



*Review by Sravan Ebaen*



# ARTESANIA ESOTERIC

*An ultimate performance rack of great  
flexibility and demonstrable efficacy*

2012

*Sravan Ebaen*

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# ARTESANIA ESOTERIC

COUNTRY OF ORIGIN



SPAIN

**Reviewer:** Srajan Ebaen

**Financial Interests:** click [here](#)

**Source:** 27" iMac (3.4GHz quad-core IntelCore i7, 16GB 1.333MHz RAM, 2TB hard disc, 256GB SSD drive, ADM Radeon HD 6970M with 2GB of GDDR5 memory); PureMusic 1.87; Amarra 2.3; Audirvana Plus 1.3.1; April Music Eximus DP1; Esoteric/APL Hifi UX1/NWO-M; Audiophileo 2

**Preamp/Integrated:** ModWright LS-100 with Psvane CV-181T tubes, Esoteric C-03, Bent Audio Tap-X

**Amplifier:** First Watt SIT1 monos, ModWright KWA 100SE

**Speakers:** Aries Cerat Gladius, Boenicke Audio B10

**Cables:** Complete loom of Zu Audio Event, KingRex UCraft & UPower USB, Stereolab Tombo Trøn BNC/BNC coax

**Stands:** 2 x ASI HeartSong 3-tier, 2 x ASI HeartSong amp stand

**Powerline conditioning:** 1 x GigaWatt PF2, 1 x Furutech RTP-6

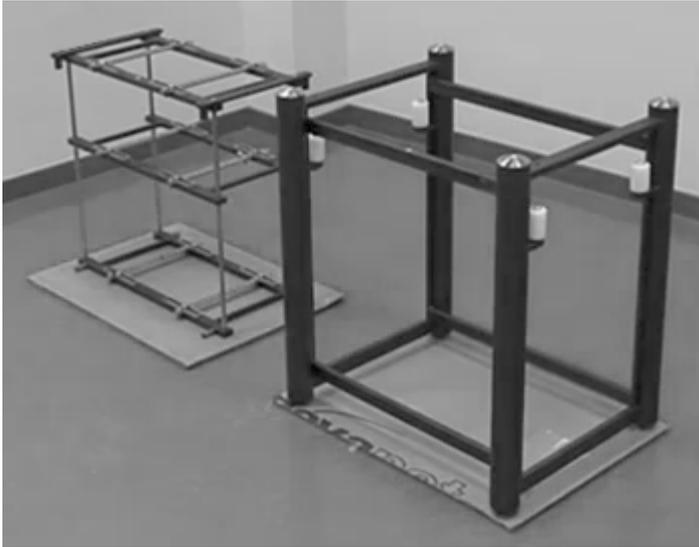
**Sundry accessories:** Extensive use of Acoustic System Resonators, noise filters and phase inverters

**Room size:** 5m x 11.5m W x D, 2.6m ceiling with exposed wooden cross beams every 60cm, plaster over brick walls, suspended wood floor with Tatami-type throw rugs. The listening space opens into the second storey via a staircase and the kitchen/dining room are behind the main listening chair. The latter is thus positioned in the middle of this open floor plan without the usual nearby back wall.



**Eduardo de Lima** prototyped his Audiopax Model 88 amplifier in steel, aluminum and brass. Though he couldn't explain underlying cause, he much preferred the sound of the brass enclosures. Another designer transplanted the entire guts of an Arcam integrated into a curvaceous composite chassis with very deliberate resonance control measures for the circuit boards, transformer etc. He pronounced the performance delta—identical circuit, no electrical part changed—*profound*.

**What audio circuits sit *in* and *on* has an effect.** Unless they pursue one-up custom work, audiophiles have no choice over their gear's enclosures. But they *can* and should control what—as their components' mechanical extension—they use as a rack. This accounts for more or less effective resonance control depending on applied engineering. A rack can even add a measure of inter-component shielding. Sitting atop one another, components are exposed to radiated fields from below and above. Carbon-fiber shelves for one can act as shield barrier.



