



## EQUIPMENT REVIEW

# Esoteric E-03 phono stage

by Jason Kennedy

**Y**ou have to hand it to the Japanese, no one builds electronics like they do. The attention to detail, the finish the fit and the feel of high-end kit from that island nation is second to none. The Germans get pretty close, yet somehow don't quite manage to make such perfectly executed products. This was apparent with the likes of Luxman back in the day and continues with brands like Esoteric today, although there aren't many brands like TEAC Esoteric. A company that builds only high-end components and up until recently only those designed to replay five-inch polycarbonate discs. But a few years back, it started to introduce amplifiers to its range and now has an integrated, preamp and three power amps on its website. It also has a phono stage and in true Esoteric style, it's a fully formed and fully featured example of the breed with two inputs and variable settings for each. It appears to be based on the company's C-03 linestage preamplifier and there's a clue in the name as to why that might be, although it's not clear what 'E' might stand for.

The E-03 is part of Esoteric's Master Sound Works concept, components designed to reproduce the 'audio impression' of the master tape. The case is a masterwork in itself; a steel subchassis splits up the interior in order to shield the amplifier circuits from flux leakage from the mains transformers that sit behind the front panel, that is two mains transformers for two identical amplifiers, because this is a dual mono design all the way through. The exterior of the case is in solid aluminium, which has a two finishes. It's bead blasted in certain sections and brushed in what's described

as 'short scratch' style in others to provide some contrast. The front panel is actually deeper than it looks, for fixing purposes, while the top lid reveals no means of fixing at all. The three feet give a disconcerting rattle when you pick the unit up but that's because they are two part, stainless steel examples that have a hardened tip sitting in a cup, very much in the style of certain aftermarket supports.

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Around back, RCA phono inputs for the two phono stages within the E-03 are spread out laterally with the output RCAs alongside them. There are no XLRs because this is a single-ended design and while certain markets appear to like them there is little point in putting an unbalanced

▶ signal through an XLR just for the sake of it, in fact there is a good argument for avoiding this approach. The final rear panel fitting is the earth clamp, just one which seems a little mean given that there are two inputs here, I wouldn't like to try fitting the earth leads from two SME arm-leads, with their double earth tags, onto this one post.

The luxuriously sculpted front panel has controls for impedance on both inputs and capacitance on the right hand one, this because one input is dedicated to moving coil cartridges whereas the other can accommodate moving magnets as well. Input one for MCs has seven impedance settings all the way from 10 Ohms to 10k Ohms, input two offers four impedance settings over the same range plus three capacitive loadings. Both inputs have a demagnetizing function for cartridges and step-up transformers.

This is a well-equipped phono stage no doubt about it, all too many of the ilk either don't have any means to adjust what the cartridge output sees or require you to open the box to fiddle with little DIP switches or move jumpers around. Esoteric's approach means that you can experiment with impedances rather more easily so you are more likely to get this aspect of cartridge set-up right, I wish more stages were this simple.

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It also wish that more stages were this revealing but that isn't going to happen any time soon, if experience is anything to go by you can't make phenomenally transparent electronics without the attention to detail that Esoteric has brought to bare here. My first impressions were of an immensely relaxed and easy sound but this was largely because the first slab of vinyl I spun through it sounds that way. The E-03 is totally free of grain or edginess which is still quite rare in solid state amplification and initially makes a product seem soft edged. However it soon becomes apparent that you can hear an awful lot more of the fine detail, the harmonics and reverberations that accompany every note, every sound. Thus an old copy of Mallard's eponymous debut is extraordinarily laid back but replete with nuances. And yet the playing is bang on time albeit in a totally effortless and fluent fashion, with none of the leading edge sibilance that passes for speed in so much equipment. Put on a recent release of Deep Purple's seminal Machine Head and there is no mistaking the drive of the track Highway Star which will have you leaping about in the armchair even at low level, well it did for me a least.

This stage's greatest quality is its ability to show you the often huge differences between recordings and pressings, an ability that can be negative if the pressing of Steely Dan's *Katy Lied* happens to be more worn than you thought. I found another one – you need several to get you by – which initially seemed better but deteriorated as the stylus approached the label. Of all the albums to warrant audiophile re-issue this is one of the most obvious yet



inexplicably overlooked. We have enough great pressings of *Gaucha* and *Aja*, it's the mid period diamonds that need re-pressing. Rant over.

