

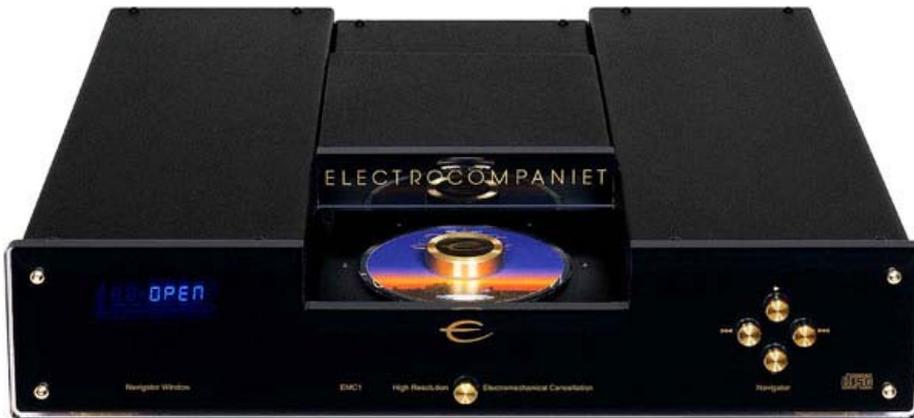


December 2009



# Electrocompaniet EMC 1 UP CD player

Ed Momkus



## Specifications:

### Line section

Single-ended gain: 1.6x (4dB)  
Balanced gain: 3.2x (10dB)  
THD (1V out, 1KHz): <0.002%  
Maximum output (Balanced): >14V RMS  
Channel separation (1V out, 1KHz): >90dB  
Equivalent input noise: 4µV

### Digital section

Transport: Philips CD Pro top loading drive unit, latest version  
DAC: 24-bit upsampler 192KHz  
Digital out: RCA/XLR

Power consumption: 23W  
Dimensions: 19W x 4.5H x 17.3D (inch)  
Weight: 44lbs.

**MSRP:** \$7,290

## U.S. Representative:

Electrocompaniet Inc

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I have often read CD player reviews that imply that the sonic differences between CD players are very minimal. This has not been my experience. It is true that this may have generally been the case in 1990, but things changed by the late 1990's, and the last 5-7 years have seen an amazing variety of players. So many that even veterans of digital audio can't keep up. For example, I have owned over a dozen different CD players, reviewed four (including my own Esoteric front end) since joining the Dagogo staff, and extensively demo'd (in my own system) a dozen others. Included are the Lindemann 820S SACD Player ([January 2009 Edition of Dagogo](#)), the EMM Labs CDSA CD/SACD player, Oracle CD 2500 ([August 2006 edition of Dagogo](#)), Music Hall Maverick SACD player ([May 2007 edition of Dagogo](#)), Levinson 39S, the Cary 306/200, the Electrocompaniet EC-1 and several custom-modded DVD players, as well as EAD transports and DACs.

My current front-end is an Upgrade Company-modded Esoteric P-70/D-70 combo (see my review in the [December 2008 issue of Dagogo](#)), connected by two Transparent Reference AES/EBU and one Transparent Reference BNC digital cable, mounted on a Target VW-2 wall-mounted dual turntable shelf, and powered by way of a dedicated outlet connected by Lessloss DFPC *Signature* Power Cords (review to come). I really love this front-end, but I will tell you frankly that I would not feel this much affection for it without David Schulte's (the Upgrade Company) mods. His mods improved several things, but for my taste, the main improvement was the body and warmth added to the presentation. This body and warmth are not, in my opinion, artificial coloration. Instead, they brought the Esoteric combo closer to "live".

The absence of sufficient body and warmth in digital components has been one of the chief complaints (there have been others) made about digital. You can attempt to compensate through your selection of preamp, amp or cables, but this is an extremely dangerous approach where you risk cobbling together a system that addresses component shortcomings by adding coloration. In my opinion, you need to fundamentally love both your speakers and your front-end before you tweak the sound with other components.

Realizing this, designers turned to tubes, upsampling, oversampling, and different digital formats (SACD and DVD Audio) in an effort to address these and other digital issues. Electrocompaniet was an early adapter of upsampling, but there was clearly more than upsampling to what they were doing. My own Esoteric is an upsampling player, but even after the mods it doesn't have the body and weight produced by the EMC 1 UP. In fact, as you will see below, the EMC 1 UP produces the sort of full-bodied sound that is normally associated with tubed players, but without the hassle of tubes. Read on.



