

Esoteric E-02 Phonostage

REVIEW

by Allan Moulton | Jun 14th, 2019



AAA



MAGNIFYcation

At the most recent RMAF I was using my handheld, foldable 3x-to-8.5x magnifier to align an Ortofon A95 cartridge on a manufacturer's turntable. The little Carson Triview is inexpensive (I think I got it at Staples), and it works great to get a nice, clear picture of where that tiny stylus is in relation to the "bullseye" on the protractor. I'm easily dazzled by the benefits of these small things, and it got me thinking about the upper limits of magnification.

So that we might get to the actual audio review more quickly...just know that the finest traditional (sometimes called "optical" or simply "light") microscopes are effective to a resolution of approximately 200 nanometers and magnifications up to about 2000x. Now, a nanometer is one billionth of a meter. Traditional microscopes can give us clear views well into the cellular level. Of course, we would all intuitively grant that such traditional means of magnification (i.e., not electron microscopes) with high resolution would only be possible with the finest quality optics. While my little pocket magnifier surely has cheap lenses that are more than adequate for the task of low magnification, taking something and magnifying it 1500 or even 2000 times with resolution must be an altogether more challenging job. Any errors would be, well, magnified.

AMPLIFYcation

My primary cartridge is the good old Denon DL-S1. Its output is a tiny 0.15mV. A millivolt is one thousandth of a volt. Your average digital source these days would output around 2V, which would mean that my cartridge's voltage would need to be magnified (I mean amplified) 13,333 times to be on an equal output footing. And even if we might get by with an average of 1V output (depends on the overall system gain including recording level), we'd still need 6667x. The price you and I pay for very low-output cartridges.

Digital sources rarely require preamplification; they require attenuation. This is why various forms of passive preamplifiers have "gained" (I can't help myself) popularity. In the world of low-level analog signals (microphones, reel-to-reel, phono cartridges) however, we are stressing our electrical systems to the maximum. This is why, when it comes to phonostages, you hear names like John Curl, Tim de Paravicini, and Nelson Pass. Low-level signal amplification is the area where the men get separated from the boys. Just as in the optical

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Esoteric E-02

The cartridge magnifier (phonostage) in the focal crosshairs here is the new Esoteric E-02, the Japanese manufacturer's top entry in the field. The E-02 sits above the long-established E-03 (in the market for more than eight years!), which was reviewed by TAS' own Greg Weaver in 2015. Its most substantial difference *vis-à-vis* the smaller E-03 is the E-02's fully balanced circuit topology, from input stage to output stage. Esoteric claims this makes it "perfectly designed for handling the extremely low-level signals from an mc cartridge." (We'll be the judge of that.) This is a fully active (no step-up transformers for mc gain) solid-state phonostage built for low noise and linearity.

As usual, I'll save a fuller technical description for the Technically Speaking sidebar. In keeping with the opening theme here, though, I'll single out that the E-02 has a very high mc gain of 72dB in balanced mode, whereas the E-03 has a maximum gain of 66dB. Every 6dB is a doubling of electrical gain (voltage). (3dB is a doubling of acoustical volume "loudness.") This means that what looks to be "just" a 6dB difference is actually twice the amplification power!

The E-02 is powerful, but it's anything but complex to use. There are inputs for three turntables (two RCA and one XLR), but otherwise there is no learning curve. All buttons are in front of you, and it's the kind of component you'll soon set and forget. So, if you're the kind of analog devotee who wants multiple EQ options other than RIAA, or if you think you need your cartridge loaded at exactly 488 ohms, you should look elsewhere for your phonostage. Don't worry, it just means you have fewer chances to screw it up (harsh, but true).

The execution and build-quality are exemplary. There are specialty spiked feet included, and even the front selector knobs have an action based on the ball-bearing technology developed for Esoteric's well regarded VRDS drive mechanisms, which were the firm's approach to deal with vibrations caused by spinning small silver discs at high speeds (remember the CD?). There is an overall feeling of a finished product with attention to the finest details, from a company capable of fully developing and manufacturing world-class products.

I'll offer up one aesthetic criticism, which I just can't shake. In isolation, the overall look of the E-02 is very nice. But, is it Esoteric? Is there any indication of where it's built, a culture with a rich aesthetic tradition? Unless you read magazines like this one, would there be any way to pick out the Esoteric from a police lineup alongside a dCS, Constellation, Boulder, and Bryston? Sure, each has its differently swirled and shaped CNC'd front plates, and each might use different colored LEDs. But do the designs say more about the process used, or the artistic choices made? I'm becoming a bit desensitized to the look of many of these things today. To my eyes, they look more generic than esoteric. Give me a spark. Show me some personality. Tell me where you're from. Throw a Urushi knob in for heaven's sake or forge the faceplate. Do something that I remember and love, not simply appreciate, only to soon forget. Make me use all my senses. I want to be all in!

