

Esoteric

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E-03 phonostage pre-amp

6moons.com Review by Frederic Beudot November 2009

I don't think anybody expected Esoteric to launch a phono preamplifier, ever. Yet here it is. I am quite sure that admirers and detractors of the brand alike have been wondering what has gotten into the otherwise rather predictable Japanese manufacturer. What I was wondering when I received one of the very first E03s to make it to the US - were they simply plugging a hole in an otherwise superb product line; or making a statement?

Knowing just how much Esoteric's president Ohmachi-san loves vinyl, I expected the latter and

was not disappointed. What I was not ready for though is just how much of a statement Esoteric would make. I have not reviewed all of Esoteric's gear but have written about quite a few components, have heard many more and even own an X03SE. Yet to date, the E03 is simply their best piece of equipment—or at least my favorite of those I have heard—and that includes the Blue Moon recipient C03 preamplifier.

The biggest surprise in that context may actually be that the E03 does not seem to bring any revolutionary technology to the table. Like many of Esoteric's latest additions to the 03 Series, it builds upon trusted solutions simply pushed to their very limits in terms of execution. There is thus very little to write about except to mention fully separate left and right signal paths housed on two separate boards with separate transformers and all discrete components without a single microprocessor in sight

to avoid noise contamination. The only technical novelty—possibly—is the use of high-voltage circuits for the RIAA amplification and output buffers, inherited I presume from the C03 preamplifier which also runs high voltage rails for optimized dynamics and transparency.

Like in the C03 and A03 previously reviewed, components are placed symmetrically on the boards to provide mechanical stabilization in addition to each board being in its own enclosure to minimize resonance. To finish introductions, the E03 provides two inputs, one for MC (66dB gain) with seven loading options; and the other for either MC (66dB gain) or MM (40dB gain) cartridges, this one with four resistive and three capacitive loading options for MC/MM respectively. This second input is very useful for people who switch regularly between MC and MM but have only one tonearm. At least they do not have to change input cabling each time they change cartridge type.

Selection of loading and input occurs at the front panel through rotary selectors which activate relays on the input boards. Why cannot all manufacturers of high-end phono stages implement such a convenient solution? Instead they force us to deal with small jumpers to be inserted at the back or inside the component. I just don't get it. And don't drink the Kool-Aid meant to preserve transparency either. The E03 is by far the most transparent phono preamplifier to come through this house at any price - and it has no jumper in sight.

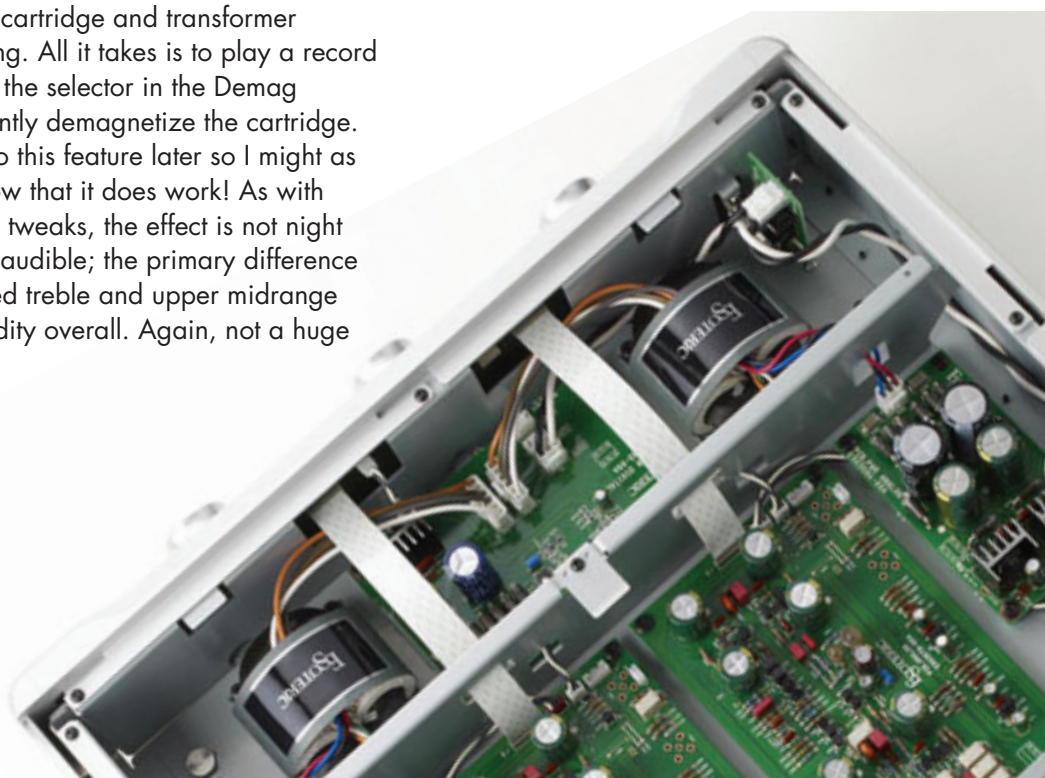
One feature that I found more useful than expected is the presence of a cartridge and transformer demagnetizing setting. All it takes is to play a record for 30 seconds with the selector in the Demag position to conveniently demagnetize the cartridge. I won't come back to this feature later so I might as well tell you right now that it does work! As with most demagnetizing tweaks, the effect is not night and day but clearly audible; the primary difference being a more relaxed treble and upper midrange and a hint more fluidity overall. Again, not a huge