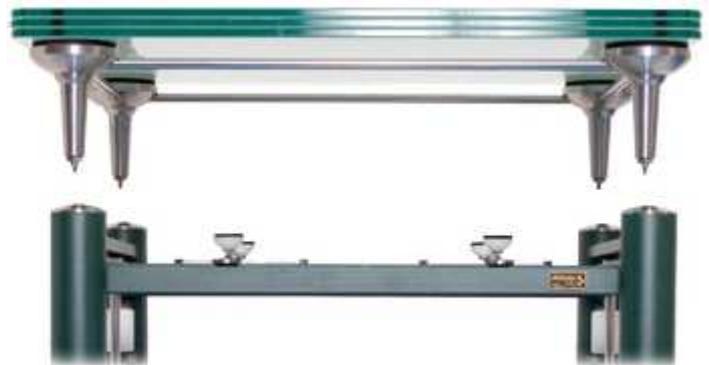
**With José Luis Lafarga's Artesania Esoteric** rack from Spain's Andorra province, the latter function applies not. *There are no shelves* (unless you insist). Instead there is a metal exoskeleton, 3- or 4-tier, single or double wide for the 3. Suspended via Nylon bushings from within that—the white cylinders at left—is a second hanging skeleton with height-adjustable rails and width-adjustable decouplers for the component bottoms.

Fanciers of oversized turntables get the optional glass\*1shelf on top. That leaves 14cm of clearance for the tier below. Its very tall spikes park in receiver dimples of the exoskeleton. For equipment that somehow doesn't lend itself to Javier's preferred shelf-less scheme there are 12mm 52.5 x 42mm shelves that slip atop the decouplers.

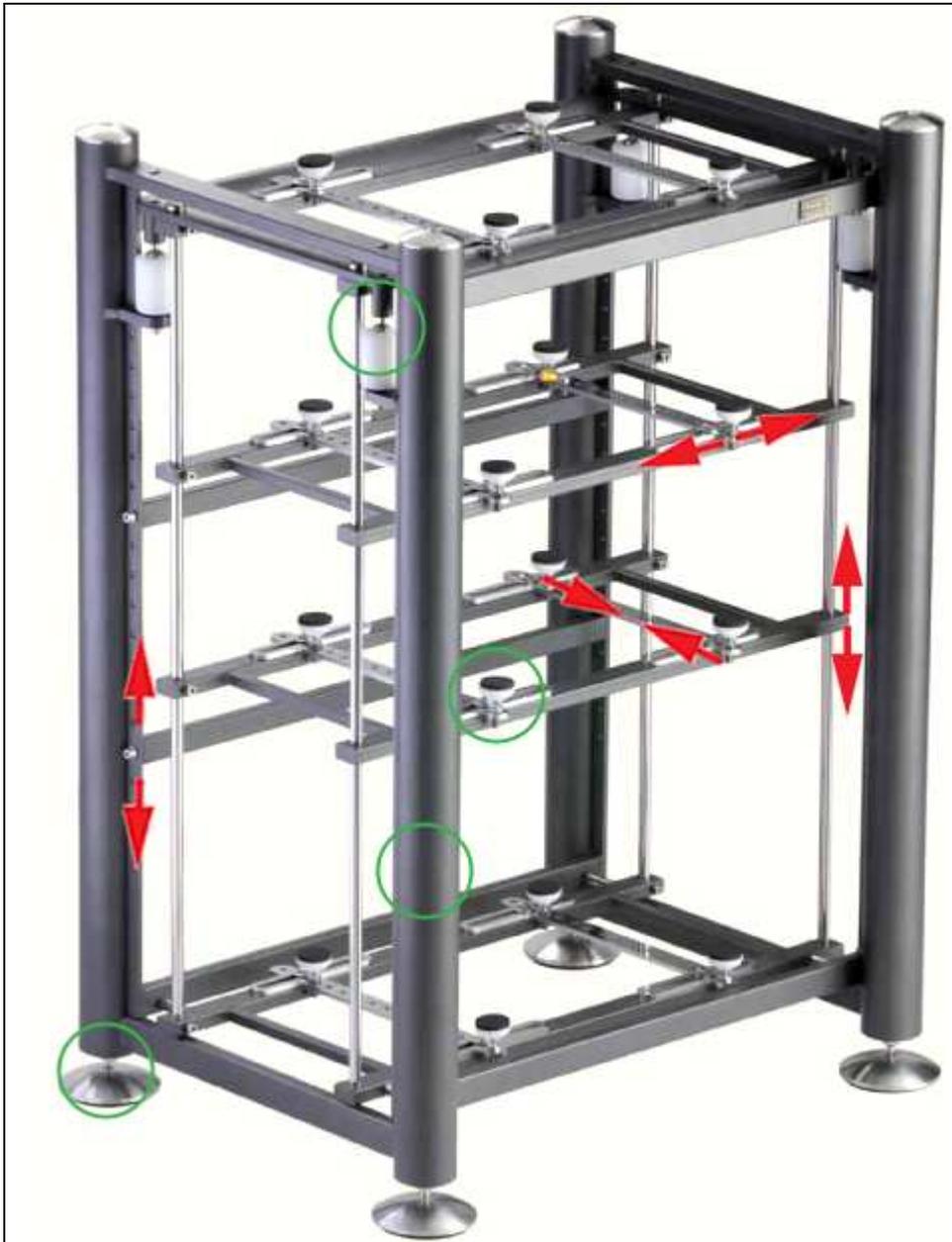
\*1 Glass suffers a poor audiophile reputation for ringing. Not all glass is the same though. High-tech companies Crystal Cable and Perfect8 Technologies very deliberately exploit the 'sound-proof' amorphous properties of specialty glass in their top speakers. This [link](#) contains some background. Artesania laminates three sheets of a tempered glass type for their top choice where a shelf is required.



