

hifi & records

Das Magazin für
hochwertige Musikwiedergabe

Reprint
Issue 2/2015



»Epicurean«:

CD/SACD player Esoteric K-03X

Remembering the Esoteric Grandioso quad set which I had the chance to use on the external GoI rubidium precision clock, I still get shining ears (hifi & records 4/2014). This quintet tickled the most subtle details and spatial information out of SACDs and CDs the mere existence of which I would have denied earlier to the best of my knowledge. The Esoterics would have certainly remained in my listening room if only my personal budget had allowed me to buy them. Yet hope was budding when last year the Japanese company announced the two integrated CD/SACD players K-01X and K-03X, the latter being the lower priced model. It carries a whole range of ingredients suggesting that it can generate the sonic optimum both from the physical SACD and CD phonograms and also from the supplied high-resolution data files.

The construction, which puts some 28 kilograms on the scales, rests on three feet, two on the front and one centred on the rear. As long as these are not loaded, you can notice that their lower section can swing freely. They are grounded only if the player rests on them and the pedestal pins push on the plates. Since there are no intersecting force axes in such a three-point support, the player has a wobble-free footing.

Despite its colossal appearance the K-03X is a miracle of precision engineering where all the clearances are just right, robustness is omnipresent and whose puristic face with no more than eight keys gives no hint to its ample set of features. Watching the drawer slide in and out is already a delectation. Other than its precursor, the rear panel now offers an AES/EBU putput socket, the coaxial digital output supports DoP (DSD Over PCM), the USB-B input now understands DSD 2.8 and DSD 5.6, and in the PCM section the converter capacity can handle up to 32 bits at 382 kilohertz sampling rate.

Review: CD/SACD player Esoteric K-03X

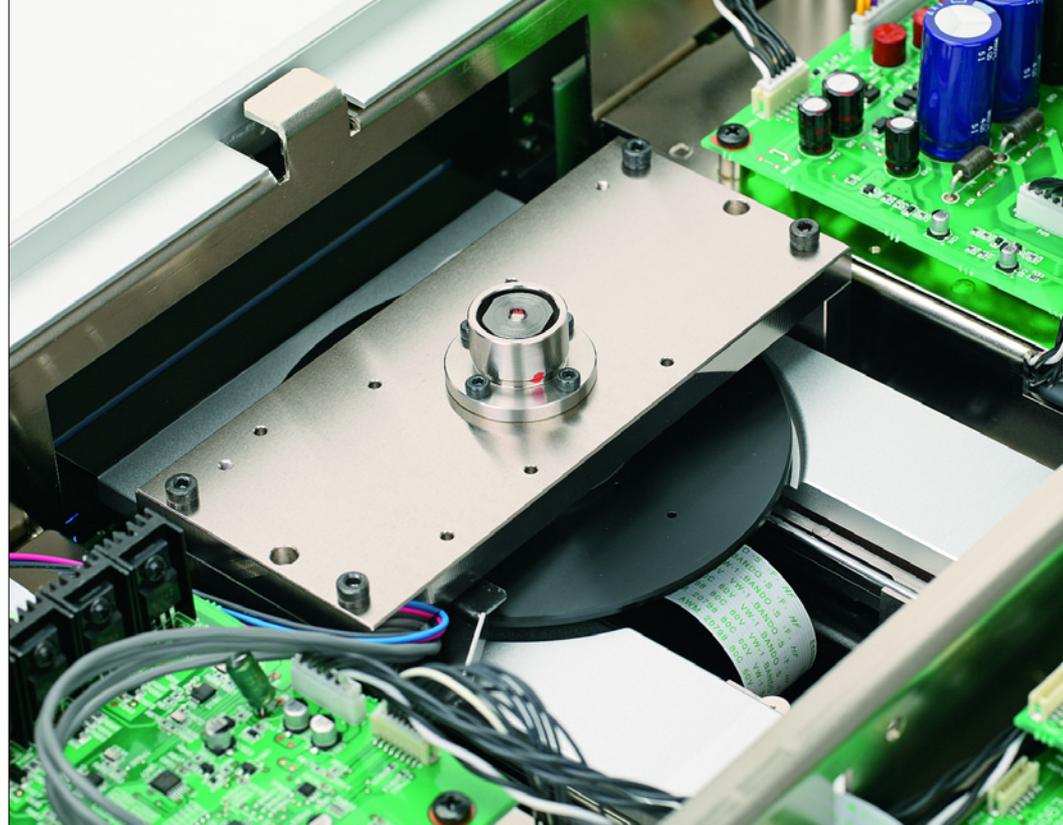
With their latest K-03X CD/SACD player Esoteric intends to satisfy the most demanding music listeners. Can the Japanese do it?

