

INTEGRATED AMPLIFIERS

ELECTROCOMPANIE ECI 4

Music box with muscle, too

Electrocompaniet is one of those perennial marques in top-end audio that seems to come up with one good component after the other – but without the hype or fuss that often surrounds higher-profile brands.

The Norwegian hi-fi maker is no stranger to these pages, and regular readers will by now know that its initial claim to fame centred around an amplifier design that addressed transient intermodulation – a previously unrecognised form of dynamic distortion.

By designing an amplifier employing very low negative feedback levels, Electrocompaniet's founders were able to address the effects of this distortion, with improved sonic performance the result.

By the mid-Seventies, Electrocompaniet (or EC, as it's often called) added a further, new design principle dubbed FTT, or floating transformer technology. FTT recognises that the power transformer is not merely a power reservoir, but plays an interactive role in the amplifier's function and performance.

The FTT design principle allows a more linear power supply with greater current delivery and a lower impedance. Capacitors are selected according to their impedance vs. frequency response behaviour, rather than merely by size. And if EC is to be believed, the sonic implications are extremely favourable, too.

These primary design principles have been at the core of modern EC pre-amps and power amps for a number of years now, and are also incorporated in the new ECI 4 integrated amplifier – the company's largest and most powerful integrated unit ever.

For all intents, the newcomer looks very much like a beefed up ECI 3. It has the same, high-gloss acrylic fascia, occupied by five brass buttons: a centrally located power switch, and four navigation buttons, which perform volume up/down and source selection duties.

The ECI 4 is larger and heavier than the ECI 3, but is still compact enough not to appear gargantuan in the context of more conventional DIN-sized components. The blue power light also provides an indication of output level set-

ting, while the source selection is visually confirmed via display on the left in a similar hue.

The rear panel boasts a set of robust, universal binding posts, and a host of input and output options. There are six inputs, of which two are balanced and four are line-level. There's a tape loop for recording purposes, and a choice of single-ended RCA or XLR balanced outputs, allowing the ECI 4 to operate as a pre-amp, or to link an off-board power amplifier to the system for bi-amping purposes.

One line-level input is a direct, so-called HT (home theatre) input and is not affected by volume adjustment on the amplifier. When selected, the amplifier thus operates as a fixed-gain power amplifier.

Also unusual is a gain adjustment sliding

switch on the rear panel, with a choice between 0 dB and +9 dB. This is to allow better matching between the output signal of a source component and the EC's input stage.

If the claims on the technical specification sheet are anything to go by, the EC has no reason to feel in any way inferior in the company of those large, dedicated power amplifiers so often providing the urge in top-end systems.

The rated maximum output comes to a muscular but certainly not Herculean 120 watts/channel into 8 ohms. That's upped to a more realistic 200 watts into a 4 ohm impedance. And just to prove that this is not an amplifier easily destabilised by lower impedances, the ECI 4 will reliably deliver a mammoth 350 watts into a lowly 2 ohms.

If that makes for impressive reading, consider perhaps the most telling statistic of all: claimed peak current output of the ECI 4 is greater than 80 Amps.

All this translates into an amplifier hardly short of discipline or authority when translating the most challenging of recordings. While there is no shortage of impetus or nimble response,

the bass is extra-deep and very, very solid, never allowing the music to run away with the performance.

For all its control, the ECI 4 is also content to allow the tonal range to blossom unfettered. The smooth progression from low to high is achieved seamlessly, embroidered by fine detail and colourful texture along the way.

That unrestrained appeal is bolstered further by this amplifier's superlative staging capability. Hooked up to my ultra-transparent Celestion SL700SE Mk II speakers, and with a Rotel RCD-991 as primary source, the ECI 4 delivered its musical message with impressive clarity of purpose, presence and realism.

The generous soundstage not only allows the EC to place the music in an accurate, believable dimensional context, but also to ensure that there's enough space for the more subtle hues and details to come into their own. The result is a sound that is absorbing, attention-grabbing and realistic.

With a good array of facilities and features, linked to more than ample power and the kind of sophistication expected of esoteric components, the Electrocompaniet ECI 4 is a more than able substitute for powerful two-box combinations. Add a smooth tonality, a fine grasp of detail and robust construction, and this amplifier has all the makings of a winner.

Deon Schoeman



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VERDICT

All the oomph you're ever likely to need in an elegant one-box solution that offers balanced connectivity, too. Big, bold sound tempered by sensible and sensitive approach to detail. A great all-round package.

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