

ELECTROCOMPANIET



P12 High Performance Balanced Integrated Amplifier



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Organic Pair...

The Electrocompaniet Prelude PI-2 integrated amp and PC-1 CD player

by Alan Sircom

When you think 'Electrocompaniet', your thoughts naturally stray towards high-end separates. Those with long, long memories might recall a giant-killing 25Watt power amp from more than three decades ago. Others might come from a more technical perspective and remember that Electrocompaniet was the company that began the quest to eliminate transient intermodulation distortion. But the end result always seemed to be the same; gold on black fascias, big products with equally big price tags.

Those products still exist, and are still a core part of EC's strategy, but they're now called the Classic Line. The products need to be delineated because there's also a DP line of high-end digital amps and the Prelude Line, and it's the Prelude Line that interests us here. Bringing the unstinting high-end ethos of EC down to prices affordable to the rank and file audiophile, that can't be a bad thing, can it?

These are the key Prelude Line products; there's a smaller 50 Watt PI-1 integrated, a 2.5-way floorstanding loudspeaker called the PSF-1 and an as-yet mystery, all-in-one Arcam Solo type product provisionally called Maestro, too. Both the Prelude PC-1 CD player and the 100 watt PI-2 integrated amp are styled in a broadly

similar manner to the Classic Line products, with a single standby button on one side of the box, a four-way push button matrix to operate basic functions on the other and a centre-mounted readout and drawer in the middle. But these aren't the big gold buttons on or shiny black fascia found in the Classic Line; the choice is down to a flat black or brushed aluminium front, both with smaller, brushed



aluminium buttons. This shows that EC thinks this is a wholly separate line, not a soft-start to the more upmarket products in the range.

Both Prelude Line products are maximally minimalist, with only a limited-function display, and most of the functionality removed to a remote control. Concessions to modernity, like RS232 ports or USB sockets... forget it. In addition, the amplifier has just two balanced and two single-ended inputs, while the manual for the CD

player seems to show that the single-ended output was a late addition to the schema, it being absent from the eight-page booklet that accompanies the product. There is though, an S/PDIF coaxial connection for digital recording or processing.

The modern bit is on the inside, and this shows one of the ways that Electrocompaniet has managed to produce a more cash-conscious line without sacrificing quality control or shifting production out of Norway.

There's extensive use of surface-mount technology on the PCBs, which keeps board-stuffing costs to a minimum while the digital volume control is taken from the EC4.9 pre-amp. That's not a cost-saving measure, though; it's a sign of just how seriously the company takes these Prelude products.

The amplifier also sports a wholly new protection circuit. This manages to prevent high temperature, DC offset and short circuits the output, but is said to have no deleterious characteristics on sound quality and even improves matters because it has allowed EC to reduce the number of contact points between amp and speakers by eliminating a relay at the output stage. The amp comes with a good sized toroidal transformer and a healthy amount of reservoir capacitance; ►

▶ more than enough to keep it ahead of the competition, although the limitations of price means it doesn't have a particularly 'stiff' power supply. That being said, in the context of amplifiers at the price, the PI-2 is more than powerful enough to cope with any speaker this side of about three grand.

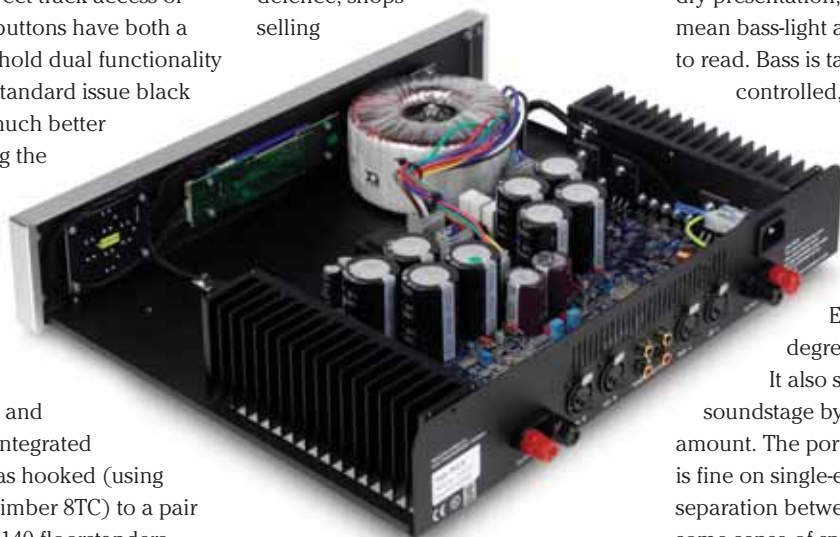
The CD player features a DVD-based transport mounted on a new, centrally located, anti-vibration mechanism. This is claimed to reduce the need for error correction, reduce the influence of external interference and run very quietly. The latter is certainly on the money; it's one of the quietest CD spinners you can get, short of resorting to a huge and heavy VRDS or CD silo found in considerably more expensive players. The data read off the disc is then fed to a Cirrus Logic 24bit/192kHz digital converter, running into a fully-balanced analogue output stage. This last runs in pure Class A.

