2019, marked a significant departure for Esoteric by replacing conventional DAC chipsets with the company's proprietary FPGA-based Master Sound Discrete DAC architecture while fully embracing network-based music playback. Rather than viewing streaming as an accessory to a DAC, Esoteric designed the N-01XD as an integrated "Network × DAC" platform in which the network interface, digital processing, clocking, conversion stage, analog circuitry, and power supplies were engineered as a unified system.

Released in 2024, the current Esoteric N-01XD SE represents the next stage of that evolution. Rather than introducing an entirely new product, Esoteric incorporated engineering refinements developed during the evolution of its flagship Grandioso SE series. These include the Master Sound Discrete Clock, refinements to the analog circuitry, updated component selection, and numerous improvements throughout the signal path. Existing N-01XD owners were even offered a factory upgrade to SE specification, underscoring Esoteric's commitment to continuous refinement rather than frequent product replacement.

That philosophy reflects decades of experience in digital audio. Long before network streaming became commonplace, Esoteric established its reputation through the development of its VRDS (Vibration-Free Rigid Disc-Clamping System) CD transports, followed by continual refinement of CD and SACD playback. Mechanical precision, clock stability, power supply design, and meticulous attention to signal integrity became defining characteristics of the brand. As digital playback evolved beyond optical media, those same engineering priorities migrated naturally into network streaming, proprietary digital conversion, and integrated digital system design.



During my conversations with Esoteric's engineering team, one philosophy surfaced repeatedly: the objective was not to create a component that simply sounded impressive, but one that reproduced recorded music with the greatest possible sense of naturalness and authenticity.

I've been reviewing several DACs lately and given the chance to review my first Esoteric product, so I jumped at the Esoteric N-01XD SE when it was offered. While N-01XD SE sits below the no-compromise Grandioso series, it incorporates a substantial amount of trickle-down engineering from Esoteric's flagship platform, including the Master Sound Discrete DAC architecture and many of the design principles that have defined the company's pursuit of digital playback for decades. Rather than simply adapting an off-the-shelf DAC chipset, Esoteric has engineered virtually every stage of the signal path—from digital processing and clocking to the analog output stage and power supplies—as a cohesive system.

Although the N-01XD SE is fully compatible with Esoteric's remote controls, a remote control is not included in the box. Owners who already have a compatible Esoteric remote can enable its operation through the setup menu. During the review, however, I found myself relying almost exclusively on the excellent Esoteric Sound Stream app, making the omission largely inconsequential for everyday use.

With that foundation established, the question becomes less about features than execution. Does Esoteric's integrated approach to digital playback produce meaningful sonic advantages over assembling exceptional individual components? The remainder of this review attempts to answer that question.



**Understanding the Esoteric N-01XD**

It is tempting to evaluate the Esoteric N-01XD SE by its specifications alone. The component is filled with impressive engineering. Yet after speaking with Esoteric's engineering team, it became clear that none of those individual technologies represents the company's primary objective. Instead, the N-01XD SE was conceived as an integrated digital playback architecture. Rather than optimizing the individual components independently, Esoteric treated each part of the system as a contributor to the performance of the whole evaluating not just each part, but their impact and interactions with each other and the whole. That philosophy became a recurring theme throughout my conversations with the engineering team and ultimately proved just as important as any individual specification.

The heart of the Esoteric N-01XD SE is the company's proprietary Master Sound Discrete DAC, but the term *discrete* should not be confused with *R-2R*. Although the conversion stage is built entirely in-house from discrete components under FPGA control rather than around an off-the-shelf DAC chip, the N-01XD SE remains fundamentally a delta-sigma DAC. The FPGA performs the digital signal processing before feeding a proprietary discrete, multi-level delta-sigma conversion stage that forms the foundation of the Master Sound Discrete DAC.

I asked Esoteric's engineering team why they chose to develop a discrete delta-sigma architecture rather than follow the growing trend toward resistor ladder (R-2R) DACs or other alternative conversion topologies. Their answer was straightforward: after evaluating the available approaches, they believed a

proprietary multi-level delta-sigma design offered the greatest technical flexibility while avoiding the limitations they associated with resistor ladder architectures.



Esoteric explained that separate delta-sigma modulators are employed for PCM and DSD material, allowing each format to follow its own optimized signal path instead of forcing one format to conform to the other. Their multi-level architecture also expands upon conventional one-bit delta-sigma conversion by employing nine signal combinations rather than a simple binary output. According to Esoteric, this approach allows more precise waveform reconstruction while maintaining native support for today's high-resolution PCM and DSD formats.