difference but considering how easy the operation is here, well worth the effort every few days. When I first introduced the E03 in my system, I was plagued by quite higher than acceptable noise levels. Testing throughout the house revealed that the E03 picked up noise from the freezer's motor in the garage and the de-humidifier in the basement. Unfortunately—and for the very first time I must add—no power filter was able to eliminate the problem, not the Isotek Nova, the Isotek Titan or the Monster Power HTS5100.

I was not sure the review would proceed before I followed Esoteric's advice to use a cheater plug and lift the ground. Instantly the problem vanished. As it turns out, the E03 is a very efficient noise sniffer. It will let you know about any contamination in your system. The good news is that the solution was both cheap and easy. Nonetheless my new music room currently being built in the basement will have dedicated power lines and grounds to address the issue at its very power delivery source.

With the hum finally banished, the E03 proved very quiet - not as quiet as the Audia Flight Phono which thus far is the absolute reference in that department but not far behind and certainly not an issue over my 97dB/m Zu Essence speakers unless I pushed the volume to completely unhealthy levels. In practical use, the E03 was as quiet as anyone could desire.

The really important question though is how the E03 sounds. That's the real issue. Besides being superbly





transparent, revealing and absolutely neutral, I can't think of anything else to say about the sound. LP after LP, one singular impression was on endless repeat: the needle went deeper in the groove and retrieved more information than ever before, even more than the Flight Phono was able to conjure up. I knew of course that the needle wasn't really going any deeper but damn, it sure sounded like it.

Alas, just talking about high resolution cuts the E03 far too short. It could leave the reader with an unjust impression of harshness or sterility which absolutely applies not to this machine. The E03 actually offers magnificent instrumental textures and vocal accuracy, fluidity and rhythm, expansive dynamics on large orchestral surges and tremendous litheness on instrumental flutters, with deep and resolved bass, extended and nuanced treble and imaging and staging to die for. In other words, I have yet to find anything at which the E03 does not excel.

When powered through the Accustic Arts Ferrite II power cord at first thought the E03's only weakness might be a slightly lighter than desirable tonal balance. Yet switching to the Zu Mother cured that impression without losing any resolution. In fact, this association of Zu Mother and E03 very quickly became my favorite and the one I used for most of my audition.

Starting with Sir George Solti directing the LSO in a recording of Mahler's First Symphony [Decca, re-edited by Speakers Corner], the impression was one of depth and width, the muted trumpet calls in the distance endowed with superb brassiness. Similarly the drums evinced a texture I had never

heard before, resonating in the background far behind the orchestra. Although far from being his most complex, this most youthful and joyful Mahler symphony never fails to amaze me with its perpetual changes of musical sceneries but I had yet to hear it recreated with such veracity, such lifelike dynamics and magnificent instrumental tones and details. No, it was not a live concert but the closest illusion I'd managed so far.

The most telling aspect that I was listening to vinyl remained the discrete surface noise and the rare clicks and pops. Here the E03 is unforgiving and will let you hear your records' condition as is, pristine or soiled. This may actually be the only reserve I'll express about the E03. It may not be most adapted to an old and scratchy vinyl collection. The Italian Flight Phono was far better at minimizing the impact of less than ideal quality discs.

Switching to Johnny Cash, the man materialized in my room. The effect was simply incredible. I knew this recording to be very intimately miked but had not realized just how well Cash's tired voice was captured. I suspect the Zu Essence played their role in this apparition as they really shine on male voices but no other phono preamp so far had made Cash sound so real. You know the old reviewer cliché about a veil being lifted from the music. I hate complacency but in this case, that's still the best description for what I heard.

Again and again it recurred with each disc I listened to - a feeling of closeness as though I had moved many rows closer to the stage without that

undue projection that sometimes accompanies gear that is a bit too extrovert. The E03 was perfectly balanced and did not throw any specific parts of the music at the listener. It just cleaned the glasses for an undistorted view of the event.

Proceeding with James Brown Live at the Apollo, far from a superior record by any stretch, Mr. Dynamite on that night of October 1962 exuded the James Brown sound and persona that made him the idol he is. The Audia Flight and its gently warmed up sound almost sugar-coated the performance. Yes it sounded good but almost too good to lack some of the raw energy. The E03 on the other hand brutally revealed the challenge of recording a jam-packed house in 1962 yet the primal energy was left intact. Which was best, living with the distortion and saturation originally recorded but the man's astonishing energy preserved; or some gentle mellowing to smooth over the technical challenges of the recording? Only you can tell which suits you better. I went for raw and primal on that one.

