

Esoteric X-03 CD/SACD Player

The latest disc-spinner from TEAC's high-end division.

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It's an old story that the more revealing an audio system becomes, the faster it can teeter on the edge of abrasiveness. In the audiophile quest for detail, highs can become searing and mids thinned out. The effect may initially be enthralling, but soon results in a serious case of listener fatigue—and may even deter the novice from venturing into high-end waters at all. A case in point came for me a few years ago when, after lurching out of a room featuring a super-duper, megabuck system with the excellent Avantgarde Trios and all the obligatory audio doo-dads, I wondered, “How can a system that expensive sound that lousy?”

Nowhere is this danger more pronounced than in digital recordings, which have long had a tendency towards stridency. Whip out a recording from the matutinal years of CD in the early 1980s and you may well find yourself crying uncle. In recent years, however, matters have begun to improve and the perils recede as CD recordings get better and new formats such as SACD and DVD-A take another step in the direction of a more inviting sound. The difference remains real, but there's no denying the

fact that it's becoming increasingly difficult to distinguish CDs from vinyl, and that the digital format is sometimes markedly superior, both because of better equipment and recording techniques.

Enter the TEAC Esoteric X-03. It produces one of the most natural, refined, luminous, and above all, sophisticated sounds that I have ever heard from a digital player. Forget the three Gs: glare, grunge, and grit. Those terms

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are utterly foreign to the Esoteric. This is a mellow and full-sounding two-channel unit, but with excellent transparency. The Esoteric is interested in the big picture rather than spotlighting details, which, incidentally, is closer to what you actually hear at a concert.

Seldom has a product been more misnamed. The Esoteric isn't in the least es-

oteric. Its virtues aren't hidden, but in plain sight. In fact, no small part of the Esoteric's superlative performance, I'm certain, can be ascribed to its phenomenal build-quality. I don't know how it is with you, but I'm fairly indifferent to the way most audio equipment looks. What I'm more interested in is resonance control. I've found most isolation devices to be something of a mixed bag and have lost the desire and energy to do much tweaking over the years, so I tend to place a premium on well-constructed equipment. Does the top case ring when you rap it? When it comes to digital, immunity to vibration means that the laser can track the CD more precisely. This is why the lightweight, reverberant quality of some expensive gear never ceases to confound me. Not so with the Esoteric.

The designers of the Esoteric have made Herculean efforts to ensure that both the tray and the casing of the unit are close to impregnable. Topping the scales at over fifty pounds, this heavyweight is built like the Fort Knox of CD players, and, considering the musical treasures it can unlock, so it should be. Another nice touch is that the unit only features three feet, which, in theory, should help further isolate it from

any nasty vibrations. There's also a little hole cut into the CD tray for your thumb, so that you can easily seat and unseat discs. And speaking of the CD tray—it's a special sled that's been designed with an internal clamping system that essentially holds the disc in a vise. No stupid pucks placed on top of the CD that can wiggle and bounce around inside—these guys at TEAC are dead serious about excavating the last drop of performance. To its credit, TEAC has clearly put a lot of thought, effort, and TLC into this baby.

While some audiophiles get hung up on the nuances of SACD versus CD. I don't and neither does the Esoteric, which plays them both beautifully. In fact, the Esoteric never balked at playing any disc—burned, scorched, seared, or otherwise. The machine is mechanically as unflappable as it sounds. It never loses its serenity. Far too many players suffer transport breakdowns or balk, for often inscrutable reasons, at playing certain discs.

No doubt the Esoteric's virtues come at a stiff tariff. At \$7700 the Esoteric is not inexpensive, but to acquire this kind of sound five years ago would have required the fortune of a Croesus. It's important to say upfront, however, that this is not a player for the headbanging crowd. It doesn't draw attention to itself and lacks the slam that rock aficionados not only crave, but also deserve. Rather, the Esoteric seduces you with its wonderful palette of tonal colors, bloom, and capacious soundstage.