## Design

The EMC 1 UP is a top loader with a sliding, rather than a hinged, door. Most top loaders must be placed on the top shelf so that there is room for the hinged door to swing open. This may not be important in some systems, but drawer-style players and transports can give you more flexibility in placement, especially if you also have a turntable, which definitely needs to go on the top shelf of your rack. The EMC 1 UP's top slides straight back, opening not only the top of the unit, but also sliding back part of the top of the central face of the player so that you can put the disc in on a middle shelf that has enough clearance. Top off the disc with the supplied magnetic puck, close the sliding top, and you're ready to go.

The EMC 1 uses a Philips CDM-PRO 2 transport. The CDM-PRO mechanism and DSP board are housed in a rectangular metal block consisting of 4 sheets of metal alloy with soft rubber coupling feet. This electro-mechanical damping system is designed to isolate the transport's laser mechanism from vibrations. The EMC 1 employs 24/192 kHz DACs and all circuits are fully balanced and symmetrical. Two separate transformers power the digital, analogue, drive mechanism and fluorescent display. The power supply is designed using Electrocompaniet's Floating Transformer Technology, which is also used in Electrocompaniet amps. The whole player stands on three triangularly-placed feet. You can get more details and information from Electrocompaniet's website: [www.electrocompaniet.com](http://www.electrocompaniet.com).

## Setup

Setup was straightforward. I only used the balanced outputs, which is what Electrocompaniet recommends, and ran balanced throughout the entire equipment chain. For my first listening session I used Silent Source Signature XLRs to connect the EMC 1 UP to the pre and powered it by a regular [LessLoss DFPC](#). In later listening sessions I substituted the fabulous Silent Source Music Reference XLR interconnects and LessLoss DFPC Signature power cord. Over the course of several listening sessions I played the EMC 1 UP through three different preamps: the MBL 6010D, the [Pass XP-20](#) and the Shengya CS-6. Amps included Electrocompaniet Nemo monoblocks and Shengya PSM-600, and the speakers were [B&W 800D](#) and [Janszen Model One](#) electrostatics.



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### *First Impressions*

I first listened to the EMC 1 UP without the Spider Clamp. I could immediately hear the voicing that I love in the Electrocompaniet Nemo monoblocks – a detailed sound with excellent body and natural-sounding tonal richness. Well-recorded piano had concert hall clarity, cymbals were crisp and clear, the wooden-bodied sound of acoustic guitars was clearly discernible, and brass had bite without harshness. The weight and richness of acoustic bass was excellent, and the bass in general was among the more realistic I've heard, while the top-end was extremely pleasing and listenable, with good extension. I don't like to make assumptions based on reputation, but these initial auditions immediately demonstrated that the EMC 1 UP deserves its reputation as a top digital source – extremely enjoyable from the first listen, with no major weaknesses and definitely competitive with players up to \$10,000 and some above that price range. As a result, all my comments about “weak” points are made in the context of comparisons to the top digital components I have heard.

