

hi-fi+

ELECTROCOMPANIET



Balanced Compact Disc

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# The Electrocompaniet ECC-1 CD Player and ECI-5 Integrated Amp

by Chris Thomas

This CD player and amplifier combination have a sound that's easy to like. Even from cold it makes a powerful and compelling musical statement, especially with complex, dynamic material. It's twenty-something years ago that I first enjoyed the original and well-known 25-watt class A amplifier from this Norwegian company and I think it is fair to say that, at that time, sound-wise they were ahead of the game. But the thought of that experience still invokes some painful memories. I can never think of that particular amplifier without remembering the terribly sharp edges that they left on their casework – and the day that one of the faceplate handles came loose as I lifted it, causing the razor-keen edge to open my finger in a full-length precision cut a surgeon would have been proud of. I also recall that I had a practice session with a south London reggae band that evening and had an impossible time wedging the plectrum between my thumb and the copious quantities of plaster I had wrapped around the finger in an effort to keep it straight. Luckily I only had to play a couple of hours worth of offbeat upstrokes which, given my peculiar angle of attack, gave me tendonitis. In stark contrast to its casework, the amplifier sounded as smooth as silk.

Fast-forward more than two decades and here I am listening to more Electrocompaniet equipment, only this time the company is under new ownership. The range on offer these days is vast in comparison and I am pleased to say that the edges are smooth now, although from a personal point of view I can't get too



excited with their appearance. Marketing men tell me that we purchase with our eyes. I'd like to believe we use our ears too, because to me these components make a slightly awkward visual statement. They use an attractive black acrylic fascia, but here Electrocompaniet have decided to incorporate brass coloured buttons. They look too bling, like fittings from a footballers bathroom, and do the amplifier and CD player no favours at all. In attempting to give the electronics a classy look I'm afraid they have

succeeded in doing the opposite. So, I humbly suggest that they stick to the steel versions as fitted to the lower priced models. But, that aside, they are conventionally functional with both the ECI-5 integrated and the ECC-1 CD player coming under the banner of their Classic Line. Delivering 120 watts into 8 Ohms the amplifier is a substantial and powerful proposition for a moderately priced integrated.

Inputs are comprehensive with two sets of balanced sockets, single-ended RCAs for another three line-level components plus a tape loop and a unity gain home theatre input. There is also a set of balanced pre-amp outputs and single pairs of sturdy gold-plated speaker connections. It is fully remote operated and all selections are made via the navigation window on the front panel, while a neat display around the company logo indicates the volume setting. The CD player utilises the Cirrus Logic 24Bit/192kHz DAC and has both single-ended and balanced outputs, plus a S/PDIF RCA digital output. It incorporates a Philips transport and a front-loading disc tray fitted with an internal suspension system. With nothing in particular to distinguish them from the crowd externally, it was a pleasant surprise to hear just how bold they are when ▶

## ● EQUIPMENT REVIEW

► asked to do some work. This is no laid-back, cosy sound. From the very beginning this combination had a distinctive sonic signature, intrinsically linked with the speed and dynamic impact that the amplifier in particular brings to just about every piece of music. I believe that different systems lead you (subconsciously) towards playing specific types of music that suit them, and it was quite a while before I began to notice any real weak spots in their performance. The ECI-5 shows its speed and transient reserves at every opportunity and is something of a mini-powerhouse. Used as a pair they are full of momentum and drive. The bandwidth is excellent and it is both tautly controlled and focussed too, applying its power with strength and precision. But don't get the idea that the music is lean or remotely lightweight. The amplifier's abilities when it comes to delivering the big transient swings are notable but its recovery for the next event is even more so. When the musical rhythms are hot and contain many percussive elements, this combination never drops a stitch. I was quite taken aback with the enthusiastic way it dealt with the title track of Antonio Forcione's *Touch Wood* (Naim cd069), which is a bristling amalgamation of guitar playing and body slapping, as he becomes a kind of one-man-band of rhythmic and melodic interplay. This track is food and drink to the Electrocompaniet combo. The sheer tempo and the dynamism of the playing shows that Forcione has formidable technique, but it also poses specific questions of any system asked to make sense of the shape of the whole piece. Many will give you a breathless interpretation but substitute pure, furious excitement

for musical focus. But I was impressed by the uncluttered way the Electros handled this, helped enormously by the persuasive way the amplifier kept its sense of immediacy and dynamism under control



without over damping any of the guitar-thumping percussion. The track 'Alhambra' is one of my favourites, featuring the fretless and complex Uddan guitar, with its unique voice and flavour. It captures the Spanish Sierras and the glorious city of Granada exquisitely and for me, shows Antonio at his best. I love the Flamenco-scented rhythms and flow of the piece. The swaying tempo, unusual shape and growing character of the leading edge of each unfretted note were impressively handled. There is a slightly bright shading to the tonal balance, but I don't see it as a problem, just something to bear in mind when thinking about cables and speakers.

