



ELECTROCOMPANIET ECI-5 MkII



This review first appeared in the January 2012 issue of [hi-end hifi magazine fairaudio.de](#) of Germany. You can also read this [review of the Electrocompaniet ECI-5 MkII](#) in its original German version. We publish its English translation in a mutual syndication arrangement with the publishers. As is customary for our own reviews, the writer's signature at review's end shows an e-mail address should you have questions or wish to send feedback. All images contained in this review are the property of fairaudio or Electrocompaniet - Ed.

Reviewer: Markus Sauer

Source: Heed Obelisk DT CD transport and Heed Obelisk converter

Preamp: Tom Evans The Vibe+ with Pulse PSU

Power amp: Jeff Rowland 102, Symasym

Integrated amp: Octave V70SE

Loudspeakers: JBL LSR 6332, Magnat 1005

Review component retail: €3.900



Norwegian brand Electrocompaniet has been around nearly 40 years. They remain proud of their history even though by 2004 high-tech company Westcontrol took - well, *control*. Whilst the established industrial design continues on, the new leadership addressed technical upgrades particularly with SMD applications. That's also the case with today's subject, the ECI-5MkII integrated.

It's quite chunky and with 483mm width in excess of the standard 440mm. Check that your rack can accommodate it. The scale tips at 20kg. The acrylic face plate is dominated by the so-called navigator display which confirms chosen input and various error messages should such conditions arise; and four *square-en-pointe* arranged control buttons on the right where left and right shuttle through inputs, up and down adjust volume.

Embedded elegantly in the central company logo via an LED that migrates in clockwise fashion around the 'E' is classy feedback on the volume setting. I found it a bit strange that the hue of this volume indicator—violet-blue—doesn't match the standard blue of the navigator window. I was pleased again that volume ramped up very gingerly to afford precise adjustments at low levels. The ECI-5MkII omits balance control.



For socketry there are two XLR and four RCA inputs whose selection the display confirms with lettering sizable enough for the short-sighted to be fine at standard room distances. The two XLR inputs appear as CD and TUN for tuner, the remaining unbalanced inputs as TAP (tape), DVD, VCR and HT (home theater). Playing critic and given the use of this chip-driven dot matrix display, it would be quite easy to build in user naming of inputs. Competitors either offer unlimited alphanumerical coding or a larger choice of preprogrammed options. Then a phono stage for example can appear properly indicated rather than show up as DVD.

The HT input obviously anticipates insertion of the Norse box into a home theater context where control over volume occurs with the source rather than ECI-5MkII. Finally there's a fixed REC1 output; two variable pre-outs (one XLR, one RCA) for either bi-amping or a subwoofer; and the ubiquitous five-way speaker terminals. The navigator window alerts about conditions like DC at the inputs or overheating but during my time with this amplifier I encountered no hiccups to ever see any of these warnings. The face plate also sports a 'hard' mains switch which in fact does disconnect the machine from utility power. Standby is only available via remote by a long hold of the mute button. This equates to 1-watt power consumption which kicks up to shy of 100 watts during idle but the generous heat sinks meant that even then the Electrocompaniet never exceeded getting warm to the touch.

The included remote was a plastic variant which also controls the firm's source components. Customers keen on something more luxurious can spend an extra €450 for the all-metal ECT3 wand. The firm's presentation makes some bones about symmetrical signal processing which my colleague Ralph Werner already reported on in his review of their bigger pre/power combo to serve as reference for the curious.



Otherwise the Norwegians remain rather mum on specifics here even though, like most, they engage in flowery verbiage to describe certain features as though they were unique. As far as I could make out, their "floating transformer technology" is simply a center-tapped transformer as is sensible for balanced circuitry; and star grounding. But then it's not about technology but results.

