

Champagne Mood

On special occasions we treat ourselves to a glass of champagne. Its unique quality lies in the carefulness with which it is produced, and also in the limited growing region of the grapes used for this purpose. It's no coincidence that the front panels of the Accuphase devices have shimmered in champagne gold for quite a long time. But to get into a champagne mood while listening, it takes much more than just a noble appearance.

In 1972 I was in Munich for the first time to visit some friends and the Olympic Games together with my mother. I can't recall the sports events. But I remember the large, almost intimidating hi-fi system of my friend's dad, although I didn't know any brand names back then. In the same year the two brothers Nakaichi and Jiro Kasuga, ex Trio-Kenwood engineers, founded a new company named "Kensonic". They wanted to distinguish themselves from the upcoming mass production and develop, produce and market super high-grade high-end devices. The start took still place in the private rooms of Jiro Kasuga in Tokyo's Ota district. In 1973 the company moved then to a new building in the Aoba district of Yokohama where it's still headquartered. In the same year the first products were launched, among others the T-100 analog tuner under the brand name Accuphase.

In 1979 I visited my first hi-fi tradeshow, the IFA in Berlin, which took place alternately with the Dusseldorf "hifi" back then as the most important industry get-together. In the meantime I knew all sorts of brand names and for a long time I was standing still in awe before the noble big amplifiers from the USA and Japan. At that time the European hi-fi industry was rightly trembling in fear of "the Japanese", for one had ignored a number of trends. Under the headline "Fear of Japanese" of its 34/1978 issue, the Spiegel magazine also wrote about the boycott of the 1978 hifi Dusseldorf by some

German large-scale producers. They had been complaining about exhibition areas being too small and seemed to be happy with the expansive IFA in the two-year rhythm. During that time a specialization away from the mass products already became apparent. Four years later the HIGH END came into existence, while the “hifi” disappeared from the scene. The Spiegel aptly wrote: “Whereas consumer hi-fi keeps getting cheaper and cheaper, the avantgarde nabs a pretty penny for their technological edge.”

Kensonic knew that, but always laid focus on a reasonable, transparent price-performance ratio and durable products. This has paid off, for the company is still independent, incurs no debts and needs no investors, either. From the very beginning they took their time for developments, and it was not before 1979 that the AC-1 was introduced as their first pickup manufactured in-house, which was then succeeded by four other models through the decades. After the introduction of the T-100 tuner even a dozen further tuner models followed. In 1982 both the company and brand names were merged; “Kensonic“ vanished, leaving only “Accuphase Laboratory, Inc.“ Though Accuphase may be known for their great amplifiers or CD players in the first place, the company has a long analog tradition. At Accuphase the clocks were ticking differently right from the start, and the makers have admirably remained true to themselves. So for decades they had relied on the phono sections built into the preamps and saw no need to develop an external phono stage. Although with the C-7 (1979) and the C-17 (1984) so-called head amps or pre-preamps for MC pickups had been designed, but only with the C-27 from 2008 a separate phono stage was presented – 46 years after the company foundation. Its follow-up model C-37 (2014) was the predecessor of the current C-47.

The most important design criterion of the C-47 is a fully balanced dual-mono circuitry together with a discrete mains transformer for each channel which results in a once again lowered noise floor. The values of the C-37 were already outstanding, now they are exorbitantly good. Like in the C-37, the MM stage was not just given a level boost for low-output MC pickups, yet constructed separately in keeping with the solution for the C-27. Take a look at the pictures, I have almost no words to describe this wonderful layout adequately. By the way, in case you think the indeed essential mono key might have been forgotten – forget it. It sits in the preamps where it truly belongs to. The

