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ELECTROCOMPANET
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ON DISC • POP, JAZZ & CLASSICAL

Timeless III, Spirits 2, Texas, Coleske, Chris Rea, The Pretenders,
Mark Knopfler, Robert Lockwood Jnr, Maria Callas... and more



cover feature

THE SYSTEMS
ELECTROCOMPANET

Iron fist, velvet glove



A system with the potential to push out in the region of 2 kW of music power could all too easily sound over the top. But this system wields its iron fist in a velvet glove, allowing an engrossing musical experience.

cover feature

Regular readers of this magazine will know the Electrocompaniet brand well, since we've reviewed a good number of the Norwegian marque's products over the years. Indeed, the AW120 power amplifier and EC 4.6 pre-amp do duty in my reference system, as does an ECP-1 phono stage.

Problem is, as much as I hold the brand in high regard, I've never really heard all the top-flight kit from the stable in one system. And so, when a chance arose to hear the awesome Nemo monoblock power amp partnered by an all-Electrocompaniet front end, I thought it well worth the effort to take some time off for a listen.

The system under scrutiny here employs the Electrocompaniet ECM-1 CD player as source component. The unusual top-loader employs a Philips Pro transport mechanism mounted in an ultra-rigid enclosure, and uses a clamp-type system to keep the disc in place. An innovative mechanical filter combats resonance.

Under the covers, EC has endowed the player with a high-resolution 24-bit/96 kHz D/A conversion stage. Hand-picked circuit components are employed for the fully differential, balanced signal path. Also of note is the total separation of the digital and analogue stages.

Top-quality power supplies (four in all) combine to make for an excellent source component that makes the most of digital accuracy, but dresses this precision in swathes of musical capability.

The EC 4.7 pre-amp is a high-resolution DC-coupled and fully balanced unit with a high-grade motorised volume control, six single-ended inputs of which one is mirrored by a balanced XLR input. Output choices also extend to a choice of RCA single-ended and balanced versions, with a full tape loop also provided.

The Electrocompaniet EC 4.7 is a high resolution, high performance, DC coupled and fully balanced, remote controlled preamplifier. The characteristic EC look, with thick acrylic faceplates and blue indicator lights is part of the package.

Of technical interest is the high-current floating transformer technology (FTT) circuit design, as well as fully discrete circuit components, a beefy toroidal power transformer and high-capacity capacitors. A remote control unit is standard and performs level adjustment and source selection functions.

However, the real showpieces are the two massive Electrocompaniet Nemo monoblocks, each of which can deliver a full 600 watts into 8 ohms. Indeed, the output into a nominal 4 ohm output is exactly double at 1,2 kW. Remember also that the Nemo is stable all the way down

to a circuit-sapping 0,5 ohms, while current output peaks at more than 150 amperes.

The Nemos operate off balanced XLR inputs only, an illuminated blue E logo on the front fascia and none of the cosmetically intricate heatsinking one usually expects of esoteric power amplifier designs.

Designed specifically for use with the B&W Nautilus speakers at the famous Abbey Road studios, the Nemos are among the most powerful power amps in the world, and the ultimate expression of EC's floating transformer technology.

The Crystal Clear Acoustic Obsession floorstanding speakers boast an unusual granite finish, pointing towards the ultra-rigid nature of the enclosures. For the same reason, resonances are non-existent. The Kevlar mid and bass drivers are thus provided with a totally inert platform, which encourages exceptional accuracy. The front baffle is angled for time alignment purposes.

A new addition to the local audio

manufacturing scene is the advent of the John Topham-designed Blue Skies power conditioners, of which two prototypes were on duty in this system. A compact 1 kVA is dedicated to the ECM 1 CD player, while a substantially larger 5 kVA unit looks after the remainder of the system.

Cabling in the system is Electrocompaniet throughout, with the exception of the speaker cables. Power cabling is ECK 3 – a cable employing four twisted pairs of high-purity copper in a parallel configuration. EC claims that the cable is self noise-cancelling.

The interlinks are XLR-terminated ECK 4 balanced designs employing a silver/copper alloy. Both centre conductor and shielding are Teflon-coated. Speaker signal transfer is via Transparent's highly regarded Super cabling.