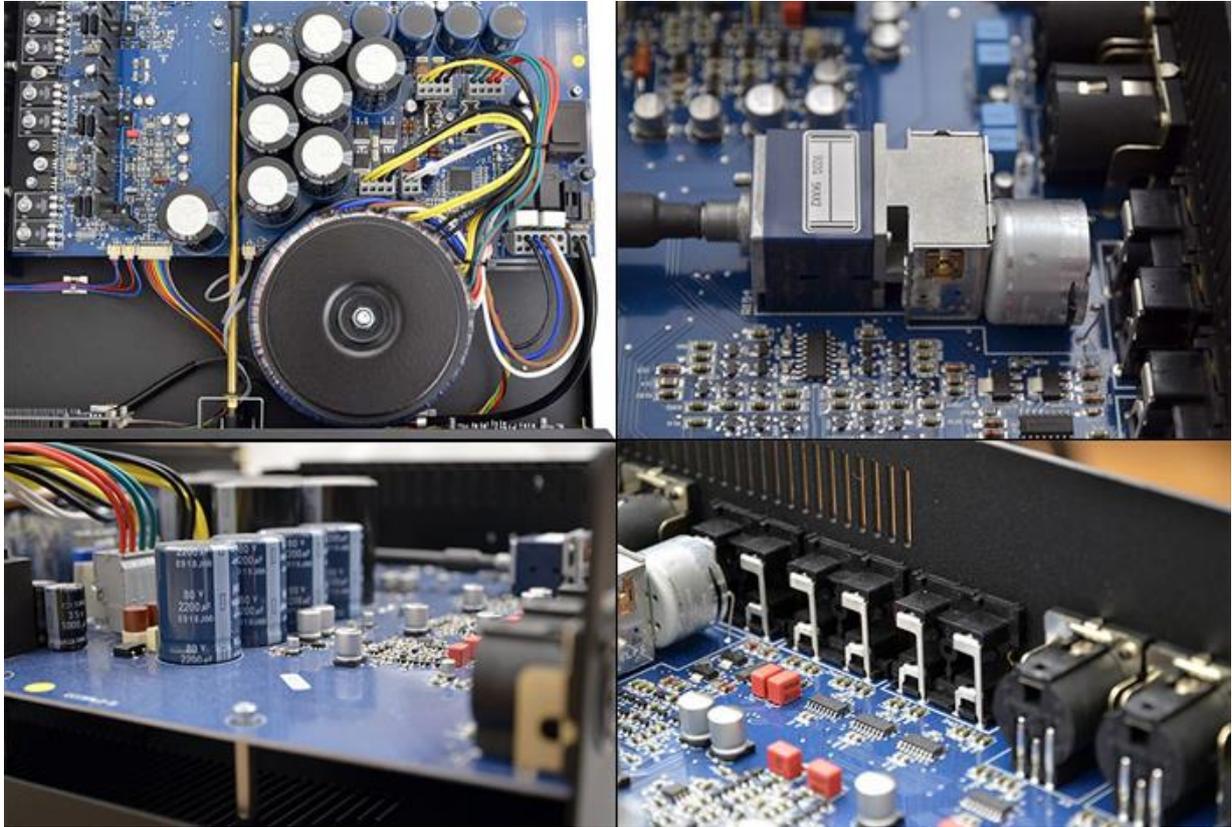
Sonics Part I. Here the ECI-5MKII had a readily discernable character which spread evenly across the audible spectrum. My listening notes keep mentioning things like voluminous, potent, generous and relaxed. When a friend asked how I felt the Norse box was voiced, I replied "British, with a dash of Yankee accent". I said British because the ECI-5II is tuned for long-term comfort in the best English tradition whilst the American twist arises from a wonderfully fulsome bass. Naturally fairaudio tradition insists on more than one catch phrase to get sonically descriptive so let's start with the midrange where the Electrocompaniet's leanings are easily spotted.



That's because voices—male and female—attain a slightly darker timbre than with many other amps. On Nitin Sawhney's *Prophesy*, Natacha Atlas sounded a few years older than she was when "Sunset" was actually cut. That extra maturity served her expressivity well. There was passion and sensitivity for timing and emphasis. Image lock was high and localization occurred cleanly at stage center but the last iota of mixed-in reverb was missing though admittedly that had zero effect on her formidable seductive powers.

This repeated itself with Gil Scott-Heron's "On coming from a broken home pt. 1" from *I'm new here*. While his voice was cleanly separated from the not terribly impressive synth doodling backdrop which I could have done without, other amps in the past rendered the diction of consonants a tick clearer and sharper (something this recording can stand since it's sadly apparent how Scott-Heron's drug use caused him to lose some teeth). Octave's V70S for example scored higher on lyrical intelligibility. The ECI-5MkII didn't undermine the hypnotic effect of Scott-Heron's voice however. Musical and verbal meaning telegraphed *en masse* as it were.