Height-adjustable cross braces in the back add rigidity to the exoskeleton whose 60mm hollow uprights "with special diffusing paint" are filled with a resonance-absorptive compound. Four adjustable bumpers prevent play between inner and outer frames. The fore/aft supports bars of the inner structure move parallel or slightly angled and sport a number of holes to change the positioning of the pins with their upfacing polyamide decouplers and absorptive neoprene pads. A ground terminal accommodates phono stages. More neoprene discs slip beneath the four main spindle pin receivers for an additional disruptor of mechanical energy transmission between floor and rack.



Also included are 2.4kg anti-magnetic RF-shielding damper discs to be placed atop sensitive equipment. Max support weight for the suspended inner structure is 150kg. A turntable may add another 150kg to the outer structure. Unit depth is 52.5cm, outer width 67cm, total height is 73 or 98cm for the 3- and 4-tier versions.



**In short**, the Esoteric rack from Artesania is yet another serious vibebusting attempt in the vein of Grand Prix Audio, HRS, Silent Running, Stillpoints, SGR & Co. It's not hi-fi furniture. There focus is appearance and wood the most ubiquitous choice. The Esoteric is a *performance* rack. Its first order of business is broadband vibration attenuation. It wants components to sound like themselves (in mechanical isolation) rather than be affected by other gear, foot falls and the speakers' jackhammer action migrating through the floor into the rack and its critical cargo.

In lieu of levitation, such mechanical isolation relies on multiple disruptive junctions inside the rack. Mechanical energies traveling through its structure are repeatedly blocked and converted into heat. This involves freedom of motion (the 4-point suspension), rubbery barriers and damping in the filled uprights.

Where Artesania goes more mobile than some is modularity. Their tiers are infinitely adjustable up and down, their decouplers for optimal contact patches on component bellies are only slightly less so (though they clearly favor 4-point over three-point support).



Unless it were housed in a different room or airtight closet, what no rack can address is component reaction to airborne attack. Music moves air. Play louder, generate more low bass. This very action increases acoustic pressurization around your gear. All a properly engineered hi-fi rack can effectively accomplish is to measurably minimize mechanical crosstalk. Such vibratory feedback occurs between support and component (shelf, stand, floor) and between the components themselves. How electronics talk to *themselves* (how for example vibrating transformers couple to PCB parts or how tubes go microphonic from air turbulence) remains unaltered.

To make true alterations in that realm requires hardware modifications. Artesania's included RF/mass dampers are a first very basic step in that modify-the-enclosure direction. If pictures are worth a 1000 words, *moving* pictures by way of video must be priceless. So take an intermission from reading. Watch [this](#) 9-minute very instructional YouTube presentation on how to set up this upscale rack that looks to be from the high-mass rigid and 'laboratory'\*2 design school but is actually suspended.



