

A

bout 35 years ago, a small Norwegian company named Electrocompaniet arrived on the HiFi scene with a new approach to amplifier design that concentrated on minimizing TIM (Transient Intermodulation Distortion). In case you aren't familiar with TIM, it was first pointed out by Finnish engineer Dr. Matti Ojala, who has a pretty amazing background in electronics and telecommunications.

Electrocompaniet's first amplifier was a 25-watt per channel solid-state model, featuring a stark, black front panel with the logo on the front. It wasn't much to look at, but along with the Mark Levinson ML-2 monoblocks and early Threshold amplifiers, it became part of an elite class of solid-state amplifiers that sounded musical for the first time. They extended this design philosophy to preamplifiers and eventually CD players, while they enjoyed a tremendous amount of success worldwide. About five years ago, however, they left the US market.

This fall, thanks to the help of U.S. importer Peder Beckman, Electrocompaniet is back and is doing well. The company's dedication to high performance with minimalist casework is still intact, with a number of their models still in the current lineup. When our publisher had a chance to chat with him, Beckman said, "Electrocompaniet does not produce new models just for the sense of fashion." It is worth noting, though, that the sparse, machined aluminum front panel has been replaced by a thick Plexiglas front panel (though still black) that is very sexy in an understated way. It's tough not to be highly impressed by the build quality in this player as soon as you take it out of the box.



The Electrocompaniet EMP-1M

A NORWEGIAN MASTERPIECE

By Jerold O'Brien

Setup, etc.

The EMP-1/S is straightforward to unpack and set up. It features five balanced XLR outputs (no RCA's), an SPDIF output, outputs for composite video and HDMI. The remote guides you through a quick setup menu so you can adjust the usual parameters.

Though I'm not a video expert by any means, I did just take possession of a new 55-inch Samsung LED TV, and I must say that I was impressed with the DVD video quality of the EMP-1M. I can't imagine you could wring more performance out of these legacy discs, and the multichannel audio performance was excellent. The EMP-1M is certainly a great way to maximize your enjoyment with an existing DVD collection if you weren't feeling the pressure to upgrade to blu ray just yet.

The Sound

If you have a large collection of CD's and SACD's and don't require video or multichannel playback, the EMP-1/S might be the perfect player. Should your needs change, it can be updated to the EMP-1M. Currently, the EMP-1M has an MSRP of \$9,990 while the EMP-1/S costs \$8,250, making it an even better bargain, considering the level of sound quality offered is the same for both decks.



Listening very carefully to the SimAudio 750 player that I also am currently writing about created an interesting comparison. The Sim has slightly more inner detail and dynamic slam (and can be used as a DAC, which is a big bonus for those requiring that functionality), but I kept coming back to the natural presentation of the EMP-1M. It reminded me a lot of a great solid state class-A solid-state amplifier, which just happens to be what Electrocompaniet specializes in.

As my reference system is slightly on the warm/lush side of the tonal scale, with a pair of Vandersteen 5's driven by a pair of Audio Research Ref 210T's, the EMP-1M was a perfect compliment to my system and taste in sound. If your musical taste runs more to solo vocalists and singer/songwriter style, it will be easy to be fooled into thinking you are listening to analog with the best source material.

The EMP-1M makes a great case for saving the SACD format. Listening to The Jung Trio's current SACD, *Piano Trio in F Minor, Op.65*, was a fantastic experience. This player has a subtlety and lack of grain that really puts it in the big league. The Groove Note recording is exquisite, the amount of detail and decay of the piano and violin is reproduced in a very convincing way, these being two of the toughest instruments to nail.

Spending some more time with acoustic music, I listened to a fair share of the Stones' and Dylan catalogues on SACD as well, both being great examples of the medium. Again, I was able to hear further into these rock recordings than I am used to with my current reference player, with Dylan's voice taking on a further level of raspiness and phrasing.

While the EMP-1M did a great job with all of the audiophile standards, it was a ton of fun with my favorite rock recordings, possess-

ing more than enough punch to play my favorites from the '60s and '70s. Actually, the slight bit of warmth this player adds to the presentation made these discs sound much less digital, and that's a good thing. If you are someone who never invested in the analog side of the fence or got rid of your LP collection a long time ago, this player could keep you from going back. It's that good.