I started off listening to BB King's atmospheric 'Blues in the Bayou', which immediately displayed the ability of the system to stage with generous



confidence. Big and bold, the soundstage easily extended beyond the physical borders of the listening venue, with spectacular height of particular note.

Fortunately, the dimensionality of the staging never became so layered as to disturb the unity of the performance, showing a talent for integration and resultant realism instead. Talking of which, King's piano had just the right ring of truth, underscoring the strong sense of overall credibility evoked by the Electrocompaniet system.

Tonality was impressive, too: with so much power available, the bass was every bit as deep and solid as one would expect it to be, with not even the slightest hint of flabbiness. However, for all its muscularity, the bottom-end was never allowed to dominate the musical proceedings.

With such an excellent foundation to work from, the rest of the tonal range was as smooth as it was progressive, rising from a full, rich midrange through to rounded treble and clear, detailed tops. The brass section on this recording projected just the right mix of sassy texture without becoming too bright or attacking, while finer details remained coherent.

Quite different was the challenge posed by the exceptional live recording of the classic *Over The Rainbow* by Tori Amos on the five-track EP, 'Hey Jupiter'. While the BB King production is big and expansive, it is the intimacy and close-up treatment of Tori's voice that comes under the spotlight here – and the EC system revelled in the task.

Close your eyes, and you could well believe that the sometimes-eccentric

singer was right there in the listening room, so detailed and realistic was the sonic picture painted by the system. Every intake of breath, each carefully enunciated phrase, every inflection was portrayed with unwavering accuracy. Indeed, not a subtlety was allowed to escape the attentions of the EC combination.

However, it was the ability of the system to contain all this detail into a contextually believable frame that forced one into rapt attention until the last note had died away. Indeed, so strong was the sense of 'being there' that it underscored the EC system's ability to effortlessly draw the listener into the music.

The earthy, bone-shaking acoustic bass of Ray Brown and his fellow jazz luminaries on 'Superbass' provided perhaps the best opportunity for those big Nemos to prove just how prodigious their power reserves are. Despite relatively high listening levels, and lots of subsonic harmonics, the sheer impetus and linearity of those power amplifiers impressed: they simply sailed through the challenge.

But this recording also highlighted the ability of the system to really bring detail and ambient information to the fore.

While coping with all the super bass this recording's title promises, it retained the dexterity and sense of purpose to deliver pin-point imaging and an almost holographic soundstage.

Any fears that so much power in a single system would lead to a too forceful, too authoritarian delivery was quickly dispelled. Here is a set-up that never allows technology or electronic powerplay to get in the way of the music, that delivers accuracy without becoming clinical, and that thoroughly entertains and involves.

As with all truly high-end systems, the Electrocompaniet system doesn't shirk its responsibilities when it comes to dealing with flawed recordings, as the Gould/ASO production of Beethoven's Piano Concerto No 1 proved. Although the performance is admirable and intricate, the sound was thin and tinny, and certainly not up to doing the system any justice. However, that the musical validity of the actual performance was still able to shine through means that the Electrocompaniet approach is probably more tolerant than other systems in this league.

The system as reviewed here represented the state of the Electrocompaniet art at the time. But the good news is that there is an even better CD player, the ECM-2, on the way. Other new products expected are a new integrated amplifier, a number of upgraded power amplifiers, and even a DVD player.

If these are able to emulate even just some of the musical magic expressed by this top-end Electrocompaniet system, I can't wait to hear them.

Deon Schoeman

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VERDICT

No shortage of power and control in a system that employs its muscle judiciously, allowing the music to take centre stage. Articulate and pacy, it also has a talent for finesse and subtlety.

TEST SYSTEM

Electrocompaniet ECM-1 CD player,
Electrocompaniet 4.7 pre-amplifier,
Electrocompaniet Nemo monoblock
power amplifiers, Crystal Clear Acoustic
Obsession loudspeakers,
Electrocompaniet interlinks, Transparent
Super speaker cable, Blue Skies power
conditioners

RECORDINGS

BB King – Blues in the Bayou (MCA)
Tori Amos – Hey Jupiter (Atlantic)
Ray Brown and Friends – Superbass (Telarc)
Beethoven's Piano Concerto No 1 –
Gould/American Symphony Orchestra
(Sony)
Holly Cole – Temptation (Metro Blue)

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