The conclusion reversed though when I switched to Casadessus' mono recordings of Beethoven's Piano Concertos. The vinyl I was spinning now were fifty-year-old releases found at Goodwill's for 50 cents each. Of course they were not in the best of shapes but remained listenable oldies with the Flight Phono's kinder and warmer approach to music which here was more than welcome. The Flight Phono made surface noise less prominent than the E03 and treated distortion more kindly. Tolerance for abused old records is not in the E03's vocabulary.

For anything in better shape than my Casadessus recordings, the E03 was boss and king, offering deeper resolution with the smallest of details and projecting a stage of epic proportions when appropriate.

As mentioned before, I could not fault the presentation of the E03, be it on ZZ Top's guitars, the Gorillaz and their cavernous bass beats, Dietrich Fisher Dieskau's unique tone or the Spanish Folia. In each and every case, the E03 nailed tone, depth, transients and dynamics in a fashion that was more natural than anything I have heard at home thus far - another step up and not a small one.

The existence of the E03 takes nothing away from the Flight Phono's great performance but the Italian machine throws the virtues and limitations of pure class A operation over the music with a hint of warmth, gently shelved-down frequency extremes and slightly rounded transients. In many systems those qualities will be a welcome asset to

enhance the pleasure of music listening, be it from brand new pressings or old licorice. But when the system and listener can live with a greater level of truthfulness, the E03 clearly jumps ahead.

The E03 erects liabilities with its truthiness of course. It won't put honey on sour records but neither does it impose limitations on playback. With a system both tonally dense and tuned for maximum transient responsiveness as mine, the E03 was like an adrenaline injection and took playback to a complete different level. Music came alive in a fashion that reminded me very much of Steve McCormack's VRE-1 preamplifier, albeit with added weight and more explosive dynamics. Especially when the Zu Essence speakers were fronted by the slightly more reserved C03 preamplifier and A03 amplifier, the E03 added a feeling of unfiltered unrestrained energy that I found addictive.

One of the side benefits of the E03's ruthless honesty is the improved ability to set up your cartridge correctly. Until now I had considered the millimetric obsession over cartridge alignment, VTA and loading a 'nice to have' adjunct but not always a critical task. The E03 drastically altered my opinion. Any of these adjustments now no matter how small could and would be heard. Similarly the sonic character of interconnects and power cords was never so obvious as when plugged into the E03. I already mentioned how the Zu Mother was a perfect match over the AA Ferrite II which was a little too lean for my taste. The Zu Varial also worked well as an interconnect although I wished I could hear one of Esoteric's own Mexcel links to see just how far the E03 might venture.

Similarly differences between cartridges were painted in much starker contrast over what I was used to. The Denon DL103 is finely resolved, open and dynamic and tonally superbly accurate but sometimes a little stiff in the midrange. The Grado Reference Sonata 1 on the other hand is midrange-centric and fluid while lacking in extension and dynamic capability.

The Denon clearly was my cartridge of choice during this audition but I regularly vacillated between the two since the mixed MC/MM input and the interchangeable head shell on the Ortofon tonearm made switching a breeze, merely requiring a quick alignment check as well as VTA and pressure adjustment. This became a 15-minute process which used to take a solid hour with the Rega RB300 tonearm.

At £4,495.00, the E03 is not cheap and—the Flight Phono provides one—still needs a good power cord to show all its colors. This puts the Italian and Japanese phono preamps on equal footing for pricing. In many more modern-sounding systems than mine, the Flight Phono will shine but in my setup, it was a little opaque and veiled compared to the E03. Hence the Japanese came out on top for me. The Flight Phono taken alone impressed me a lot but as stated often by our editor, once you've heard a piece of equipment that takes playback to a different level, you can't "un-hear" it thereafter. That's exactly how I feel about the E03. In my system, it was clearly superior to force the Flight Phono into second place.

In brighter leaner systems, the E03 might end up being too much of a good thing but in a balanced system, it will unearth the final level of resolution and passion one can expect from vinyl done right. I wish I could compare the E03 to some far pricier offerings available from Boulder, AMR or Walker to name a few but I have a nagging feeling that the E03 sits very high on the price/performance index indeed.

No matter how much I itch to write out a Blue Moon award for the E03, I must restrain myself and wait for the last contender in this series of phono preamp reviews to arrive. It might shine additional light

on just how good a value the E03 really is. If the NAT Signature phono with its battery-powered zero feedback triodes is anywhere as good as the NAT Symmetrical line stage was which I reviewed a few months ago, the E03 will receive more than a fair shake at brisk competition. Or the Serbian could walk away with the award. It's something I won't know for a few more weeks. If you already know that you don't wish the hassle of tubes, the E03 is without contest my favorite solid-state phono preamp in this review series, ahead of the Audia Flight Phono and way ahead of the ASR Mini-Basis Exclusive.

Over and out for now until the NAT Signature phono has been fully assessed. Esoteric's E03 truly blew me over and away, perhaps all the more so as it was rather unexpected to see Esoteric set the bar this high with their first-ever foray into vinyl playback. Now I have to wonder when their first turntable will launch. Surely they cannot leave the E03 an orphan, can they now?

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