



Esoteric K-05X / G-02

THE X-FACTOR FOR AUDIOPHILES

By Claus Volke. Photos: Ingo Schulz

What does “high end” actually mean? This is a subject on which we all have our own individual views, criteria and opinions. Esoteric is no different.

— What “high end audio” means to me is equipment that brings us all closer to the essence of the music itself, built by music enthusiasts with the necessary technical expertise. I also expect this equipment to be constructed using high-quality materials. Devices that have been cobbled together in tiny series on Lego baseplates are not my thing at all. Admittedly, I have heard a few such constructions that have knocked my socks off at first. But, when requested to play a second piece, they’ve often started to emit strange noises or produce disturbing strobe effects.

Nevertheless, there are a few globally operating audio companies who

are trying to address the needs of high-end clientele as well as serving the normal consumer segment. The revenue these companies make selling mass-market devices potentially allows their engineers to develop with a greater amount of creativity and build extremely high-quality equipment. On occasions, these firms are able to sell high-end equipment at prices that wouldn’t even cover the component costs for other audio tinkerers.

Self-driven

TEAC is a great example of such a company. I have to admit that this is the very first time I’ve actually been able to conduct an in-depth test with a device from TEAC’s high end arm Esoteric. However, over the years I’ve come into frequent contact with such equipment, especially the ▶





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digital players and transports. These were mostly owned by audio fans with a mild equipment addiction or by hard core tube freaks from Asia. Few systems from that part of the world manage to do without Esoteric components, even if it's "only" a transport or data source for a DAC—tube based of course.

The fact that Esoteric makes superb transports will come as no surprise to connoisseurs. And the first object in this test, Esoteric's K-05X SACD player, contains what is probably one of the company's most massive, critically-acclaimed and complex transport components. This transport mechanism has the slightly cumbersome name of VRDS-NEO VMK-5. As a lot has already been written elsewhere about the mass drives built by TEAC/Esoteric, I'll just describe the most striking feature: a plate suspended from a turntable bridge that clamps the disc from above, practically eliminating vibrations and further enhancing the smoothness of (SA)CD transport. Developed and manufactured totally in-house, this mechanism is a great example of the company's audio engineering expertise. Alone the weight of this intricately constructed transport is enough to distance it totally from the usual plastic versions, often sourced from the PC sector.

Stylish, solid, sophisticated

The virtues of the K-05X go far beyond the extremely sturdy transport mechanism and can be found

everywhere throughout the interior and the housing. Everything is exactly as it should be. As soon as you place the 14 kg device on your rack, you instantly gain the impression, or more precisely you instantly realize you're handling materials of only the highest quality. I would also like to commend Esoteric for totally moving on from its earlier "box-like" shape—now boasting elegant designer looks instead. Stylish yet substantial, the unit comes with a multitude of adjustable settings—upsampling and digital filters for PCM and DSD signals to mention just two of these possibilities. All settings are simple and fast to configure, and can be just as easily reversed after you've tested them. My attention was drawn to the fact that upward conversion can be regulated individually for each input—and therefore for each separate source signal: an interesting and practical feature that will be immediately appreciated by anyone wanting to use the K-05X's DAC stage with other digital sources. When playing an SACD, the DSD signal is passed directly to the DAC stage. In the case of a CD, the signal can be converted to the DSD digital format—and this quickly became my preference.

