Esoteric N-05XE

- Streaming preamplifier
- £13,000
- ★★★★★

WHAT HI-FI? ★★★★★





A good choice of connections means the Esoteric will slot easily into a wide range of systems

The separates approach has held sway in the world of high-end hi-fi from the very beginning. That is perfectly understandable, given the idea that each component has only one job to do, and so can be optimised for that task. Such logic is undeniable. When you are charging huge sums of money for a premium product, every last degree of performance matters, after all.

But we have noticed a change in recent years. Manufacturers are getting better at integrating functionality without compromising the sound, particularly in the digital space. Esoteric's new N-05XE streaming preamplifier is a prime example of that trend.

This beautifully made unit combines network streaming, digital-to-analogue conversion and a preamplifier in one neat, albeit chunky box. Any house-proud hi-fi enthusiast will appreciate the reduction in interconnects, mains cables and required rack space a product like this brings. Just add a power amplifier with passive speakers or, even better, just a pair of actives, and you have a minimalist but well-featured system that (potentially) can still match the best at the price.

The N-05XE seems like an ideal front-end for such a set-up. It is well equipped, sporting a streaming section that ticks almost all the boxes. This Esoteric will play any music file available on your home network, but has to be hardwired via an ethernet cable or optical using an SFP port. Wi-fi connectivity, while undeniably convenient, is not on the menu on stability and performance grounds

We have no complaints about file compatibility; it is excellent. This Esoteric is happy to play hi-res recordings up to 32-bit/768kHz PCM and DSD 22.5MHz. We can't imagine anyone getting caught short with this player. Embedded streaming services include the Connect versions of Tidal, Qobuz and Spotify, and the N-05XE is certified as Roon Ready.

A LITTLE OUT OF THE ORDINARY

This streaming preamp's digital section is a little out of the ordinary. Rather than use off-the-shelf DAC chips for the N-05XE's digital module, the engineers decided on an in-house solution based around an FPGA (Field Programmable Gate Array), a powerful processor programmed with the company's own software instructions. This converter section is a multi-level Delta Sigma design based around discrete components to optimise performance.

Should the upgrade bug strike, which we suspect may take a while, it is possible to add an outboard 10MHz clock to the N-05XE. Esoteric's own G-05 clock costs £5500, so it's a serious investment. We have heard such things make a notable improvement, so it is worth a listen.

For a streaming preamp to be successful, the analogue side of things has to be as capable as the digital. Esoteric's engineers haven't cut corners with the N-05XE's analogue preamp section. It is a dual-mono, fully balanced design with a sophisticated power-supply arrangement that even goes as far as delivering a dedicated feed to the volume-control circuit. Great care has been taken to ensure that the preamp performs consistently, whether driving a power amplifier, the line output or the headphone socket.

> ""Stereo imaging is excellent, with a broad and spacious soundstage populated by crisply focused instruments"

That headphone output is no afterthought. Esoteric has taken things seriously here, developing a new dual-mono parallel-single-ended amplifier module. The aim was not only to improve the sound, but also to ensure good drive characteristics across a broad spectrum of headphone types. There is a choice of a conventional 6.3mm socket or a 4-pin XLR output on the front panel. The headphone amplifier is rated at a healthy 1200mW per channel into a 32-ohm load, which should be enough in most cases.

The company has worked hard to ensure that the N-05XE can slot easily into a wide range of systems. There is a good choice of digital connections on the rear panel (USB Type B, coaxial x 2, optical x 2 and AES/EBU) alongside a USB Type A for playback of stored music. In addition, there is a USB Type C socket on the front to connect either a flash drive or a digital source such as a computer or personal music player.

Bluetooth 4.2 is included too. While it isn't the best-sounding connection option as far as sound quality goes, compatibility with aptX and LDAC means the results are still more than acceptable. We like that Esoteric has included this wireless functionality, as there are times when convenience trumps the need for absolute performance.

On the analogue side, there are two line-level inputs (stereo RCA and XLR), where the XLR can be configured for conventional balanced use or running Esoteric's proprietary ES Link system.

ES-Link is a current-based transmission method (rather than voltage-based, as is conventional), and is claimed to be less sensitive to the impedance characteristics of whatever it is connected to, so improving sound quality. The choice of single-ended RCA, balanced XLR and ESL-A is mirrored on the analogue output side of things

Esoteric has built an enviable reputation for excellent build and engineering, and rightly so. We are happy to report that the N-05XE lives up to those traditions. Its

WHAT HI-FI?

