



# Melody maker

At the heart of its new range of Element mini-separates, ELAC's latest integrated amplifier packs a punch, says **David Price**

**A** taste of things to come, ELAC's new EA101EQ-G packages a number of different technologies inside its very compact case. It's as if the company's engineers have tried to squeeze a quart from a pint pot. Part of the company's new Elements range, it's one of a number of products designed to "wean people off sound bars", according to ELAC's UK importer. In truth it's not an out-and-out audiophile product, but attempts to give a taste of hi-fi to those that normally go without it.

While many companies go down the Class D route for their mini amplifiers, this is a BASH (Bridged Amplifier Switching Hybrid) design. Its power amplifier runs fully modulated rails to 'track' the signal voltage, keeping a constant low voltage across the output transistors. The modulated switched mode power supply works in conjunction with a conventional

Class B amplifier, switched by DSP. The system avoids low-level output spikes that can happen with Class G designs, but it can generate noise which must be properly suppressed. The result is claimed to be high power from a small, efficient amplifier; ELAC specifies 40W per channel into 8ohm, which is impressive for a compact box.

It sports one coaxial digital input, plus two optical and an asynchronous USB, running up to 24-bit/192kHz. There's also Bluetooth with aptX support plus two standard RCA line ins – which are then converted into digital at 24/96 via the amplifier's powerful Crystal Semiconductors DSP chip. This also performs digital-to-analogue conversion duties and the amp's sophisticated room correction system, which can be accessed via the smartphone app (Android and iOS). The Auto Blend and Calibrate function (ABC) works out the best way for the speakers and sub to work

## DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
ELAC Element EA101EQ-G

**ORIGIN**  
China

**TYPE**  
Integrated amplifier

**WEIGHT**  
2.5kg

**DIMENSIONS (WxHxD)**  
204 x 56 x 285mm

**FEATURES**

- Quoted power output: 2x 40W (8ohm)
- 24-bit/192kHz Crystal Semiconductor DAC/DSP
- Inputs: 2x RCA; 1x coaxial; 2x optical; 1x USB Type-B, aptX Bluetooth
- Subwoofer output

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Hi-Fi Network

**TELEPHONE**  
01285 643088

**WEBSITE**  
elac.com

in room, setting an optimum crossover frequency and phase relationship.

This is a pleasant package with an awful lot of stuff squeezed into a small space. It's well finished too, with a metal front panel and rubberised top plate that exudes quality. The fascia has a 6.35mm headphone socket and there are source, power and volume switches. The fine pitch OLED volume/source display wins plaudits for being a decent definition, but is too small to be useful if the amp is at the other end of your room.

## Sound quality

This little ELAC integrated sounds quite distinctive in its own way. It does well for its price and size, with quite a fulsome, big-hearted presentation. In truth, it's not quite up to the best of the rest at its price, but it's important to remember that the EA101EQ-G is tilted to the lifestyle, rather than the audiophile market.

Whatever type of music you choose to play, it gives a lively and engaging rendition, with a decent amount of power considering its diminutive dimensions. You will need to match it up with a reasonably sensitive loudspeaker to produce a sound that can fill a medium-sized room without any great sense of strain – see page 106 for everything you need to know about component matching.

Kicking off my testing in a medium-sized listening room and fed with a good digital source, the ELAC delivers a bouncy rendition of that old club classic *Pacific 707* from 808 State. This is electronic dance music from

25 years ago, mastered on DAT and hardly what you'd call an audiophile recording. Yet this amplifier is able to scythe through the mushy mix surprisingly well, throwing out large amounts of detail. More impressively, it's able to piece together the music in a rhythmically coherent way – it has a decent degree of control and this allows the listener to really get into the groove and enjoy things. It is reasonably adept at tracking dynamic peaks, although it can't quite deliver the full slam of the bass drum in the way that you'd wish from a larger-sized integrated. The EA101EQ-G works well within its own set of operating parameters, one might say, but try as it might it simply cannot make up for its small size – and limited punching power. The 808 State track isn't exactly the world's warmest recording, but this little integrated helps slightly with a very subtle bloom in its upper bass that helps pad things out usefully.