Although the front panels of both are limited to the four-button diamond on the right hand side, there is a considerable amount of control available. No direct track access of course, but the buttons have both a press and press/hold dual functionality that helps. The standard issue black remote does a much better job of controlling the kit, even if it's not the most up-market of handsets.

This duo replaced a Cyrus CD 8 SE/PSX-R CD player and Sugden A21 SE integrated amplifier and was hooked (using a single run of Kimber 8TC) to a pair of ProAc Studio 140 floorstanders. The first reaction was, it must be said, one of disappointment. The products had been happily running in for a few days, everything should be good, but the overall sound was bland. Nothing you could necessarily pinpoint as

out of sorts, and very smooth and well-controlled. But bland; sort of like chicken soup, without the chicken. That said, it's very easy on the ear; the sound is almost valve-like in its sweetness and is a perfect match for those late-1960s/early-1970s rock albums that sold by the squillion; all those sweet Peter Green Fleetwood Mac cuts or like *Layla* (the album) and *The Allman Brothers Live at Fillmore East*. It was still far from emotionally gripping, though. A quick round of experimentation solved the problem.

I'd initially connected the EC duo with a single-ended cable. In desperation I replaced this with a "pair" of balanced leads; one of these XLR cables was a meter long, while the other was nearer three meters. Under any normal circumstances, that should end with being drummed out of the audiophile community, facing backwards on the horse, wearing a tunic with all the brass cut away. In defence, shops selling



matched audiophile-grade XLRs are hard to find at 9:30pm on a Sunday night, and better replacements were quickly pressed into service - because the change was significant. The reason

why XLR cables were so thin on the ground that particular Sunday night was that I'm not convinced of their efficacy in smaller audio systems. Balanced XLR connections are remarkably useful



in professional applications, which demand low noise across long runs. In most homes, no such demands are made and single-ended often sounds better. Exceptions are rare, but the Electrocompaniet PC-1 and PI-2 are definitely one.

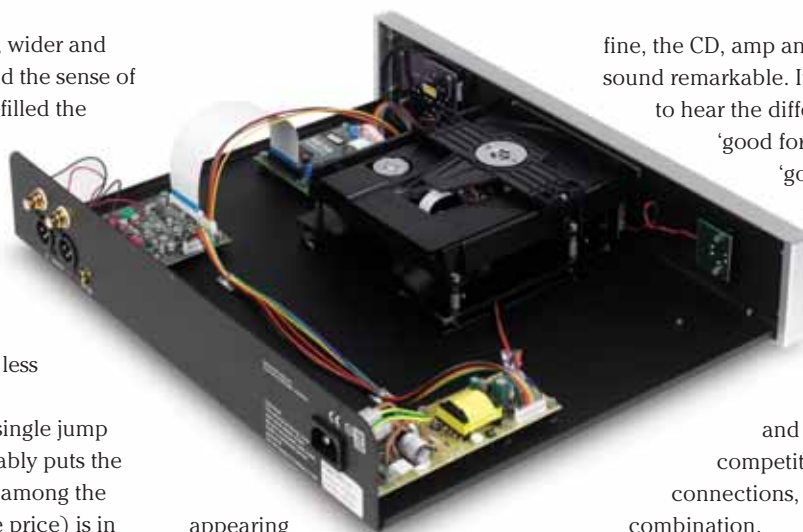
The sound springs to life with XLR, while still retaining the smoothness and accuracy of the single-ended performance. It's extremely tidy and ordered, but not neat-freak OCD tidy; instead the sound just seems precise and has all its ducks in a row. It's a dry presentation, but that doesn't mean bass-light as it's usually taken to read. Bass is taut, deep and well controlled, capable of handling the rhythmically tight, but often wayward and overblown bass guitar on Rory Gallagher's *Live in Europe* CD with a real degree of charm.

