

hifi & records

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»Masterpiece«:

Esoteric K-01 X

December 1984 was cold and wet. Using public transport, I was then heading for a dealer in Essen who had announced a used Philips CD 100. After 500 deutschmarks had changed hands, I was carrying the compact player back home in a plastic bag. Four weeks earlier I had bought my first compact disc, the album »Love Over Gold« by the Dire Straits, and finally I could listen to it on my own player. But hey, those days were very different from now: after inserting the CD, one had to close the plastic lid of the Philips manually, and for lack of a display there was no time indication. Green LEDs were showing the number of the tracks, a second LED bar had been provided for the programming.

My CD and later also SACD collection has kept growing steadily in over three decades. But whilst I still listen to the Dire Straits album often and with pleasure, I used to change my CD players regularly. I remember gladly the Denon DCD-1800, an Arcam Delta 70 or the Marantz SA-KI Pearl which is still with me today. Each of them marked a distinct leap in the quality of reproduction. Which, of course, raises the question as to how many steps are yet to come on this flight of stairs.

In issue 4/2014 of hifi & records I had definitely reached the top-most landing in every respect: not only does it answer to the name of Esoteric Grandioso, but given an adequately perfect workmanship, it also sounds as unique and precisely as the name suggests. However, this four-piece combination, which is hardly affordable for ordinary mortals, has two siblings. The Esoteric K-03X, the »smallest« offspring in the family, made a successful appearance in issue 3/2015, likewise presenting an addictive reproduction that easily deprived the numerous acoustic biases towards digital technology their foundation. Now only one is still missing, and I could not and would not let this one pass by on me: the K-01X.

Mechanical mass seems to be a prerequisite for sonic excellence. The bigger brother weighs in at a hefty 31 kilograms, three more than the K-03X. Three articulated special feet decouple it from the

installation area and provide a wobble-free stand in the rack. What a good-looking player this Esoteric K-01X is indeed! Its startup procedure did not give me any problems, since it is identical to that of the K-03X. The K-01X can also put out the signal balanced or via RCA, yet prior to listening the active output must be selected accordingly in the clear menu. Sure, all functions of the player can also be controlled on the device, but in practice the well-designed remote control should mostly be used for this.

In technical respect this mighty machine has, of course, plenty to offer. The drive block of over five kilograms is exactly the same as in the Esoteric flagship Grandioso P1. When the CD or SACD lies on the drive pulley, it is pressed down from above on its entire area by a platter which is suspended from a massive steel bridge of two centimetres thickness. Flapping motions of the sound carrier are therefore no longer possible, whereby the accuracy in reading out the pits from the surface is increased. The precise clock for suppressing any jitter errors is provided by a voltage-controlled crystal oscillator which is made exclusively for the Japanese.

The digital signal is then fed to two mono converter sections which are equal to those of the Grandioso D1. Esoteric uses eight 32-bit DACs from AKM (AK4495 S) per channel and the Muses 02 op-amps for the subsequent current/voltage conversion. A clever algorithm is supposed to charm an arithmetical 35-bit resolution out of the various converter elements connected in parallel, which on paper is 2,048 times superior to a 24-bit unit. This technology by Esoteric is said to be largely responsible for the fine mix of analogue sound and ultimate resolution while ensuring maximum linearity at the lowest possible distortion level.

The power supply section is staffed with no less than four toroidal transformers located in the player basement: one for the drive unit, one for the tray mechanism and the digital circuits – and, oh dear me, each D/A converter even has its dedicated power supply! That way negative influences on the

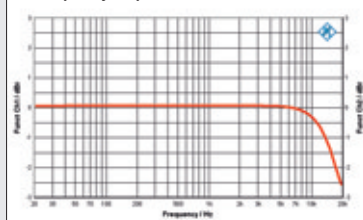
Review: CD/SACD player Esoteric K-01X

Its construction is evocative of a bank vault, it costs a fortune and sounds as if it wasn't of this world. Would you mind, here comes the Esoteric K-01X.

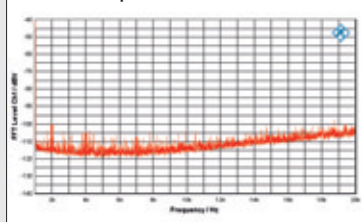
Masterpiece

Lab-Report

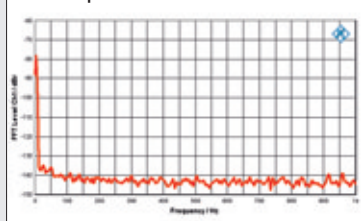
Frequency response: Esoteric K-01X



Distortion spectrum: Esoteric K-01X



Noise spectrum: Esoteric K-01X



Esoteric K-01X (CD/DSD mode, bal.)