Perhaps the most revealing aspect of the discussion, however, was what Esoteric did *not* claim. The company never suggested that delta-sigma is inherently superior to other conversion topologies. Instead, its engineers argued that a proprietary discrete delta-sigma architecture best supported their design objectives: complete control over the conversion process, independent optimization of PCM and DSD playback, and seamless integration with the analog circuitry and power supply architecture developed alongside it.

Esoteric repeatedly emphasized that the DAC itself is only one element of the playback chain. In their view, the analog output stage, clock architecture, power supplies, and digital conversion process must be developed together as a single system. The Master Sound Discrete DAC is therefore not simply a replacement for a commercial DAC chip—it is one component within a larger engineering philosophy that treats the entire digital playback chain as an integrated whole.

Esoteric places high emphasis on the analog circuitry following digital conversion. The balanced output stage employs the company's proprietary High Current Line Driver (HCLD) modules, designed to deliver exceptionally wide bandwidth, high slew rate, and substantial current capability while maintaining linear operation. The HCLD provides enough power to use the N-01XD SE as a dedicated preamplifier if desired. According to Esoteric, this stage is every bit as important as the digital conversion itself. The company believes that preserving the integrity of the analog waveform after conversion contributes as much to realism and dynamic expression as the conversion process that precedes it. That philosophy differs from manufacturers who focus almost exclusively on DAC architecture. Esoteric instead treats digital conversion and analog amplification as inseparable parts of the same process.

Timing accuracy has been central to Esoteric's engineering philosophy since the company's earliest VRDS transports, and the Esoteric N-01XD SE continues that tradition. The SE version incorporates Esoteric's Master Sound Discrete Clock, a refinement derived from development work on the Grandioso series. Rather than simply specifying a lower phase-noise oscillator, Esoteric redesigned the clock circuitry using a discrete architecture intended to improve signal purity and timing precision throughout the digital signal path. Supporting the digital and analog circuitry are multiple independent linear power supplies, each assigned to specific sections of the component. Instead of allowing the network circuitry, digital processing, and analog stages to share common resources wherever possible, Esoteric physically separates these functions to minimize interaction between them. The result is an architecture that reflects a recurring Esoteric principle: reduce interference before attempting to correct it later.




**"Less Is More"**

When I asked Esoteric whether reducing digital listening fatigue had been an explicit design goal. The answer was unexpectedly nuanced.

Esoteric's engineers rejected the idea that the Esoteric N-01XD SE was intentionally voiced to sound smoother or warmer than competing products. Instead, they described their philosophy as "*Less is more.*" Rather than emphasizing desirable frequencies or deliberately softening the presentation, the objective was to eliminate artifacts not in the recording throughout the signal path. According to Esoteric, removing those distortions and artifacts naturally produces a presentation that listeners often describe as more relaxed without sacrificing detail or extension.

That explanation resonated with my own experience over the course of the review. The Esoteric N-01XD SE consistently revealed differences between recordings instead of homogenizing them. I'll get into more details in the listening section below, but Esoteric purposely avoided "voicing" the N-01XD SE in the traditional sense. By eliminating digital artifacts in the conversion process that can overwhelm, dominate, or mask the listening experience, more of the original recording is allowed to come through. This can fundamentally change what the listener is familiar with on the recording and aligns with my listening experiences as well.



By the time I finished examining the design of the Esoteric N-01XD SE, one conclusion had already become apparent. Esoteric is not attempting to build the world's most elaborate DAC or the world's most feature-rich network streamer. Instead, the company is pursuing something more holistic: a digital source in which every subsystem contributes toward a single objective. Whether that philosophy

ultimately translates into a more convincing musical experience cannot be determined by studying circuit diagrams or specifications. It can only be answered through extended listening.

**Living With the Esoteric N-01XD SE**

Reference digital components are often judged by their measurements, specifications, and sonic performance, but ownership extends well beyond sound quality. A component intended to become the digital centerpiece of a high-end audio system must also prove reliable, intuitive, and flexible enough that it disappears into everyday use. Over the course of this review, that ultimately became one of the Esoteric N-01XD SE's greatest strengths.