The first and most immediate impression that the Esoteric makes is how fully it reproduces the musical line. In visual terms, to me it's the difference between a balloon that's sagging or bursting with air. On one of my favorite recordings of the Handel Trio Sonatas [Convivium Ensemble, Hyperion], the mellowness of the oboe and the amount of tube-like air surrounding it were enchanting. I can't get that beautifully woody oboe out of my head. Overall, the sound was full and warm with each instrument carefully reproduced in its own space. Hearing all four instruments like this, particularly the cello with its rich resonance, bumbling along together, each easily distinguished, each limpidly

communicating with the other to create a coherent musical message, is always a thrill for me. Isn't that what this hobby is, or is supposed to be, about?


The truth is that the Esoteric is so mellifluous that it simply floats out the music, tugging at your heartstrings rather than bellowing, "Listen to me!" On "I Deserve It" [Warner], Madonna's voice simply sounded immaculate—relaxed, luscious, and heart-rending—while the accompaniment, especially the drums, was perfectly in place, with nary a trace of harshness. It's the kind of sound, I'm convinced, that would instantly make any non-audiophile, if not capitulate to the siren song of high-end audio, at least understand why a table radio may not always be the right answer. A friend of mine who is an experienced listener discerned the Esoteric's gentle qualities within seconds, and it was certainly fun to watch his eyes bulge at the refined sound.

Don't get me wrong. The Esoteric does not smudge or blur transients. Quite the contrary. The Esoteric lingers over notes, giving them their full value. Its sound is not effervescent, but stately with extremely measured and regular pacing. This makes for a convincingly whole presentation, unruffled and unhurried, where the notes simply unfold instead of colliding with each other.

Indeed, what makes the Esoteric so enjoyable is the combination of articulateness and bloom. The things that audiophiles crave—the reproduction of quavers, vibratos, and shadings within a phrase—are what make the rise and fall of a passage more than just a rote recapitulation of a series of pitches. The ability to deliver these qualities is what distinguishes what the Germans like to call the *Liebhaver*, or amateur, from the *Kenner*, or expert, musician. The Esoteric, you might say, is a *Kenner*.

After weeks and weeks of listening to the Esoteric, I returned to my regular Meitner digital gear. It reinforced the virtues of listening to different gear for me. The Meitner threw the Esoteric's qualities into even starker relief. The Meitner was more detailed, complex, and transparent, revealing more lines of music. In addition, it was more energetic, particularly in the

bass and treble. The Esoteric's octave-to-octave balance is irreproachable, but it sounds slightly shrunken next to the Meitner. It's simply not quite as big. It seems to me that the Esoteric is a piece that you love, excusing any deficiencies, however minor, *because* you love it, whereas the Meitner is the King Kong of digital. It simply commands awesome respect for its power and sweep. Ultimately, however, the similarities rather than the differences between the players are what stood out. I could easily live with either with no regrets. Of course, audiophiles like to place enormous importance on small distinctions, which is their right. Fine. One person's diminishing returns is another's minimum requirement. But both the Esoteric and the Meitner offer stratospheric performance, an embarrassment of riches, by any standards.

Top-notch digital playback is becoming scary stuff and breathing in this rarefied air can be a dizzying, even intoxicating, experience. The Esoteric draws you into the sound to such an extent that you tend to forget about the nuts and bolts of the player and simply wallow in the music. If you haven't guessed by now, I did a not insubstantial amount of wallowing. Yup, I liked it. A lot. And so, I bet, will you. If you're in the market for a top-notch player and your budget permits the likes of the sumptuous Esoteric, I suspect that, after listening to it, you may decide not to waste much time looking elsewhere. 

SPECIFICATIONS

Transport outputs: One optical, one coaxial, one i.LINK terminal
 Analog outputs: Balanced (XLR) and unbalanced (RCA)
 Dimensions: 17.5" x 6" x 13.75"
 Weight: 51 lbs.

MANUFACTURER INFORMATION

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 Price: \$7700