



ELAC ELEMENT EA101EQ-G INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER/DAC REVIEW

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Views: 1,208



PRICE \$699

AT A GLANCE

Plus

Good power in compact form
Outstanding app-enabled subwoofer auto-setup
Onboard 192/24 USB DAC

Minus

No line outputs for external amp
Small display

THE VERDICT

Elac's Element EA101EQ-G amp/DAC nails the sweet spot of price, performance, and worthwhile features with surprisingly audiophile sound and the added value of auto-EQ and app-enabled subwoofer crossover/blending.

It's an amplifier. It's a USB DAC. It's a room/subwoofer equalizer. It's a headphone amp. It's an app-enabled Bluetooth receiver. It's all of these, and it's only \$699—and it's from the revived German brand Elac, whose latest Andrew Jones–designed loudspeakers have won acclaim in these pages and elsewhere. Ultimately, Elac's Element EA101EQ-G may be best characterized as what the stereo receiver is morphing into for the 21st century. There's no FM or AM on board (why would there be?), and the form factor is entirely different, but the market niche is equivalent: the backbone of a music-playback system for those to whom sound quality is paramount. Most folks today can live happily enough with earbuds, a smartphone, and a Bluetooth speaker or two (previously, they would've been happy with a Walkman and a boombox), but serious music lovers still demand something more. With this integrated amp/DAC combo, Elac is positioned to deliver it.



BASH-Fest

The EA101EQ-G is a two-channel integrated amp, probably of about 40 watts per

channel. I say “probably” and “about” because Elac specs power at only 1 kilohertz (40 watts into 8 ohms and 80 watts into 4 ohms) rather than over the 20-hertz-to-20-kHz range usually stated for serious audio products. (Check our Test Bench measurements for the confirmed details.) The topology in question is BASH (Bridged Amplifier Switching Hybrid), in which a conventional Class A/B output stage uses a sort of simplified Class D amp as its power supply. The switch-mode supply tracks the input, keeping power-supply voltages just above the audio signal’s momentary demand, yielding near-Class D heat, power-consumption, and packaging efficiencies while retaining a Class A/B audio signal path and characteristics. BASH has been common among subwoofer amps for a couple of decades, and it has been used without much fanfare in car audio, multimedia speakers, and other applications requiring efficient power and compact size. (Effectively, BASH is a lot like Class H, with the aforementioned tracking, switch-mode power supply and a soupçon of smarts thrown into the pot.)

Geekery aside, BASH’s efficient nature gives rise to the Element’s delightfully compact dimensions, almost exactly those of a box of Grape-Nuts cereal. Similar density, too (but far less crunchy). It’s a Teutonically handsome piece, with a glass-paneled fascia that has a single, smoothly detented volume knob, a couple of flush, capacitive-touch switch-pads for power and cyclical source-select, and a 1/4-inch headphone jack. The reverse features two analog stereo, one coax, and two optical digital inputs, along with a USB Type B input to the Element’s 192-kHz/24-bit DAC (of unspecified origin), a line-level sub output, and stereo speaker outputs on solid multi-way posts. (There’s also a USB Type A jack to deliver any future firmware updates via flash drive.) There are no full-range line outs, however, so you can’t use this as a preamp with a larger amplifier should you outgrow its internal power amp.



The Elac is so operationally simple as to be entirely intuitive, whether from the three-control front panel or the almost-as-simple remote. However, it can do much more if you first download its free Android or iOS app. (Only the Android version was ready for this review; the iOS version should be on iTunes as you read this.) I used a basic Android mini-tablet kindly purloined, temporarily, by colleague Al Griffin from a Vizio TV—and I quickly found Elac’s EA101EQ-G app on Google Play.

Of course, the app accesses all the basics—treble, bass, volume, balance, and subwoofer level—and it allows the naming and selecting of inputs. Its most interesting feature, though, is Auto Blend, which according to the manual “...first selects a high-pass filter, then using the smartphone’s microphone, measures the near-field response of both the main speakers and subwoofer...[and] then adjusts the low-pass filter to obtain optimal blending between the subwoofer and main speakers. Auto EQ minimizes the effects of the room’s acoustics, allowing you to hear the sound the designer intended.”

Oddly, this is the first and last mention of Auto Blend/EQ, either in print or online, in Elac’s materials. I’ll have much more to say, of course, but first comes the question of basic sound quality.

Sounds Like...

