

Shine On

Electrocompaniet is an illustrious name in high end hi-fi, but one whose star has recently faded. Now though, the new Prelude PC-1 and PI-2 CD player/integrated amplifier puts it right back on the map, says David Price...

Anyone whose hi-fi memory stretches back to the nineteen seventies will remember Electrocompaniet as a prestige audio brand, making cleanly styled, sweet sounding electronics that gained great critical acclaim at the time. Unfortunately though - in this country at least - its light faded and others marched in to take its place, meaning that by the beginning of this decade the company was all but invisible here.

The Electrocompaniet '2 Channel Audio Power Amplifier' was the result of a paper presented to a 1973 AES conference, which presented the idea of transient Intermodulation distortion (TIM). The story goes that Norwegian record producer Svein Erik Børja took this concept to Electrocompaniet, who refined it and produced a transistor amplifier designed to eliminate this type of distortion. The company duly made

qualify as 'high end' in many people's books.

Although the £1,034 PC-1 CD player is the company's 'entry level' silver disc spinner, it's a very well turned out machine showing superb build quality (at the price) and boasting high quality engineering under the hood. It sports the latest 24bit/192kHz DAC from Cirrus Logic, together with a precision fully balanced analogue output stage operating in Class A, feeding XLR socketry on the back panel (although there are RCA phono outputs too). The transport is mounted on a new mechanical anti-vibration system claimed to isolate it very effectively from the outside world. Certainly the 'slimline' disc loading assembly is one of the slickest and most solid feeling we've seen at the price. It sports a crisp, dark blue display under the disc drawer, and to the right are four crisp

and there's protection circuitry to guard against high temperature, DC offset and short circuit at the output. This has, say Electrocompaniet, been designed to have no deleterious effect on the sound whatsoever, and they've gone for the shortest signal paths throughout - witness the fact that they've even removed the output relay to reduce the number of contact points between the amplifier and the loudspeakers. The amps have the same simple but elegant four-button control layout, offering volume up/down and source selection. The same digital volume control as used in the high end EC4.8/EC4.9 preamplifiers is fitted, and there's an oversized linear power supply with a 400VA toroidal transformer and a capacitor storage bank of 80,000uF fitted under the hood. It's the same size as the CD player, but weighs 10kg.

SOUND QUALITY

Whilst this review primarily concerns the PC-1/PI-2 combination, the inveterate fiddler in me couldn't help but try both components individually first. To wit, the PC-1 CD player found itself locked head to head with *Hi-Fi World's* old favourite, the AstinTrew AT3500 - a £1,150 machine which has seen off all comers at or near the price.

Surprisingly, it didn't punish the Electrocompaniet. Rather, the two machines gave different presentations, both of which I really enjoyed. Compared to the reference AT3500,

"when connected up together, they punched far above their weight..."

a name for itself for super clean sounding solid-state amplification, and built up its business to get the product into over forty countries worldwide.

After this early success, the company failed to capitalise on the momentum it had gained, and it wasn't until Electrocompaniet got new owners and new management in 2005 that things started pushing forward again. It is now producing a wide range of high end kit - all made in Norway - the cheapest of which is the new Prelude range, which would

transport controls - with the stop button doubling as an open/close button (although this isn't labelled, which is confusing to newcomers). It's compact at 420x270x77mm, and weighs 4kg.

The matching £1,430 PI-2 integrated amplifier is the more expensive of the Prelude integrated range (the cheaper PI-1 costs £1,151). Both are fully balanced, with two XLR inputs on the back sitting alongside two RCA phono inputs. Inside, modern surface mount technology (SMT) is to be found,





the PC-1 is a little tidier and less exuberant sounding, but more polished and three dimensional - and even very slightly stronger in the bass.

Soul II Soul's 'Keep On Moving' was beautifully carried through the Electrocompaniet, setting up a strong groove into which the player pulled the listener. Individual instrumentation was rendered with real finesse, the electric piano sound being rich and polished. On the AT by comparison, it was a little splashier but slightly more expressively played. Thanks to its delicacy and accuracy, it's fair to say that the Electrocompaniet sounded more like high end hi-fi. The timbre of the soloist's voice was more delicately conveyed than with the AstinTrew, which gave a larger and more commanding presence to it, but a touch of raggedness too.

