

The Over-Amp

With a massive XXL amp Accuphase is crowning their range of integrated amplifiers. The E-800 excels by class-A operation and the technical highlights the Japanese high-end maker is famous for

Now what's this? The Japanese have managed to score a surprising coup! Like a shimmering gold nugget the amp, presented by Accuphase at the Tokyo International Audio Show last November, attracted attention from all quarters. Surrounded by visitors who kept uttering "ah!" and "oh!", the new E-800 was resting on its pedestal in an unmissable and auspicious way as the only integrated amplifier featuring the large caliber of the bigger power amps from the Japanese luxury manufacture.

And when the first units arrived at Germany's Accuphase dealers, quite a few hi-fi aficionados were making a pilgrimage to the studios in order to marvel at this novelty. Because the E-800 – which measures about 24 centimeters (9.5 in.) in height, weighs 36 kilograms (79.5 lbs.) and costs almost 15,500 euros – is something really special. As usual it boasts two power meters in its thick, pale golden satin front panel which, however, have no needles. Instead we see bar graph meters with 30 orange LEDs each twitching to the beat of the music and showing the currently demanded output voltage within a display range of a good 50 decibels. This feature is reserved exclusively for the top-level components of the Japanese maker. If you feel annoyed, or for undisturbed listening trips in the dark, the lightshow can be defeated completely.

Otherwise the E-800 is a very normal Accuphase amplifier. But what does "normal" actually mean here? After all, the noble amps from Yokohama are virtually crammed with top-class technology in the finest quality of workmanship. A steadily improved flagship is certainly the complex level control in the form of the super sophisticated, yet ultra precise and permanently constant "Accuphase Analog Varigain Amplifiers", in short "AAVA".

Precise levels with "AAVA"

But here the smooth-turning volume knob merely acts as an encoder while 16 differently weighted, cross-connected current signals set the desired level with perfect and ideally graded precision – in the upper range with a resolution of 0.2 dB steps, accurately documented by the red digital display. AAVA is thus an active part of the amp circuitry and, as the Japanese claim, supposed to avoid signal losses, impedance fluctuations and distortions of common attenuators. In the E-800 this circuit even operates as "Balanced AAVA", i.e. in a symmetrical mode with both a phase-correct and an inverted signal flow which, when summed up, shall eliminate even the very last itchy-bitsy deviations.

As always with Accuphase amps the power electronics, fed by a mighty central power supply, sits left and right of the chassis on separate heatsinks for each channel. A vital element is the dozen of MOSFETs per channel used to move the speaker cones between each other back and forth in the Accuphase-typical "push-pull" mode with two "hot" outputs. To make this happen with maximum control and to ensure the E-800 has

notably the woofer firmly in its grip, the designers claim to have increased its damping factor by 25 per cent over the previous top model E-650.

Yet those who expect a wattage giant now just because of the E-800's sheer size and its power blocks, see themselves deceived. The wavy "Class A" lettering below the firmly clicking input selector which controls only long-term stable relays, of course, already suggests that ultimate quality comes before quantity here. In order to avoid the dreaded crossover distortions at the transition point between the positive and the negative half-wave of the signal, the power transistors are kept open over a wide power range, which results in a lower efficiency because a large part of the energy is constantly lost as waste heat, but avoids potentially hazardous switching operations.

The E-800's specs sheet shows a power range of up to 50 watts per channel into eight ohms or 100 watts per channel into four ohms respectively. In fact the amp is much stronger – see measured values –, but will go into switching mode beyond these marks with peak levels being on tap then that will rarely be scaled in practical use. Thus in the final analysis the Accuphase is an AB amplifier with a particularly high quiescent current. However, the E-800 is not a sham since the promised output power is provided in class-A mode, as can easily be seen from the adequate power drain during stand-by operation. This energy needs to go somewhere: it flows straight into the heatsinks. Nonetheless the amp won't heat up excessively, evidence of its prudent class-A design.

Maximum openness via XLR

The customary generous feature list is bound to make you reel. For instance, the Nippon amp allows to connect an ample device fleet and, beside a defeatable tone control, also offers a balance control plus a capable headphone output that will easily spur even demanding models to deliver top-notch performance. Tape fans find a record section with a tape monitor function. Phase reversal, mono switch, loudness "compensator" and a muting function complete the catalog of conveniences. As usual most of these functions are hidden behind a flap that swings down softly at a gentle push.

Below the connectors are dedicated ins and outs in case one would like to run the pre- or power amp section of the E-800 separately. Bi-amping can also be realized via RCA or XLR outputs, with the A-48 class-A power amp being the natural game partner in the Accuphase range.

But in the large STEREO listening room the over-amp had to stand its ground on B&W's definitely finicky 800D3 all by itself, a task which it mastered with flying colors. One would almost be tempted to acknowledge the E-800 as the benchmark for the lightness and obvious naturalness an integrated amplifier can provide. Thus e.g. Ana Caram's rhythmically tricky "Telephone Song" came bubbling out of the speakers in a totally detached and at the same time perfectly disentangled and homogeneous way, with the Accuphase DP-560 SACD player as the source device that we had wired up alternately over RCA, XLR and digital coax using HMS Suprema.

Here we noted that the E-800 presents its extremely airy character primarily over the XLR inputs. Good thing that it has got even three of them. Via RCA the reproduction became only a tad bit narrower and seemed to be minimally rounded off regarding tonality.

The high quality level of the optional DAC-50 digital module (see box) was substantiated by the fact that its performance came very close to the XLR result. In most cases an external D/A converter will therefore become dispensable.

The same holds true for the AD-50 phono board. Even high-class pickups can enjoy life here to the fullest and play freely and without restraint, with lots of space and punch. The AD-50 can easily challenge discrete phono preamps in this price range. Plus it will save you an additional device and a set of high-grade AF cables. Moreover, the module lies on the electrical potential of the E-800 which helps prevent disturbing compensating currents – not an insignificant point.

What had been anticipated already during the first listening excursions with the Accuphase, turned out as a sound image of superlatives soon after: tall, deep and expansive as if reproduced by a top-drawer pre/power amp combo, the orchestra vigorously setting in on Chadwick's "Jubilee", was sitting in the room. That was glitz and glamor, even when the musicians backed off to the cozy homeliness of a softer pace a few moments later. The E-800 never lost the thread of suspense, keeping the attention close to the arch of melody while taking a step back and watching the acoustic scenery from a superior perspective.

Master of the color palette

Sure, the Accuphase arranges and gradates decidedly and clearly like on a drawing board. But at the same time it assembles all the lines to form a harmonic entity and thus exemplarily manages the balancing act between analytics revealing every single detail, and an emotional coherence which is amazing even in this price range.

The impression of a distinct naturalness and floating grace is backed by the truly overwhelming colorfulness of the shimmering, yet also sonorous mids which are reproduced without the slightest trace of artificiality. This makes the E-800 the master of all voices, atmosphere and shades to create an effect of exceptional vividness and "truth". This "over-amp" can also do "loud", but it was not designed to bash on loudspeakers. It rather makes music in a gorgeous way!

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