It also seems to expand the soundstage by a not inconsiderable amount. The portrayal of imagery is fine on single-ended (with good separation between instruments and some sense of space and solidity) but it lacks the image depth and dimensionality possible from a recording like Evan Dando and Juliana Hatfield singing 'My Drug Buddy' on *Rare on Air Vol 1*. Moving over to the balanced option, the ▶

▶ soundfield opened out, wider and behind the speakers and the sense of radio studio ambience filled the listening room. This also worked well with classical music, making the classic Klemperer/*Bruckner 6* recording from EMI's 1960s output seem less claustrophobic, but no less tightly knit.

Perhaps the biggest single jump (and the one that arguably puts the Electrocompaniet duo among the best you can buy at the price) is in the portrayal of dynamic range. This was what made the single-ended sound appear so bland, seeming to curtail the dynamic expression of a performance; but in balanced operation, it's like listening to a different combination. Where once was flat, now the swings of energy make even the likes of Rachmaninov's *Isle of the Dead*, er, come to life. It's not just an improvement in large-scale dynamics that benefits, either; the interplay between musicians on Paul Desmond's *Pure Desmond* album is extremely natural and unforced. This was perhaps the defining moment in the Electrocompaniet turn-around; the laconic 1970s jazz was deeply soporific in single-ended mode, but on XLR this was a concert you'd really like to attend.

Splitting the two proved difficult, simply because the boost in performance from balanced operation meant playing a single-ended source into the amp, or the CD into a single-ended amp, so you were listening to the Electrocompaniet products hobbled from the outset. This did show that the richness of the sound is amplifier-derived and the ordered, deep and rhythmic bass comes from the CD. Going back to the pairing as a single-ended entity showed the two were still running-in and getting better, some of the blandness to the sound



appearing to have lifted. An unusually electrically quiet evening helped too. This late-night session also highlighted one of the great arbiters of good systems; the ability to play at whisper-quiet levels as well as when the volume is pumped up. The ECs' bass does not fold under when played quietly and there was even some dynamic range to be had, although the foreshortening of low-volume dynamics is more to do with the drivers slumbering in this case. The tonal unevenness of late-night, low volume listening sessions was mercifully absent.

So, did Electrocompaniet really manage to bring the ethos of their high-end models to this entry-level range? I really think so... EC products were always praised for their chocolatey rich upper bass, extended bottom end and extremely smooth overall presentation. The only thing that's missing is that deep bottom end; although it's there as much as is needed for the sort of speakers that might be partnered with the duo. It leads to a slightly leaner overall balance, but again, with the majority of partnering speakers that will only be a good thing.

It's all very well talking about the whole being greater than the sum of the parts, but the parts still need to be very good. Here, that maxim becomes all-important; the CD and amp sound

fine, the CD, amp and XLR cables sound remarkable. If you ever want to hear the difference between 'good for the money' and 'good at any price' then try this EC duo with single-ended and then balanced. Staying single-ended, the PC-1 and PI-2 are fine competitors; with XLR connections, it's a winning combination. ➤

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

PC-1

Type: Integrated CD player
 D/A conversion: 24bit, 192kHz
 Audio outputs: 1pr single-ended (RCA/phono)
 1pr balanced (XLR)
 Output Impedance: 100 Ohms
 Output Level (Balanced): 4.5Vrms
 Digital Output: 1x 75 Ohm co-axial S/PDIF
 Dimensions (WxHxD): 420 x 77 x 270mm
 Weight: 4kg
 Finishes: Black or silver
 Price: £995

PI-2

Type: Integrated amplifier
 Inputs: 2x line-level balanced XLR
 2x line-level single-ended RCA/phono
 Input Impedance: 47kOhm(balanced input)
 Outputs: 1pr single-ended RCA/phono
 1pr balanced XLR
 Rated Output: 2x 100 Watts/8 Ohms
 2x 150 Watts/4 Ohms
 Dimensions (WxHxD): 420 x 77 x 340mm
 Weight: 10kg
 Finishes: Black or silver
 Price: £1490

UK Distributor:

EC Distribution Ltd,
 Tel. (44)(0)20 8893 5835

Manufacturer:

Electrocompaniet
 Net. www.electrocompaniet.com