

**INTEGRATED AMPLIFIERS
ELECTROCOMPANET PRELUDE PI-1**

Swingtime!

Norwegian high-end audio brand Electrocompaniet has had its share of upheaval. The company was taken over by WestControl some three years ago, amidst fears that the change would see the marque forced into the potentially more lucrative mass-market arena.

As staunch EC fans will know by now, the reality was quite the opposite: the new owners streamlined production processes and upped quality control, but stuck to their high-end guns, and continued producing the same family of amplifiers and source components.

A number of upgrades to the existing products, most of them retro-fittable, were introduced, with more than satisfying results in terms of detail, weight and authority. But, it seemed, the quintessential status quo would remain the same.

However, those original fears were raised when it became known that Electrocompaniet was contemplating the launch of a more affordable range. Was the nightmare about to come true?

Well, having spent a considerable amount of time with the new Prelude PI-1 integrated amplifier and its matching PC-I CD player,

VITAL STATS

Power output.....2x 50 watts
(8 ohms, THD= 0,2%)

Maximum current output...>50 Amps

Frequency response....1 Hz to 200 kHz
(-3 dB)

THD< 0,006% (20 Hz – 20 kHz)

Inputs2x XLR balanced,
2x RCA single-ended

OutputsLoudspeaker binding
posts only

Dimensions (WxDxH)
.....420 x 340 x 77 mm

Weight6 kg

PRICER20 950

VERDICT

Authentic, visceral Electrocompaniet performance in a simpler, more affordable package.

SUPPLIED BY

Jade Services
011-976-2750

WEBSITE

www.jadec.co.za

I'm happy to report that the newcomers are not only impressive performers in sonic terms, but also remain true to the EC ethos.

The PC-I CD player will have to wait for a separate review, since this discussion focuses squarely on the PI-1 integrated amplifier.

Any sense of initial trepidation about this new, more affordable EC product is quickly dispelled on unpacking the unit. Yes, it looks quite different from EC's Classic Series products – cleaner, less ornate, and a little more prosaic.

But the simplicity of execution also looks smart and contemporary, and the finishes are still aesthetically pleasing. The all-metal construction adds a tactile robustness to the package.

The front panel layout is typical EC, with four round buttons arranged in a diamond pattern to allow for source selection and volume control. An accompanying remote control handset offers armchair adjustment of these parameters.

Taking up a central position is the bright blue fluorescent display, which shows the selected source, and a numerical value for volume output.

The rear panel is home to two RCA and two balanced XLR inputs, as well as nicely



executed binding posts and a kettle plug-type power socket. Again, it's the simplicity and the quality of the execution that impresses.

So, where did EC cut the corners to bring the price down to the Prelude's levels? The answer is nowhere. Quality remains peerless. But it has opted for circuit boards featuring surface mount technology, which is both cheaper and more efficient to produce, but with potential gains in manufacturing quality and consistency.

I allowed the PI-I to run in for a good 100 hours or so before taking any serious notice of its sonic talents – and it does need a good burn-in, so don't be too disappointed if your brand new, out-of-the-box amp initially sounds anaemic.

But the wait is well worth it: once settled in, this amplifier is a musical and engaging performer. More importantly for EC traditionalists will be the fact that the PI-I sounds like

an authentic EC product.

There is the same warmth and definition in the bass, the same richness and texture in the midrange, the same sweetness in the treble, all achieved without robbing the delivery of clarity or impetus. The delivery remains agile and articulate, the staging open and accessible.

And don't be fooled by the rated 50 watts per channel into 8 ohms. The amplifier is impressively stable, and won't shirk its responsibilities even at 2 ohm loads, by which time it is rated at 100 watts per channel. A current output in excess of 50 Amps adds to the amp's sense of authority.

A huge boon in the league the PI-I competes in, is the presence of balanced inputs. There is no doubt that the reduced noise floor offered by this interface (and its closer relationship to the symmetrical circuit design of the amplifier) pays handsome sonic dividends.

These include a greater degree of clarity, more convincing resolution of fine detail, and an overall ease of flow that translates into greater musical eloquence. That EC's own Prelude Series CD player also offers a balanced output makes that particular pairing an even more attractive sonic proposition.

The downsides? Well, I'm a believer in keeping audio hardware powered up – they remain more thermally stable, among other benefits. But the PI-I goes into a sleep mode that also shuts down the display. And when active, the display is a little on the bright side.

These are small irks, however: in performance terms, the Electrocompaniet PI-I is a giant killer. It is highly communicative, believable and entertaining, with a real-world approach that makes the music swing.

For this kind of money, there's very little else that can compete ...

Deon Schoeman

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CD PLAYERS
ELECTROCOMPANET PRELUDE PC-1

Sleek, sweet surprise

Regular readers may remember that we featured Electrocompaniet's new, more affordable 'lifestyle' components, dubbed Prelude, some months back. That initial report was followed up with a full evaluation of the PI-1 integrated amplifier.

Local Electrocompaniet importer Jade Services supplied both the PI-1 amp, and its matching PC-1 CD player for review, and it's the latter unit that now comes under the spotlight.

At the time, I specifically evaluated the player in the company of its integrated amplifier stable-mate, as well as linked to other pre-amps and integrated amplifiers, in an effort to isolate just what the CD player sounds like in own right.

