



New streaming amp has old school ethos

Hi-res network playback, app control and multiroom expansion give Elipson's latest Music Centre a modern feel, says **Ed Selley** – but he appreciates its CD playback too

IF YOU HAVE had contact with French manufacturer Elipson in the UK, it is likely to be on account of its distinctive-looking (read: spherical) Planet loudspeakers, or its Prestige Facet lineup (the latter including Dolby Atmos upfiring modules – see *HCC* #291). But as well as these offerings, the company makes a small number of smaller electronic goodies. We previously looked at its Chroma 100 turntable in *HCC* #318, and now it's the turn of the recently updated Music Centre to receive our attention.

The 'recently updated' part of that statement is important because Elipson's Music Centre itself has been around in one form or another for nearly a decade. What the brand has done very effectively here, with the £900 Music Centre Connect HD, is augment the basic specification to meet the needs of the market in 2021. This means the product's 'core' is the same as it has been since it was launched, and explains why there's still a CD drive here when many companies in the 'just-add-speakers' game don't bother with silver disc.

A question of ports

In fact, the Music Centre Connect HD is comprehensively specified. In addition to CD playback via its slot-loading drive, there's DAB and FM radio to savour, while connections are an optical digital audio input, two line-level inputs and both a stereo preout and mono subwoofer output (the latter including an adjustable 50Hz-200Hz crossover, which is a rare but rather handy feature). You can

then additionally plug in a USB stick and, so long as it has MP3 or WMA files on it, the Music Centre Connect HD can play them too. Next to the USB port, which is mounted further to the side for slightly easier access, there are also 3.5mm headphone out and 3.5mm auxiliary inputs.

This is a nice roster of connectivity, but there's more still. Elipson went ahead and added aptX Bluetooth support to a previous version of the Music Centre, but now introduces network streaming, also found on its compact Connect 250 amplifier (£250), W35 wireless speaker (£800) and Connect Wi-Fi Receiver (£130). This allows for the Music Centre to access material stored on a local library at sample rates up to 24-bit/96kHz (you can give your 192kHz downloads the night off), and become part of a multiroom setup supporting up to eight zones. It additionally brings Spotify, Tidal, Qobuz and Deezer, along with internet radio and AirPlay, to the party.

This networking functionality is delivered via either 2.4GHz Wi-Fi or Ethernet, and is controlled through Elipson's own smartphone/tablet app which, aside from its curious insistence of only working in portrait mode, is a user-friendly interface. Setup is straightforward and I didn't experience any bugs or crashes.

Text appeal

Compared to the full-colour interfaces of more expensive rivals, such as the recently reviewed HiFi Rose RS201E [*HCC* #323] or Cambridge Audio's super-stylish Evo 150, Elipson's text-only display is something of a disappointment, but it's

easy enough to read. Below it are touch-sensitive transport/function controls.

The rest of the Elipson's hardware stands comparison to more expensive devices too. Amplification, rated at 2 x 120W (4ohm), comes from an ICEpower Class D module that promises energy efficiency and enables a compact chassis, allied to 32-bit DSP to manage its relationship to the inputs. Said chassis is little changed from the original Music Centre – largely because it's a very effective piece of industrial design, smart without being showy and very well assembled too. I would like the older silver finish to make a reappearance, but beyond that I can't find anything to grumble about.

At just over 7cm high and 33cm in diameter, this streaming amp will easily sit in a kit cupboard or an AV shelf. For a more glamorous installation, Elipson sells a slim stand, with internal cable path, for £150.

The lack of an HDMI ARC connection on the Music Centre Connect HD means your TV's handset won't work as a control point for it, but it does come with an IR handset of its own, which makes it simpler to get to grips with than rival machines that are only operated by an app.

Deep dive

Connected to a pair of JBL L52 Classic standmount loudspeakers, a spirited run-through of an episode of the 'Line of Duty with a submarine in it' BBC series *Vigil* provides an impressive demonstration of what this amplifier does very effectively. This is a refined and expansive performer, able to create a believable sonic space for the action onscreen. Dialogue is unfailingly easy to follow.

The ICEpower module seems able to go effortlessly loud with no subjective sense of strain. The £1,000 JBL speakers are a likely type of partner for the Music Centre Connect HD but I also ran with it £4,500 Focal Kanta No1s without wanting for power.

Listening to the Hans Zimmer score for *Dune* (Deezer Hi-Fi) to get in the mood to go and see the movie, the Elipson makes use of the same virtues it shows with TV material. It pushes information well beyond the confines of the speakers but avoids there being any perceivable hole in the middle from a left/right presentation.

I have found on occasions that material played via the Connect app can sound a little less weighty than the same digital from the CD mechanism, but this is never unmanageable and a little tweak of the onboard EQ settings is sufficient to nullify it.

And the Elipson manages to be good honest fun too. The tremendously energetic delivery of Dodie's *Hate Myself* (24-bit/44.1kHz) is captured perfectly. The intimacy of the start of the track, simply vocals and guitar, is detailed and well defined with moments like her (deliberate) cough being clearly audible. As the song builds, the Music Centre Connect HD gives space and presence to the additional instruments being worked effortlessly into the performance. It pounds along, working at an emotional as well as a technical level.

The fact this do-it-all device has its 'old school' features is, it must be said, rather handy. If you still have CDs you

SPECIFICATIONS

ONBOARD POWER (CLAIMED): 2 x 120W (4ohm) **CONNECTIONS:** 2 x stereo analogue inputs; 3.5mm input; optical digital audio input; stereo analogue pre-out; subwoofer output; 3.5mm headphone jack; Ethernet; USB **STREAMING/USB AUDIO FORMAT SUPPORT:** FLAC, WAV, ALAC, AAC, AAC+, MP3 up to 24-bit/96kHz **INTEGRATED SERVICES:** Tidal, Qobuz, Deezer, Spotify, iHeart radio **DIMENSIONS:** 73(h)x 330(w) x 330(d)mm **WEIGHT:** 3.9kg

FEATURES: Integrated Wi-Fi; AirPlay; aptX Bluetooth; UPnP media player; CD playback; DAB/FM radio; app control; remote control; ICEpower amplification module; 50Hz-200Hz subwoofer crossover control; multiroom compatible (16-bit/44kHz) with other Elipson Connect products; optional stand; touch-sensitive front-panel controls

TESTED WITH



BUILD A PROBLEM: This full-length debut from the youthful, soft-voiced singer/songwriter Dodie won't be everyone's cup of tea, but the intimacy and intricacy of its production means even its most throwaway tracks make for an interesting listening experience. And you can even buy it on cassette...



enjoy listening to, this isn't going to require you to rip them to make use of them. Likewise, DAB and FM limits your access to Albanian Jazz stations but it's frequently quite a bit easier to access your preferred UK content. This is an even-handed all rounder, something that more determinedly forward-thinking rivals can struggle to be.

Bargain box

All this has to be taken into account against the competitive asking price of the Music Centre Connect HD. When I've found myself thinking 'It doesn't have the sexy display of...!', I've been forced to remind myself that the bulk of the devices I'm making comparisons to are at least £500 more expensive. Elipson has tweaked its long-running formula very effectively and the result has to be seen as a bit of a bargain ■

HCC VERDICT



Elipson Music Centre Connect HD
→ £900 → en.elipson.com

WE SAY: Elipson has refreshed its smart-looking all-in-one to good effect, creating an engaging-sounding device with a brilliant specification for the asking price.

AV INFO

PRODUCT: Networked stereo amplifier/CD player

POSITION: Elipson's flagship Connect component

PEERS: Naim Uniti Atom; HiFi Rose RS201E