I’ve a deep-seated skepticism of reports of amplifiers “sounding” this way or that. Any competently designed modern amp, operating within its intended parameters, should be effectively transparent, at least until it approaches the limits of its usable dynamic range. (A big if, of course.) And the EA101EQ-G did little to alter my belief system. I auditioned the little Elac extensively full-range (subwoofer-less) and before applying any Auto Blend or Auto EQ. My primary source was my desktop iMac, playing hi-res audio files in DSD, FLAC, and WAV formats via its asynchronous, 192/24-capable USB input—which quickly revealed that the Element, whatever its Class or on-paper ratings, is an amplifier of substantial abilities.



Via my long-term, stand-mounted monitors (the long-discontinued Energy Veritas 2.3 speaker), track after track displayed no difference from the sound I'm accustomed to hearing from my everyday preamp and power amp—the latter rated for 150 watts per channel. Sure, the big power amp could play slightly louder, and the Elac's stress signature when pushed well into clipping—a noticeable brightening that edged into "shoutiness" on high vocals, solo strings, and the like—was a bit different. But otherwise, it was a case of pick 'em.

After a few hours, I simply sat back and listened, and I loved what I heard. For example, a hi-res track like Kurt Weill's suite from *The Threepenny Opera* yielded all the detail, air, and imaging specificity I expected. Indeed, the soundstage seemed to stretch from the outer edge of speaker to speaker and even a bit beyond. This is busy, contrapuntal music, but its considerable clarity and texture were fully evident—for example, in how

the airy bell-strikes on the ride cymbal floated over all the brass, banjo, and woodwind busy-ness, with a truly live-music effect.

In direct contradiction to my above statement, I began to wonder if the amp had a certain affinity for soundstaging. Tracks with generous hall sound (or high-grade studio reverb), and tracks with unusually wide stereo imaging, seemed just a shade more alive, distinctly wider, and even a bit “taller” than I remembered. A track I've heard countless times, Diana Krall's version of “Frim Fram Sauce,” ballooned its gorgeously recorded vocal's natural reverb above, behind, and around the piano in convincing fashion, but it kept unblurred the punchy pianoness of the occasional sharp accents from Krall's fingers. With my worldview shaken, I tried to compare, but the process of switching source inputs and speaker outputs is laborious enough to make such comparisons inconclusive at best. Suffice it to say that the Elac not once suffered from the contrast.

EQ for You

Satisfied regarding the Element's sound quality bona fides, I cranked up Elac's app on the Android tablet and ran its Auto Blend/EQ routine. This first queries you about the make and model of your speakers and subwoofer, but since the app didn't bat an eye at my long-discontinued and somewhat obscure Energys, nor at the prototype of a small company's unreleased new sub that I happened to have on hand, I can only guess at how it employs this data. Next the app prompts you to hold your Android's mic close to the speaker first, and then the sub, and finally at the listening position, as it determines high-pass (speakers) and low-pass (sub) crossover frequencies, adjusts speaker-sub phase and level, and then adjusts overall speaker/room EQ—all the while drawing graphs representing acquired data, target, and corrected response. It's visually very cool, but sadly the graphs aren't saved: Once the routine is complete, they're gone until the next run.

Auto Blend worked remarkably well. I did three runs with two different subs and sats, and in all cases I was rewarded with impressively wellknit blends, free of crossover-region “thud” and delivered with pleasingly (to me, anyway) conservative initial sub-level settings. (Most auto-setup routines yield initial sub levels that are several decibels too high for my taste.)

Auto EQ's evidence was less clear-cut. In my room, which is fairly flat/smooth to begin with, its effects were subtle, and in contrast with most room/speaker-EQ algorithms I've tried from AVRs and pre/pros, it didn't seem to “sharpen” or intensify the presence



region. It did, however, tighten up, subtly, the 40-to-120-Hz octave-and-a-half—similar to (but, I think, less prominent than) typical runs with Audyssey MultEQ. As always, don't read too much into this or any other auto-EQ result in one room on one system: way too many variables.

Beyond the setup options, Elac's app provides basic controls on one screen, with a cool, color, bouncing bar graph of input signal and output levels (the latter, of course, only an approximation). There's additional drop-down menu access to adjustments for balance, subwoofer level, tone, and input selection. Via another app page, the EA101EQ-G can learn to "map" commands to the keys of just about any other IR remote, so you could use (for example) your TV remote to command volume, mute, and even source-select on the Elac. The routine is similar to those seen on countless soundbars, and it's straightforwardly prompted by the app's and the amp's screen.