

ELAC

FROM INVENTION TO REINVENTION...



Once very big, not so long ago Elac found itself more or less on the floor. Now, with inspired leadership, it seems the Kiel company's fortunes are again on the up.

Gunter Kürten has already had some interesting stops in his hi-fi life, including roles at LG, Sharp and Denon but the challenge he found when he joined ELAC, founded in 1926, was new to him. However, the 52-year-old has thrown himself into his firefighting task: turning the historic loudspeaker manufacturer into something future-oriented.

In the 1930s Elac was a great employer in Kiel: up to 5000 people worked for and at the company. Starting with sonar technology for seafaring, later on it moved into pretty much everything that had to do with technology. Whole blocks of flats in today's Kiel university district were formerly owned by the company, before the majority of the company premises were placed under the supervision of the

university shortly after the war. In the 1950s, the theme of music reproduction began to be explored in the flourishing republic, and in 1957 not only cartridges were produced, but whole record players. In the 1960s, the three German companies – Dual, Perpetuum Ebner and Elac – cornered some 90% of the world market for record players, unimaginable as that may seem today.

However, the analogue technology surpassed its zenith, and loudspeakers became increasingly important to the company. Forays into TVs, radios and HiFi, in particular receivers, were not very successful, so in 1980 the decision was made decided to concentrate solely on speakers.

“Made in Germany” was and is a worldwide selling label, and so for Elac

it's of great importance to produce large parts of its loudspeakers themselves in the Kiel factory halls. However, it has long been recognized that customers are only willing to pay the additional price for products made in Germany, rather than in some lower-cost country, if they also have other advantages.

Germany, United States, Far East

In fact, when Kürten joined the company, it seemed to him that almost the only selling-point was that “Made in Germany” label, even though Elac used a lot of innovative technology in its loudspeakers. Customers were increasingly less experienced in engineering, the specialist trade ignored the product to the best of their ability, it was no longer fully



▲ Air pump, record player, sonar unit - the past was not just HiFi.



▲ Even TVs, receivers and clock radios carried the Elac name.



▲ The showroom in Kiel's company headquarters. The listening room is hidden in the oval.

on the radar of the markets and distributors - the company's future looked anything but bright.

Kürten, personally chosen by Managing Director Wolfgang John to lead the company's fate and by nature an optimist and very enthusiastic, quickly developed a concept for a reboot of the company. He soon realized that loudspeakers alone would make it difficult to lead the company into a secure future, so he rolled up his sleeves, sat down with his staff in Kiel and developed a strategy based on several pillars. Moving into new production and business premises signalled a new beginning, with development and production of individual high-quality components and loudspeakers in Germany, as well as development at the Research Center in the USA under the direction of the renowned loudspeaker developer Andrew Jones

Jones had already developed for TAD loudspeakers highly appreciated worldwide, and since he came on board Elac has also offered coax chassis without a jet tweeter, and this in very moderate price classes.

But that's not all. In order to make a name for itself quickly, with new technology at a low price in the market, the Discovery was the perfect way to create a veritable, well-sounding and easy-to-use streamer (1100 Euro) as well as the small power amplifier EA 101 EQ-G for around 700 Euro, which is also an absolute highlight in sound and features in its price class. These products, made for a cost-conscious and / or younger audience, are designed according to Elac guidelines in the Far East, with an expansion to complete the model series currently on the agenda.

Digital and analogue

Analogue? Yes, you read correctly: remembering their roots and their glorious past, the people in Kiel delivered in May this year the Miracord 90 Anniversary record player, as a tribute to the company's 90th birthday. Even in this move Kürten was proved right, the originally planned number of units selling out: in order to avoid novice errors in planning and production, the chief designer from the company's analogue

prime, Wilfried Werner, had been 'reactivated' (!) and given a young, successful team to develop the 2000 euro player.

Remarkably not only the turntable motor unit, but also the tonearm is German-produced, with only the cartridge being imported - it's an Audio Technica moving magnet model. What's more, it seems Elac is almost certainly not going to rest with just the one model: it's likely a family of record players will be built piece by piece.

Bonus Buy

Kürten soon became certain that in the medium term, a separate electronics line, with which one can control the sound from beginning to end, is unavoidable. And so he surprised us last autumn with the takeover by Elac of the very innovative but financially chronically weakening US manufacturer Audio Alchemy. The first products from this liaison are soon to be seen.

Secret of the tweeter

One of the most innovative Elac technologies is also among the most invisible:



▲ The Elac company building is dedicated to the inventor of the AMT tweeter, Oskar Heil.



▲ Some pairs of Concentros await completion



▲ The Concentros are demonstrated with high-quality Burmester electronics.



▲ The film of the jet tweeters is extremely thin and light.



▲ 16 operations are required to complete a jet tweeter – it's a job for specialists.



▲ Various jet tweeters with copper and aluminum foils after drying

the “Jet” tweeters, which are painstakingly produced in Kiel, are found in the company’s loudspeakers as well as in numerous top-class cars with Burmester sound systems, where they deliver crisp high frequencies without sharpness and distortion. However, they are usually hidden behind screens.

The secret of this tweeter, which works according to the principle of the “Air-MotionTransformer” invented by Oskar Heil, is not only the hard work and the long-term development of the production processes, but also the ingredients. The films come from a European manufacture, as does the special felt, which is delivered in a defined thickness and strength. Even the silicone glue, which is applied by machine, is not a standard kind but the best the market offers, with around € 3 of glue used per tweeter set. First-class ingredients only provide the basic prerequisite to deliver the manufacturing tolerance required at Elac, of only +/- 1 decibels – this meaning that further selection or pair matching in speaker assembly isn’t required.

While other AMT tweeters make do with five or six folds, the expert hands at Elac use 22 precisely aligned folds in the copper or aluminum foils to give them the best possible sound, this taking five minutes per tweeter, and after completion, each individual one is measured for the harmonic distortion and frequency response.

Also completely in-house was the design and construction of the Concentro super-loudspeakers: developed from the first drawing to the finished product in Kiel, it is produced there by development manager Rolf Janke and his team, with each crossover carefully adapted to the individual requirements, and though the speaker weighs 175 kilos, it’s designed to be unpacked and set up by a single person - German thoroughness.

The fact that the loudspeaker is not necessarily produced for the German market, with its pair price of more than 60,000 euros, is eagerly accepted by Elac: demand is so great in Asia that we were able to admire an entire miniature series nearing completion. For a manufacturer

not significantly in these regions – either of price or geography – before, that’s certainly a compliment.

So, for anyone thinking, “if only there was a smaller and more affordable brother...,” the desire has been noted at Elac long ago. Prepare to be surprised.

About 3000 m2 of area

With the move to the company’s origin, an open corporate culture also began: the offices are glass, and viewed from a friendly atrium with a small coffee bar. The fact that Elac is not only concerned about quality and production constancy, but also a meticulous documentation of all the stages of the work, as well safety and environmental compatibility, is not least due to Elac’s original ‘rock star, Thomas Werner. The tour through the halls of the ISO certified company also clearly shows that it is a labor of love to convince visitors Elac is a company with a mission – to bring the name back to prominence on the national and international HiFi markets, and leave behind the shadows of the past.

Michael Lang



▲ The legendary 4Pi ribbon horn, with its 360-degree dispersion, is also built in Kiel.



▲ The special chassis for the Concentro midrange and bass drivers are designed for minimal distortion.



▲ Elac doesn’t build the motors for the record players: they come from specialist Allied Motion.