Moving to 4hero's 'Morning Child', and the PC-1 again gave a great account of itself, with a very wide and detailed recorded acoustic, bristling with lots of detail such as the intricate glockenspiel work running throughout the track. The AT3500 sounded wider still, but a little more two dimensional, lacking the depth perspective of

the Norwegian machine. Bass was fractionally more animated through the AstinTrew, but the Electrocompaniet's was never less than strong and tuneful. Indeed I particularly enjoyed the way the latter timed; it has a sort of laid-back confidence that made this track very enjoyable. By comparison, the more uptempo sounding AT almost seemed to be trying too hard. This was a facet of the PC-1 that shone through whatever music was played; it's very musically enjoyable but always in control, never giving the impression that it's about to lose grip on the proceedings.

A very encouraging performance from the Electrocompaniet CD player then - so I now turned to the amplifier. Compared to Sugden's A21a S2, the PI-2 is a powerful beast with a very commanding bass. The Police's 'Wrapped Around Your Finger' was delivered in an expansive fashion, with the Electrocompaniet integrated showing its similarly priced rival a thing or two about image scale. Sting's sinewy bassline dominates the song, and the PI-2 carried it with infectious energy. Once again, just as I'd discerned in the PC-1 player, the PI-2 integrated displayed fine timing combined with a confident, carefree

nature. It didn't show signs of distress - even at high volumes and when the song moved to a dynamic climax, it sounded relaxed and assured.

Lou Donaldson's 'Alligator Bogaloo', a classic BlueNote recording, showed the Electrocompaniet to carry the tonality of acoustic instruments with aplomb. The Sugden was fractionally superior in this respect, its glassy clarity cutting through the recording like a hot knife through butter, but the Electrocompaniet gave an equally enjoyable - if different - presentation. Here is a more 'velvety' performer, concentrating less on detail retrieval and more on carrying the mood of the recording itself. Tenor sax had a satisfying rasp but was never harsh, double bass was especially rich and warm and the drums started and stopped in the Electrocompaniet's wonderfully laid back but rhythmic way, making the song a delight.

Eager to hear the PC-1/PI-2 as a pair, I pulled out the AstinTrew and Sugden, and stood the Electrocompaniets on top of one another, connecting them up via balanced cables. The difference was dramatic, showing that when two high quality components are designed to work together, they can

REFERENCE SYSTEM
 AstinTrew AT3500 CD player
 Sugden A21a S2 integrated amplifier
 Yamaha NS1000M loudspeakers
 Usher S-520 loudspeakers



punch far above their weight. Already excellent individually, the combination really started to work magically together – and I began to properly understand what the Electrocompaniet brand is trying to do.

When working together, the most striking thing is the rich but very clean tonality of these electronics, allied to an insistent but not frenetic rhythmic quality. For example, cueing up T.Rex's 'Hot Love' gave a joyous rendition of the song – as Marc Bolan fans will know, Tony Visconti's production isn't exactly of the highest fidelity, but the Electrocompaniets delivered a strong, tuneful bass that bounced the song along with gusto, allied to a wide soundstage and a smooth, silky hi-hat sound. Vocals lacked any sign of edge but were highly expressive, giving the music a rare combination of smoothness and directness.

Goldie's 'Timeless' showed the Electrocompaniets to be muscular music makers, despite their obvious civility. This searing drum'n'bass song is a veritable torture track for hi-fi systems, especially at high volumes, but the PC-1/PI-2 showed true grace under pressure. Once again, they gave a beautifully smooth rendition of a less than softly recorded song, whilst remaining able to communicate its power and punch. Especially when run in balanced mode, the combination was able to push out prodigious amounts of bass (for its price) whilst displaying unerring control. Better still, it was gloriously tuneful and that characteristic Electrocompaniet timing didn't falter when presented with swingeing transients and

swathes of sub-bass.

In truth, there's next-to-nothing to criticise about either the CD player or the amplifier, scoring as they did so highly against our favourite price references and working so well as a team, but if there's one thing I'd draw attention to, it's the treble. There's nothing wrong with it at all, it's just that some listeners who crave incision and atmosphere in this region above other factors such as bass power and grip might find the Electrocompaniets a little unatmospheric.

