

## CD PLAYER &amp; AMPLIFIER

Electrocompaniet  
ECC 1/ECI 5

Under new ownership and benefitting from modern production engineering facilities, the audiophile vikings have returned to fly the Electrocompaniet flag worldwide  
Review: Ken Kessler Lab: Paul Miller

Slowly-evolving life forms crawling from primordial ooze, pteranodons dominating the skies, volcanoes spewing lava – it seems that long ago I last heard from Electrocompaniet. It was born of a small Class-A amp which found instant critical acclaim, before reality caught up with us and we realised that reliability, build-quality and other non-sonic concerns matter, too. But, like the fish that learned to walk, Electrocompaniet evolved into a higher form.

Nearly 35 years after its debut, the brand has three model line-ups, each including amplifiers and digital sources. The ECC 1 CD player and ECI 5 integrated amplifier are part of the middle range, the Classic Line, both wearing the black Perspex front panels and subtle gold details that have become the signature look, but it may appear new-ish in the UK market, where it had been trading quietly. As of 2007, the company has its own UK operation, for greater appeal to British customers. And the Classic Line seems best suited to this territory.

**DIAMOND STANDARD**

Minimalist in the way one expects of Northern European designs, both the ECI 5 integrated amp and ECC 1 CD player relegate as much as possible to their remote control, each unit featuring a diamond-shaped array of four buttons on the right-hand expanses of their fascias to accomplish all primary functions. While they look pretty, they are non-intuitive and merely irritate. For the amp, the top and bottom buttons alter level, while the left and right scroll

**RIGHT:** Both the CD player (top) and amplifier (bottom) feature a diamond cluster of controls for track skip and play plus input selection and volume, respectively. These are duplicated alongside other functions on Electro's remote

through sources. On the CD player, they access play, pause, skip and stop.

Mirroring each other (the amp's case is the taller of the two), there are displays on the left-hand sections, the CD player's revealing the necessary track information, while the amplifier's shows which source is playing. Around the logo of the amp is a blue arc that indicates playback volume, something which would be unnecessary if Electrocompaniet had opted for a rotary volume control with illuminated pointer.

**FULLY BALANCED**

At the back, both units contain robust, well-spaced socketry, single-ended and balanced via XLR. The CD player has both RCA and XLR outputs plus a coaxial digital output. The integrated accepts two balanced sources, and provides both balanced and single-ended outputs and a switch that allows the unit to be boosted

for level matching if you wish to use it with other power amps, *eg* during an upgrade path. Four line sources and tape record/playback can be accommodated, one of which – labelled 'HT' – bypasses the level control for AV throughput. Also fitted are superb speaker binding posts.

'Like the fish that learned to walk, Electrocompaniet has evolved into a higher form'

Electrocompaniet describes this as a 120W amp, so I had no qualms about driving the Wilson Sophia 2s, which it did so with aplomb. This is a meaty, robust amplifier, which never left me wanting for clipping-free slam or punch. It's nice to be able to dispense with that from the outset to concentrate on sound quality, though I am sure there are behemoth speakers which will require more power.





**ABOVE:** Electrocompaniet's Classic Line, black-backed perspex fascias with flush-mounted buttons. Lose the remote control at your peril...

Audiophile-style analysis and forensics are unnatural, but it's how we compare components. Better for us to return to the complete portrayal, eh?

#### IT'S A DOG'S LIFE

As most of Three Dog Night's presence in the USA came via the radio, despite a run of gold disc-achieving LPs when gold discs sales levels meant something, it was almost revelatory 40 years on

*'The music emerged from the Electrocompaniet pairing in its full, diaphanous glory'*

hearing the layers that made up songs like Hoyt Axton's immortal 'Joy To The World' (known to all and sundry as 'Jeremiah was a bullfrog'). From the cheesy, electric piano opening to that first vocal five seconds in, the Electrocompaniet duo cooked up a glorious whole, despite the track's obvious studio origins, probably assembled like an Airfix kit, part by part. Rich lower registers, especially the sublime drum sounds with their natural decay, meshed harmonies like 400-thread count cotton. It makes one sad that 99.9 percent of the people who adore the song have never heard it in all its potential glory.

More chilling, though, was the band's cover of Jesse Colin Young's exquisite 'Sunlight', blending bossa-nova drums and bass with delicate acoustic guitar, iced with the best impression I've yet

In which case, Electrocompaniet can serve up a 400W monoblock or a bridged 800-watter.