SOUND

BUILD

FEATURES

FOR

- Detail resolution, clarity and organisation are excellent
- Impressive sonic refinement and expansive stereo image
- Good connectivity
- Beautifully made and engineered

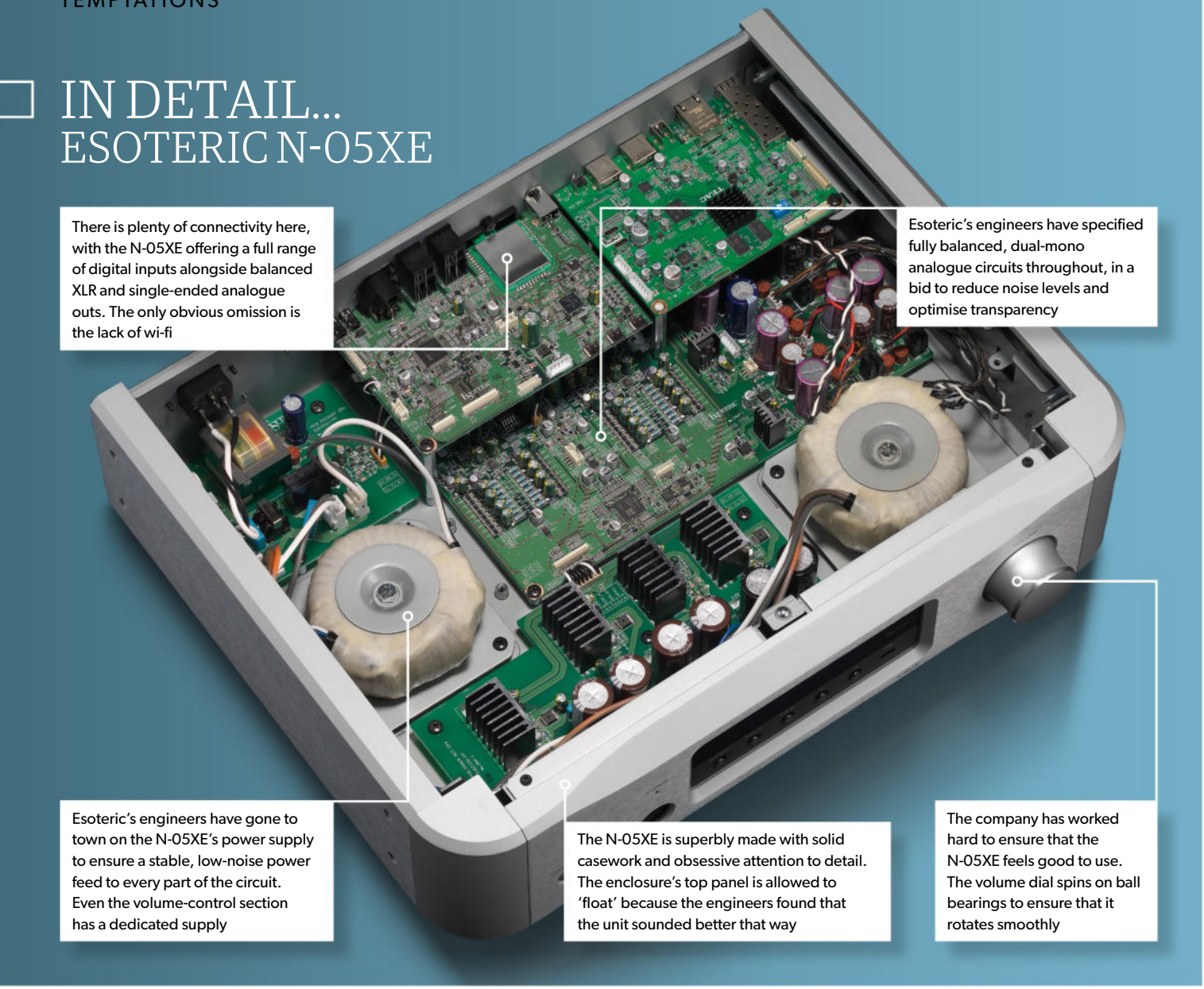
AGAINST

- Esoteric's Sound Stream app looks cluttered and could work more intuitively

VERDICT

The Esoteric N-05XE is a superbly engineered streaming preamp, packed with connectivity

IN DETAIL...
ESOTERIC N-05XE



casework is immaculately made and finished, feeling reassuringly solid. Finish options? The N-05XE is available in both black or silver.

The large volume dial spins on ball bearings, so its rotation is as smooth as you like, while every switch and button works with precision, and feels as though it will last a generation. We even like the small, double-sided metal remote. It is logically laid out and easy to use. Esoteric's engineers are clearly happy to defy convention when they think it is justified. In this case, the N-05XE's top-panel floats loose rather than being attached solidly. It is essentially free to move a millimetre or so and rattles when we tap it.