The Esoteric N-01XD SE was evaluated in several configurations throughout the review. The majority of listening was conducted using the balanced XLR outputs into a Backert Labs Rhumba Extreme v1.4 preamplifier feeding the power amplifier section of a Mark Levinson No. 5805, driving my reference Triangle Magellan Quatuor 40th Anniversary loudspeakers. Additional listening was performed using the single-ended RCA outputs. While I did not conduct formal level-matched A/B comparisons between the balanced and single-ended connections, both proved excellent. Neither presentation suggested an obvious compromise, allowing the Esoteric N-01XD SE to integrate comfortably into systems regardless of whether balanced or single-ended connectivity was preferred. Digital sources included Esoteric Sound Stream, Roon, Qobuz Connect, locally stored music, compact discs, and an Aurender N150 connected via USB. This allowed the N-01XD SE to be evaluated not only as a complete network player, but also as a standalone DAC within a more traditional digital front end.

From the first day of installation, the Esoteric N-01XD SE behaved like a mature, thoroughly developed platform rather than an early-generation streaming product. Network discovery through Roon was immediate, digital inputs functioned exactly as expected, and the front-panel display struck an effective balance between readability and restraint. Rather than trying to become a touch-screen interface, it presents the information needed during listening while remaining easy to read from across the room.

The menu system follows the same philosophy. Once I became familiar with its organization, navigation proved logical and uncomplicated. The more advanced digital processing options—including the PCMM conversion modes and DSD filter selections—are intentionally separated from the everyday operating controls. It took me a moment to figure out how to access those functions and it does explain how in the manual, but it is easy to miss. But once I figured it out it was clear and straightforward.

Perhaps the greatest compliment I can offer the Esoteric N-01XD SE is that it simply worked. During the review period Esoteric released a network firmware update. The update was initiated through the Esoteric Sound Stream application and completed in only a few minutes. After restarting the application everything resumed normal operation without incident. More importantly, the platform remained exceptionally stable throughout weeks of daily listening. Playback through Esoteric Sound Stream and Roon was consistently reliable, with no crashes, lockups, or operational surprises. The only issue I encountered was an occasional hiccup while using Qobuz Connect directly on an older iPad, and even that occurred infrequently enough that it never affected my overall impression of the platform.
For a component expected to serve as the digital hub of a reference system, that kind of reliability should not be overlooked. The N-01XD SE consistently behaved like a purpose-built audio component rather than a computer disguised as one.

One of the characteristics I came to appreciate was the Esoteric N-01XD SE's flexibility. Rather than encouraging a single "correct" way to listen, it comfortably adapts to the owner's preferences. Throughout the review I alternated freely among the various applications, services, and sources. Each offered a slightly different user experience, but the N-01XD SE itself remained the constant. Whether functioning as a complete network player, serving as a high-performance USB DAC, or acting as the digital control center for a CD transport, it never felt optimized for only one application.




That flexibility became one of the defining characteristics of living with the Esoteric N-01XD SE. Rather than asking the listener to adapt to the component Esoteric has designed a digital platform capable of integrating naturally into a wide variety of systems and listening habits. By the end of the review I found myself selecting playback methods based on convenience or the music itself rather than any perceived limitations of the component.

**Listening**

Specifications can explain how a component is designed, but they cannot predict how it will communicate music. My impressions of the Esoteric N-01XD SE were not any one single spectacular sonic attribute, but a collection of observations that became more convincing with time. Many components make an immediate impression by emphasizing a particular aspect of reproduction—greater detail, deeper bass, wider soundstages, or sharper imaging. Those qualities can be exciting during the first few listening sessions yet gradually become familiar or even fatiguing. The N-01XD SE

followed a very different path. My appreciation grew steadily as I listened to more recordings, more formats, and more playback methods.

The first quality that captured my attention was the sense of ease. There was no exaggerated detail, no artificially enlarged soundstage, and no obvious tonal coloration announcing itself during the opening tracks. Instead, the presentation possessed an uncommon sense of composure. Music emerged from an exceptionally quiet background with effortless dynamic expression, allowing individual performances to develop naturally rather than sounding as though they were being highlighted by the playback system.

At first, I wondered whether the Esoteric N-01XD SE might simply be a slightly more relaxed-sounding DAC than some of my reference components. As time with the N-01XD SE accumulated it became increasingly clear that Esoteric had not achieved this presentation by softening transients or reducing high-frequency energy. The answer turned out to be considerably more complex.