*\*2 Whilst the lack of shelves has technical advantages, it also leaves more of the cabling visible. Hence my 'laboratory' tag. The Esoteric's concept is quite ruthless about performance. Décor friendliness is arguably second. This is a tech solution that looks it. Interior designers pursuing performance racks might prefer Harmonic Resolution Systems or Finite Elemente for their more conventional furniture styling disguising the incorporated technical solutions. In that sense the Artesania is bare-boned. With its skeletal guts for glory approach, you see exactly how everything goes together. With it the audiophile obsession has nowhere to hide.*

**With a ship weight of 146kg** and the main box 80 x 120 x 100cm—the glass shelf and footer/disc hardware arrive in separate boxes—you're excused for forgetting all about suspension and only seeing red mass. Unpacking and moving this double-wide rack into its final location is *definitely* a two-person job particularly if (cough) a few steep flights of stairs without elevator are involved. Packing quality is superlative to insure everything arrives in pristine shape. The rack comes fully assembled, requiring only the removal of six lock bolts and three wooden spacer shims. The top and bottom tiers span the entire width. They only move up or down in tandem and arrive in the highest and lowest possible orientation to likely remain unchanged. Just the middle tier is split and independently adjustable left and right. It's the leveling of the outer structure (a quality bubble level is included as are all other tools required), the fixing of the height of the center tiers and all footer locations which make up the remaining work.



**The footer brackets** relative to the fixing bolts may be mounted facing inside for narrow or outside for wide. This accommodated both my half-width April Music Eximus DP-1 DAC (center right above), jumbo-sized Trafomatic Audio 101D-based single-stage DHT preamp (upper left) and everything between. To support two half-width units side by side on a single tier does require an optional but free glass shelf. By simply loosening a lock nut on a footer pin, its height is adjustable with a hex key from below so a component can already be loaded to dial in this final trim.





**For the large floor-coupling discs** Artesania provides both black neoprene and white polyamide inserts. The latter have isolating but no damping or absorptive properties. They won't "increase the overall absorption coefficient of the rack. Auditions with them tend to be transparent, relaxed and above all dynamic." The neoprene bases absorb and damp and are for installations "with little acoustic treatments where the sound tends to be aggressive, dry, hard and thin." A further tuning option comes with the included complete second set of 24 component footers without neoprene pads but a simple felt layer. Artesania recommends to experiment with both from component to component. As these footers pull out easily from their pins, swaps are completely painless. And because they are stationary, moving equipment in and out avoids the dreaded roller block jitters.

**Fit 'n' finish of the Esoteric** really are of the very highest quality. This goes for surface treatment, joint welds, threads and overall tolerances. The optional turntable shelf—or iMac desk in my case—proved unbelievably heavy. Neoprene inserts in its frame decouple it from the uprights and that spike interface again is adjustable. What you're left with after installation is a super-inert thoroughly 'thru-engineered' structure which except for whatever happens to sit atop the triple-laminated glass hangs all your components from those white Nylon cylinders.



What turned out to be an unexpected practical advantage of the shelf-less approach was the ability to crisscross signal cables inside the structure through space usually blocked by solid shelving. This has merely the power cords 'exit' the back for altogether cleaner wire routing. The exposed cross brackets also lend themselves to things like Ikea kitchen hooks from which I hung headphones.

The six included very substantial mass/RF dampers not only damp ringing top covers and provide radiation shielding but also anchor the type of lightweight component that's prone to capsizing from cable weight alone. This rack seemingly accounts for all reasonable practical requirements. That's proper design.



**P(l)ayback time.** If you've never seriously experimented with resonance control, you'll be dumbfounded by what you've left beneath the table. By implication it tends to mean you'll regard *sound* commentary on racks—under description of goods, the Spanish commercial invoice said, ha, meuble (furniture)—with suspicion. My own rude awakening came from Grand Prix Audio's Monaco Modular rack many years ago when I still lived in Taos/New Mexico. That Alvin Lloyd design left the building when my previous space's long but narrow layout balked at the racks' depth. My two GPA towers thus ended up with a friend. In moved Franck Tchang's shallower wooden HeartSong. That's what the Esoteric now replaced.