Inside the digital strongroom my first glance hits upon the solid VRDS Neo drive in its VMK-3.5-10 version. Decently decoupled from the rest of the construction, the sheer drive block weighs in at 4.4 kilograms. The yoke above the CD fixation milled from hardened aluminium is made of steel with one centimetre thickness. According to the Red Book standard, vertical flutter movements on the outer edge of the CD must not exceed +/- 0.5 millimetres – owing to its VRDS (Vibration-free Rigid Disc Clamping System) design the Esoteric remains considerably below this mark. As immediate consequences the Esoteric boasts reduced jitter, which leads to an enhanced locatability in the sound image, and less noise interference from the servo motor which needs to adjust the tracking of the Sanyo-built laser less often. This in turn is supposed to contribute to a cleaner sound image. The laser sits on a circular metal base so that its tracking angle is always 90 degrees. This is not the case with conventional systems, which also produces more tracking errors.

In the player's current X-version the power supply of the spindle drive has also been reworked. It now consists of a discrete amplifier whose rotating speed is regulated by an HF-relieved control signal, thereby undercutting the already low noise level of the precursor. This motor control is fed by the same toroidal transformer that also takes care of the K-03X's digital section, while a second one is to supply the analogue output stages. For the ultra precise dual mono conversion Esoteric employs four AK4495S converters working in parallel per channel. An in-house development is the so-called 34-bit process. For this purpose several 32-bit blocks are gated in parallel; an algorithm is then used to generate a 34-bit signal which, as opposed to 24-bit systems, offers a resolution that is 1,024 times higher. What may seem cryptical to one or the other reader, is to me the basis of the Esoteric-typical sound quality. In order to get the signal perfectly clocked, a well-shielded crystal

Epicurean

been kindled by the Grandioso review. An unnecessary issue, as Muriel Zoe's »Bye, Bye Blackbird« made very clear. To begin with, we have that mix of percussions, trumpet and double bass which is reproduced with utmost intimacy. This is crowned by Zoe's natural sounding voice, rarely ever heard spatial information and finally – to top it all – the highest possible degree of three-dimensionality as it



The basis for the Esoteric sound: the massive VRDS drive largely contributes to the K-03X's sonic performance.

oscillator works with extremely high precision on a mass optimised circuit board. The ultimate highlight is the extremely fast output stage with a staggering slew rate of 2,000 volts per microsecond.

The menu of the K-03X now follows seamlessly to present its goody bag. At least I needed quite some time to manoeuvre through all the steps. First of all you can switch between the drive and the three inputs located on the rear panel. By the way, I didn't have to install any drivers for the USB-B operating mode, the »Vox« software instantly recognised the Esoteric as the output medium. Pressing and holding the »Mode« key for more than two seconds will prompt an eight-item menu. Here, for instance, the upsampling can be set in four steps. In addition, one can select between four digital filters. It's also possible to completely do with-

out a filter, but this may produce an audible noise floor. At this point the listener also decides whether the analogue signal shall leave the player via the XLR or RCA outputs. The menu also lets you switch on or off the display and adjust its brightness; the latter can also be done in three steps with the remote control. For eco-minded high-end lovers there is also a four-position autotimer (30, 60, 90 or 120 minutes), which I immediately turned off for sonic reasons.