Assuming the vinyl hasn't been mangled what you hear is the studio and its hardware plus the style of the producer and mastering engineer along with your favourite music. This isn't to say that these qualities are presented separately but that their nature is considerably more obvious. Importantly it also brings you more of the performance and the quality of playing, this isn't a tool for analysis but for enjoying great music. Something you can't help but do if the rest of the system is up to the job, I used a Townshend Rock 7 turntable with Funk Firm's FXR tonearm and a van den Hul Condor XCM cartridge in front of the E-03. On the other side preamp duties were taken by my trusty Border Patrol Control Unit and then Max Townshend's remarkable Glastonbury Pre, a contender for most transparent linestage in the world ever. Power amplification and transduction was delivered by the mighty ATC SCM 150ASL, an active speaker that tells you how it is come what may.

One thing that it told me was that the Esoteric's rich, three dimensional presentation is not quite as fleet of foot as the very best phono stages can be. It's unusual for a product to be able to do both timing and rich detail at the highest level and while this stage times quite nicely it's not quite up to the standards of the best in this regard. It's a ▶

▶ situation where even at this price you still have to make a choice really and that will of course come down to musical and sonic taste, I enjoy both qualities but err on the pace side of the equation when the option is available. But as my comments hopefully reveal I found the realism on offer with the Esoteric to be totally beguiling – it brings the music closer to you and puts it into the room so effectively that the result is totally convincing.

The E-03 is the sort of product that you could never have too revealing a system for, it is always going to be more refined than a power amplifier and more even handed than a loudspeaker. It may not have the sheer midrange transparency of the best triodes but its noise levels are always going to be lower and its bandwidth wider. I found quite a few albums that had more bass energy on them than expected, the ATCs are big speakers for the room they are in but this isn't often an issue but this is presumably because my Trichord Delphini phono stage is relatively lean in this area. The Esoteric isn't fat or exaggerated but it doesn't play down the bottom end, this is a quality that brings body to the rest of the range not least the treble. Arvo Pärt's *Tabula Rasa* often tests a system in this regard, his use of violins in a sparse acoustic can be grating in the wrong system but here the music's power to spiritually uplift is fully evident, its conduit to a higher plane waiting for you to close your eyes.

ECM recordings like *Tabula Rasa* can sound a little bit clinically clean but in the quieter passages its apparent that the church where the recording was made is actually pretty creaky, I bet Arvo gave someone a hard stare when that showed up on the monitors.

Less ethereal music such as Miles' *Bitches Brew* reveal the Esoteric's ability to cope under fire. This is not like *Kind of Blue*, it's a rather less accessible album and can easily be hard work for the listener. But if you eliminate distortion and time smear from the RIAA and phono amplification process it becomes a whole lot more approachable, not easy listening of course but engaging and pretty damn remarkable. It's probably at its most impressive with dense material; the Mahavishnu Orchestra, John McLaughlin and Jan Hammer's leviathan among jazz-rock combos, were inclined to throw everything at you all of the time and while the solid beat means its never hard work you don't



## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Maximum output level: 18V

Rated output level: 500mV

Gain: 40dB (MM) 66dB (MC)

Maximum input level: 180mV (MM) 9mV (MC)

Input impedance: 47 k ohms (MM) Selectable (MC)

Input 1: 10/50/100/300/500/1k/10k ohms

Input 2: MC 100/500/1k/10k ohms, MM 0/100/330 picoFarads

External dimensions (W×H×D):

44.2×10.4×36.4cm

Weight: 10.5 kg

Price: £4,795

Manufactured by: TEAC Esoteric

URL: [www.esoteric.jp](http://www.esoteric.jp)

Distributed by: Symmetry

URL: [www.symmetry-systems.co.uk](http://www.symmetry-systems.co.uk)

Tel: +44(0)1727 865488

often get this degree of insight into exactly what all five members are up to.

One thing that I found a little surprising is that the Esoteric CD players that I've had the pleasure of using in the past did not sound like the E-03, their character being akin to ECM recordings: revealing, clean and slightly lean. This phono stage is ultra revealing in the context of a warmer balance, this undoubtedly reflects the nature of vinyl itself and the extremely low distortion nature of the phono stage, there is no grain, no overload it simply tells it like it is in a calm and transparent fashion. Perhaps it's naïve to assume that the same engineers work on the analogue electronics in both product types or it could be that the analogue front end they work with has a much leaner balance. A situation that might result in both product types sounding more similar.

What I do know is that this is a fabulously well built and revealing phono stage that is capable of revealing almost everything that a great turntable can give it, if you appreciate refined components it has few peers. +