



Electrocompaniet Rena SA-1 integrated amplifier, streamer, DAC

Friday, December 8, 2017

Jason Kennedy

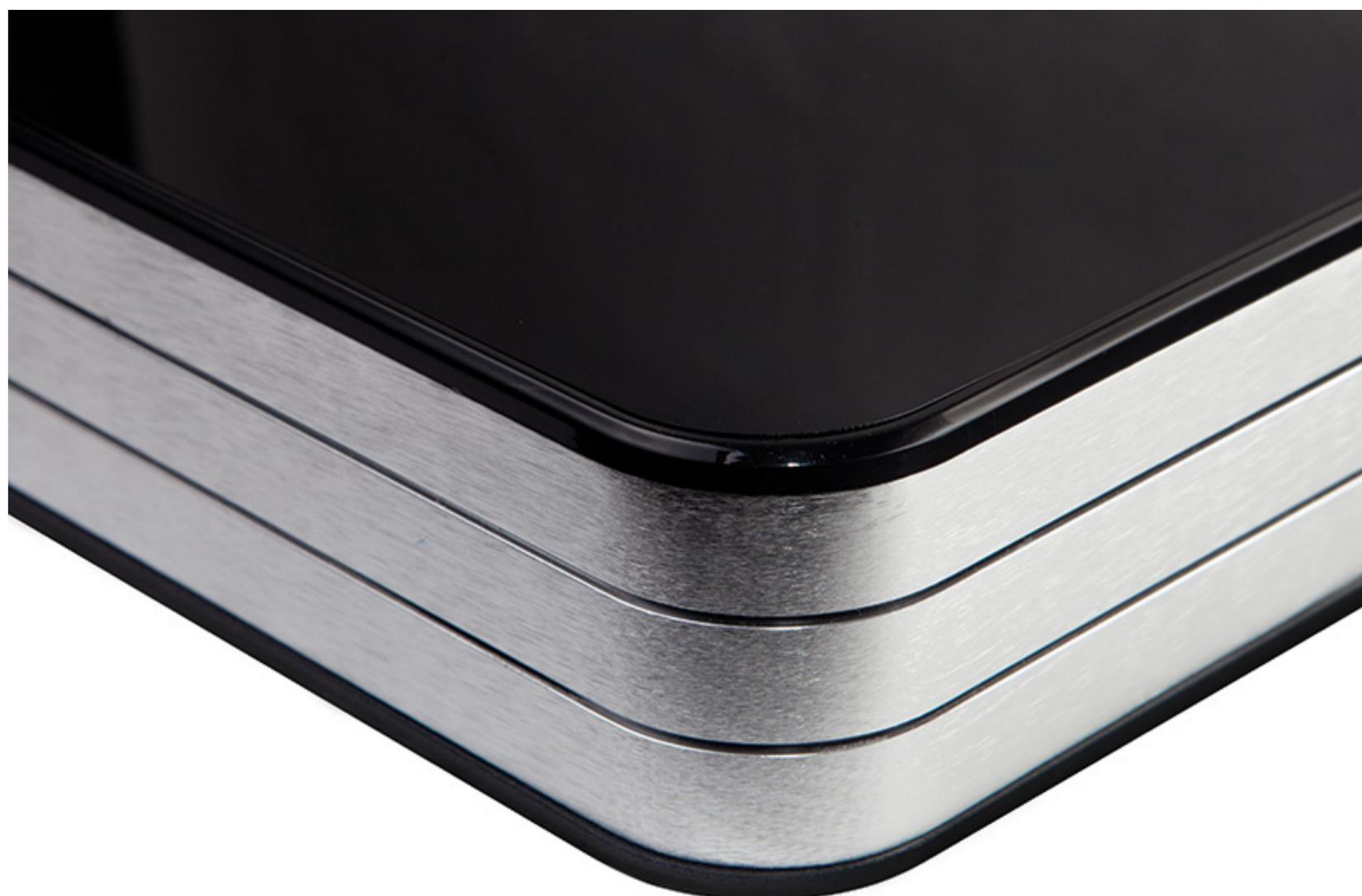
It came as a surprise when I noticed that people were using the word Sonos as a generic name for streaming or multiroom sound systems. The brand has made it to Hoover status in under 15 years. It did this by making affordable attractive products with a control system that anyone could use, in the first years you had to buy the device with the interface on it because smartphones and tablets hadn't been created. As a result Sonos is the dominant beast in the aspirational home audio market today and some parts of the hi-fi industry are doing their best to get a slice of the action.