If I were asked to identify the single defining characteristic of the Esoteric N-01XD SE, it would not be resolution, tonal balance, or soundstage. It would be the way the component consistently elevated every recording I played without making those recordings sound more alike. That may sound contradictory, but it became one of the most fascinating aspects of living with the N-01XD SE. Great recordings became astounding, revealing layers of dimensionality, nuance, and musical communication that kept me listening long after I intended to stop. Good recordings transformed into great recordings, becoming more engaging and emotionally convincing than I remembered. Even recordings with

significant flaws became genuinely enjoyable, often encouraging me to revisit albums that had spent years neglected in my library.

The Esoteric N-01XD SE did not erase flaws or disguise mediocre engineering. Compressed recordings remained compressed. Bright recordings remained bright. Thin recordings still sounded thin. Yet instead of drawing attention to those shortcomings, the Esoteric somehow reduced their ability to distract from the music itself. I found myself listening through the recording rather than listening to the recording. That distinction is important because the N-01XD SE never struck me as a forgiving DAC in the traditional sense. It did not homogenize my music collection or impose a pleasant sonic character that made everything sound similar. If anything, the differences between recordings became easier to recognize. Well-produced albums still stood clearly above average ones, and average recordings still fell well short of truly exceptional productions.

Instead, the Esoteric seemed to improve each recording by roughly one step while preserving its place in the hierarchy. It was as though the component consistently extracted more of what was already present in the recording instead of adding something of its own. This observation began to align remarkably well with Esoteric's own description of its engineering philosophy. Rather than voicing the N-01XD SE to sound warmer, smoother, or more detailed, the engineers described their approach as *"Less is More"*—removing unwanted artifacts rather than emphasizing desirable ones. Whether or not that philosophy fully explains what I heard, it accurately describes the listening experience. The Esoteric N-01XD SE never seemed to editorialize. Instead, it allowed each recording to become the best version of itself by stripping away digital artifacts and hash.

One of the other qualities that distinguished the Esoteric N-01XD SE was its presentation of three-dimensional space. Images frequently extended forward of the loudspeakers, and the center image in particular possessed a rounded, almost sculptural quality that made performers feel physically present within the room. Instead of sounding like precisely located points between the speakers, voices and instruments occupied believable space with height, depth, and substance. This characteristic became more apparent as the component settled in after the first 25 to 40 hours of operation. The presentation gradually opened up, with greater spaciousness and a smoother, more relaxed upper treble. The change was not dramatic enough to suggest a different component, but it refined the presentation in a way that remained consistent throughout the remainder of the review. The additional openness and ease complemented the N-01XD SE's ability to render depth and dimensionality without sacrificing focus.

Several familiar recordings illustrated these qualities in different ways. Michael Jackson's *Thriller* demonstrated an exceptionally spacious and coherent presentation, allowing densely layered vocals, percussion, and synthesizers to occupy distinct positions while remaining part of a unified musical performance. This recording is often bright on my system. The Esoteric N-01XD SE tamed much of that excess treble energy.

Yosi Horikawa's "Moldy Vinyl" remained one of the best demonstrations of the Esoteric N-01XD SE's spatial capabilities. The recording's well-known ambient effects extended beyond the loudspeakers and occasionally appeared beside or slightly behind the listening position. More impressive than the placement itself was the continuity of the acoustic space. The effects never seemed detached from the performance or artificially highlighted; they simply occupied a believable three-dimensional environment.

Some of the most revealing comparisons came from material I know intimately. Trio Globo's *Steering by the Stars* allowed direct comparisons between a locally played compact disc and streamed playback through both Roon and Qobuz. All three presentations were highly enjoyable, but the compact disc consistently conveyed a little more openness and air. The streamed versions remained remarkably close, and the differences were subtle rather than transformative. Instead of exposing dramatic shortcomings, the Esoteric N-01XD SE simply revealed that small differences in source remained audible while preserving the musical integrity of each playback method.

I found myself spending less time concentrating on traditional audiophile attributes and more time listening to music. The N-01XD SE is unquestionably capable of exceptional resolution, but its greater accomplishment lies in the way it organizes that information into a coherent musical presentation. Rather than drawing attention to detail for its own sake, it consistently presented recordings with a natural sense of space, dimensionality, and ease that encouraged longer listening sessions.




