

ABSOLUTE ANALOG

Esoteric E-03 Phono Preamplifier

Exhilarating

Greg Weaver

Esoteric Audio is so well known and highly regarded for its series of remarkably articulate and involving multi-box digital-to-analog systems that it came as something of a surprise to me to learn that it had a phono preamplifier in its lineup. Given my experiences with Esoteric over the years, when the opportunity arose to audition that phono preamplifier, the E-03, I was more than just a little interested.

Welcome to the Machine

Measuring 17 $\frac{3}{8}$ " wide, 14 $\frac{3}{8}$ " deep, standing just 4 $\frac{1}{16}$ " tall, and tipping the scales at just over 23 pounds, the E-03 has the form factor of most other phonostages in its class and price range. However, one look at its elegantly sculpted, rather Spartan faceplate will leave no doubt that it is a card-carrying member of the Esoteric family.

The heart of the E-03 is its power supply. Here Esoteric has chosen to use R-core type transformers, widely considered exceptional choices for powering signal circuits. Similar to a toroid, but with a core that has a nearly round cross-section rather than the typical square one, and with a tighter set of round solenoid coils, R-core transformers employ their copper windings more economically. The primary and secondary coil bobbins are wound totally separately from each other, on opposite sides of the core, significantly decreasing parasitic primary and secondary coupling capacitance, and offering improved isolation of high-frequency line noise from the signal-carrying circuits.

The E-03 is a pure left/right, dual-monaural design, using separate power supplies and fully symmetrical in both its mechanical and circuit layout. This global symmetry contributes to mechanical stability as well as channel-to-channel isolation, helping to simplify the signal path and maximize separation.

Both the RIAA and the output buffer amplifiers are built with all discrete components and use relatively high-voltage circuits to ensure abundant voltage headroom for all the active devices, allowing them to perform as linearly as possible. The $\frac{3}{8}$ "-thick sculpted front panel sports only a power switch in the lower left corner and three rotary knobs centered vertically and spaced

evenly in a row across the faceplate. The centermost knob allows selection of either Input 1 or 2. To the left of the input selector is the Input 1 loading knob. This offers more versatile moving-coil-cartridge loading, with separate settings for 10, 50, 100, 300, 500, 1k, or 10k ohms. The Input 2 control knob is to the right side, and will accommodate loading for both moving-coil and moving-magnet cartridges, with mc ranges limited to 100, 500, 1k, or 10k ohms, and mm loading choices of 0, 100, and 300 picofarads.

Both input loading knobs offer another feature, a "DEMAG" option, located at the "bottom" of their range of settings. When either input knob is rotated fully counterclockwise, it engages a built-in cartridge-demagnetization circuit for your installed mc cartridges or step-up transformers. While this feature is uncommon, I would have readily forgone it in lieu of a polarity switch, something considerably more useful and almost standard fare on other phonostages of this class.

Like all of the company's components, the E-03 chassis is supported via Esoteric's unique isolation footer, an integrated two-piece quenched-steel cone/cup system. One difference here is that rather than employing four isolation feet, with one support located near each bottom corner of the component, the E-03 employs only three—one near each of the front two corners of the chassis, and one centered along its rear.

The logic of this isolation footer application is sound. Euclidian geometry teaches us that while two points are necessary to describe a line, only three are necessary to describe a plane, with more than three being superfluous. In fact, with four points, one of the four will almost certainly be "floating" off the surface under a device being supported by the first three. From an isolation standpoint, I wish more manufacturers would employ only a troika of isolation feet, as such an arrangement allows for the more stable support of any component. Kudos to Esoteric for adopting this stance (pun intended).

Moving to the rear, we find two sets of single-ended inputs and one set of single-ended outputs, with no provision for balanced connections. Because of its dual-mono, symmetrical layout, all

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three jacks for the same channel, both inputs and the single output, are grouped together in right and left banks. The IEC socket for the power cord is slightly above center, to the upper-right rear corner. The signal ground post is located in line with, and very closely between, the right channel line-out and the left channel Input 1 jacks, making it a bit difficult to access, especially when connecting a heftier ground cable, or one without a right-angled spade termination, like that of my Stealth Helios.