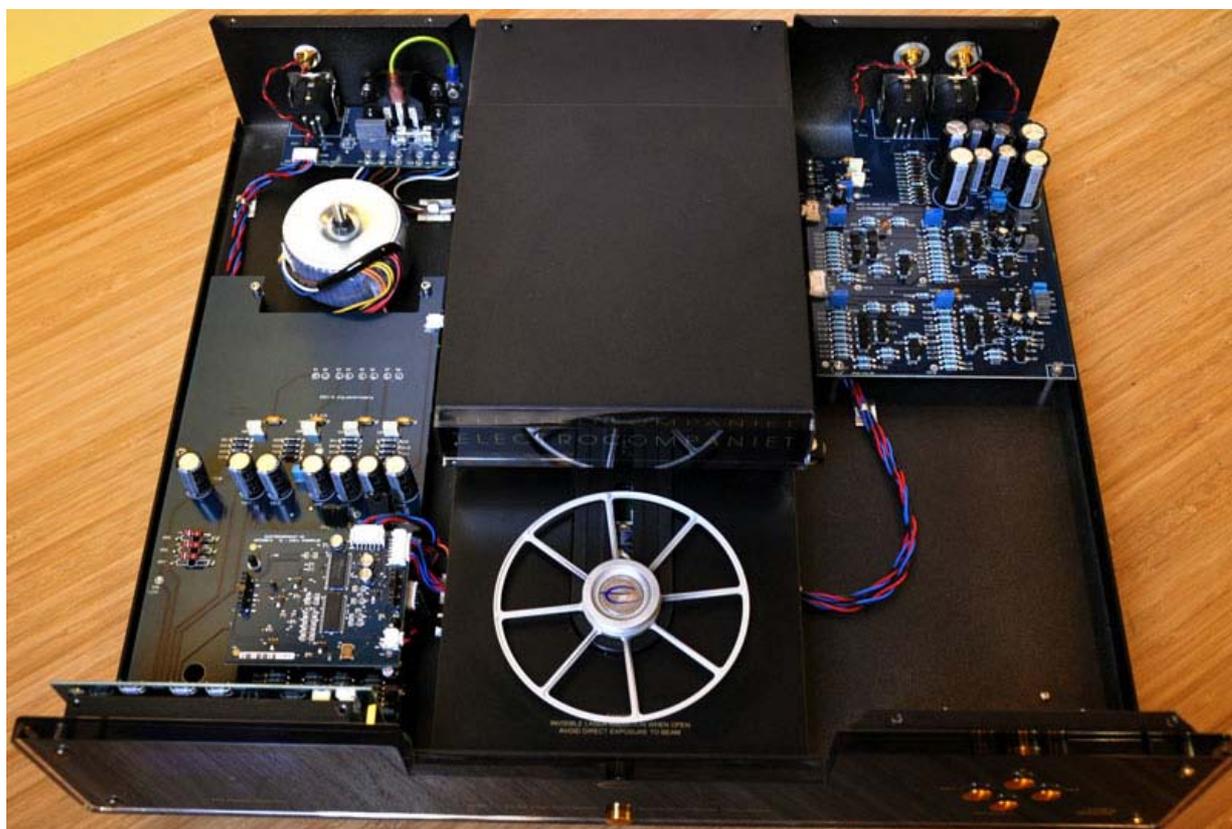
Once I shifted my listening into “analytical” mode, I concluded that the EMC 1 UP's “weaknesses” relative to the best digital I've heard were: 1)

average focus and performer separation, and 2) good but not great dynamics and speed. My modified Esoteric clearly bested the EMC 1 UP in this regard, and seemed to match my expectation that \$19,000 worth of digital separates and high-end digital cables would beat a \$7,290 one-box player. However, system synergy is such a major factor in evaluating components, that it is a big mistake to make a final judgment by only listening in one system configuration. When playing with audio equipment you sometimes get the unexpected, and this occurred when I made a few changes. I started with Electrocompaniet's Spider Clamp.

### *Adding the Spider Clamp and playing with the Millennium CD mat*

The Spider Clamp is designed to help center and stabilize the disc in the transport mechanism. However it does this, it clearly works. Adding the Spider Clamp improved definition, solidity and performer placement. There was an immediate improvement in focus and separation, thus addressing one of the two weaknesses I mentioned above and bringing the EMC 1 UP's soundstaging and performer placement much closer to that of my Esoteric combo. A few listening sessions confirmed that the Spider Clamp is essential for getting the best out of the EMC 1 UP. The improvement in a high-end/high-resolution system was clearly worth the additional cost of the Spider Clamp.

Even though my Esoteric P-70 transport uses a VRDS mechanism that will not accommodate a CD mat, I have a Millennium CD mat (February 2009 edition of Dagogo) which I use with great success in my other CD and DVD players. As an experiment, I used the Millennium CD Mat in conjunction with the Spider Clamp. This produced even better results than just the Spider Clamp by itself. For example, Steely Dan's *My Old School* had plenty of body without either the Spider Clamp or the Millennium CD mat, but exhibited a bit of sluggishness and a slightly congealed soundstage. Adding the Spider Clamp tightened everything up nicely without any loss of body or richness, making the presentation more lively, and added separation between performers. However, using the Millennium CD mat in conjunction with the Spider Clamp tightened up every note even more, turned that part of the song into a true staccato passage and brought out nuances that I did not hear on the first go-around, making it much more difficult to distinguish the EMC 1 UP from my Esoteric's impactful rendering of that tune.