Distortion factor (THD+N)	0,012 %
IM distortions (SMPTE)	0,0016 %
IM distortions (CCIF)	0,0030 %
Unweighted noise volt. (20kHz filter)	-102,6 dB
Weighted noise voltage (A-weighted)	-105,1 dB
Converter linearity:	
-50/-60/-70 dB	0,012/0,001/0,031 dB
-80/-90 dB	0,099/0,103 dB
Channel deviation	0,025 dB
Output voltage	3,44 V
Output impedance (1kHz)	50,7 Ω
Power consumption (idle state)	15 W

If the theoretical 35 bit format of the K-01X could be saved loss-free to the analogue side, the S/N ratio would be a mind-boggling -210 dB. With 16-bit data from the CD the Esoteric also has to make do with half as much, but even this is world class and better than the multi-part Grandioso. Interestingly the S/N ratios in DSD mode are slightly better, with the distortion values of PCM 4fs being lower (0.0013 %). The minimal HF roll-off could be seen in all players of this brand so far. ■



energy plane shall be banned completely. What an incredible extravagance. Of course, it should hardly need mentioning that the whole interior of the K-01X has been elaborated in electrotechnical perfection.

By the way, the two converters have not been provided for the internal diet alone: they can also process digital signals fed in from outside. An interesting feature under this aspect is the USB input which can handle both DSD 2.8 and 5.6 megahertz and PCM with a maximum sampling frequency of 384 kilohertz. Those limits should probably be far beyond of what the K-01X is thrown at in practice, but even so it works. Furthermore the Esoteric website offers a Mac/PC driver for download which is required for these formats.

Already when pressing the open/close button, the K-01X will bring you true sensuous delight. The actual drawer is closed by a lid. So before the drawer slides

out, a gate will open. After sliding back in it encloses the SACD or CD in the drive. One can specify in the menu whether the CD data shall be converted in the original or with double, quadruple or eight-fold up-sampling or else in DSD resolution. After this has been done, now finally comes the moment I have been waiting for with bated breath: »Play«.

The Avantgarde Acoustic Uno loud-

speakers were delighted with the noticeable added value in information the Esoteric K-01X delivers from the very first moment. I promise you that already in less than one minute you will get an idea about another dimension in the reproduction. In its SACD version Eleanor

Crammed with technology: the interior of the Esoteric K-01X with the massive VRDS-NEO drive. Four toroidal transformers located on the rear side make the lot complete.



ESOTERIC

PROUDLY MADE IN TOKYO

*Erleben Sie den audiophilen X-Faktor:
die neuen CD/SACD-Player der
legendären K-Serie.*

Der Maßstab



Esoteric K-01X

*monaural D/A-converters, 35-bit processing
VRDS-NEO VMK-3.5-20S Laufwerk
USB-Support DSD & PCM
UVP 20.000€* Stck.*



Esoteric K-03X

*monaural D/A-converters, 34-bit processing
VRDS-NEO VMK-3.5-10S Laufwerk
USB-Support DSD & PCM
UVP 13.000€* Stck.*



Esoteric K-05X

*monaural D/A-converters, 34-bit processing
VRDS-NEO VMK-5 Laufwerk
USB-Support DSD & PCM
UVP 8.500€* Stck.*



Esoteric K-07X

*monaural D/A-converters, 34-bit processing
VOSP SACD-Laufwerk
USB-Support DSD & PCM
UVP: 6.000€* Stck.*

* Unverbindliche Preisempfehlung inkl. gültiger MwSt.
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McEvoy's album »Yola« is wonderfully suited for rendering differences audible. It's the track »The Rain Falls« which conquers the Esoteric Grandioso terrain. At first it's not the fine nuances, the flawlessness of the musical flow or the fabulously sonorous bass which mesmerize me, but the completely changed atmosphere of reproduction. It's not me to whom the music comes through the loudspeakers, it's rather the music which draws me right into the goings-on. This I have heard for once in my life only, and yes, that was over the multi-piece Grandioso P1 and D1.

As the listening went on, the smooth character of reproduction struck me as well. It's not that the music would be wrapped up in cotton wool, this is not the case, but it is void of any harshness or steeliness. As absurd as it may sound, but this digital reproduction is by no means



Esoteric K-01X

WxHxD	44,5 x 16,5 x 44 cm
Warranty	2 years
Price	20.000 Euros
Distribution	Pioneer & Onkyo Gutenbergstraße 3 82178 Puchheim
Phone	08142 - 42 08-10

»digital«. I can measure this also by the fact for how long I can listen to the music. There are spectacular audio systems which I don't like listening to any more after fifteen minutes. And there is this Esoteric player which keeps on telling me between the notes that it would love to continue playing music, if I please.

Finally here it comes: »Love Over Gold«, bought in 1984, played without doubt several hundred times. Meanwhile I can even precisely distinguish the noise tails caused by pulling up and down the faders on the mixing console. Now each single guitar note is ringing out with such credibility and Mark Knopfler is actually singing with his characterful voice so accordingly with the presumed reality that there is nothing any more between the music and me. 32 years after the Philips CD 100, digital reproduction technology has reached a standard with the Esoteric K-01X that should easily surpass the demands of even the most critical music listeners.

Result

The Esoteric K-01X is a superb high-end audio component. Digital music has got the smoothness of an analogue sound medium, but at the same time with far greater dynamics, total freedom from noise and, of course, clicking and complemented by an energetic intensity that has no rival in the field of integrated digital machines. What a pity that the K-01X is too heavy for a plastic bag, but I will find a way to forever enjoy its performance.

Olaf Sturm ■