**The difference was *not* subtle.** It presented itself without any effort as a simple fact. Upper harmonic richness had increased, say on Vassili Tsabropoulos' nearly glassy piano on *Melos* for ECM which is beautifully counterpointed by Anja Lechner's woody cello. The visibility of decays mixing and lingering had shot up. With it came a wholesale improvement of ambient retrieval. Recorded space was more audible. Space itself makes no sound of course. It's the sounds occurring within it which light it up and map it out with their reflections and natural reverb. On sufficiently pure recordings which contain such data, this aspect became a lot more astute. Think of those qualities as the equivalent of floating gossamer during an Indian summer - spider webs on the wind which you can only see because the light refracts off them just so. Here it's the recorded reflections which unveil them



A related benefit was improved intelligibility at lower levels. Personally that's perhaps *the* most prized quality. Only those without neighbors can't relate. It's the proverbial ability to hear the needle drop. That's shorthand for everything small and subtle. To make it out clearly without having to raise playback volumes is the difference between listening a few hours more each and every day. This effect also seems to inject more space between the musical weave. It's like a declumping agent or freshly washed hair which separates out into individual strands.

Pitch definition and general articulation in the wider bass registers also were better. Cleaner but also leaner bass meant more midband transparency. With still the exact same speakers as acoustic sources, these combined effects came from nothing more than a reduction of mechanical feedback between the gear and transducers. Another way of describing it is to simply say that the sound had grown more *sophisticated*. If it were about writing, there now was more meaning between the lines. If it were about painting, there'd now be less primary colors and more varied hues. Back in audio lingo those hues express themselves as bigger dynamic ripples. When things sound more dynamic without raising the volume, it means the difference between loudest and quietest has increased. Since loudest didn't get louder, only quiet could have become quieter. So we say the noise floor dropped. That reads quite abstract, particularly since we know very well that we didn't magically turn down any background din. Cars still drive by.



**But the experience is real and very tangible.** *Loud happens sooner.* Loud here means personal satisfaction that we hear everything without straining and that installation of the Esoteric rack has noticeably lowered this threshold. When quiet sounds loud, that's increased resolution in action. It's eminently practical. But there is a price to pay. This increase in resolution removes fuzziness whose unrecognized presence appears as warmth. Hence the resultant clarity which takes its place appears a bit cooler and more crystalline. This is similar to tube-induced colorations whose elimination with transistors both takes away and gives. How one reacts to what appears and what leaves should depend on focus and willingness to adapt. If your desire is to hear *more*, there's no question the Esoteric delivers. If you prefer deliberate soft focus on a leading lady's closeup, you could find it too truthful.

**Wrap.** Whilst far from cheap, most people will only need a single 3- or 4-tier rack. Key features of the Esoteric are being sh adjustable; not using parts that wear out to require replacement; not requiring assembly; tuning features (two kinds of floor interfaces, two kinds of component interfaces); mass dampers/radiation shields for each component; a ground terminal; and free shelves when placing two half-width components side by side for example. Design and execution are top (no)shelf and the efficacy of the involved engineering is plain as day even in a casual before/after audition. There's no question about any of it.



**The real question is**, will audiophiles consider allocating significant funds on something as unsexy as a rack—that descriptor alone suggests more torture than pleasure—when shiny new components beckon for equivalent coin? That remains a far larger variable than worrying about how much better one specific performance rack might be than another. It's why manufacturers like Artesania pursue reviews like today's. It's primarily about a reminder. *This stuff matters. A lot!* Once you've gotten your active components sorted (those obviously come first) and have put together a decent cable loom, give up the upgrade itch until you've properly addressed what those components sit on. Only then will you fully hear what you already own. Really. With this rack there's a good chance you'll feel home free on the component front already. Now you can spend further discretionary funds on music or another hobby altogether. Unlike room treatments (which most of us avoid though deep down we know better) there's no valid excuse why we shouldn't aspire to a performance rack. Your gear has to sit somewhere. Why not make that count? When you're at that specific juncture of your audiophile journey—if it came sooner than later you could save yourself money, time and effort in the long run—think Spain\*. Then think Artesania and Esoteric. Once I added up features, flexibility, workmanship and undeniable performance, an award was the only proper response. Bravo to the Spanish team at Barbastro!

*\* Today's differences between premium €6.000 and €12.000 D/A converters are far less significant than the improvements the Esoteric rack will make when you come from a 'non-engineered' furniture solution. Period, exclamation mark and a few salutary pepper words thrown in for good measure. That's how €5.000 for a rack become actual value. You pay but you do get very real returns.*



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BACK



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