### *Enter the Silent Source Music Reference interconnect and LessLoss DFPC Signature power cord*

I got these cables after I had evaluated the EMC 1 Up with the Spider Clamp and Millennium mat. Naturally, I put them on my Esoteric front-end first. I was very impressed about how each of these cables audibly notched everything up in my Esoteric combo. I fully expected similar improvements when I decided to try them on the EMC 1 UP. However, I also expected these fine cables to further clarify how much better the Esoteric combo was than the EMC 1 UP. After all, my experience had been that the best components also get the most improvement from upgraded cables. I was in for a surprise. The insertion of these two cables had more effect on the EMC 1 UP, and made it much more difficult to detect differences between the two front-ends. See what I mean by unexpected results when system synergy is taken into account?

Playing music through the EMC 1 UP, fed by the LessLoss DFPC Signature and tethered to the MBL 6010D via the Silent Source Music Reference XLR became addictive. I could still hear some shortcomings when I listened in "analytical" mode and compared the sound to the "best" digital I've heard, but I simply couldn't sustain listening in analytical mode for very long. It was just too enjoyable to simply let the EMC 1 UP do its thing. For example, "Respect Yourself", on *The Very Best of Robert Palmer*, is an OK recording, but depending on the character of your system, it can sound energetic and bouncy but too thin, or rich and full-bodied but sluggish: the "You can never be too rich or too thin" adage definitely does *not* apply to musical reproduction. The EMC 1 UP got it just right.

The conclusion I reached from this experience was that the initial impression of a weakness in dynamics and speed is misleading, and that the EMC 1 UP clearly has the capacity for very good speed and dynamics, and you simply need to intelligently select a power cord and balanced interconnect that maximizes system synergy.

## A Note About Associated Equipment

Most of my listening was done through my own MBL 6010D preamp, Electrocompaniet Nemo monos and B&W Nautilus 800D. However, I had the opportunity to review JansZen Audio's Model One electrostatics during the time that I had the Electrocompaniet EMC 1 UP in my system. Electrostatics are extremely fast and detailed, so I thought that they could be a great match for the EMC 1 UP. I also had the Shengya CS-6/PSM-600 tubed pre/solid state monoblock combo and thought that they could all be a good match. It turned out that those components together were an excellent match for the EMC 1 UP. I would definitely recommend that electrostatic owners check out the EMC 1 UP as an option for a front-end, and that EMC 1 UP owners see what their players sound like with the wide soundstage and speed of electrostatics. Enough said.

## Conclusion

One of the few downsides to reviewing audio equipment is the need to be analytical and brutally analyze a component's weaknesses. Once you've gone through that exercise it can be difficult to listen to the component without focusing on its "failings". This never occurred with the EMC 1 UP, which was emotionally involving and easy to listen to for hours on end. Did the \$7,500 EMC 1 UP with Spider Clamp outplay my modded Esoteric P-70/D-70 front-end, which retailed for \$15,000 5 years ago, not to mention the three transparent Reference digital cables retailing for \$3600? Objectively, looking at isolated "audiophile" qualities, no. Low frequencies were a touch less firm, affecting PRAT on lively passages. Placement of instruments & vocals in the sound-stage was fuzzier than with my Esoteric, and at times lacked the focus I've grown accustomed to. Subjectively, however, the EMC 1 UP sure as hell *sounded* good. In fact, there was a *rightness* to the overall presentation that repeated itself on every disc played. I think that the only listeners who might feel differently would be those who love an analytical CD player and/or one which produces ephemeral images of ghostlike performers.

System matching will help you get the absolute best out of the EMC 1 UP. This was especially true when it was matched with superior cables and dynamic components. Of the components I had on hand at the time, using the EMC 1 UP as the front-end for: (1) the Pass Labs XP-20 preamp (see the July 2009 edition of Dagogo) or MBL 6010D in conjunction with Electrocompaniet Nemos driving B&W Nautilus 800D or (2) the Shengya CS-6/PSM-600 tubed pre/solid state monoblock combination driving JansZen Model One speakers produced very pleasing results.

Definitely recommended.