Electrocompaniet is one of them, this Norwegian company has been making separates hi-fi for decades now but it realised that the market has changed and introduced the EC Living range of network audio components. This includes the Tana SL-1 wireless speaker and streamer (£736), a partnering add-on L-1 speaker and two Rena streamers. All are built around the same shape and internals, the Rena exterior forms the base of the two speakers and they share the streaming electronics. The Rena S-1 (£585) is a wireless streamer that you can add to a traditional hi-fi or pair with Tana L-1 wireless active speakers, the Rena SA-1 (£621) has an amplifier built in to its compact form. Which means that all you need is a pair of speakers and you're good to go.



The small difference in price between S-1 and SA-1 doesn't leave a lot of budget for the 75 Watt class D amplification but I guess that once you have a power supply, an outboard block in this case, a chip based amp is not too pricey. It's a cute piece of kit just seven inches square and almost totally devoid of controls, there are however touch sensitive volume and power buttons on the lid, well not buttons exactly more like illuminated symbols. The only features on the box are hidden on the back where digital in and outputs including a LAN connection for wired network connection sit alongside an analogue output on minijack and speaker outputs. The latter are decidedly downmarket spring terminal types chosen presumably because they need so little space and budget. I note that the Sonos product that this essentially competes with has nicer spring terminals but considerably fewer connections for other sources. You can for instance plug in a USB drive and use it as a library if you don't have any other network storage.

Inside the box is a 24/192 DAC and wireless speaker connection capability up to 24/96, plus a host of features including support for all the usual formats including DSD128, the ability to receive Airplay but not Bluetooth, and access to Spotify Connect, Tidal and Qobuz streaming services. Control is achieved with the attractive Electrocompaniet app for iOS and Android, which is simpler than most but doesn't have an A to Z listing to aid album or artist selection. It does however have a functional search facility that makes it easy to find what you want, less convenient is that if you have two versions of the same album in your library (in different resolutions for instance) it puts the tracks from both into a single list so making it enjoy to hear the album without repetition. But this product wasn't made for obsessives like myself it was made to provide easy access to real world music collections and streaming services. I tried Qobuz which worked fine except that I couldn't guess how to 'favourite' an album or track, but it isn't hard once you know how. I also couldn't figure out how to adjust volume prior to pressing play, the volume control being on the play screen or the box itself, but in most respects this is an easy and stable app to use, which is more than you can say of some in this field. For instance I was impressed by its ability to display most compilation albums as a single entity rather than splitting them up into the artists involved as many apps do.



Sound quality

Driving the not too challenging but very revealing PMC Fact.8 speakers the Rena is inevitably a bit flat compared to more conventional amplifiers, and it's a bit lacking in refinement at the top end too, strings can sound strident. However given its price and feature set the results are entirely listenable, it can produce good scale with the right piece of music and decent weight from a kick drum. The bass is pretty solid for such a lightweight package, not the fastest but punchy enough. With rather more appropriate ELAC [B5 U5 Slim](#) bookshelf speakers the Rena sounded more relaxed, it's not the most gripping of presentations but neither does it have any obvious shortcomings. Its limitations are those of omission, mostly of depth information and timing precision. I've not heard an amp/streamer in the sub £1,000 sector that is thrilling to listen to, for the audio enthusiast the version without onboard amp is the better choice from the EC Living range. I tried the Rena SA-1 via its digital output into a DAC and got a much more engaging result, still a little short on three dimensionality but with a lot more integrity and presence. I also discovered that the digital output is volume controllable from the app which is unusual.

The Rena SA-1 is one of the least expensive entry points to streaming in the home that I have enjoyed, its sound won't blow you away but neither will it grate and where background music is concerned that's important. More important is ease of use which is where the EC app scores higher than most. If you want a one box solution to use with a pair of affordable speakers it is certainly worth investigation but if you already have a system check out its little brother the S-1 without the amp, that could be just the ticket. The Rena and its stablemates can't compete with the power of Sonos but what it can do is offer a Scandinavian aesthetic to those who can see beyond the white box hype.

SPECIFICATIONS:

Type: integrated amplifier, streamer & DAC

Power output: 75W

Frequency Response: not specified

Streaming Inputs: Network shared folder, USB Drive, UPnP Media Server, TIDAL, Spotify Connect, Qobuz, Internet Radio, AirPlay

Digital Inputs: Coaxial, Toslink, RJ45 Gigabit Ethernet, Advanced 802.11 AC WiFi with MIMO
Analogue outputs: 3.5mm jack, loudspeaker spring clips

Supported File Formats: WAV/WAVE, MP3, AAC+, Vorbis, ALAC, FLAC, APE, WMA, up to 192kHz/24bit, DSD, up to DSD 128 (5.6 MHz)

Control Software: Electrocompaniet app for iOS & Android,

Power Consumption: not specified

Dimensions HxWxD: 52 x 177 x 177mm

+ PSU

Weight: 1.6kg + PSU

PRICE: £621 (Price Updated Feb 2018)

MANUFACTURER DETAILS:

Electrocompaniet

ecliving.electrocompaniet.no