That particular impression reasserted itself time and again. The ECI-5MkII seemed to obey the medical Hippocratic Oath of *primum non nocere* – first do no harm. This machine restricted itself a tad on transparency but did so simply to spare the listener sharpness or related ear attacks. This was applied so cleverly that upon longer audition nothing really seemed lacking. The ECI-5 somehow managed to pass on musical expression unscathed despite allowing anal accountants to perhaps insist with real cause that a wee bit of reverb, air and cymbal sheen were missing.



This impression held once the upper frequencies were inspected. Cymbals sounded believably metallic, piano strings (say Frédéric Chiu's reading of the *Lt. Kije Suite* transcriptions) felt tautly stretched. Yet tonally this amp was a tad restrained. The spark which some amps bestow on a cymbal even if the recording itself doesn't was a bit toned down.

Sonics Part II. At the opposite end restraint was *definitely* not on the menu. Au contraire. When I first fired up the amp and played it louder than my average family/neighbor-conscious levels, I had to move my speakers away from the wall a bit. Bass and ECI-5MkII were more potent than most. This celebrated extension and power over the last iota of control or damping. I'd thus not combine the Electrocompaniet with speakers which require an ultra-firm hand. This reads harsher than intended. This amp was neither ponderous nor slow. Bobby Bland's "Ain't no love in the heart of the city" from a Best-of CD had the interplay of percussion and bass simply nailed. What I earlier said about the midrange applied with bass as well. The ECI-5MkII transmitted the musical message intact. This extended to dynamics too. Here the amp had unlimited power where my needs were concerned. I never managed to get past 2:00 on the dial. Even so impulses didn't explode with quite the same ferocity as some competitors have 'em. I'm quite sure the test bench would give the Electro's impulse response a clean bill of health. Subjectively however there was a very minor reticence on dynamics as a function really of the tonality's gentler voicing. Recall that tonally brighter voicing emphasizes the leading edge to sound edgier and faster while a darker voicing appears more relaxed, softer and slower.

Again, longer listening to the ECI-5MkII found no dynamic complaints. Once I'd gotten used to the tonal balance, dynamics felt correct. Microdynamics seemed spot-on, the differences between the weighting of individual notes or even within a single note teased out nicely. Spatially the amp invited absorption in

grandly broad and deep spaces. Aided by its impressive bass foundation the Norse box erected a *very* wide expansive stage which was clearly larger than with my TEAD/Jeff Rowland combo. This was seriously big cinerama scope. Width was perhaps emphasized a tad more than depth but that served most recordings well. Placement of individual performers was cleanly fixed and transients didn't interfere. Outline sharpness could have been more precise however. Here the ECI 5's more *generous* handling was felt again. I couldn't hear noteworthy differences between RCA and XLR feeds, at least not via Benchmark's DAC1 USB which our editor kindly made available to check on the balanced inputs. Comparisons to my Heed DAC meanwhile proved how easily the Electrocompaniet locked onto performance offsets between sources—I much preferred the Heed—and also various recordings.

Conclusion. Enough vivisection. Electrocompaniet's ECI-5MkII clearly wasn't tuned for scalpel-wielding surgeons. Its true virtues won't reveal themselves to bean counters. They emerge when you're simply letting the amp to its job – serve up compelling music without hassle month after month. Should other amps strike you as somewhat anaemic, here's your antidote. For a price current competition would have to call very attractive, Electrocompaniet's ECI-5MkII seems targeted specifically at buyers whose sturm & drang period is behind them to now focus on long-term comfort. This is an amp to grow old with.



Psych profile...

- Tonally on the agreeably warm rather than edgy/lit-up side. Misses the last dose of treble air but sounds exceptionally clean and distortion-free.
- Endowed with a generous well-defined bass with massive extension which could be too much for speakers demanding high levels of control. Speakers without need for high damping will be great game however.
- Plays music with taut timing where the interplay of rhythm makers like drums and bass evidences nuance and enthusiasm.
- Stages very broadly and deep while image focus isn't as sharply edged as the competition.
- Offers a very good price/performance ratio if the innate voicing appeals.

Facts:

- Dimensions and weight: 483 x 405 x 135mm WxDxH, 20kg
- Trim: black
- Socketry: 6 x line level in (2 x XLR, 4 x RCA), main-in, 1 x rec-out, two pre-out (XLR and RCA), single-wire speaker terminals
- Power consumption: 1 watt standby, 100 watts at idle
- Other: Remote control
- Warranty: 3 years
- [Website](#)