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ELECTROCOMPANIET



100W High Performance

Reference Integrated Amplifier



Navigator

# Comeback king

*Electrocompaniet bursts back onto the UK hi-fi scene with a stonking new amp*

**PRODUCT** Electrocompaniet ECI-3

**TYPE** Integrated amplifier

**PRICE** £1,650

**KEY FEATURES** Size (WxHxD): 11.5x48.3x41 cm

Weight: 12kg Power output: 70 watts (8 ohms),

120 watts (4 ohms) Inputs: 5x RCA phono, XLR

Outputs: 2x tape, XLR & RCA preamp

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**B**y a quirk of the pop world's recent loss, Electrocompaniet made a return to national news recently – in Norway, at any rate. In the scramble to squeeze every last drop of news out of the late Michael Jackson, it was noted that the star's producer Bruce Swedien credited the company's amplifiers on Jackson's mega-selling *HIStory* album. That said, you would be forgiven for thinking that Electrocompaniet was history on these shores, conspicuous by its absence from the UK amplifier scene in recent years. But, if the launch of its thrilling ECI-3 is anything to go by, Electrocompaniet is far from yesterday's news: in fact, it's making a classic comeback of King of Pop proportions.

Electrocompaniet has been making serious hi-fi for well over forty years and used to have a high profile in the UK, something it appears to be trying to re-establish now. It makes a substantial range of largely two-channel equipment for both domestic and professional markets.

The Classic range – of which the ECI-3 is the most affordable amplifier – has no fewer than five CD players, two integrated amps, three preamps, three stereo and three monoblock power amps, and a phono stage! That's a substantial range – and it's not the only one in the portfolio. It's got to be one of the largest product ranges we've

seen in the two-channel arena for some time.

Electrocompaniet claims that this amp is built with the same quality components as its most prestigious models – presumably there are fewer of them as this is also the least powerful amp on the roster. Electrocompaniet prides itself in fully balanced, DC coupled operation, so this integrated amp has XLR in and outputs to make full use of the balanced circuitry. Balanced configuration is usually chosen because it has the potential to result in lower noise, something that's not always apparent in domestic set-ups where you don't tend to use miles of cabling.

The front panel has a distinctive appearance,

**“Electrocompaniet makes a substantial range of largely two-channel equipment for both domestic and professional markets.”**

devoid of knobs. With a mere five buttons it is both minimalist and initially confusing. However, it's actually intuitive: when the light on the motorised volume pot behind the panel moves, you know that you've found the north/south volume buttons, for example. The west/east buttons change input, illuminating names in the 'navigator window' on the left of the fascia as the relays click. A relatively conventional multiproduct remote is also supplied, adding mute to the small roster of functions, effectively putting the amp into standby.

Inside the substantial acrylic-fronted box, one of Electrocompaniet's floating transformer technology power supplies can be found. This is said to be capable of delivering twice as much current as conventional designs. The company backs this up by stating that, as with

all of its amps, the ECI-3 is stable into loads down to half an ohm. This isn't something that you'd expect it to have to deal with – even the most challenging speakers rarely drop below an ohm – but it's reassuring nonetheless.

The back panel is pretty straightforward. There's a row of RCA phono inputs and outputs beside balanced versions of the same. You don't get a unity gain input for home cinema systems and neither is there a bus system or software upgrade port, however. Compare this set-up with the Arcam A38, for example: it has two sets of speaker terminals, a space for optional phono stage, a 12v trigger, remote socket and so on

– all of which have to come out of a similar budget. Maybe this is why Electrocompaniet can afford to incorporate fully balanced operation in the ECI-3?

## SOUND QUALITY

Electrocompaniet is keen that its amplifiers should be used with a source that's capable of delivering a true balanced output and suggested that we use one of its own CD players for the test. This was tempting, but would have complicated the review process. Instead, we elected to use Leema's Antila II (reviewed in *HFC* 323). Out of interest, the single-ended and balanced inputs of the amp were both hooked up to the Antila II with suitably terminated DNM reson cables and compared. The difference was not all that obvious to be frank, but we used the ▶



# Electrocompaniet ECI-3 integrated amplifier [Review]

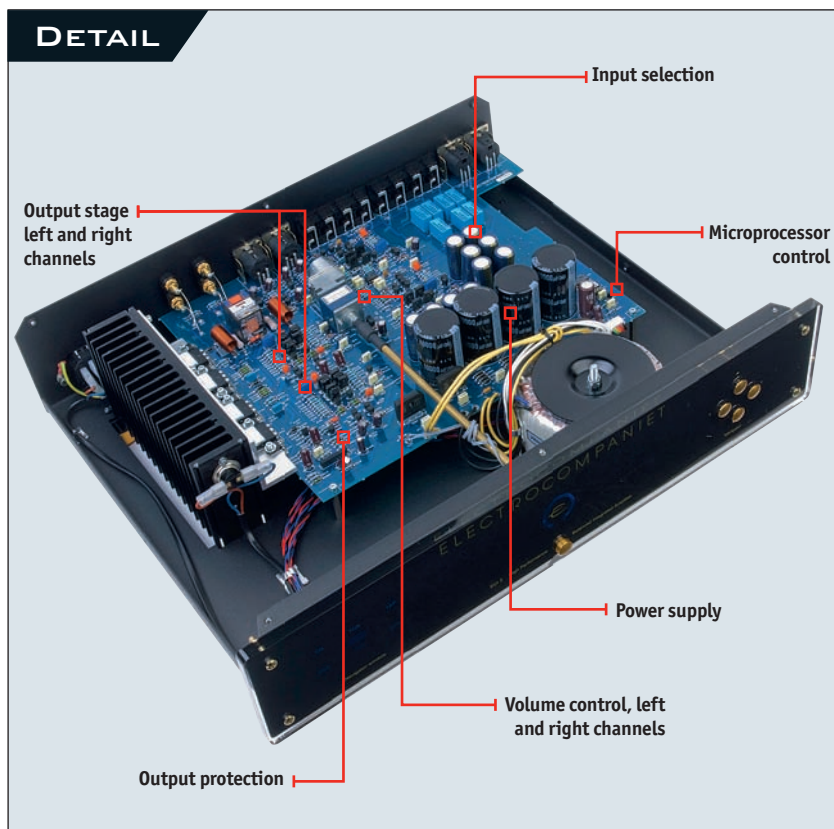
▣ balanced connection for all the non-comparative listening nonetheless.

