

# Top-notch Geek

*Accuphase has grooved their small integrated amplifier. And the E-280 didn't just become really great – it's got what it takes to be a class leader!*

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What is frowned at among pupils, is regarded as a virtue in the field of hi-fi components: striving for higher goals. And there's hardly a brand striving so consistently to push the technical and tonal limits e.g. of their integrated amplifiers ever further like Accuphase from Yokohama. With every new generation, counted upwards in steps of ten since the debut of the entry-level model E-250 in 2010, things keep progressing little by little due to better parts and sophisticated solutions. And STEREO has been watching this tough struggle already for much longer.

Whereas until the recently superseded E-270 the small amps of the Japanese relied primarily on a lively temperament which feeds on the effervescent off-the-cuff dynamics plus that extraordinary subtle feeling for gradations and micro details, which is characteristic of every Accuphase amp anyway, the new kid appears to be even more matured because more relaxed and more spacious. Such an opulently sketched and also carefully arranged stage as the E-280 manages to depict is normally indeed only available in the next higher (price) category. Whereby this integrated amplifier that was optimized in several criteria, went up in price only by a humble 120 euros to now 5,100 euros. Of course, this is a lot of money, but you also get a lot for it in return!

While the entry-level models in the Accuphase amp world have traditionally been regarded as a rather cost-effective way to enjoy a fair amount of high-end flair, this has never been more promising than with the E-280. Of course, this has also something to do with the superior haptic quality. Accordingly, the input selector switch latches through its multiple positions in such a confidence-inspiring manner, the volume knob rotates as if it were moving an exquisite sliding potentiometer instead of the pulse generator for the sophisticated AAVA level control, and the soft clicking of the relays underscores the aura of precision which the Accuphase exudes.

To distinguish the E-280 from its predecessor, one must take a very good look. At first sight they are as alike as two peas in a pod. But the scales of the accurately calibrated level meters go down to -60 decibels now – nevermind. What’s more important: in addition to the volume level and – when using a suitable Accuphase DAC module – the sampling frequency values of PCM signals, the central numeric display now also shows – in the case of DSD files – their bandwidth in megahertz. In the jungle of modern media it always comes in handy if you know what’s being played! The Japanese are so optimistic that users of digital sources are going to buy an optional DAC card for the E-280 that they placed the selector switch for its three inputs – fiber optical, coax, USB – right onto the finely brushed front panel.

### **Versatile functions**

On the other hand, this doesn’t mean that vinyl fans are locked out. For Accuphase’s smallest amp – ta-taa!– has got two rear ports now instead of one so that one digital plus one analog module can be assembled simultaneously and when in doubt, you no longer have to decide which way to go. Switching between MM and MC is also done via a pushbutton on the front.

We can only highly recommend the extra boards which, especially in view of the brand-new DAC-60 digi board (see box) deliver a very high sound quality and also save space and expensive cables to boot. Furthermore, electrically the flexible plug-ins are run on the amp’s potential which avoids annoying balancing currents like between single components – an advantage that’s often ignored.

Apart from that, the Accuphase traditionally offers some features people will look for in vain elsewhere. Among these are the tape record loop with monitoring function which enables to check a recording in progress, the defeatable tone and balance controls, the option of slaving the amp into AV chains while bypassing the internal volume control, the headphone socket which is anything but a matter of fact these days, or else the sometimes useful phase and mono switches.

Inside the E-280 the list of its special features goes on: here the unique “Accuphase Analog Varigain Amplifier“, briefly AAVA, provides a finely graded as well as precise, long-term stable volume control, whereby this control with its 16 interlinked and combinable current switches is part of the amplification and does not have an impact as a passive element. Thanks to optimized processes, the Japanese claim to have reduced the noise of this stage by twelve per cent as compared to the very similar one of the E-270, which in all honesty is equal to a mere good decibel. But the Asians who

are obsessed with details are just fighting for every gram like the Olympians recently did in nearby Tokyo.

For this very reason they also increased the damping factor of the power amps with their discrete channel layout via “Balanced Remote Sensing“ by 25 per cent, as the manufacturer states. This parameter, which is a measure of how precisely the amp controls the speaker, and in particular its heavy woofer cone, is supposed to benefit from a modified feedback. Beside the useful signal tapped near the fat connection terminals, mass currents help lower the output impedance of the power stage which in turn benefits the damping factor. Of course, the meanwhile typical Accuphase speaker connection using low-resistance, reliable FET transistors instead of, in the long run, failure-prone relays can be found here, and the newly developed protection circuit, separated electrically from the sensitive audio section by photocouplers, is also said to have its share in the increased performance.

### **Playfulness with a serene note**

The E-280 had arrived fully equipped at our place, i.e. including the digital and analog modules DAC-60 and AD-50, and we gave it a good warm-up before first listening in. At least at the onset this is just as important as the mains phase-correct connection of the power cable (see scheme). Who doesn't pay attention here is going to lose some of the finesse, the pleasure and zest with which the Japanese sets to work.

Here it amazed us with its obviously relaxed and effortless leadership skills. While the E-280 had a naturally easy game with readily motivated speakers such as DALI's brilliant Epicon 6, Dynaudio's way more demanding Confidence 30 and 50 were not served below value either, so they could also display their remarkable talents. Apart from the correct tone, the decisive factor was the unpretentious naturalness and serene noblesse with which the nippon amp was leading the speakers in a gallant and unwavering manner. In every moment one had the impression of listening to an offspring of the amplifier aristocracy which brings the little Accuphase closer to the heels of its big brothers than ever before.

However, this doesn't mean that His Royal Highness was keeping a low profile. The E-280 was rather brim-full of enthusiasm, making the vibraphone slaps on “Saturday Night“ by the Red Norvo Quintet dance with dry clicks between the speakers, putting the instrument in a sprawling, breathing spectrum that was filled both by the accompanying band and the audience, staggered deeply into the background, and the

natural room reverberation of the live recording, thereby emphasizing its ambitious aspirations.

Now after two afternoons which I spent exclusively with the E-280, thoroughly checking out on its inputs and modules, I am thrilled by the proffered balance that combines ease with substance, transparency with sonority and boisterousness with that kind of contemplation which grants the listener access to any level of expression in the music. Because as inspiringly this Accuphase may play, it will never content itself with superficiality.

### **Homework? Done.**

Of course, I was fathoming the performance limits of the Accuphase e.g. with the fierce impulses of Monty Alexander's "Moanin'", and it stayed relaxed until close to overload. Also great was the conciseness and solidity in Brian Bromberg's bass playing. Yet on average the volume level was moderate to pretty low – in my experience an unmistakable indicator of high-class hi-fi that tears up a vividly sparkling, buoyant auditory cosmos which propagates in a three-dimensional way and doesn't need heady sound levels to "make things go loose".

After short excursions to other amps I always loved to plug back into the small Accuphase with the big musical heart, especially since the optional modules required no "periphery". Two source devices was all I needed! Aurender's N10 music server, linked to the DAC-60 via a top-class digital cable, proved to become an audiophile song of excellence. Basically this also applies to our MM and MC pickups on the AD-50. Therefore this amp geek doesn't only impress with its zealous eagerness – it has simply done its homework. And this diligence deserves ungrudging appreciation.

*Matthias Böde*