Elac Discovery DS-S101-G

So, you've taken the plunge and spent hours, days, weeks — even months — transferring your extensive collection of precious CDs to an external hard disc drive as lossless files. Chances are it's a big Network Attached Storage (NAS) device, sitting quietly on your network.

The next step is to access and play all that music. There are many ways to do this, some more complex than others, some more expensive than others. But here's a caveat: you'll only make full use of that painstakingly created music library if it's easy to access — and if it sounds good.

To achieve those objectives, you'll need software that's intuitive to use, and powerful enough to cope with large tracts of metadata. You'll also need network-connected hardware capable of retrieving the music files from the NAS, and playing them, or at the very least passing them on in digital form for further conversion and playback.

German audio brand Elac's answer is a slim, elegant box completely devoid of any apparent switchgear. The Discovery DS-S101-G is a music server that acts as the bridge between a NAS (or a USB drive) and one or more audio systems.

Even better, it comes with an integrated, pre-installed version of one of the best music management software packages in the business. Roon Essentials is an only slightly pared down version of Roon, which has already revolutionised the way users access and listen to music.

The Elac Discovery's electronics are wrapped in a smart, anodised aluminium housing with rounded corners. The front panel, with a smooth, recessed opaque fascia, is home to nothing except a small status LED that lights up when the unit is switched on.

The rear is more heavily populated. Digital and analogue outputs are accompanied by an Ethernet network connection and a USB 2.0 Type A slot, the latter accommodating mass storage devices such as external hard drives and memory sticks. Power is provided by a separate, wall wart-type power supply that plugs into the back, too.

The total absence of any switchgear is a bit disconcerting initially: where to start? It's well worth at least glancing at the manual, which has lots of easily understandable diagrams, and not a lot of bumph.

First things first: download the Roon Essentials software pertinent to your device (iOS 64-bit, Android, Max OSX or Windows). Next, connect the Discovery to your network, and your system.

The Elac needs a wired, Ethernet connection — it doesn't accommodate 802.11 Wi-Fi, which is probably just as well, given the typical size of the high-res lossless music files it has to accept. A quad-core, 1,2 GHz ARM9 processor keeps things running smoothly.

The rest of the connections are pretty straightforward, even without the manual. The Discovery offers two digital outputs, which can be used to feed a digital signal

of up to 192 kHz/24-bit to a separate D/A converter. Both coax and optical outputs handle high-res files.

However, the Elac also has its own, built-in Cirrus Logic-based DAC, which it uses to feed the two stereo RCA output sets provided.

Each of these outputs can operate independently to offer a measure of multiroom capability. That means you could be playing a Beethoven piano concerto in your main system via the coax digital output and a dedicated DAC, while sending some Billy Cobham drum solos to a separate zone via one of the two analogue output sets.

For this review, I kept things simple, though: for much of the time, I ran the coax digital feed into a Bryston BDA-3 DAC, with is balanced outputs linked to the Ayre KX-5 Twenty pre-amp reviewed elsewhere in this issue. One of the Elac's analogue output sets was hooked up directly the KX-5, with its matching VX-5 Twenty power amp driving Vivid B1 Decade speakers.

As counterpoint, the Elac also did duty in conjunction with our regular Primare pre-amp and Parasound power amp. The Primare hosted both digital and analogue feeds from the Discovery. Our KEF R500s were the speakers of choice in this set-up.

(VITAL STATS)

Processor	ARM9 quad-core
DAC	Cirrus Logic CS4398
Digital outputs	1x coaxial RCA, 1x Toslink optical
Analogue outputs	2x stereo RCA
Connectivity	Gigabyte Ethernet
Inputs	1x USB Type A
End point support	AirPlay, Roon Ready endpoints
Formats supported	WAV, AIFF, FLAC, ALAC, OGG, MP3, AAC
Integrated streaming	Tidal
Control app	Roon Essentials
Dimensions (WxHxD)	210 x 110 x 50 mm
Weight	900 grams
Price	R17 770

Verdict

User-friendly music server solution that benefits from the class-leading Roon interface. Vibrant, accurate sonics. Digital and analogue outputs operate as separate, independent zones, further boosting overall versatility.

Supplied by	Sky Audio
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Website	www.skyaudio.co.za

OUR RATING: 84 / 100

Once switched on, the Elac will be recognised by the Roon software (as long as both devices are on the same network) and you'll be prompted to specify the location of your music files. In the case of the NAS, it means inputting the actual network address for each folder containing your library. USB devices are recognised automatically.

The Elac offers integrated support for the Tidal streaming service. If you subscribe to Tidal, entering your login details allows Roon to combine your favourite Tidal content with your physical music library, as well as highlighting new content. The Tidal integration is seamless, and another big plus point favouring Roon.

