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AUDIO REVIEWS

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SEPTEMBER 2009



ZU ESSENCE FOLLOWUP

Reviewer: Frederic Beudot

Financial Interests: click [here](#)

Source: Esoteric X03SE, Apple iMac, *Weiss Minerva* [on loan], Acoustic Solid Classic Wood, AS WTB211, Grado Reference Sonata 1, Denon DL103, Clearaudio Nano, *Audia Flight FL Phono* [on loan], *ASR Mini-Basis Exclusive* [in for review], *Esoteric E03* [in for review], *SQ-PH-1t* [on loan]

,Preamp/Integrated: *Esoteric C03* [on loan], Wyred 4 Sound STP

Amplifier: McIntosh MA2275, Genesis GR360 & MDHR, *Esoteric A03* [in for review]

Speakers: FJ OMs

ables: Zu Varial, Zu Libtec, Slinkylinks RCA copper, *Esoteric Mexcel balanced interconnects* [on loan], Zu Mother, *Accustic Arts Ferrite 2* [on loan], *Isotek Elite* [on loan]

Powerline conditioning: Monster Power HTS5100mkII, *Isotek Titan* [on loan], *Isotek Nova* [on loan]

Sundry accessories: Isopads under electronics and good 'ol wooden chest

Room size: 12' x 13.5' x 8.

Review Component Retail: \$3,495/pr factory-direct in the US



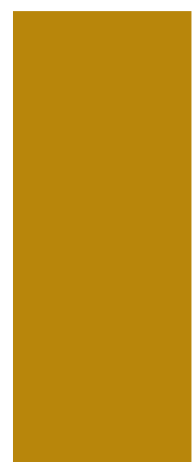
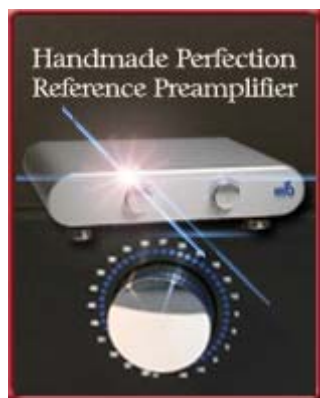
ESSENCE AT MUNICH HIGHEND 2009 WITH LUXMAN

I was in no particular rush to write a follow-up on the Zu Essence. I bought them six months ago on Srajan's assurance that the past shortcomings of the Druid had been addressed. Honestly, his [review](#) left nothing out so a follow-up was *not* on top of my list of priorities. After all, I got the Essence to listen to music, not as an analytical tool for reviewing purposes. Zu's recently announced change back to direct distribution in the US with a substantial price reduction on the Essence as a result (from \$5000 to \$3495/pair) raised my sense of urgency.

At their launch price, the Essence and its combination of qualities was a great value already. At this new price, the speaker simply has no match. Imagine superb tone and density, imaging to die for, bass extension down into the 30s, finely resolved treble detail thanks to the new ribbon tweeter, a never aggressive upper midrange and lower treble and the ability to sing with amplifiers as varied as Srajan's 2wpc Yamamoto SET or my 360wpc class-D Genesis GR360.

To my ears, the Druid suffered from three weaknesses. Its bass though extended when correctly set up was very finicky and required tremendous attention to sound its best. Now that's a thing of the past with the new loading scheme of the Essence. Bass is deep, plump and punchy wherever you plunk those speakers down. The second shortcoming of the Druid was its lack of treble amplitude and resultant lack of relative detail. It was not unpleasant to listen to but not necessarily what customers wanted. The ribbon tweeter of the Essence addressed this without sacrificing the tonal density and listening ease the Druids were famous for. The added transparency and detail retrieval from the Essence are obvious from top to bottom but really shine in the treble. Yet you will never hear the Essence scream at you to make it my dream speaker for treble energy, just enough to not sound dull but never too much to get harsh.





The last shortcoming, the one which five years ago had me walk away from buying a pair of Druids, was a certain level of boxy coloration in the midrange. That too has been addressed and is completely eradicated thanks to the new driver, construction material and design. To my greatest surprise and satisfaction, the association of Essence with Genesis GR360 + MDHR amplification is simply stunning. I was *not* expecting a high-power class-D amplifier to do well, operating essentially below 1 watt of output 90% of the time but it does thanks to the optional Maximum Dynamic Head Room unit which enables the GR360 to deliver current and voltage with the same steadfastness at a fraction of a watt as it does at 300 watts.



Dynamic nimbleness is key for a working association with the Essence. The wideband paper driver brings all the tone density you'll ever need or want. What you must preserve with strategic choice of ancillaries is the speakers' exceptional litheness, their ability to transmit the smallest of dynamic fluctuations. That takes an amplifier of great class but not necessarily high price. The 50-watt Esoteric A03 does decently well with the Essence but its focus is more on tonal richness than dynamic flutter. At the end of the day—surprise!—the class-D ballerina outclassed the class-A champion on these Zu speakers.

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Of course the Essence is not perfect. Despite great progress in treble information, we are still a far cry from what a diamond tweeter delivers in details but likewise far removed from associated ear pains. The only tweeter I have heard to date which provides both more information without harshness is the Genesis circular ribbon tweeter implemented in their top-line speakers. I have not heard the Raal ribbons which nowadays are finding their way into more and more designs but by reputation, also operate on that lofty plateau.

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