The proximity of the right output and left Input 1 jacks to the signal ground terminal, combined with its closeness to the bottom of the chassis, necessitate ground cables being routed down into this location from above, rather than up from the bottom or in from either side, to clear the input and output cables. This results in a rather distracting and unattractive form of cable dressing, with the ground wire protruding up visibly from behind the preamp.

Wish You Were Here

The first sonic aspect to strike me upon dropping the E-03 in place of my reference DSA PhonoONE was its stark quietness—an almost tangible silence that allowed the music to emerge from a near perfectly “black” background, free of any distracting low-level noise.

Bass performance was exceptional, bordering on the best I’ve heard in extension, definition, and coherence. Pitch in the lowest octaves was clearly and accurately defined, allowing for incredibly fine delineation of doublebass pizzicatos or powerful jazz or rock bass guitar snaps and runs.

Additionally, the lowest three octaves were rendered with remarkable speed, delivering music with an engaging and exhilarating sense of pace and drive. The rhythms of every genre of music I fed the E-03, from Metallica to Mozart, were communicated in an undeniably compelling manner, driving musical compositions in an infectiously enjoyable fashion.

From the onset, it was clear that midrange transparency and tonality were also strong suits of the E-03—articulate without being exaggerated or spotlighted, yet with a liberal helping of body and bloom. Voices were wonderfully rendered with revealing detail and nuance, providing for an extremely organic and involving presentation.

The E-03 clearly excelled at illuminating timbre and detail. Human and instrumental voices were reproduced with a well-balanced combination of texture, body, and tone. Listen to the sensual pleading of Henryk Szeryng’s violin on the Lalo *Symphonie Espagnole* [RCA]. Though the instrument is somewhat artificially spotlighted within the stage (an artifact of this particular recording), via the Esoteric the purity and naturalness of its timbre were undeniable, though ever so slightly to the cooler side of natural.

For a taste of the E-03’s treble proficiency, I listened to the subtle flavorings of the struck triangle deeply immersed within the title track “Aja,” from the 1977 Steely Dan album of the same name [MFSL]. Its delicate characteristics, often lost in the clamor of the rest of this complex jazz-rock arrangement, were presented clearly and in their own space, with distinct attack, glorious vibrancy, and delicate, effortless decay. The tail ends of stopping transients remained clearly audible as they slowly and naturally waned amid the meticulously woven fabric of the rest of the composition.

The E-03’s ability to precisely portray spatial cues and to

accurately render the soundstage may be its strongest suit, on par with the best I’ve heard. On the 1977 Crosby, Stills & Nash release *C/S/N* [Atlantic], the cut “Fair Game” is strewn with a myriad of percussion instruments (maracas, sandblocks, etc.) in the musical foreground. The E-03 presented the most articulate and deepest layering I’ve ever experienced from this recording, one not particularly known for its audiophile attributes. Each of these instruments acquired a definite location in the soundstage, maintained a singular voice, and never wavered from the space it initially occupied.

I next tried *Harp Attack* [Alligator], which features blues legends Carey Bell, Billy Branch, James Cotton, and Junior Wells, all playing different-keyed harps (harmonicas). In the opening cut, “Down Home Blues,” the four are lined up left to right, slightly behind the plane of the speakers, and take turns soloing. The E-03s performance here was nothing short of magical.

There is something primal about the sound of a harp blown live, right in front of you. There is a robust ferocity to its sound, a bite, if you will, and a resultant growl that make it very challenging to reproduce faithfully! Yet the Esoteric E-03 shone brilliantly in this regard. The individual locations of the four bluesmen within the soundstage were portrayed impeccably, and the resultant sounds of their voices and harps were not just represented with lifelike vibrancy, but were also so convincingly recreated in size and location that you might well have thought the four men were standing across the front of your room. I’ve heard many more costly phono preamps falter here.