If you have a large library of music, and an extensive list of Tidal favourites, it will take some time for all that music to be identified, associated with metadata, and the catalogue stored on the Elac. It only captures the metadata — the actual music files remain on the NAS.

The Elac has a maximum capacity of 30 000 tracks, spanning both local files and Tidal content, which should be enough for most applications. And as for functionality, the Elements version of Roon retains most of the important stuff: excellent metadata content and support, transparent sonics

and excellent content integration.

And so, to the sound. Let's start off with the Elac Discovery as the sole interface between the NAS/Tidal and the Ayre pre-amp, using its analogue outputs. For this review, I focussed on a single

recording to make for an easier comparison between different playback configurations.

Cello virtuoso Yo-Yo Ma's renditions of Artur Piazzola's *nueva tango* music are spellbinding: dramatic dynamics, delicate nuances, stirring melodies, and above all the soulful, heart-warming strains of Ma's regal cello, accompanied here by guitars, a small string section, and the occasional piano.

The music is lovely but challenging from an audio system perspective: some set-ups manage to track the pace and intricacies of the music, but lack the tonal depth and insight to reach the heart and soul of the music. Others have the tonal range to portray the cello's rich and resonant registers, but lack vital agility.

The Elac suffered none of these vagaries. It reflected the transparent, mildly reverbative ambience of the recording and the tonal stature of the instruments with a beguiling truthfulness that demanded attention.
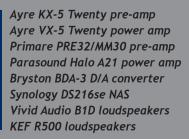
There was a purity of tone and purpose to the sound that added to the validity of the listening experience. The instruments were painted with a bold and confident

Software

Yo-Yo Ma — The Soul Of The Tango (Sony CD, ripped to 44/16 WAV)
Billy Cobham — Spectrum (Warner CD, ripped to 44/16 WAV)
Chris Thile, Brad Mehldau — Chris Thile & Brad Mehldau (Nonesuch 44/16 FLAC via Tidal)

Associated Equipment

Ayre KX-5 Twenty pre-amp
Ayre VX-5 Twenty power amp
Primare PRE32/MM30 pre-amp
Parasound Halo A21 power amp
Bryston BDA-3 D/A converter
Synology DS216se NAS
Vivid Audio B1D loudspeakers
KEF R500 loudspeakers

brush, but one that was also able to fill in the finer strands and hues.

The Elac's translation of the performance was lucid enough to follow the melodic trail of each instrument: from the majestic, even bombastic piano and the slightly anxious violins on 'Le Grand Tango' to the always rich, rounded and emotive sound of Ma's commanding cello.

I liked the way the Discovery wasn't intimidated by the density of the music, nor the complexities of the arrangements. It's view on the music was unwavering, but it never allowed its close scrutiny of the recording to get in the way of the ebb and flow, the darting dynamics and the sheer splendour of the music.

Okay, so as a one-box solution to get music from a hard disc to a stereo system, the Elac was very convincing indeed. Forget about the fine analysis: under the Discovery's auspices, the music sounded vital, fluid and convincing. If it was the only source at my disposal, I wouldn't be in the least disappointed.

Let me also point out that the Ayre duo, linked to the marvellously open and revealing Vivid Audio B1Ds, presented a tough challenge of their own: any flaw or shortcoming of the Discovery would be mercilessly revealed. But the Elac stood its musical ground, and wasn't in the least disgraced.

When I compared the Elac's own treatment of the music to that of the Bryston BDA-3, fed via the coaxial digital output of the Discovery, some differences did become apparent. The harvest of fine detail was more pronounced, and constructively applied, allowing the instruments to assume greater presence and stature.

The graduation of the tonal hues was finer, too, and the lower registers gained further depth and impetus. And the soundstage became more expansive, opening up more space for the instruments.

None of these improvements came as a surprise. The Bryston plays in a different sonic league, with a price to match. But put it this way: without the Bryston for comparison, I would have been more than happy to listen to the Discovery

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sans external assistance, simply because it gets the balance between staging, detail, coherence and pace so right.

And that's the real magic of the Discovery: in many ways, you don't want it to do more than grab the music off a NAS or from Tidal, and listen to how the Elac plays it with all the verve and conviction it is capable of. Its appeal lies in its simplicity, and the way the Roon software makes so much music so accessible.

Downsides? For fans of DSD, the bad news is that the Elac won't play back DSD files — it's limited to 192/24 PCM. But that's really the only flaw I can think of, and it will only be pertinent to those with a significant number of DSD files in their library.

For the rest, this is a brilliant package, focused on what matters most: ease of use, enjoyable access to the full music library, and sonics that remain essentially true to the music. In that context, the Discovery's multiroom features become less important, but remain as a way to extend its reach in a home, even at a later stage.

And if the retail price looks on the dear side, consider that this one, sleek box is a server/DAC/endpoint all rolled into one, while also including Roon capability. Sounds like a pretty good deal to me!

Deon Schoeman