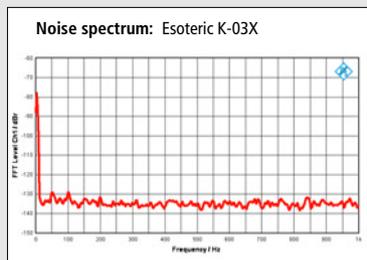
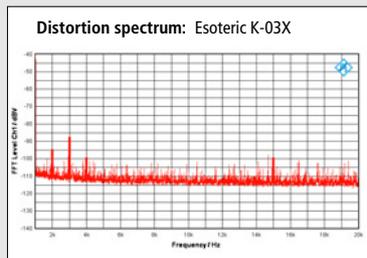
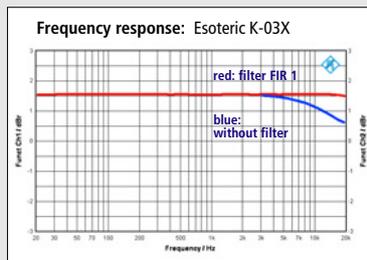
After wiring the K-03X with the Moon 740 P preamp using balanced cables, I was trying to curb my high expectations as to the quality of rendition which had

gets lost almost completely e.g. over the T+A PDP 3000 HV which is likewise on duty in the listening room. The Esoteric creates a truly phantastic, three-dimensional stage and is able to play back music in a way you just would not expect from a digital source.

In particular natural instruments benefit from these qualities. Thus pianist Lang Lang is performing Bartók's piano concerto no. 2 with vibrant vitality. No transients will get lost here, and the dynamic range also seems to have no limits. When the orchestra sets in, this doesn't happen at the cost of the piano, it rather joins in courteously. I couldn't



Lab Report



Esoteric K-03X (CD balanced)

Distortion factor (THD+N)	0,0016 %
IM distortions (SMPTE)	0,0030 %
IM distortions (CCIF)	0,0025 %
Unweighted noise voltage (20kHz filter)	-94,3 dB
Weighted noise voltage (A-weighted)	-96,7 dB
Converter linearity:	
-50/-60/-70 dB	0,011/0,009/0,010 dB
-80/-90 dB	0,012/0,015 dB
Channel deviation	0,008 dB
Output voltage	4,79 V
Output impedance (1kHz)	51 Ω
Power consumption (idle state)	15 W

Regarding its measuring values the K-03X needn't hide from the mighty Grandioso set, its S/N ratios are even slightly better. With the digital filter disabled, the highs necessarily reveal a little drop-off (circa 1 dB @ 20 kHz), with the usual FIR filter they show a perfectly straight line. In the distortion spectrum we see a dominant k_3 , the interference spectrum is absolutely flawless, just like the converter linearity and the channel deviation. The output voltage is 4.79 volts for XLR and 1.99 volts for RCA. ■

stand the shootout with the Marantz SA-KI Pearl for long – too obviously the Esoteric is superior in all aspects.

The Largo in F from Handel's »Xerxes« gives an impressive demonstration of the sonic stability. The fundament, on which the melodic flow is spreading, is adamant. The Esoteric doesn't modulate anything or cheat, no, it makes music – and this reminds me of only one other player I've heard so far: Esoteric's

end of the CD. In practice it rather seems to be the other way round.

After hooking up my optimised MacBook to the K-03X via USB, I'm changing the input. »USB g6« is now indicated on the well readable display. I click on play for the sensational album »Lux« by Voces8. This choir is an outstanding example of what a phantastic music we do have on this planet – and with the Esoteric I'm leaving my listening room,



Grandioso P1/D1. When Allan Taylor's SACD »Leaving At Dawn« is rotating in the K-03X, the informative content is noticeably going up, the music is set apart from a »sound carrier« even more clearly. The string play is as transparent as in the original and the voice is firmly nailed between the speakers. This is again one of these moments where I regret that the introduction of the SACD format did not simultaneously mark the

heading towards a paradisaical audio realm. So let's chronicle that the acquisition of an Esoteric K-03X is already justified by each category of sound or data carriers alone. The fact that it plays back CDs, SACDs and data files in such an incredibly sovereign style and musical beauty, makes it the most attractive digital player in its class to my taste – and this time there will be certainly no farewell from my listening room.

Esoteric K-03X

WxHxD	44,5 x 16 x 44 cm
Warranty	2 years
Price	13.000 Euros
Distribution	Onkyo Europe Liegnitzerstraße 6 82194 Gröbenzell
Phone	081 42 - 42 08 10

Result

The Esoteric K-03X is a full-grown hightech machine, a potent SACD and CD player which renders these physical phonograms with a captivating and even unique tonal quality. Data files are equally converted into music with utmost care so that the listener has plenty of options to indulge in a relaxing sound bath. Olaf Sturm ■