Conclusion

So to recap, The EMP-1M is by far the most musical digital disc player I've had the pleasure to listen to in my system. It easily exceeded my reference Ayre C-5xeMP by a considerable margin in every category, with more bass slam, a more natural upper register and better low-level detail resolution. In short, more analog-like in every way, with a tonal balance that is slightly on the warm side of neutral, but in such an unobtrusive way that it was always pleasing.

The biggest question that potential buyers will have to ask themselves before writing the \$9,990 check for the EMP-1M is whether they can live without blu ray capability. While it uses Faroudja technology to scale up to 1080i, it's still not blue ray. The good news is that even if you don't plan on using the EMP-1M for video, you can purchase the EMP-1/S. Though I'm not much of a videophile, I do love multichannel audio and I would have liked to see this excellent multichannel player work with DVD-a discs as well. Most of the multichannel enthusiasts I know have a hefty collection of DVD-a discs, so this would be a deal breaker for that crowd.

Regardless of whether you choose the EMP-1M or the EMP-1/S, you will be rewarded with superb audio performance and rock solid build quality from a company that has a 35-year reputation for building great gear.



Second Opinion: How does it stack up to the big boys?

By Jeff Dorgay

Having a few top-line CD players on hand from Naim (The CD555), Wadia (781 SE), SimAudio (Moon 750) and a full Paganini stack from dCS, I was curious to see how much of the cost-is-no-object performance was available from the EMP-1M.

The player is beautifully built and would be a visual compliment to the rest of the gear on which it shares rack space. The remote control is a plastic unit not quite in keeping with the high level of fit and finish that the player presents, but as US importer Peder Beckman told me, “We are introducing a deluxe remote soon, that will be optional. The basic remote keeps the cost down for the customer that does not want to pay for it.” I love fancy remotes, but feel the thought process is sound. And you can always add it later.

Jerold’s description of the EMP-1M is spot on in terms of tonality. It has the slightest touch of warmth to the presentation, which I found very attractive and made for extremely long listening sessions – not always easy to do with digital. I’d go as far to say that if you don’t have a superlative analog front end (or a large collection of records), you could easily do without it and just listen to the EMP-1M.

In my reference system, the Naim and dCS players had a clear edge in terms of the level of detail they could resolve. Both these players offer more dynamic contrast as well, but again, this is playing music on a relatively cost-is-no-object system. When compared with the Sim and Wadia players, it became more of a question of which flavor of reproduction one prefers. Either way, the EMP-1M more than held its own in terms of tonality and musicality. When I reconfigured my system to a more reasonable setup (Harbeth 40.1’s, ARC SP-17 pre and Moscode 402au power amplifier), the differences between the \$30k-\$60k players and the Electrocompaniet were greatly minimized.

Though I’m a newcomer to the world of multichannel and high performance video, I would strongly recommend the EMP-1M if it is compatible with your disc collection. Otherwise, I’d go for the EMP-1/S (featuring identical sonics, but only two channels of output and no video capability) as one of the best players in its class. Your music and video library will determine which one of these two players is right for you, but the sound quality is a home run out of the park, regardless of which one you choose. ●

The Electrocompaniet EMP-1M Multichannel player

MSRP: \$9,990
(EMP-1/S, 2ch playback only - \$8,250)

www.electrocompaniet.com

PERIPHERALS (JD and JO)

Digital Sources Naim CD555, dCS Paganini, Ayre C5-MPxe, Wadia 781, SimAudio Moon 750

Preamplifiers ARC Ref 5, Burmester 011, McIntosh C500, ARC SP-17

Power Amplifiers ARC Ref 210T’s, Burmester 911MK.3, McIntosh MC1.2KW, Moscode 402au

Speakers Vandersteen 5A, GamuT S-9, Harbeth Monitor 40.1, Verity Audio Finn

Cable Shunyata Aurora, Shunyata Stratos SP, Cardas Golden Reference

Power Running Springs Jaco, Dmitri and Maxim power conditioners, RSA Mongoose and HZ power cords, Shunyata Python CX power cords