The PC-1 may be part of the Prelude lifestyle series, but its front switchgear will be familiar to anyone who has previously operated an Electrocompaniet component. The fascia has a centre-mounted transport tray, directly above the obligatory blue-backlit display.

The primary switchgear is a four-button array on the right, looking after track forward and reverse, stop and play. There is a power button on the left.

No surprises on the rear panel, either: the balanced and single-ended outputs, and the coaxial digital output, are kept company by the usual kettle-type power socket.

Initial batches of the Prelude line were available in silver enclosures only, but it now seems that Electrocompaniet has sanctioned the release of black enclosures as well – a clear effort to broaden the unit's aesthetic appeal. Pity: I rather liked the dull silver finish of the test unit.

I also liked the solid feel of this player: its weight of around 4 kg doesn't sound impressive, but in practice, the all-metal construction feels reassuringly robust, as do the positive actions of those rounded buttons.

Another pleasant surprise was the Philips-sourced disc transport, which features a proprietary suspension and damping system

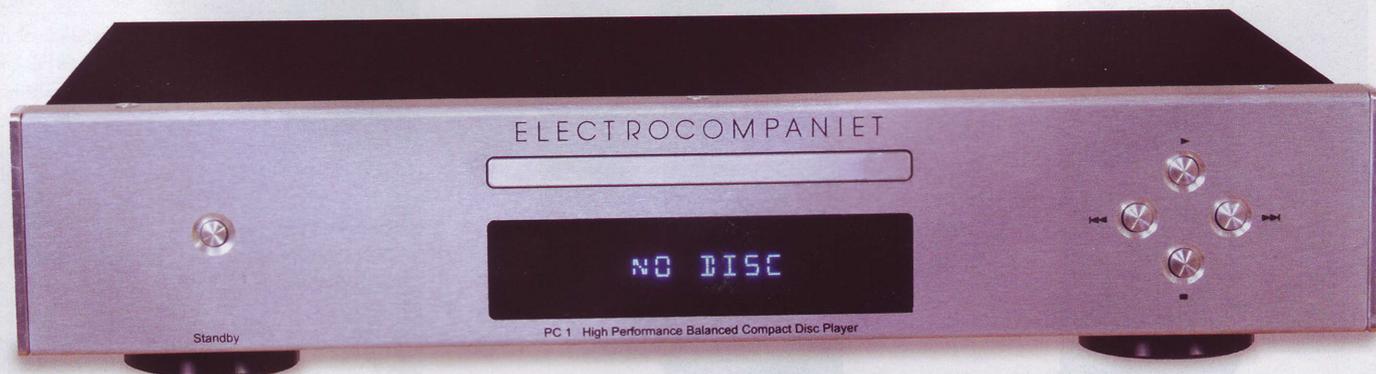
to isolate the transport and its laser pick-up from external vibrations. This has the additional benefit of promoting accurate and reliable data retrieval, as well as quiet operation.

Interestingly, the transport will read just about any optical disc – including DVDs containing conventional music or compressed audio files. Of course, it also copes with conventional Red Book-standard CDs, as well as CD-R and CD-RW software.

A latest-generation Cirrus Logic 24-bit/192 kHz DAC chip is tasked with the signal's transformation from the digital to the analogue domain, while the PC-1 also employs a fully balanced class A output stage in the best Electrocompaniet tradition.

Our test unit required some burn-in time before reaching its optimum performance level. But once on song, this CD player really got my feet tapping.

It has a knack for drilling right into the essence of the music, so that the resultant



VITAL STATS

performance isn't just a shallow representation of the original recording.

Instead, the music is delivered with zest and vigour, and displays a fullness of tone and richness of texture that is quite at odds with the player's positioning at the affordable end of Electrocompaniet's product palette.

I particularly liked the way the music seemed to flow with an intensity that made even favourite discs sound fresh and invigorating. It was as if the PC-I was able to unlock the original energy of the performance to gripping effect.

Staging and imaging were top-class, with an open, seamless delivery allowing the sound to blossom in all directions, but without losing all-important focus. And again, the effect was to make the music accessible and, ultimately, thoroughly enjoyable.

Digital conversion24-bit/192 kHz
Frequency response.....20 Hz – 20 kHz
Dynamic range96 dB
OutputsXLR balanced analogue, SPDIF coaxial digital
Dimensions (WxDxH)420 x 270 x 77 mm
Weight4 kg
PRICER19 500

VERDICT

Sophisticated, approachable and revealing delivery from well-built, neatly executed CD player. Great value at this price point. Even plays MP3s!

SUPPLIED BY Jade Services
 011-976-2750

WEBSITE www.jadec.co.za

The PC-I is predictably compatible with the PL-I integrated amplifier I had on review at the time. And it sounds even better with the Electrocompaniet 4.6 pre-amp and AW120 power amplifier that serve as my regular amplification reference.

But it's a measure of the deck's intrinsic talent that it isn't intimidated by even smarter, truly esoteric kit: it acquitted itself very well in the company of the Viola Labs Cadenza/Symphony pre/power combo. If anything, this duo only underscored the sonic appeal of the PC-I.

Its accessibility, linked to a pervading sense of credibility and the smile factor, makes the EC Prelude PC-I one of the most entertaining CD players I've had the pleasure of reviewing. And in value terms, it is a true hi-fi bargain.

Deon Schoeman

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