Short personal rant completed. It's so much easier to be a critic than a manufacturer.

The School Concert

There's only one good reason to be attending an elementary school concert—you have a relative (usually son or daughter) participating. You shouldn't be there for the performance quality. In the midst of the chaotic cacophony, you're there to see your precious little Jane or Johnny beat the hell out of a tambourine, murder a recorder, or proudly sing the songs the music teacher is so painstakingly directing.

Real life affords us this opportunity to focus on the smallest details within large and sometimes confusing landscapes. Small glimpses and sounds of Jane and Johnny are all that a parent needs at a school concert to be left in an irrational emotional state. Real life allows the tiniest things to have the biggest significance. It doesn't make the choices of focal importance for us.

The best audio systems and equipment have an ability to realize instruments within a performance. They allow, as in real life, all the sonic elements to be equally present, be they large or small, or buried behind three other instruments, or three feet in front of the loudspeakers in your lap. As a listener, there is a freedom of attention, as if the choice of importance (just like at the school concert) is yours, not the system's. My first impression of the Esoteric E-02 was that it had this rare ability to realize the sonic stage.

For those of the opinion that even a mention of *Jazz at the Pawnshop* will trigger an immediate revocation of your "serious jazz guy" give you Ben Webster's *Gone with the Wind* [Black Lion Records/ORG-2028]. Originally recorded in 1965 at Copenhagen's Jazzhus Montmartre, it also has the very live, noisy jazz club feel of *Pawnshop*, without so much accompanying listener guilt. The E-02 allowed

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present as the speakers in front of me. Your “reference” gear better be able to realize and recreate like this. The E-02 does.

Non-Taxable Gains

Within the first 30 minutes of auditioning the E-02 I knew that it is a special piece of electronics. Sure, it’s quiet. Sure, it has no trace of tonal tilt. Sure, it’s dynamic and extended. I’ve heard many phonostages jump these hurdles. What makes the Esoteric special is that it freely allows or enables the music to be. By “freely” I simply mean without penalty. We live in a world where monetary gains are taxable, and the same is true of gains in an audio system. Big-voltage amplification is usually taxed with color, compression, and/or temporal smearing. The E-02 is gain without taxation (or, at least, you can write it off this year).

This may seem counterintuitive, but as a result of the sonic tax holiday the Esoteric E-02 affords, I rarely found myself focusing on it long enough to think, “Man, what a great phonostage.” Instead, I sat amazed at the achievement from my Denon cartridge, as though it has just been blown up to superhero status. Or, I reveled in the aforementioned freedom of performances fully realized, where everything taking place was somehow whole and worthy of attention.

Dave Holland’s solo album *Emerald Tears* [1978, ECM-1-1109] is not for the faint-of-heart. If things aren’t right, it’ll get pulled off the platter before the stylus has had a chance to reach the bottom of the groove. Fortunately, this was the most insightful reproduction of it I had heard. On the fourth cut, Anthony Braxton’s composition (you figure out what the title is, as I haven’t got a clue what the equation means), my notes emphatically state that there was “no confusion,” and that there was “no time to remember notes recently played.” This piece and this album had been set propulsively free. The overall sense was of an artist at work, creating and living right now! Human fingers on strings, with sonic expressions and textures uncorrelated from the audio system. Again, this is an album that goes to the back of the stack if anything’s off. The E-02’s neutrality is not of the boring variety. The speed present here is not the residue of a lean or bright balance.

Unforgiving?

Not really, if you mean that it must be fed race gas or you’ll stall at the starting line. I always had the feeling that I was simply getting the best of what was available, nothing more (but nothing less). So, I could easily play my favorite “C” side of Ed Sheeran’s 180-gram 45rpm *Divide* [2017, Asylum] and enjoy “Supermarket Flowers,” or tap my feet to the somewhat historical-sounding *Benny Goodman in Moscow* [1962, LSO-6008] without needing to turn it down.

Some of my favorite other phonostages from Nagra, E.A.R., and Luxman (the EQ-500, in particular) all add in (to a greater or lesser degree) a bit of identifiable “juice.” Perhaps not coincidentally, they all combine step-up transformers with tubes, and each of them has a very engaging character that can see them through poorer recordings. Their “juicy” goodness can be a fall-back when the recording completely fails. The Esoteric does not have this “extra” color. As such, I could see some listeners judging it as unforgiving. I never felt limited, however. In fact, the E-02’s rare ability to allow me to elevate recordings like Holland’s *Emerald Tears* to the front of the stack more than offset its resistance to putting lipstick on a pig.

