



EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Electrocompaniet PD-1 digital converter

by Alan Sircom

Like many audio brands today, Electrocompaniet has now built the device that can bring the company – and its customers – into the 21st Century. The Prelude Line PD-1 DAC is a balanced digital converter that allows users to access the usual slew of optical and coaxial connections as well as the computer link of the moment – USB. It is best used in balanced mode, but sounds fine single-ended too. It has a remote and a four-way front panel press-button system to select the source and a bit-reduction volume control. That alone makes it worthwhile of inclusion into the computer audio pantheon. But there's more.

Electrocompaniet also designed the 24bit, 192kHz PD-1 to work with the company's EMS-1, a RF wireless USB transmission system that takes the signal from a computer and plays it as if it were a wired source. The EMS-1 is a small breakout box that can beam signals through a few walls, but this also has an advantage in removing the potentially noisy spinning discs of a computer out of the room.

With a not-too-complex remapping of your home network architecture, it's possible to use a smartphone or tablet computer in the man cave to control the computer in the lair that drives the DAC back in the man cave. All completely wire-free. Sonos users may drop into smug mode here, as that system has been able to do this – under Sonos' proprietary Mesh wi-fi network – for some time, but we audiophiles are sometimes not exactly quick on the uptake. Some of us still think a remote control is a kind of magic stone that makes noise happen, so Electrocompaniet's offering is the stuff of sci-fi. By using their own wireless network Electrocompaniet (like Sonos before it) more or less guarantee there's no contention – part of the reason why audio companies are

wary of recommending wi-fi is the fact so few home users ever change from default channels, which means a whole street full of users might be using the same wi-fi frequency settings. Under such conditions, dropouts are a virtual inevitability. You need to make sure the EMS-1 and PD-1 are both on the same RF channel, and it's worth experimenting with different channel settings to minimise local contention, but installation is a breeze. Macs and Windows machines will not need drivers for the EMS-1 and all you need to do is adjust your computer's audio output settings as described in the manual. Most will be up and running in a few minutes.

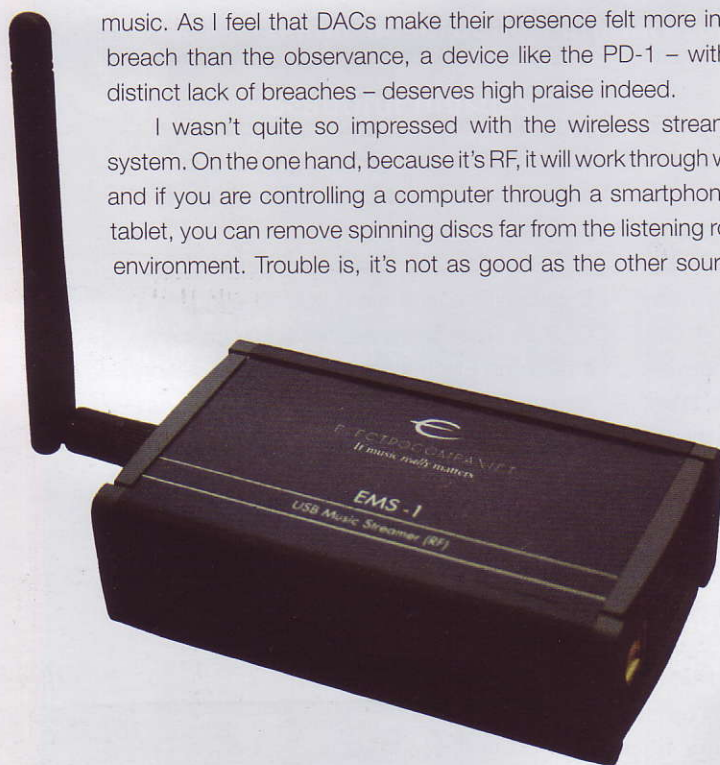
Back to the Electrocompaniet DAC. Ergonomics overall are good, although it's a DAC so ergonomics are not a key concern. It relies on Electrocompaniet's four-direction joystick-style control on the front panel; up and down work through the sources and left-right drive the bit-reduction volume ▶