Staying in sync

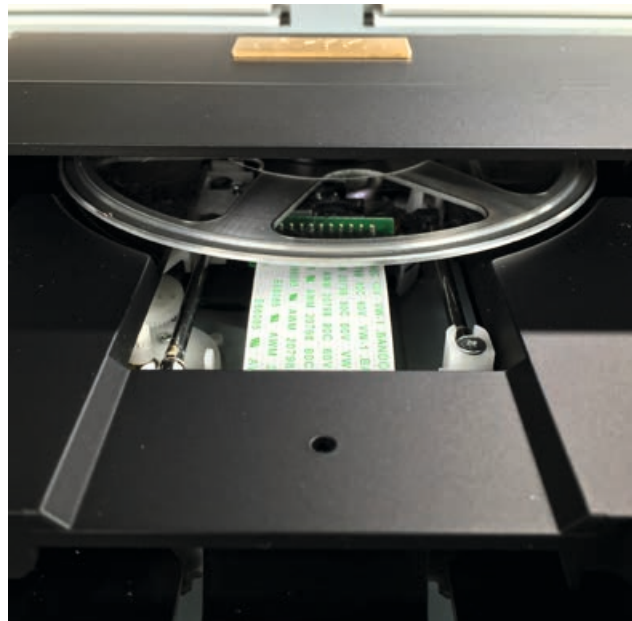
Esoteric claims that "Generation X" of the already established K-05 has been thoroughly upgraded. Alongside 32-bit dual-mono DACs—that even use a 34-bit processing algorithm—and a huge range of digital inputs, the K-05 again features a detail I have regarded as important ever since

my first experiences with Esoteric components: a connection for an external master clock generator. So it's now time to connect up the Esoteric G-02 I've also been supplied with. By providing much greater precision, a master clock is able to massively reduce jitter. This technology has been widely used in recording studios for a many years now, and is often regarded as mandatory. Due to their wide range of selectable frequencies, the clocks from Esoteric can also be connected up to products from other manufacturers, assuming they have the necessary interface of course. For external clock purposes as well, the K-05X permits configuration of a different frequency for each input or signal source. If the DAC stage receives signals from a coaxial or optical input, they are synchronized with the external master clock signal. When USB input is used, the selectable clock frequencies depend on whether the sampling rate of the files is 44.1 or 48 kHz, or a multiple thereof. I recommend you try out the G-02's 10 MHz signal (the standard in recording studios) for all audio file types! If you do, however, make sure you use a 50 Ohm cable instead of the usual 75 Ohm variety.

Weighing in at around 10 kg, the G-02 can be swiftly configured for each of the separate inputs. Once the devices have been powered up again, the oscillator stabilizes after as little as 15 seconds. Stability has been achieved when the small control lights on the player and clock stop blinking and are continuously illuminated. We could talk about technical details for ▶

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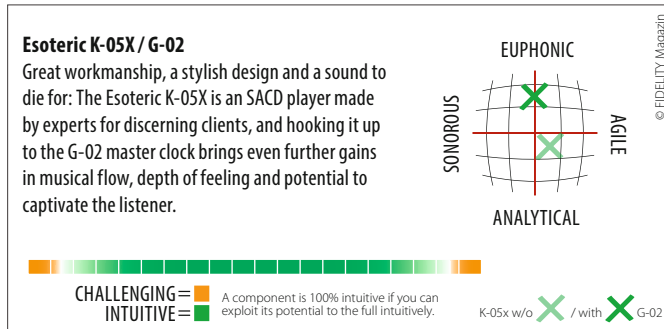




ACCOMPANYING EQUIPMENT

CD players: AcousticPlan Vadi | **Preamps:** Shindo Aurieges L, Audio Research LS7 | **Power amplifiers:** Air Tight ATM 300, Jadis DA 5 (mod. Tube Audio Professional), Welter 300B (,monos) | **Integrated amplifiers:** Pass INT-60 | **Loudspeakers:** Odeon No. 38, Acapella High Fidelio, Dynavox UniQorn, Rogers LS3/5 | **Cables:** HMS Gran Finale Jubilee Top Match LS and XLR, HMS Energia Suprema power cord; Kondo KSL SPz, Auditorium 23 | **Accessories:** HMS Energia Definitiva, HMS Silenzio, HMS Perfect Match, Acoustic System resonators, Acoustic Revive RD 3 and RR 888, Black Forest Audio Zero Plugs C + M, Shakti Stones

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considerably longer, especially with regard to the K-05X, but it's now time to turn to the music.