CONCLUSION

A tremendously impressive showing considering this combination's sub-£2,500 price tag, the Electrocompaniet PC-1 CD player and PI-2 amplifier are redoubtable performers in their own right, but together and running in fully balanced mode, are on another level. The company's sound is a distinctive one that should appeal to many; velvety clarity allied to relaxed but confident musicality. I for one was enamoured.

VERDICT Adeptly designed, built and voice electronics delivering a highly polished but musically engaging sound.

ELECTROCOMPANIET
 PC-1 £1,034
 ELECTROCOMPANIET
 PI-2 £1,430
 NSS Ltd.
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 www.electrocompaniet.com

FOR
 - powerful, smooth sound
 - relaxed musicality
 - build, finish, styling
 - balanced operation
AGAINST
 - limited inputs on amplifier

MEASURED PERFORMANCE

PC-1 CD PLAYER

Our analysis shows this player has an almost ruler flat frequency response. It isn't quite a Sony in this respect, but it does get close. Expect a slightly brighter sheen to treble than many players out there, which often use their filtering to soften the analogue balance.

Distortion levels were low at high music signal levels but didn't compare with the best much below 0dB. At -30dB we measured 0.014%, where 0.004% is possible, and at -60dB the PC-1 produced 0.48% distortion, against a best case of around 0.3% or so. This explains why the IEAJ Dynamic Range value was a disappointing 109dB, against 112dB best case result. However, the PC 1 still performed respectably well and these results do not damn it.

The balanced XLR outputs produced 4.2V, double that from the unbalanced phono outputs. Performance through both was identical measurements suggested; however, balanced lines still give best sound quality in practice.

The PC 1 offers a tidy measured performance. It isn't a class leader, but it is very good. NK

CD Frequency response (-1dB)
 2Hz - 20.8kHz

Distortion	
0dB	0.0007
-6dB	0.0015
-60dB	0.48
-80dB	3.1

Separation (1kHz)	109dB
Noise (IEC A)	-116dB
Dynamic range	109dB
Output (Bal/Unbal)	4.1/2.1 V

PI-2 AMPLIFIER

Rated at 100 watts, the PI-2 produced almost exactly this amount into 8 Ohms, increasing to 170 watts into a 4 Ohm load, so it has plenty of grunt and copes easily with low loads.

The Electrocompaniet joins a few rivals in the market for possessing negligible high frequency distortion, measuring 0.0017% at 1 Watt, 10 kHz. Even at high power, the level rose to just 0.017% at 10kHz and there was little visible crossover distortion. Our analysis clearly shows an entirely flat spectrum, likely noise rather than distortion products. Suggesting a well worked out combination of componentry and circuit topology, this should endow the Electrocompaniet with a fine sonic performance.

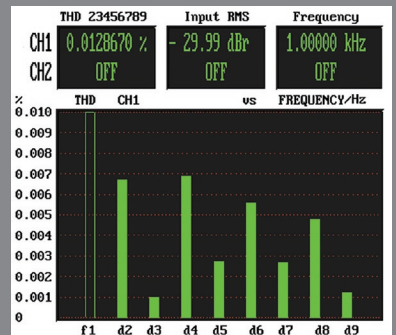
Bandwidth was wide, extending out to 75kHz, and damping factor very high at 168. The latter figure suggests a grippy or even dry sound well purposed to keeping loudspeakers under tight control in the bass, good for under-damped designs.

Sensitivity was reasonable at 500mV, fine for CD and most tuners, but low for some low gain phono stages.

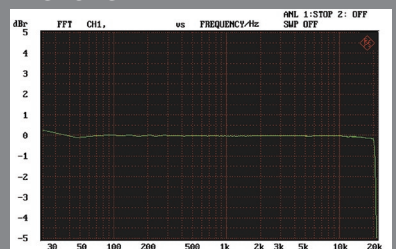
The PI-2 measures very well in all areas, it is a well honed modern solid-state amplifier. NK

Power	105 watts
CD/tuner/aux.	
Frequency response	3Hz - 75kHz
Separation	80dB
Noise	-97dB
Distortion	0.001%
Sensitivity	500mV
Damping factor	168

CD PLAYER DISTORTION



AMPLIFIER FREQUENCY RESPONSE



AMPLIFIER DISTORTION