Switch to some sweet soul music, and you see a different side to the performance. No longer having to work so hard with that powerful, heavily modulated electronic bassline, it appears slightly more at ease. However, it's now being asked to serve up something that – in the case of Isaac Hayes' Stax classic *Café Regio's* – is tonally silky sweet. That subtle upper bass warmth is appreciated, but you're clearly made aware that the ELAC isn't the richest and most euphonic-sounding amplifier around. It has a certain greyness to its midband; tonally things sound just a little too dry and lacking in colour. I enjoy the song a good deal, but can't help thinking that it could have been recorded anywhere – rather than that famous



Costing a whisker under £700, the new Cyrus ONE (HFC 417) is a close competitor, if not absolutely identical. It's bulkier than the ELAC and lacks a display. It makes up for it with an MM phono input. There's no fancy room correction on the Cyrus and no digital inputs, so it's far more suited to the analogue domain – although it does sport aptX Bluetooth. It also has a lot more power from its bespoke Cyrus Class D output stage. The ONE sounds far bigger and punchier than the ELAC and there's more detail, depth and transparency too. Overall it's a more musically satisfying performer, although obviously less versatile.

Stax recording studio in Memphis with its notoriously plush acoustics. This is, of course, where we have to pinch ourselves and be reminded that we're listening to a £600 do-it-all mini amplifier, rather than a full-size hi-fi separate, so it's important to keep everything in perspective. The upside is that the EA101EQ-G has a fair stab at the song's lovely, lilting rhythms and really keeps the listener's attention. Next on the listening list is *Follow You, Follow Me* by Genesis. Perhaps not the band's absolute finest, but a nicely recorded and atmospheric ballad nonetheless. This amplifier makes a good fist of it, serving up a reasonably spacious stereo soundstage – although in truth

## It has a decent degree of control, allowing you to get into the groove

a similarly priced full-size design would do better. The ELAC is slightly constrained left to right and especially front to back, preferring to keep things pretty close to the plane of the loudspeakers. That said, within these confines the music sounds tidy and well ordered with a decent amount of detail. The dreamy feel of the song is captured well, once again this little amplifier gets into the rhythmic nitty gritty and carries the listener with it. There is a slightly processed feel to the sound of singer Phil Collins' voice, making it sound less organic than you would expect. Still, the amp redeems itself somewhat with a lively, animated presentation and just enough power to really spoon out those bass guitar notes. Up top, the hi-hat and ride

cymbals sounds crisp and well resolved, although it could be argued the performance lacks some sparkle.

## Conclusion

It's hard to review ELAC's Element EA101EQ-G as an out-and-out specialist hi-fi separate – it's like trying to rate a four-wheel drive Jeep on its performance and handling. This little amplifier has been conceived and designed for people who aren't audiophiles in any conventional sense, but who could one day become one. This is where a large proportion of consumer audio market is right now – from soundbars to Sonos, lots of money is being spent in this sector. It certainly makes a fine stab at offering something that will appeal to precisely these buyers – that want high technology, clever functionality and serious configurability from the comfort of their smartphone.

It has a bouncy and engaging sound, but is too opaque and constrained for hi-fi listening. Match the Element EA101EQ-G with a decent pair of bookshelf speakers and/or a sub, position things carefully and use a decent-quality source and you'll have a lovely little music maker ●

## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

**SOUND QUALITY**  
★★★★★

**VALUE FOR MONEY**  
★★★★★

**BUILD QUALITY**  
★★★★★

**FEATURES**  
★★★★★

**OVERALL**  
★★★★★

**LIKE:** Versatile functionality; engaging sound; size

**DISLIKE:** Can't quite match full-size amplifiers sonically

**WE SAY:** Impressively packaged compact integrated amplifier

## CONNECTIONS