A solid rock of sound

The Cello in the 17th Century (Deutsche Harmonia Mundi) is a somewhat older recording by the gifted cellist Anner Bylsma. The Ricercari by G. B. Degli Antonii (1687), the probably earliest published pieces for cello (according to the booklet at least), immediately reveal two of the K-05X's outstanding characteristics: excellent spatial reproduction and truly wonderful control. The K-05X is totally in command at all times, filling the room with rock-solid structures of music and sound. But this is not meant to imply that the unit exerts any compulsion or artificial pressure. Everything appears natural and matter of fact: like speeding at 200 kmh along the highway in a premium limousine instead of a tiny sports car. Translated into musical terms, the calm superiority of the Esoteric enables its listeners to appreciate the historical nature of

these pieces by revealing Ricercari's fundamental philosophy and composition style. Which, incidentally, found its perfection decades later in the suites for unaccompanied cello by J. S. Bach.

But let's fast forward from the 17th century to modern times. Although Toru Takemitsu (1930–1996) wrote a large number of amazing pieces, not a lot of people are familiar with this contemporary Japanese composer. Takemitsu's music is not always easy to listen to at first, but, like so many other things in the sphere of the arts, if you persevere and approach it with an open mind you will reap a rich reward. Ideal candidates for such a personal voyage of discovery are the three solo pieces for flute on the *Chamber Music* (Naxos) CD. The Esoteric K-05X also proved itself to be the ideal player for these pieces: it places the flute—which has its own special timbre particularly in the higher, overblown pitches—in a seemingly infinite space stretching in all directions. Exploiting the already-mentioned control and extension, and through Takemitsu's magical,

harsh tone sequences, somewhat reminiscent of sounds from nature, the player seems to pull the listener right into the middle of this acoustic space—and right into the music itself. A wonderful interaction of music and machine, both, coincidentally, with roots in Tokyo.

Time for a brief excursion into jazz, with Grant Green's *The Complete Quartets with Sonny Clark* (Blue Note), featuring Sam Jones on bass and Art Blakey and Louis Hayes on drums. For the Sonny Rollins classic "Oelo", the K-05X produces amazingly springy yet well-controlled bass notes that ensure a solid, unshakable foundation for the rhythm group. Originating almost exactly 17 years before Green's premature death in 1979, this recording is characterized by a harsh, driving rhythm in which the two main instruments, guitar and bass, need to be differentiated soundwise but also heard to be mutually supportive. The Esoteric K-05X's capability of reproducing the bass notes in their entire range of timbre is particularly noticeable when the guitar falls ▶



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silent and Sonny Clark briefly takes over on piano. Now for something I had originally wanted to avoid: Johann Sebastian Bach's *St Matthew Passion* directed by René Jacobs in 2013 (harmonia mundi). Why, you might ask, did I want to avoid it? Because, after only a few brief minutes, it became clearly apparent what my favorite benchmark CD player, the AcousticPlan Vadi, doesn't have: the ability to play SACDs. And now I know it's something I really lack. With classic in particular, many SACDs are superior to their CD counterparts—even when players like the K-05X are able to achieve a CD sound

quality that comes astonishingly close to the SACD level. Nevertheless, I've yet to experience a device where I can unreservedly say that a CD can be played in SACD quality. Coming back to the *St Matthew Passion* itself: the dynamism, depth, structure and timbre that this superb Esoteric player is able to create in SACD mode out of this intimate yet theatrical recording is truly impressive.