circuit of the C-47 was developed by Takahiro Koyano, a 34-year old engineer whose previous job at Yamaha High Tech Design Co. Ltd. was to design high-end specific ICs. He's specialized in line and phono preamps as well as D/A converters. Surprisingly I received very personal information about Koyano-san which I certainly don't want to withhold from you. This guy is an audio nerd who buys old, worn out hi-fi equipment, refurbishes them completely and spruces up their circuitry in his leisure time. In addition, he loves music and plays the violin. If I was to create the profile for an ideal designer, it would exactly look like this. Another interesting fact to know is how the typical development phase of an Accuphase device passes off: the majority of the circa 30 design engineers, an amazing number of experts – which sheds a light on the depth of development –, is involved in all new products. This also explains why Accuphase devices seem to be made by one single person, and their company ID is clearly visible at any time. Over a period of two to three years ideas are being developed and discarded again and circuits tested until the concrete design phase begins. During this time the engineers are in close contact with various parts manufacturers for device-specific developments. This makes it easier to understand why Accuphase works together only with Japanese makers. After the completion of the first prototype a specially trained team carries out soundchecks for at least three months, in the course of which parts are swapped until finally everybody is happy. On average after a couple of years the devices embark on their journey from Yokohama around the world, whereby only about 30 per cent are exported.

The C-47 allows to use three pickups simultaneously, for us testers this is sensible luxury. On the back we have a separate ground connection for each input which is also worthy of the name. On the front, left below the center display, is a rotary switch for MC/MM, next to it are the keys for the level adjustment (gain) and the subsonic filter, and to the far right is another control for the impedance selection (6 for MC and 3 for MM) with, in my view, absolutely practice-oriented values. The C-47 memorizes the settings for all inputs and shows them clearly readable on the beautiful display. My tonearms are all wired through in one piece, so I can't connect an XLR cable for a fully balanced operation. Maybe the C-47 would notch up its acoustic performance a bit more in fully balanced mode, but it sounds phantastic also in unbalanced mode. You can read it out from my lines, it's not only an immense enjoyment working with such a device, but also do music listening with it. I was using three different pickup systems:

the Lyra Delos, the Mutech Hayabusa, and the Hana Umami Red. To my ears, each of them feels the best at 100 ohms of terminating impedance and the standard gain setting.

As you now, we are not a comparing magazine. However, after the German Accuphase distributor P.I.A. Hi-Fi had been singing the highest praises about the new C-47, I simply had to accept their offer to compare it to the C-37. I know and appreciate the C-37, which is why I was wondering about the statements of the otherwise so reserved P.I.A. staff. Viewed from the front the two devices look very similar, only the champagne front of the older model shimmers in a more silvery hue. Now, what can happen in terms of sound here? Well, there's a lot happening, and it's nothing subtle, something that really amazed me because of the basic quality of Accuphase devices. Thus over the C-37 the Hana Umami sounds almost as if, figuratively, it didn't wear a silk kimono, but a sou'wester. When the C-37 is connected, something like a heavy acoustic curtain descends over the music, as if musicians were rehearsing behind it on the stage and I was waiting in the audience for this curtain finally being pulled up. But this is simply not happening. I check the settings – normal gain and 100 ohms, everything's identical. The difference between the two devices is so significant that I don't need to trouble my audiophile sensitivity any more. My Air Tight ATE 2005 phono preamp also flashes its tube-equipped finger at the Japanese sister. By comparison the C-37 sounds slightly compressed, somewhat musty, sluggish, almost dull, while its successor not only plays hands down in a higher league at identical gain, but even a bit louder. Why this is so and whether that huge sonic advance is primarily due to the purely balanced circuitry, as colleague Holger Barske supposes? I don't know, I'd rather listen to the music.

The smooth transparency presented by the Lyra Delos in combination with the Schröder No.2 SQ tonearm and the C-47 is something that certainly not many of those who could never hear the system that way will give it credit for. From this experience originates a good bit of advice: you own a Delos, would like to allow yourself the C-47 and are now wondering if this makes sense? And how! Because I can promise you that you will not want to upgrade at first, but listen to music. And when the Delos needs to be renewed one day, you can still deal with the topic of upgrading. The C-47 will be there and also take the next step. How do I know this? I installed the Mutech Hayabusa