#### LIFTING THE VEIL

With a devastating drum disc, Jonathan Faralli's *Percussion XX* [Arts Music 47558-2], I used Henze's bizarre 'Prison Song' to challenge the pair's imaging capabilities when dealing with roiling lower registers and tightly-focused upper-frequency images, especially cymbals and woodblocks. The two kept up with the rather manic presentation, moving to bells and flute and God-knows-what-else, all the while keeping everything in place and with its own, airy space.

After a dose of Cage and Stockhausen, which convinced me that the amp had no fear of huge dynamic attacks and swings, I was ready for some real music – do people actually listen to those two for pleasure? Edsel and BGO performed a service for UK music lovers by re-issuing a bunch of Three Dog

Night's best albums, the band having been criminally ignored in Britain, which only granted them two hits during their late 1960s/early 1970s run of the US charts. Lead by forceful, quasi-blue-eyed-soul vocals, always showcasing the greatest songwriters of the era (Randy Newman, Nilsson, Allen Toussaint, John Hiatt, *ad infinitum*), the production was always huge – not over-engineered so much as Spectorian in its majesty.

Why is this so useful for assessing sound? Because, in addition to being of far greater aural appeal than someone banging away for dear life on all manner of dissociated percussion, the mere fact of the homogenisation forces the listener to focus on specific instruments if one is 'participatory' rather than passive. Otherwise, it's a wash of sound with a solitary intent – which is what the producer and performer intended: a complete picture.

#### SOUND 1, ERGONOMICS 0

Electrocompaniet has come a long way from the crude, almost terrifyingly edgy offerings of the late 1970s, Norse Ecosse era and their UK-made, 25W, flesh-singeing Class A babies of dubious reliability. Indeed, the two pieces reviewed here are so stylish and well-made that they deceived me into thinking that they cost double their actual price. But, as if to undermine their desirability, someone in Norway decided to mess with the ergonomics: buttons should *never* replace rotary controls for volume.

Simple proof: despite the car industry's desperate moves to replace analogue dials – a 'needle' and a circular scale – for speed, engine revs, fuel, etc, with digital read-outs, it has been proven time and again that the public responds more swiftly to a needle on a dial than illuminated digits. Even the new Jag, with a TFT instrument cluster, shows graphic images of analogue dials! So, too, is adjusting volume a long-established, instinctive affair. Why replace a single, intuitive knob with small up-and-down buttons in a four-button array with source select? Call me old fashioned, but keep your buttons to yourself.

## CD PLAYER & AMPLIFIER

### ELECTROCOMPANIET ECC 1/ECI 5

Sticky volume pot aside, the ECI 5 amplifier is built for the modern age with a modest +27.5dB gain and huge 97dB A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBW), requiring a ~1.3V balanced input to achieve its rated 120W/8ohm output. In practice the amplifier is capable of delivering 2x135W/8ohm and a full 2x215W/4ohm with 165W, 300W, 440W and 360W possible under dynamic conditions into 8, 4, 2 and 1ohm loads, albeit with increasing distortion into these lower impedances [see graph 2, below]. Harmonic and intermodulation distortions are 2nd-order in nature and also very consistent with frequency, hovering between 0.004-0.006% from 20Hz-10kHz, rising to 0.017% at 20kHz and 0.04% at 40kHz (all re. 10W/8ohm). The 0.03-0.04ohm output impedance is low enough but the ECI 5 still has an 'engineered' response, flat down to a subsonic 5Hz but gently rolled-off above 20kHz (-0.4dB) to reach -5.1dB/100kHz.

The ECC 1 player offers a similarly impressive S/N ratio (114dB re. 0dBfs) and very low 135psec jitter [see graph 1, below] courtesy of Electro's 85ohm balanced analogue output stage and choice of Crystal 24-bit/192kHz DAC, respectively. Distortion lifts slightly to 0.006% at the player's maximum 4.5V (balanced) output but then drops to 0.0005% at -10dBfs. With dithered source material, distortion harmonics are at the noise floor of the player from -20dBfs all the way down to -90dBfs. The response is flat to within -0.12dB/20kHz with a channel balance of 0.02dB and stereo separation better than 120dB across the board. In short, a well engineered player with no significant shortcomings. PM



**ABOVE:** Single-ended and balanced (XLR) outputs on the CD player meet balanced inputs/preamp outputs on the amp, four line ins and a pair of 4mm speaker terminals

heard of Young's angelic vocals. Any notion that the ECI 5 could do major ass-kicking with drums or powerful rock, but would probably turn clumsy with something fragile, was dispelled during the opening bars. Light as the foam on a Michelin-grade chef's lobster ravioli, the music emerged from the Electros in all its diaphanous glory, the two units caressing a song that must never, ever suffer third-rate playback. It's a song designed to place a lump in one's throat, even as a cover.