During development, it was found that mounting the lid loosely in this way lends an increased openness to the product's sound. Similarly, you will notice that the unit's feet move around when you take it out of the box. These feet are of a surprisingly complex design, featuring an internal spike-and-base arrangement claimed to disperse mechanical vibrations.

In day-to-day use, a network streamer lives or dies by the quality of its partnering app. Esoteric's Sound Stream app is a solid effort that proves stable in use. It has the usual range of features, but isn't quite as slick and intuitive as the best we've come across. The layout can look rather cluttered, though we get used to things relatively quickly.

A product at this level deserves a top-class partnering system. We slot the N-05XE into our reference set up, using it first with our Burmester 088/911 MKIII pre/power driving ATC SCM50 speakers, and then bypassing the preamp and plugging directly into the power.

Our main streamer comparison is with Naim's pricier ND 555/555 PS DR, but we also have recent experience with price rivals such as Moon's 681, Linn's Selekt DSM Edition Hub and Naim's NSS 333.

TWEAKER'S DELIGHT

If you love to tweak, you are in luck. In line with most modern digital products, the N-05XE allows the user to switch between various upsampling and filter settings.

We spend a good few days experimenting with the various options, and settle on the highest rate (512) for the Delta Sigma Modulator operating frequency and the RDOT option (a slow roll-off design with some clever processing) for the digital filter. But note, the differences between the various settings are subtle at best. The choice comes down to taste and partnering system as much as any obvious superiority.

If you like an extrovert, edge-of-the-seat presentation, then this or any other Esoteric product isn't for you. In our experience, the company's sonic signature is all about precision, refinement and delicacy. It is a cultured sound that is impressively clean, combining class-leading detail resolution with a degree of understatement that takes time



The volume dial is super-smooth while every switch and button works with precision

to appreciate. Once you get used to it, most alternatives seem a touch uncouth in comparison.

Stream a demanding classical piece such as Stravinsky's *The Rite Of Spring*, and the N-05XE's composure is welcome. It takes a frantic piece of music and lays it all out effortlessly for the listener. Each instrumental strand is easy to track, and nothing gets lost as the composition becomes ever more difficult. Instruments are carefully rendered, with the texture and shape of notes presented with care.

Tonally, this Esoteric is as balanced as they come, with no particular part of the frequency range gaining undue prominence. The highs are sweet without sacrificing too much in the way of bite, while the top-to-bottom balance remains beautifully cohesive and nicely judged. The presentation doesn't have the architectural solidity of our reference Naim, but it remains clean and stable.

The N-05XE's stereo imaging is excellent. The product's dual-mono configuration obviously pays dividends here, with a broad and spacious soundstage populated by crisply focused instruments. Everything is locked in position and doesn't blur as the music becomes more demanding. We're particularly pleased with the way that the N-05XE renders soundstage depth, giving the recording a wonderfully three-dimensional feel.

It is pleasing to note that this Esoteric is equally as talented when used as a DAC. We use a variety of sources from our MacBook Pro (loaded with Audirvana music-playing software and plenty of hi-res music files) and Naim's ND 555 streamer serving as a digital source to an iPhone 14 Pro Max to test Bluetooth.

"It is a cultured sound that is impressively clean, combining class-leading detail with a degree of understatement that takes time to appreciate"

The N-05XE does well. It has a highly resolving DAC module and equally talented analogue output stage, which combine to deliver whatever the recording requires. Rosalía's *Berghain* comes through with dynamic intensity and rhythmic momentum intact. We marvel at the music's drama and the Esoteric's ability to communicate the singer's emotion while still delivering a high degree of clarity and control.

We switch between various file types from 24-bit/192kHz Beethoven recordings to Stevie Wonder's *Innervisions* on DSD, and the N-05XE copes with ease. There is no hint of unwanted hesitation or noise. It gets on with the job without fuss.

Bluetooth pairing is swift, and we have no issues with stability. The sound quality via this input is obviously limited compared with the other options, but it is perfectly fine for casual listening.

It is also pleasing to note that the Esoteric's analogue inputs sound good too. Such a talent isn't a given with digital-based components, but it means that the N-05XE is perfectly capable of working well with both analogue and digital sources.

The story is just as positive with headphones. We try Yamaha's magnetic planar YH-5000SE, Austrian Audio's open-back The Composer and Focal's closed-back Stellia, and all work well. The N-05XE drives every headphone with ease, delivering a balanced and detailed sound that is neutral enough to put the spotlight on the headphones rather than the source component.

Convenience and the high-end aren't usually comfortable bedfellows, but this Esoteric proves it is possible to combine the two in a neat, easy-to-use package.

The N-05XE is a hugely capable product that compromises very little compared with more purist options. If you are looking for a top-class sound and don't want the clutter of conventional high-end separates, this Esoteric is a great place to start.