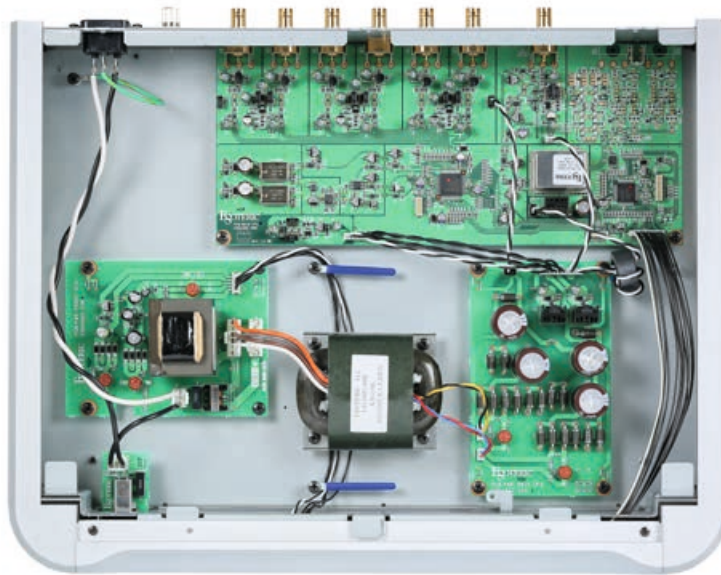
A farewell to jitter

Finally, I'd like to add a few comments on the master clock. After a few weeks of testing, I must honestly say that the

external master clock really deserves its own detailed review. Nevertheless, there are still a few things I can tell you in the space available here. I recommend everyone who owns a player that can be connected up to a master clock to actually try out this option, and I really mean everyone. After only a few hours of listening, one thing was definitely clear to me: if I were lucky enough to actually own the K-05X, I would quickly hook it up to a G-02 on a permanent basis. The master clock reinforces all the positive characteristics of the stand-alone K-05X. But it does this in a positive way, serving the interests of the music rather than ▶

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resorting to any “razzle dazzle” or showmanship. One of the comments I noted down during my tests says it all: “Music and flow perfectly in sync.” This amused me somewhat when I re-read my notes later on. Although, of course, the remark was made in reference to how the music itself was being played, the presence of a synchronizing master clock like Esoteric G-02 makes it a pleasantly ambiguous comment.

The package of dreams

As a stand-alone player, the Esoteric K-05X is probably unrivaled in its price class. I, for one, am unaware of any other player in this price category that provides the same overall quality, expensive materials and absolutely convincing sound. Although it is outstanding and “bang on” with CDs, when it comes to SACDs the K-05X really shows how fantastic this format can sound. And when the player is used in combination with the G-02 master clock (not a cheap piece of kit at all), I would go even further: the lucky owners can enjoy a sound that ranks with the very best, in this and even higher price categories.

I am yet to encounter a serious rival, particularly for classic and jazz fans. You can always opt for something even more expensive, of course. But you have to decide for yourself whether you’re getting something that is actually better from the musical and sound perspective—more often than not it’s simply something that is different again. In any case, my congratulations to every owner of a K-05X/G-02 combo. With flawless engineering and superb workmanship, it raises the “music experience” to a spectacular new level. What’s more, its wide range of inputs and configuration options means owners will have few qualms about anything the future may bring.

I am prepared to bet that, in five to ten years’ time, comparable devices will be selling for far higher prices than those specified here—if they are being sold at all. Why do I think that? Because the demand for real high-end units, of which Esoteric’s machines are prime examples, will probably sink in the future. Because there’s a lot of people out there whose ears have been tarnished by permanent exposure to low-data and compressed sound, and are therefore no longer

capable of appreciating the wonderful and overwhelming emotions that music can engender. But engendering such emotions is exactly what the Esoteric K-05X and G-02 are able to do. As a consequence of this, their talents cannot be praised too highly. Which makes the final verdict crystal clear: the Esoteric K-05X and G-02 are prime examples of high-end audio in every sense of the word! ■

SACD Player

Esoteric K-05X

Digital inputs: coaxial, optical, 2 x USB 2.0 |
Special features: master clock sync. (BNC), VRDS-NEO VMK-5 transport mechanism |
Digital outputs: coaxial, optical | **Analog outputs:** balanced (XLR), unbalanced (cinch) |
Dimensions (W/H/D): 44.5/13.5/36 cm |
Weight: 14 kg | **Warranty period:** 2 years |
Price: 8500 €

Master Clock Generator

Esoteric G-02

Dimensions (W/H/D): 44.5/11/36 cm |
Weight: 10.5 kg | **Warranty period:** 2 years |
Price: 6000 €

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