Invisible Hand

Lest you are thinking that the E-02 must commit more sins of omission rather than sins of commission, I’ll simply say that omission was never on this phonostage’s menu. It’s certainly capable of immense power, substance, and harmonic structure when called upon. A better description of the impression I had during my audition of the Esoteric was of an invisible hand, always at the ready with plenty in reserve; allowing things to be the best version of themselves.

When it was time for mezzo-soprano Christina Ludwig and bass/baritone Walter Berry to take the stage singing Mahler [*Des Knaben Wunderhorn*, 1968, Columbia KS 7395, bonus live LP with a poorly recorded Leonard Bernstein on piano], they did so with wonderful presence—magically and powerfully, as if from some secret energy source.

And when it was time for Pink Floyd’s *The Wall* [1979, Columbia 36183] to seemingly occupy every nook and cranny of my listening room, it did so, with goosebumps nearly as big as the stage. A recording in perfect alignment with the musical style. Love it every time. “Is there anybody out there?” Yeah. Me.

What It Won’t Do

Simply put, it won’t help balance (or really, counterbalance) your system. Better have your ducks in a row already with the rest of your

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That's about it.

Without Prejudice

For the record, I have no prejudice against components with a strong character. In fact, some of my closest friends are components with strong character. But my experience has been that there is a place in a system to “build in” this character, and this place is as far away from the front end as possible—further still from a little signal in need of a bunch of gain. As a result, I’ve always been a counter-culturalist when it comes to that old “tube preamp with a solid-state amp” path that so many of you have followed. Not that it can’t be done; it’s just that (literally) the optics are at risk at too early a stage. I always get the feeling in many of these system concoctions that the color (usually artificial and/or accidental “warmth”) is inevitably in my listening way.

The problem has always been one of cost. The really good low-level signal amplifiers with low noise/distortion—the kind of things that get out of the way in every way except to do their job, which is boost a signal—are almost always very expensive and rare. I remember when the Boulder 2008 phonostage was first released, and I remember my last experience installing a Constellation Orion phonostage. Both had that eerie invisible-hand ability where you just knew in listening that they weren’t the system’s rev limiter. But the Boulder was over \$30k, and the Orion was about \$80k at last count. No quantity of audio journalism will ever put me in their ownership category.

The Esoteric E-02 is, by far, the least expensive phonostage that I’ve had experience with to simply do the job of amplifying a small signal many thousands of times. I didn’t say it was inexpensive (so don’t get all unnecessarily huffy), but if you want my industry opinion, it has been underpriced at \$9000, both in terms of its performance and in relation to the pricing of the smaller E-03 (which is \$6500). That makes it a bargain, and yes, it makes my day to tweak half of you reading that statement.

Specs & Pricing

Inputs: One balanced on XLR jacks (moving coil), two unbalanced on RCA jacks (moving coil or moving magnet)

Input impedance: Moving coil, 10, 50, 100, 200, 300, 500, 1k, 10k ohms; moving magnet, 47k ohms

Outputs: XLR/ES-LINK analog connectors (creates active ground when connected to an Esoteric ES-LINK equipped preamplifier or integrated amplifier), 1 pair; RCA connectors, 1 pair

Output impedance: XLR, 20 ohms; RCA, 23.5 ohms

RIAA accuracy: ±0.2dB, 10Hz–20kHz

THD: 0.007%, 1kHz, mm, rated output

Output level: RCA, 2V RMS; XLR, 4V RMS

Gain: RCA, mm 40dB, mc 66dB; XLR, mm 46dB, mc 72dB

Input sensitivity: (1kHz, rated output), mm 20mV, mc 1mV

Maximum input level: (at 0.1% distortion) mm 100mV, mc 4.8mV

S/N ratio: Moving-magnet 100dB, moving-coil 80dB

Channel separation: (mm, 10kHz, IHF-A) >96dB

Subsonic filter: 17Hz, 6dB/octave

Dimensions: 17 5/8" x 5 1/4" x 14 1/4"

Weight: 27.5 lbs.

Price: \$9000

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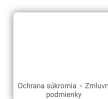
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By **Allan Moulton**

Let's just start with a confession of sorts. I enjoyed listening to the combined talents of Roger Whittaker, Nana Mouskouri, The Irish Rovers, Zamfir, and Chuck Mangione with my family as a youth (Allan winces).

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