

ACCUPHASE DC-37 DAC, C2120 PRE- AND A-47 STEREO POWER AMPLIFIER

# High-end as it was meant to be

This may be a bit of an unusual start of a review but may I tell you what my biggest frustrations as an audio reviewer these days are? It's that many audio components increasingly do less of what they were meant to do! By this I'm not only referring to needlessly complicated and sometimes illogical operation but also to values of construction and playback that are merely the result of theoretical computer calculations. The main problem with this approach is that so little perceptual experience has been gained in the process, that sometimes a "hugely improved" version appears on the market within a year. That things can be done differently is proven by the Japanese Accuphase brand with their latest range of components. These are products that not only sound comfortingly good straight from the box, but also show effortlessly that listening to music and intuitive operational control can still go together perfectly.

The reason for writing this intro also partially lies in the perceived difference between Accuphase's unfailingly well thought out designs and other brands' designs, which is evident the moment the equipment is unpacked. That this illustrious brand is still as conservative these days as it was in 1972 is a fact. But what is wrong with a flawless finish, first class materials (by touching any Accuphase panel you'll feel evidence of this) and conventional controls? Especially when the volume control is so uniquely free from play, so solid and smooth, and when the source selection knob clicks so reassuringly steady and well-damped. The Accuphase experience almost seems to form a sacred beacon against the current quick-discard products of our society. Add to this a logical placement of operational controls, precisely in the locations where you expect them to be and the blissful idea forms in one's head that for once the hard-earned money has been very well spent!





### C-2120 pre amplifier

Of the 4-model pre-amplifier range, the C-2120 is the entry model. Yet it isn't a sober or function-deprived model, the biggest differences between the C-2120 and its bigger brothers being more connectivity, even better components and more costly circuits. As with any Accuphase, the C-2120 looks substantial in the equipment rack. It's not only the outer dimensions of 15 cm height, 46,5 cm width and 40,5 cm depth that convey a sense of robustness, its proud 17 kilos also indicate a solid construction. Mind you we are still talking about the entry model, but with Accuphase, these turn out to be every bit as perfect in look and finish as the dearer models. In addition to the high level of execution as discussed above, Accuphase are particularly proud of the AAVA volume control. AAVA is short for Accuphase Analog Vari-gain Amplifier. In short, the AAVA control makes it possible to ban all potentiometers from the circuit, while keeping the signal path 100% analog. In practice the circuit contains 16 voltage to current converters that send the resultant

signal to 16 switches that together can form 65.536 possible combinations, which are derived from a microprocessor and sensor that are controlled by a rotary encoder as part of the manual volume control. After obtaining the desired volume level, the current is converted back to voltage. While this may seem like a detour, this method has proven to be highly effective. Not only are the achieved signal to noise ratio and distortion lower, the inter-channel deviation in level is minimal and eventually there is no observable difference in frequency range or sound quality, regardless of the volume setting! Other highlights of the C-2120 are separate transformers for the left- and right channel, a 3-position selectable gain, a fully modular construction separate for each channel and (according to the manufacturer) a tone control without adverse audible effects. Last but not least there is the possibility to insert two optional expansion boards. There's one that offers phono MM and MC and a DAC board with three connections (coaxial, optical and USB) which can convert signals up to 24/196. The very positive impression continues

on the rear where an extensive range of gold plated RCA as well as balanced XLR in- and outputs completes the picture.

### DC-37 DAC

Although Accuphase can be perceived as a very conservative brand that still holds disc players in high esteem, the brand has recently decided to extend their product range with a second high quality DAC. This was seen as a gift sent from above by many international distributors and for many music lovers this will indeed enable the long awaited completion of their audio system. According to Accuphase, the DC-37 inherits the progressive technology from topmodel DC-901 DAC and DP-720 SACD player, housing the electronics in a beautifully stylized 6,5 cm wide, 11,4 cm high and 38,5 cm deep enclosure. With its 14,4 kilos this is a remarkably weighty and full size DAC. But it's the completely logical layout of the controls on the front panel, which seemingly only this brand is capable of, that will make this component such an ideal and universally loved device.





The power button is of the reassuring "hard" type (Accuphase components never have a standby button) and there are six soft buttons with the perfect amount of travel to select the various (2x coax, 2x optical, 1x USB and 1x HS-link) inputs. Above the input section is the display showing bitrate and sample frequency in the for this brand so typical red/orange colour while a LED shows "lock" status right below the amber-coloured brand name. Two buttons for volume level up and down along with dB read out on the display complete the front panel controls. Continuing the logical layout on the rear there are the connections for the aforementioned inputs with next to this a pair of single ended outputs and a pair of balanced XLR outputs. The IEC power inlet all the way on the right completes the picture. As expected the perfect execution is continued on the inside with neatly compartmentalised sections. All the way at the front there is the power supply section with two large toroidal transformers, one for digital and one for analog. In the back on the left side is the analog circuitry and in the back right side finally is the digital section that holds the Accuphase-in house developed MDSD (Multiple Double Speed DSD) processing circuit with its eight sub circuits wired in parallel. Within this chipset there is support for hi res files up to 5.6448 MHz for DSD and up to 32 bit 384kHz for PCM. In other words the DC-37 is the true omnivore that many music lovers with a feel for quality have been eagerly waiting for.

### A-47 stereo power amplifier

While the C-2120 preamp and DC-37 DAC already possess a timeless beauty, for me they cannot match the A-47 power amp's simultaneously refined and muscular looks. It can be difficult to describe why one component has it more than another, but as far as I am concerned, the A-47 definitely has the x-factor.

