

ESOTERIC

C-03 & A-03

Made by and for perfectionists, this is a sensational pre and power amp partnership

PRICE £6,995 (C-03 preamplifier); £7,495 (A-03 power amplifier) **CONTACT** Symmetry Systems ■ 01727 765488 ■ www.symmetry-systems.co.uk

Most hi-fi products have a back story: a narrative that says what the product is, what it's supposed to do and to whom it will appeal. The Esoteric C-03 and A-03 aren't most products, however: in this case, it's difficult to quite explain what the back story is.

Esoteric, the high-end subsidiary of TEAC, is best known for its disc-playing hardware and its superbly engineered transport mechanisms. In this case, though, there are no special gimmicks and few signs of proprietary technology. The story of the C-03 and the A-03 is that they don't really have a story: instead, they're textbook implementations of established amplifier practice. But, they're good – very good indeed.

Both products tested here are two dual monaural designs, constructed as two identical and entirely discrete circuits where normal stereo designs often interlink the two channels in various ways – for example, in the volume control and balance stages. The power amplifier alone is true Class A and both are stripped bare of gimmicks. Gone are tone controls and even a tape output, the latter allegedly to help shorten the audio circuits. They're not entirely devoid of creature comforts, though. Each input can be named in the preamplifier's front panel dot matrix display; levels can be normalised and unused inputs skipped; and unselected inputs are electrically isolated from the rest of the circuit. Thankfully, the pruning knife stops short of excising remote control.

Internally, the audio circuits are clustered around the in/output sockets which are stacked one above the other rather than using a single circuit board for both purposes. The volume control also keeps the two channels independent and uses 'fly by wire' processing from Burr-Brown in the form of two monaural controls, avoiding transporting audio around the amplifier. Predictably, power supplies are a major preoccupation in both preamps and power amplifiers, with dedicated supplies for each channel of both components. There are three single-ended line inputs and two balanced, with the preamp being natively single-ended and the power amp natively balanced. The preamp tips the scales at 22kg and the power amp 38kg – a lot for a 50-watt design.

In common with the preamplifier, the power amp internally consists of two identical monaural amplifiers with much of the weight accounted for by the massive transformers, internal screening and the outer case, which has 12mm-thick walls. Massive convection heatsinks keep the A-03 street legal, but being Class A, it runs pretty hot.

There's a degree of flexibility here that may not be apparent at first glance. The C-03 preamplifier is a minimally equipped line level

amplifier. Although there is no provision to add an internal phono step-up, Esoteric does list a sophisticated and beautifully built free-standing phono preamplifier, the E-03, which matches the form factor of the C-03 with two independent, fully configurable phono inputs, one MC, the other MM/MC. The unit can also play out through one of the C-03's inputs. It is a flexible solution and a natural partner for the C-03, but it's far from cheap. The power amplifier is a true, Class A, solid-state design, but its 50-watt rating, which appears to be conservatively specified, can be increased by bridging to 200 watts, converting it to single channel operation. Add a second A-03 and you have a high-power stereo amplifier at your fingertips.

Build quality and finish are simply beautiful and the operational feel puts most high-end designs to shame. Handling these two components is like handling Rolex watches: you just know they're superior.

SOUND QUALITY

Superiority is also the word that springs to mind when it comes to performance. It is hard to describe the sound of this combination: weirdly, it doesn't really have an identifiable sound of its own – but that's not necessarily a bad thing. It's not to suggest blandness: more

"Superiority springs to mind when it comes to describing the Esoteric's performance"

that it is almost totally devoid of what usually manifests as character or personality, which is a part of just about any item of electronics you can name. Specifically, the Esoteric pairing is fast, assured and extremely dynamic, but there

is no identifiable edge to the sound and no grain – in fact, there's nothing to distract you from the musical content.



This is a solid-state design made by and for perfectionists. It lacks the warmth and polish that some valve amplifiers bring to the party, but it is not cold or mechanical either. It's very much a master of its situation and it transcends the usual stereotypes. Despite its modest power yield, it is very much on top of whatever it is driving. It doesn't bottom out, or lose grip at high volume levels and is completely unfazed, for example, by the MartinLogan CLX (see separate review, p48), whose input impedance is not far short of a short circuit at high frequencies.

There is no granularity that we could detect, nor other obvious giveaways of its solid-state origin. The sound is extremely well-disciplined, but in no sense is it sterile. The greatest accolade this reviewer can dish out to the Esoteric is that if he had to choose one last amplifier to own, on the evidence available right now, this would probably be the one to go for. ■■

Alvin Gold