for almost triple the price tag and put on a dream record: John Lewis & Sacha Distel: Afternoon in Paris (Versailles MEDX 12005 / Sam Records SR12/1, Re Frankreich 2015, LP). I was surprised to discover the very young French tenor saxophonist Barney Wilen as a frantic young musician. Later his lip became much softer, but here he's blowing so passionately that at first I didn't recognize him at all. He's playing deep, very deep in the room as if he had leaned on the rear studio wall. In the club of the most influential 20th century pianists, John Lewis tends to be overlooked easily, his role as a composer and his capacity as the head of the Modern Jazz Quartet are too sublime. His intro on "Willow Weep For Me" is so enchantingly beautiful and his quotation of "Mona Lisa" nothing short of amazing. And those who know Sacha Distel only as a chansonnier, must listen to his guitar playing on this record: in a sparkling, exquisite and lithe manner the C-47 is releasing the notes into my listening room – what a delight.

Is Jorja Smith the singer Mariah Carey always wanted to be? She's by all means a singer who leaves me extremely impressed. Her album *lost & found* (FAMM JSLAFLP01, UK 2018, LP) was mixed down in a modern way and thus optimized for less than high-resolution playback situations. Which is why "Teenage Fantasy" bugged me because of its compression effects. Owing to the C-47's integration capability the piece now develops magical traits; this is now the record I had wanted after watching Smith live on arte. What subtle effects I am now suddenly aware of! How she seems to vanish behind the speakers in the haze of noises and then again, mixed up front very straight, almost appears to be sitting on my lap ... well, I've got to stop here but if you can, listen to this for once, and exactly with this combination.

Salute To The Sun (Gondwana Records GONDLP039, UK 2020, 2-LP), the new recording by English neo-jazzier Matthew Halsall, guides the listener on an unusual sound trip. Maybe to Borneo? Into a jungle anyway. – And Halsall comments on this journey with his trumpet like pianists once did when backing silent movies. I feel strongly reminded of the unforgettable radio plays of my childhood. Besides the infinite wealth of noises and permissive effects I hear a double bass with a full and gnarly wooden sound while the piece is picking up speed, saxophone and piano are finding their places and the drummer is setting first accents. The stupendous resolution of the C-47 is so entirely integrated into the overall event that I'm holding my breath, and even long after the record has ended I'm still keeping my listening seat in awe. Finally I put

on one of my favorite albums by Miles Davis: *Seven Steps To Heaven* (Columbia CS 8851, USA 1963, LP). It was aptly described as a transitory album, for the old quintet line-up no longer existed and the new one hadn't got together yet. Only bassist Ron Carter as a future member of the legendary second quintet is already holding the strings tightly in his fingers. But the record is far more than just a "transition". With pianist Victor Feldman Miles gets along noticeably well, and tenor sax player George Coleman was a giant who earned way too little fame. Thus Miles celebrates the "Basin Street Blues" with his stuffed trumpet as a near-duet with the so exquisitely playing Feldman, far away from the ongoing, self-imposed innovation pressure. Through the wonderful acoustic timbres, the spotlighting of the room and the explosive dynamics of the cymbal hits the C-47 makes the transition from bop and cool to modal jazz with freer elements easy to grasp.

Last but not least I had to listen to some Bill Evans. No musician has accompanied my life longer, no one has influenced it more. For a long time Edition One and Two of *The Paris Concert* (Elektra Musician 96.0164-1 / 960 311-1, Germany 1983, LP) had been the last available recordings by the final Bill Evans Trio. When we realize how badly Evans' health was already afflicted back then, it's hard to believe with how much energy and beauty he's playing here. Evans really seems to have been kept alive energetically by the love of his audience as Laurie Verchomin, his last life companion, narrates in a long interview: "His vigor ... came from the audience, his bandmates and the endless universe of love which exists for all of us."

Yes, all of our lives are finite, but in such moments – thanks to Bill Evans and a phono preamp like the Accuphase C-47 – it expands far into infinity for an almost endless champagne moment. If you ask Eckart Witzigmann, the "chef of the century", about his favorite beverage, he needn't think long: "Champagne is always perfect." How right he is. Making the exceptional your standard is a wise choice, a decision for more musical enjoyment and life quality. That the C-47 is one of the finest phono preamps available these days, and in the sum of its qualities something like the gold standard, is something I won't need to mention again, will I?

Christian Bayer