On one of my favorite “Guilty Treasures,” Roger Waters’ 1992 magnum opus, *Amused to Death* [Columbia], there is a clap of thunder that starts off your right shoulder, outside the boundary of your sidewall, then slowly rolls forward along that wall, bending and continuing across the front of the stage until finally sliding up the left sidewall, completing a clearly defined, semi-circular pattern. With lesser phono preamps, this distinctly defined movement can become confused, lose its clarity of direction, and blur as it crosses the room from right to left, rather than revealing a clear-cut, semi-circular arc.

The E-03 has no difficulties portraying dynamic events, of both the micro and macro varieties, in all their complex shadings and with uncannily appropriate scale. I was reminded of one of my early observations—that of the E-03s overall quietness. This innate silence clearly contributes to the preamp’s ability to more

SPECS & PRICING

Gain: 40dB (mm), 60dB (mc) **Weight:** 23 lbs.

Cartridge loading: 10, 50, 100, **Price:** \$6000

300, 500, 1k, or 10k ohms

(resistance); 0, 100, and 300

picofarads (capacitance)

Outputs: Unbalanced on RCA
jacks

Dimensions: 17 3/8" x 4 1/16" x
14 3/8"

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directly render microdynamic events and instrumental decays.

In fact, the degree to which it consistently accomplishes this difficult responsibility is nothing short of astonishing at its price point. Listen to the exposed inner detail of a string being bent, be it in a Janos Starker cello sonata or a Stevie Ray Vaughn Fender Stratocaster solo, and you will get a taste of what I am describing.

On the macro scale, at the end of “Late Home Tonight, Part 1,” also from *Amused to Death*, listen to the jet fighter release its missile and the resultant detonation. That very dynamic explosion (watch the volume here!) literally rolls through the room, starting well behind the speakers, rushing furiously past your chair on its way toward the back wall like a wave.

Moving to the Rickie Lee Jones 10-inch, seven-song EP, *Girl at Her Volcano* [WB] was a true treat. This record has long been a favorite test disc for dynamics and pace. The verve and subtlety of the piano work on “Walk Away Renée” and the convulsive power of the drums on “Under The Boardwalk” were conveyed as well as I’ve heard from this recording.

With complex and demanding dynamic passages like the opening from Prokofiev’s *Scythian Suite* [Mercury] or the delicacies of massed strings such as in Tchaikovsky’s *Serenade for Strings* [London], the E-03 did an impressively convincing job of unraveling the dense and often overwhelming layers of sound. The E-03 easily, accurately, and precisely separated those layers within the soundstage with realistic size and shape, all the while delivering the rich harmonic texture, engaging instrumental bloom, and authentic timbre of these elaborate compositions.

Nothing else I’ve had in-house unraveled these complexities and subtle cues as completely and with as much individuality and involvement, or presented them with such a clearly defined sense of scale. This dynamic prowess contributed significantly to the remarkable sense of “liveness” that the E-03 so readily offered up.

Have a Cigar

I don’t think I was into this audition more than about 40 minutes when it dawned on me that the E-03 shared, in large part, the Esoteric familial voice—musical clarity and expressiveness, a focused, expansive,

realistically sized soundstage, and a relaxed, organic, yet detailed presentation.

Some may quibble that the E-03 does not offer the last word in instrumental bloom and body, and though I’d have to agree in absolute terms, especially by comparison to some top-flight tube phonostages, it is still more than merely competent in this respect. In addition, some may find its mechanical limitations—in particular, the lack of balanced connections or a polarity switch—to be disqualifiers. But as much as I would have liked those options, the arresting sonic arsenal of the E-03 outweighs them.

The Esoteric E-03 represents an exceptional achievement at this price point. With its striking, stylish appearance, intelligent circuit design and execution, and stirring sonics, it readily distinguishes itself from much of its competition. Considering its effective blend of bass extension and speed, addictive broadband clarity and focus, *über*-accurate imaging, and soundstaging chops, it must be seen as an exceptional value, as well. **tas**

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