## SOUND QUALITY

Noise is notably low with the ECI-3, which makes us wonder if that balanced connection does make a difference after all. Our *Keith Jarrett Carnegie Hall* disc didn't seem to give up all of its reverberant detail, for example, but you can hear a long way down into the mix. High frequencies are not only a little darker than usual, but also extremely clean: the right hand piano keys come through in a truly shimmering fashion that's highly convincing.

Our next disc – Cougar's fine *Patriot* album – revealed impressive depth of image against a backdrop that can only be described with the immortal phrase 'inky blackness' – it's that quiet, alright. Here the cymbal tone is very natural, if not as harmonically rich as usual. Still, it's very convincing and makes a good case for suggesting that other amps add some high-frequency haze of their own.

The heavier riffs of the album are dealt with in a calm and yet fully bone-crunching fashion that encourages one to turn up the wick, but the real revelations come with the better acoustic recordings. András Schiff's Beethoven



## HISTORY LESSON

Electrocompaniet came about after Norwegian record and broadcast producer Svein Erik Børja was inspired by an AES lecture given by a Dr Matti Otala in 1973.

Otala was of the opinion that transient intermodulation distortion (TIM) was one of the biggest barriers to fidelity in amplifiers. Børja took this theory to Per Abrahamsen of Electrocompaniet and asked him to produce an amplifier that minimized TIM, a project that was encouraging enough for a 25-watt power amplifier to go into production by the name of The 2 Channel Audio Amplifier.

In the years that followed, this design was refined and changed as Per and his team realized that TIM reduction was not the whole story. One of his biggest breakthroughs was the discovery that by increasing feedback by 10dB, the sound improved dramatically. The original design has gone on to form the range that Electrocompaniet produces today, but you won't find a 25-watt unit in their portfolio any longer.

Piano Sonatas, for example, provide plentiful reverb, attack and dynamic vitality alongside tremendous delicacy in the slower passages.

As the Electrocompaniet is about the same price as an Arcam A38, albeit with fewer features, we dug one out of the store cupboard to see how it would fare. Impressively, the results suggested that we could have a new benchmark – the ECI-3 proving to be significantly more precise and calm compared with the louder, livelier and rather busy Arcam.

Both amplifiers have similar timing qualities, with no undue emphasis on leading edges, but the Electrocompaniet's precise midband removes much of the haziness to leave a cleaner musical phrase. This makes long-term listening a more pleasurable experience.

There is also impressive grip on tap for a 70-watt amplifier (it would seem that Electrocompaniet's approach to power supply design has paid off when it comes to controlling the loudspeaker). Double bass has real texture and weight, yet remains nimble and on the ball. It also makes for very clear-cut imaging: on a spin of our Gillian Welch test disc, she is placed left of stage with her guitar while her cohort is on the right. This may not

sound all that impressive, but usually the two are melded together in the centre and the playing cannot be easily separated.

Bringing in PMC's PB1i speaker in place of our Bowers and Wilkins 802D reveals that the transmission line-loaded PMC's balance is rather better suited to this amplifier's character. The PB1i has a very open midband and this works rather well with the slightly dark character of the ECI-3, the pairing turning in a highly revealing and engaging sound with a variety of discs – one that makes alternative amps sound positively veiled.

If this model is anything to go by, Electrocompaniet's return to the UK is long overdue. This is an impressively resolute and powerful integrated amp for the money. **HFC**

Jason Kennedy



| VERDICT  |  |
|--|--|
| <b>SOUND</b><br>★★★★★  | <b>PRO</b><br>A highly revealing and powerful amplifier that is extremely well built and finished, with fully balanced operation – a rarity at this price. |
| <b>FEATURES</b><br>★★★★★   | <b>CON</b><br>The slightly dark mid/top won't be to all tastes. Front panel operation is also willfully obscure to the uninitiated.                        |
| <b>BUILD</b><br>★★★★★  |  |
| <b>VALUE</b><br>★★★★★  |  |
| <b>CONCLUSION</b><br>Taste cannot be ignored when it comes to sound quality and we like the calm, clean presentation of this amp enough to forgive its relative lack of midband sparkle. The fact that it's so revealing is the key to its addictive musicality. |  |
| <b>HI-FI CHOICE</b><br>OVERALL SCORE ★★★★★   |  |
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