► control. Its bright blue LED display can be a touch garish with the volume up full, but there's a dimmer control on the remote. The range of sources allow for both local (and with the EMS-1, remote) connection, with two coax, one Toslink, the RF connector and USB links, although the USB and EMS-1 are limited to 16-bit/48kHz signals and not designed for asynchronous operation. This doesn't have the thick acrylic and gold-on-black finish of the company's Classic line, but – aside from a top panel that clanks when given a knuckle-rap test – the PD-1 is every bit as well-made as the rest of the Prelude Line range, which is a high recommendation because they have gained a name for reliability.

Like a lot of Electrocompaniet products, the DAC is best in balanced operation. Single-ended is not far behind, but the DAC moves out of cruise control and into something slightly more exciting in balanced mode. 'Balanced' is not just the preferred choice of output, though, because it neatly sums up how the PD-1 sounds. Everything sounds balanced and right through this DAC; no need for artificial transient energy or excessive dynamics for that edge-of-the-seat drama. No need for slightly too much treble masquerading as detail for that energetic zing, or a gentle roll-off to take the edge off the clipped screams of the worst victims of the loudness war. Just good, honest, fuss-free digital conversion. The fact that this is so rare it needs pointing out perhaps shows why audio is missing the bigger picture.

It's been said that music lovers use audio equipment to listen to their music, while audiophiles use music to listen to their audio equipment. If that's the case, this is distinctly NOT an audiophile product. The sense of natural balance doesn't draw you to hi-fi aspects of the music, just draws you into the music. I tried a number of sources – including online sources like Spotify – and never once found myself focusing on anything other than the music. As I feel that DACs make their presence felt more in the breach than the observance, a device like the PD-1 – with its distinct lack of breaches – deserves high praise indeed.

I wasn't quite so impressed with the wireless streaming system. On the one hand, because it's RF, it will work through walls and if you are controlling a computer through a smartphone or tablet, you can remove spinning discs far from the listening room environment. Trouble is, it's not as good as the other sources,



sounding slightly thin by comparison. Also, built-in USB provides a more balanced sound, but just lacks the focus and control of coaxial and optical. Ultimately it's not a big deal-breaking difference, but an interesting observation that this is a DAC that works best with 20th Century digital inputs.

I don't want to downplay the PD-1 here. In fact, it's a DAC of such poise and detail that it not only makes a lot of sense to existing Electrocompaniet owners, but is good enough to be the gateway into a wider Electrocompaniet world for those not yet one with their Danish side. OK, if you are already firmly ensconced in the post-CD future and all you need is a USB DAC, this might not be your best choice, but where it shines out is as a digital-only preamplifier for people mid-migration from CD-based to file-based music. And let's be honest, right now, that means most of us! +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Audio Outputs: Stereo balanced line out (XLR)

Stereo single-ended line out (RCA)

Digital Inputs: 2 x S/PDIF Coaxial, 1 x S/PDIF TOSLink, 1 x USB Type B, 1 x RF Link

Digital/Analog conversion: 192 kHz, 24bit

Input sampling rate supported: S/PDIF 192 kHz, 24 bit, USB 48 kHz, 16 bit, RF Link 48 kHz, 16 bit

Upsampling rate: 192 kHz, 24bit

Frequency response: 1 – 48 kHz

THD + N: < 0.003%

Output impedance: 100 ohm

Output level: 3.4 Vrms

Noise floor (20 - 20 kHz): < - 140 dB

Dimensions (WxHxD): 42x5x34cm

Weight: 4.3 Kg

Prices £1,250 (PD-1); £250 (EMS-1)

Manufactured by

Electrocompaniet AS

URL: www.electrocompaniet.com

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Tel: +44 (0)20 8893 5835