But, it was listening to Pat Metheny's *A Map Of The World* (WB 47366-2) that I first noticed a very unusual character to his instrument: it sounded too twangy, lacking in its full sustain and almost a little banjo-like. The sweeping strings and the whole ambient presence of the orchestral backdrops were majestic and as pictorial as they should be, but that guitar sound had me stumped, sounding like a different instrument to the one I had heard so many times before. I began to run through some other discs that I thought

might highlight the same thing and decided to use both the CD player and the amplifier in separate systems. The results confirmed my earlier impression that the amplifier is a little bleached at times and though it copes with the initial impact of individual energies and voices extremely well, it comes up slightly short when dealing with the tonal colours and hues of plucked strings and vibrating instrumental bodies. This is hardly noticeable on the vast majority of material but there are discs that will highlight it.

Often the simplest of musical structures are the most revealing. Take Shelby Lynne's *Just A Little Lovin'* CD (Lost Highway B00097789-02), a masterful production by Phil Ramone who has gone for a sparse, dry and simple recording without the slightest hint of flash musicianship to be found. Instead he has avoided the reverb control, left her vocals as natural as possible and as a result her interpretations of the well-known Dusty Springfield songs are as minimal as the backing tracks. But there is a sense of intimacy here as she sings well within herself against the accomplished and understated support. Otherwise the simplicity of her expression and her own phrasing are stylised only by the occasional slight break in her voice. Her careful approach to pitch with a mere whiff of Country twang thrown in lend the whole disc a wonderful air of balance and delicacy which I am sure is what Ramone was looking for. But these feelings are difficult for any hi-fi system to convey, as within that superficially simple structure lives an extraordinarily complex series of relationships: vocals, instrumentation, the spaces around them and the time frame they exist in. This is where the Electros surprised me with their ability to layer musical performance and technique with nuance and fit ►

● EQUIPMENT REVIEW

▶ it all together, preserving that elusive sense of quiet and stillness that both characterises this album and attracts me to it. The better the system, the easier it is to appreciate these subtleties and the exploration of such contrasts is one of those areas where re-visiting a recording will always be more interesting than the live event. Okay, so this combination can be a little rough around the edges too. The cymbals do not ring with quite the alluring metallic shimmer that I have heard on other (more expensive) systems and her vocal is slightly pinched and a bit too nasal. But I can forgive its lack of tonal richness and diversity because, as well as the feeling of movement, there is a sense of powerful stability, even on such restrained music, that constantly underpins the performance. No matter how great the demands on the amplifier get, it always feels as if it has something in reserve.

Of the two, it is the CD player that has a greater sense of order and calm. Listening to it with a different amplifier, I was constantly struck by the neatness and general organisation it brought to the music. It is relaxed and almost tranquil with a natural tonal balance, moving through the music

with a feeling of unforced resolution. The ECC-1 has an engaging way of laying the music before you, with a notable ability to focus fine musical detail into a broad, coherent soundstage. The amplifier then seizes hold of this and drives it into the room so that, with a decent pair of speakers like the JMLabs Micro Utopia Be, the

sound can be quite forward. The soundstages they create together are firm and broad rather than lush and deep, and you definitely get a front row seat with these components.

I might have my own reservations about their cosmetics, but I'll say again that this is a very easy combination to like. They have a bold and very occasionally brash character but it would be wrong to characterise them solely in this way. It's combined with a sense of clear musical organization and stability that's unusual at any price, and rare indeed at the cost of these units. I'd listened for quite a while before I discovered their prices; when I did they came as a very pleasant surprise indeed. For such an accomplished performer I think that £1590 for the CD player is an absolute bargain: especially for a machine that would work well in so many systems. Electrocompaniet amplifiers might have a reputation for being warm and smooth but that's not how I found the ECI-5. Instead, it is powerful and very dynamic, with the ability to drive a loudspeaker really hard. It certainly had no trouble at all coming to grips with the Micros, which is remarkable given its £2350 price-tag.

If control, pumping rhythms and sharp attention to fine detail is what you are looking for then this amplifier will not disappoint. Not as even-handed as the ECC-1 it is not quite such an astonishing bargain, especially given the quality of the competition (not least from Electrocompaniet

themselves). But, as a combination there is something special about this pairing and the sum of their musical performance easily outweighs that of the individual parts, making their arrival a very welcome return indeed. ▶+



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

ECC-1 COMPACT DISC PLAYER

Type: Single-box CD player  
 Transport: Philips  
 Audio Outputs: 1x balanced (XLR)  
 1x unbalanced (RCA)  
 D/A Conversion: Cirrus 24Bit/192kHz  
 Output Impedance: 100 Ohms  
 Output Level: Unbalanced – 2.3V  
 Balanced – 4.6V  
 Dimensions (WxHxD): 483 x 75 x 385mm (HxWxD)  
 Weight: 9 kg  
 Price: £1590.00

ECI-5 AMPLIFIER

Type: Two-channel integrated amplifier  
 Inputs: 2x balanced (XLR)  
 3x single-ended (RCA)  
 1x tape (RCA)  
 1x Home Theatre (RCA)  
 Outputs: 1x balanced (XLR)  
 1x tape (RCA)  
 1 set speaker binding posts  
 Output Power: 120 W – 8 ohms  
 200 W – 4 ohms  
 350 W – 2 ohms  
 Nominal Input Impedance: 330 kOhms  
 Dimensions (WxHxD): 483 x 135 x 405 mm  
 Weight: 16 Kg  
 Price: £2350.00

UK distributor:  
 NSS Limited  
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 Electrocompaniet, Norway.  
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