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ELECTROCOMPANIET ECI 6DS INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER Simplicity and Value

By [Wayne Garcia](#) | Dec 31st, 2013



It may seem odd to compare a sophisticated audio component to a Japanese toy, but Electrocompaniet's ECI 6DS integrated amp is so versatile that I can't help but think of those "transformer" toys that can be reconfigured into robots, monsters, animals, flying machines, action heroes, and goodness knows what else.

But in this digital-meets-analog-meets-computer age components such as the ECI 6DS aren't so unusual. As Electrocompaniet USA's Peder Beckman explained it, "Electrocompaniet is known for its great analog two-channel stereo systems. When EC decided to expand into today's technology we had a decision to make: Build a brand new integrated from the ground up like

everybody else does, or take a unit like our well known ECI 5MkII integrated analog amp and integrate today's digital technology with our existing analog technology. Not the easiest way but the best sounding, and we are all about making the best sound.”

We'll get into the details shortly, but for now let me tell you that this is one impressive effort—very clean and pure, reminiscent of a mountain stream that allows you to see with crystalline clarity the life below the surface in a slightly magnified way.

At \$7499 the ECI 6DS features a 125Wpc power amp section that, frankly, seems underrated; an analog preamp with balanced as well as single-ended inputs (but no phono stage); a 24-bit/192kHz D/A converter, and SPDIF, TosLink, and USB digital inputs. It also sports Internet radio and Electrocompaniet's Audio Server, from which you can network all your computers and other DL-NA-supported devices like smartphones and satellite receivers. The ECI 6DS will also play from a memory stick, and Beckman supplied me with one with his own mix of 192/24 files at bit-rates up to 9850kbs.

As with other software-based units, the ECI 6DS can be upgraded via the Internet, but note that two or three updates occurred while I had my review sample. Yes, it was over the course of many months, but also, one supposes, par for today's course.

And while the unit comes with a versatile remote control, Electrocompaniet's clever, simple, four-button, front-panel controls make the unit not only very clean-looking but also a joy to operate. The left/right buttons select source, while the up/down adjust volume.

As noted, the sound of the ECI 6DS is very clean and pure, and also notably coherent from bottom to top, making for a very well balanced, unified presentation. For example, listening to Esoteric's excellent SACD release of Mozart's Piano Concerto No. 20 (Curzon/Britten/English Chamber Orchestra) I was struck by the natural balance among the various orchestral sections, the percussion, and the piano, each voice clearly defined with an easy grace that allowed me to fall into the performance without much thinking about the audiophile stuff we can all get too hung up over. Curzon's piano had a natural, bell-like brightness, yet also the gravitas and lower-register weight that make the first movement of this piece especially ominous in feeling. And the ECI 6DS dynamic coloring and fine delivery of pace retained the necessary tension between the strings, piano, and percussion, pulling the listener directly into the performance.

Reference Recordings' excellent release, *Britten's Orchestra* (Michael Stern and the Kansas City Symphony), revealed the Electrocompaniet's impressive lack of noise and hash. In “Dawn,” the opening movement of the *Four Sea Interludes and Passacaglia from Peter Grimes*, the music emerged from a deeply quiet backdrop, conveying that almost eerie, goosebump-inducing feeling we get in the concert hall of something budding to life before us. I also liked that the ECI 6DS's low noise and fine dynamic tracking let me play the music at a level where these opening passages were appropriately quiet, without the need to crank it up later when the “Storm” passage lets loose with all the fury the title implies.

Britten also showed this design's fine recreation of a well-captured soundstage, conveying a convincing impression of width and layered depth as well as a nice suggestion of ambience. That said, the ECI 6DS doesn't offer much in the way of that thing we call “bloom,” meaning the sense of air expanding and contracting around instruments and voices as they rise and fall in volume. Though many tube units excel at this—as do some of the best solid-state designs—the lack of it often brings with it a somewhat dark, coolish tonality. In this regard the ECI 6DS does a fine

juggling act, leading me to conclude that it's actually pretty neutral, balancing cool with warm depending on the recording. I found it cooler and darker with the Mozart, and richer but also brighter with RR's *Britten*.

Switching musical moods, the ECI 6DS flexed its muscle with MoFi's release of Stevie Ray Vaughan's *The Sky Is Crying*. His gorgeous take on Jimi Hendrix's "Little Wing," at once tenderly jazz-inflected and explosively, raunchily bluesy, about popped the bass panels on my Maggie 1.7s, which of course can bottom out when overdriven. Yes, I played it loud, as one should this music, but the amp was so composed and in such control that when all hell broke loose I wasn't quite prepared for the athletic leap in dynamic range and the attendant volume that came with it. Thankfully, the remote is also quickly responsive. So take note, the ECI 6DS has plenty of power in reserve.

Vocals, too, are well served by this new Electrocompaniet design. A recent Beatles binge, various operas and Strauss' *Four Last Songs*, Ella Fitzgerald's *Gershwin Songbook* (Verve), wherein the gorgeous creaminess of her reverb-swathed voice and the bounce of the orchestra on "Let's Call the Whole Thing Off," left me utterly enchanted for the umpteenth time.

One challenge for such multi-faceted designs can be ease of use. I have no such complaints about the ECI 6DS. It is remarkably intuitive to operate, and I found switching between its various functions to be the proverbial breeze.

I have yet to mention this because I think it's something we should expect from components at this level, but this is also one solidly built (and quietly attractive) integrated amp. That, combined with an impressive sound, Transformer-like flexibility, frustration-free operation, and upgradeability, makes Electrocompaniet's ECI 6DS a most attractive option for the music lover who is also drawn to the simplicity and value found in the best integrated designs.

SPECS & PRICING

Type: Integrated amplifier with built-in DAC

Power output: 125Wpc into 8 ohms, 200Wpc into 4 ohms

Analog inputs: One balanced (XLR), three single-ended (RCA)

Digital inputs: Two SPDIF, two Toslink, two USB

DAC: 24-bit/192kHz

Outputs: Preamp (XLR), 5-way binding posts

Dimensions: 18.3" x 5.3" x 16"

Weight: 44 lbs.

Price: \$7499

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