**Listening Across Sources**

The Esoteric N-01XD SE can be used as a complete network player or as a standalone DAC with an external digital source, so I spent considerable time moving among its different playback options. The differences among sources were audible, although they were usually subtle and did not alter the fundamental character of the N-01XD SE or my enjoyment of the music. The most important conclusion was not that one playback method was universally superior. Instead, the N-01XD SE proved revealing enough to preserve small differences among sources while remaining flexible about how it was used. I

could choose Esoteric Sound Stream for its stability, Roon for library management, Qobuz Connect for convenience, an external server through USB, or a disc transport without feeling that I was working against the component's design.

That flexibility is central to the appeal of the Esoteric N-01XD SE. It does not force the owner into a single software platform or digital architecture. It can replace several components in a modern front end, or it can be introduced gradually into an existing system as a DAC, network player, or digital hub.

The Esoteric N-01XD SE offers several PCM upsampling algorithms and DSD filter options, and I spent time exploring them. I can't claim that all the differences were audible to me, but some were subtle refinements rather than wholesale changes to the presentation. None altered the fundamental character of the N-01XD SE or transformed one recording into another.

As my listening progressed, I found myself returning to the factory default settings. They consistently provided the most natural balance of resolution, spatial presentation, and tonal ease, allowing me to stop evaluating processing options and simply listen to music. When I later discussed these settings with Esoteric, the response was telling. The engineers explained that the default configuration represents the presentation they intended when developing the Esoteric N-01XD SE. The alternative PCM and DSD processing modes are provided not because the defaults are considered a compromise, but because some listeners may prefer subtle variations to better complement their systems, rooms, or personal tastes.



That explanation closely matched my own experience. While the alternate modes offered worthwhile opportunities for experimentation, I repeatedly found myself returning to the default settings Esoteric had selected. Rather than feeling compelled to optimize each recording, I came to appreciate the defaults as the most complete expression of the design philosophy behind the Esoteric N-01XD SE.

**Conclusion**

The Esoteric N-01XD SE entered this review facing an unusually difficult challenge. At approximately $26,000, exceptional technical performance is no longer enough. The high-end digital market has matured to the point where numerous manufacturers produce DACs capable of extraordinary measurements and superb musical performance. The question is no longer which component measures best, but which design philosophy resonates most with the listener.

Esoteric's answer is clear. Rather than assembling a collection of individually optimized components connected by increasingly sophisticated interfaces, the company has pursued complete control of the digital signal path. From network input or optical disc to the final analog output stage, every major element has been designed to work as a unified system. The premise is straightforward: eliminate unnecessary interfaces, clocks, cables, and conversions, and allow the engineering to serve the music.

After many weeks of listening, I believe Esoteric has succeeded. The Esoteric N-01XD SE is unquestionably resolving, dynamic, and remarkably quiet, but many products at this level are. What distinguished the Esoteric was its ability to organize those strengths into a presentation that consistently sounded natural, spatially convincing, and musically coherent. Recordings retained their individuality rather than being filtered through a recognizable "house sound." Great recordings became awesome, average recordings became great, and even less-than-perfect material remained enjoyable without disguising its flaws.

Perhaps the greatest compliment I can give the N-01XD SE is that, over time, I stopped evaluating it. As the review progressed, I spent less time changing filters, comparing inputs, or analyzing individual sonic attributes and more time listening to music. That is a surprisingly rare quality, particularly in a component whose technical sophistication invites endless experimentation. Even features such as the PCM and DSD processing options ultimately reinforced this impression. After exploring the available settings, I consistently returned to Esoteric's defaults—the same settings the company's engineers described as the intended use of the product.

Reviewing components at this level inevitably changes your perspective on what is possible. Over the years I have had the opportunity to spend time with some exceptional digital sources, each reflecting a different philosophy of digital reproduction. Rather than converging toward a single ideal, today's finest DACs are becoming increasingly distinctive in their approaches. The Esoteric N-01XD SE represents one of the most complete and coherent expressions of that philosophy that I have encountered.

It is also the finest DAC I have reviewed to date. That statement is not based solely on absolute sonic performance, although the N-01XD SE certainly delivers it. It reflects the complete ownership experience: the engineering, industrial design, streaming implementation, operational stability, flexibility, and, above all, the confidence that every part of the product was developed with a unified purpose. I could easily imagine living with this component for many years without feeling the need to

chase the next incremental improvement. When the review period ended, packing the N-01XD SE for return was more difficult than usual. That is perhaps the strongest endorsement I can offer. Of all the digital components that have passed through my system, this is the one I would most seriously consider purchasing for myself. It did not simply impress me—it changed my expectations for what an integrated digital source can achieve.

