

ELECTROCOMPANIET ECI 5

by Ricardo de Marino, Clube do Audio Editor-in-Chief

Receiving the Electrocompaniet ECI 5 made me remember the first times I went to visit the audio hi-end stores in São Paulo, when I was about 18 years old. This was one of the first hi-end equipment brands I met and I was impressed with the design that used only 5 buttons in front of a thick plexiglass panel. The blue controls shone above the otherwise fully black background, displaying volume, input or playing time information. I believe that this design, at that time, showed me what I was beginning to find out about the high-end philosophy: minimalism associated with quality and sophistication with simplicity.

I may have made a connection between the effect of those blue displays coming deep from behind the front panel and the way that the musical instruments leaped from the void between the loudspeakers during my auditions. It's the kind of effect that's actually capable of inspiring awe, especially when seen for the first time. That all came back to me when auditioning the ECI 5 and I think there's a link between this perception and the norwegian manufacturer's sonic proposal.

The ECI 5 belongs to the Classic Line within Electrocompaniet's range, paired with another, smaller integrated amplifier. It's a sophisticated design, which includes a pre-amp stage with DC coupling (no capacitors in series with the signal path) and a fully balanced circuit. There are six inputs: two balanced, three single-ended and one direct. An internal circuit selects inputs through relays, selected by navigating the front panel buttons or the remote control. There are three distinct outputs: one balanced, one single-ended and one REC out. The speaker posts are of excellent quality, made by WBT, and allow both banana or spade connectors. Still on the back panel, you'll find a small switch above the RCA inputs, which flips the pre-amp gain between 0 and +9dB.

The ECI 5's power amplifier stage has a declared power of 120W into 8Ω, 200W into 4Ω and 350W into 2Ω. According to the manufacturer, its output stage is stable up to 0,5Ω. The current capacity is also very impressive, allowing 80A peaks thanks to a 70,000μF reservoir. The well dimensioned power supply and the equipment's solid construction contribute to a weight of 16 kg (35 lb) in spite of its sleek overall size.

The ECI 5 was connected in lieu of the Naim set in my system with a very coherent and balanced result. I left it connected to the power line for a few days and playing songs for another few until its burn-in was complete before starting the auditions. During the auditions it was connected to the Accuphase DC-61 converter and the Dynaudio Focus 140s. The power cord used was Logical Design's Eternity.

The ECI 5's ability to control the Dynaudios and extract a fully embodied, deep bass from them is unquestionable. Its sound stage seems to have a black background and the musical information comes up with great separation with respect to this background. This made me immediately want to listen to the track "Desde el Fondo de Ti" sang by Argentinian tenor José Cura. This recording has an exceptional background silence and an equally impressive sound stage. José Cura's powerful voice emerges precisely between the speakers as if it were his own projection. Another few meters ahead and a nylon-string guitar starts playing on the left side of the stage, on a closer layer relative to the voice, yet with a smaller body. All extremely faithful to the recording. Other instruments join the arrangement, all conveying lots of spacial information (room ambience). The plastic effect of the reproduction of this record through the Electrocompaniet was very seductive. The macro and micro dynamic variations explored by the singer were well reproduced and in consonance with other good equipment in the same price range. The only remark that called my attention was

that in spite of the black background and the great overall silence, the noise from the recording room could not be easily perceived.

I switched to another recording and from the first seconds of Pink Floyd's famous Dark Side of the Moon (Mobile Fidelity version) the heartbeats in the song filled up my room with a huge body and without loss of resolution. The wonderful delays and reverbs from this record were very well reproduced while the bass kept clean and precise.

During the intro of "Money" it seemed possible to count the coins falling that are part of the initial loop. For this track, I preferred to use the gain adjustment in the back of the unit at the higher setting, where the bass line playing the riff at 7/8 gained weight and made the music pulse. Even dialing the volume down to a similar level as before the instruments filled up much better and the rhythm sensation was also better. As expected, there was a slight price to pay in the sound stage depth and the subtle ambience clues. With this recording, however, the improvement was well worth it. When using the higher gain setting, part of the headroom available for the more intense and complex passage is compromised. Curiously, the ECI-5 is able to deal with that without becoming aggressive or tiresome. The recording was reproduced with great detail and there was lots of texture information in the instruments' sound. In this recording lots of analogic synthesizers were used and their parameters were changed in real time which led to timbre variations. At this point the ECI-5 seemed to take me directly to the control room where the record was produced. The result of the reproduction of these electronic instruments was very good and I thought it was even better than that obtained with the acoustic-only instruments.

Recordings of high technical standards, like the album "Diz" by Gonzalo Rubalcaba, completely bypass the need for the higher gain setting. It was even possible to notice the higher treble extension as I switched back to the 0 dB setting. When listening to the track "Boundcning with Bud" the drums were highlighted and played back with great authority. With respect to the piano, this amplifier had no problem whatsoever letting me hear all notes played, in spite of this being Gonzalo Rubalcaba. The ECI-5 may not have the same dynamic range as more sophisticated equipment, but during the test it did not compress or harden the sound, not even during the most strong and complex passages. In dynamics it was ok with respect to other amplifiers in this price range, but its presentation was flawless, it never altered the recording.

At the reproduction of symphonic music the ECI-5 showed its talent, never once slipping when it came to dynamics of instrument bodies. However, according to my personal preferences, I believed its characteristic more prone to other music styles than this one. This only reflects my personal way of listening to music because truth be told I can't point out a single flaw or issue with its musical reproduction.

CONCLUSION

It was interesting to have another equipment in my setup that's similar in category and price to my own, yet approaches electronic music in a different way. Which one is better? The answer to this question depends solely on what you're looking for. The ECI-5's virtues are many. Regarding reproduction, I'd highlight authority, rhythm, strong and full bass, excellent detailing, excellent sound stage and auditory comfort. When it comes to functionality, the ECI-5 offers several connection options, both single-ended and balanced and a very simple and friendly interface. This integrated amplifier seem really able to control even the most difficult speaker loads and becomes even more versatile when the gain adjustment setting is used. It's power is plenty but when connected to low sensitivity speakers it might need to have its volume turned up if the gain setting is in the low position and the room is large. I know many people for whom the ECI-5

would bring much satisfaction. I recommend its audition especially for those who listen to a lot of pop and rock, its reproduction of these genres is mostly seductive.

Tonal Balance 9,0
Sound Stage 10,0
Textures 9,0
Transients 9,0
Dynamics 8,5
Harmonic Body 9,0
Organicity 9,0
Musicality 8,5

Total 72 - Diamond Category

Vocals 8/10
Rock,Pop 9/10
Jazz, Blues 8/10
Chamber Music 9.5/10
Symphonic 8.5/10