### COVER STORY

Which led me to the most ambitious 'covers album' of 2009: the Smithereens' rendering of the Who's *Tommy*. Yes, a remake of one of the most perfect-in-and-of-itself works of the rock era. Given that the Smithereens had already released two CDs' worth of Beatles covers, including a note-for-note re-make of the Fab Four's first US LP for Capitol, such a venture is less foolhardy than one might imagine.

To make it palatable, they edited the opus of a few lesser tracks and stuck to the original arrangements like a horny dog on a nearby leg. But then you get the vocals of the inimitable Pat Dinizio, and you can only imagine that Pete Townshend would be grinning from ear-to-ear at the *homage*. It's that good, and that respectful.

Here, the Electrocompaniets emerged as sublimely natural-sounding and airy, a quality rendered vivid by the acoustic guitar opening to 'It's A Boy', a

perfect facsimile of Townshend's performance 40 years ago. The body of the guitar, the decay, the requisite twang – it was so palpable and *physically* present that I mentally added this CD to my must-play litany of demo discs.

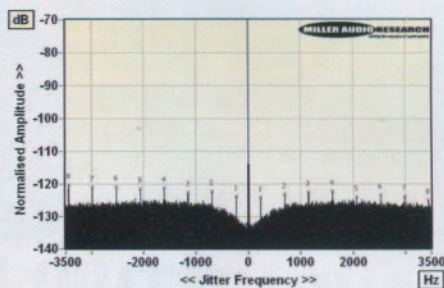
When the harmonies floated over the lone guitar in 'Amazing Journey', it was time for one of those frissons of disarming realism that make the pursuit of high-end audio so truly, utterly, soul-restoringly rewarding. And if anyone ever needs a real drummer to play Keith Moon in a biopic, it has to be the Smithereens' Dennis Diken.

Is there a downside to these Electrocompaniets? I would prefer a rotary volume control, a hint more warmth. And maybe, one could do with slightly less aggression in the midband, the vocals a shade too forward. But that's about it. It's so sin-free as to be embarrassing. ☺

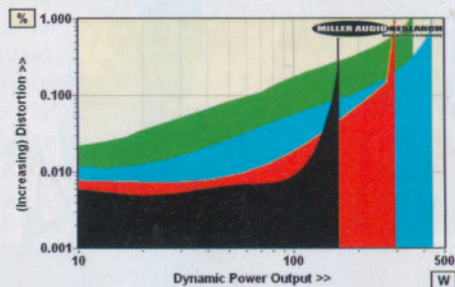
### HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

Until I sat down to write this, I'd guessed the pair retailed for around £7k. With this price in mind, criteria are adjusted accordingly; you don't approach a £600 NAD as you would a £6000 Ayre. So imagine my shocked delight upon learning at the 11th hour that the two cost £4289? Electrocompaniet's combo, quirks aside, punches wa-a-ay above its weight. So, no more fjord jokes. Ever.

Sound Quality: 76%



**ABOVE:** High resolution jitter spectrum – just 15psec higher than state-of-the-art for 16-bit CD audio



**ABOVE:** Dynamic power output versus distortion into 8ohm (black), 4ohm (red), 2ohm (blue) and 1ohm (green) loudspeaker loads

### HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Power output (<1% THD, 8/4ohm)	135W / 215W
Dynamic power (<1% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)	165W / 300W / 440W / 360W
Digital jitter	135psec
Frequency resp. (CD/amp, 20Hz-20kHz)	+0.0 to -0.12dB/+0.0 to -0.4dB
Input sensitivity (for 0dBW/120W)	118mV/1330mV
A-wtd S/N ratio (CD/amp)	114.2dB / 96.7dB (0dBW)
Distortion (20Hz-20kHz, CD/amp)	0.006-0.01% / 0.003-0.017%
Power consumption (Idle/Rated o/p)	75W/420W
Dimensions (WHD, CD/amp)	483x95x385/483x135x405mm