Thinking about this a little more I think it has all to do with the right proportions. With 46,5 cm width, 21,1 cm height and 46,4 cm depth, its heft only adds to its attraction. Especially because the hefty cooling ribs, made from a single piece of aluminium, run over the unit's entire depth and are covered with a silky coating. Useful detail of the cooling ribs is a horizontally placed extra rib not only adding sturdiness and aiding in resonance damping but which can also be used to maneuver the 32 kg heavy beast in and out of equipment racks with ease. Still there is another important aspect that makes this A-47 so special, which is its Class A circuit! You know, one of those ecological monsters that is constantly dissipating power, gets very hot and delivers only modest amounts of power. What's the value of such a device in a time when we are replacing all our light bulbs with LED variants or other energy saving variants? What many people forget is that our households are flooded with tablet- and phone chargers, game consoles and various other "hidden" energy slurpers. Most importantly the heat emission that accompanies Class A circuits is not in vain! Anyone who has listened to a truly good Class A amplifier with a conventional linear power supply will attest to this sounding quite different and musically more complete. Especially the absence of switching artefacts such as grain or nasty harshness combined with a

usually richly saturated tonality and deep musical involvement mark the Class A circuit, even today, for many as the best achievable. Its robust facade with its two big analog dB meters and necessary controls (speaker pair selection, input selection and a 4-step gain selector), hides an initially seemingly classic construction. A large encapsulated toroidal transformer in the middle, two large 56.000 µF capacitors in front of it, left and right an identically laid out circuit board with six parallel MOS-FETs and the protection circuit with its eight speaker connections against the back panel. Although the output of 2 x 45 Watt into 8 ohms seems limited at first sight, in practice this turns out to be quite enough in most circumstances. When the limit of 2 x 45 Watt in pure Class A is reached, the amp continues in Class A/B until 102 Watt of maximum power. Its stability is evidenced by the fact that its power output doubles with each halving of the impedance, leading to an impressive 360 Watt into a 1 Ohm load in Class A and 438 Watt in Class AB! But there's still more because the A-47 can also be switched into parallel mode and can then output 180 Watt into 8 Ohms and a massive 720 Watt into 2 Ohms. In conclusion of this perfected mix the A-47 offers both single ended RCA and balanced XLR inputs and four pairs of very robust speaker connectors that can fit bare wire as well as spades and bananas, making for a very universally applicable amplifier.



## Listening 1

For the listening part it is always a large advantage when the equipment is not delivered brand new but has been run in. This is fortunately almost always the case with Dutch distributor Paul Hattink. Although balanced connection leads to excellent results, the necessary experiments lead to the conclusion that single ended connections work best. Although the stereo image is fractionally more narrow, with single ended connection the purity, naturalness, spontaneity and image depth and height illusion are enhanced. Thanks to Paul's benevolence, the set has played here for several months, something I am always very pleased with because it is during an extended timeframe that you really get to know the components. One of the best aspects of this trio is the enormous stability and continuity with which they perform their task. Fortunately I hear no wide open but soul-less and distant performance one day, changed into a dark and lifeless sound the next day. Nothing of the sorts with these Accuphase products, which even during frequent speaker changes retain all of their impressive continuity. And the relatively modest power output of 2 x 45 Watt, is that noticeable during use? If I'd say "not at all" then I would not be entirely honest.



But I must say that the differences in power turn out to be much different than anticipated beforehand. To my surprise all speakers tried with the exception of the very power hungry YG Carmel, play perfectly and without any perceivable restrictions in loudness. What is noticeable is when the meters cross the 0dB indication during continuous power delivery. Although still brilliant, it is subtly noticeable that the amplifier switches from Class A to Class AB. It's something that can be perceived as a mild flattening

and less of that ultimate calmness and authority. In practice during normal use the amplifier keeps going and even with the meters in the right hand corner the sound is still undistorted and of very high quality. That the beautiful C-2120 contributes significantly to the combined sound of the setup is quickly evident when I switch to another preamplifier to feed the A-47 power amplifier. Although the other premium products present here make for certain differences, Accuphase's own C-2120 turns out to form the best match with the other Accuphase products. This is especially so because I generally prefer an optimal and even balance in combined characteristics over certain maximised individual aspects. There are parameters that can extend from the overall balance by themselves, but that make the overall tonal balance feel less integrated. Tonally I would describe this pre amplifier as fluid, neutral and all round capable. Resolution is high, but presented in a natural manner. There's none of the annoyingly etched, over-accentuated "hifi"-sound, that has the listener stuck in an analysing mode rather than feeling the music and enjoying it emotionally in a manner that invites prolonged and relaxed listening.





## Listening 2

Because the DC-37, apart from the DC-901 (natural partner for the DP-900 transport), is the first separate DA converter of the brand, I opted to discuss the unit separately. I have never made it a secret that physical disc replay thus far leads to more musical and realistic sound than

any streaming solution. Fortunately Accuphase shares this passion for top quality (SA)CD-players. It is interesting to find how a brand like Accuphase deals with this. When I listen to the DC-37 in combination with a range of disc transports and a variation of connection methods, the signs of a truly good DAC are immediately audible.

Tonally and spatially well-layered, relaxed, no hardness anywhere, full of expression and in typical Accuphase fashion once again very stable and extremely well-balanced in its totality. Although the familiar audiophile parameters such as air, space, imaging, resolution and tonal balance are certainly displayed with full conviction, the way they fit together is different than with other DACs. To put it differently, the benefits here are much more in the way that performers are portrayed in their entirety, on an emotional level, and with a feeling that the performance will never strain, rather than the more cerebral listening to certain outstanding technical aspects. Something I find very important is that this aspect is also present with streaming audio, and using the Reference Flow music server made by Dutch company AudioAanZee the performance comes a lot closer to the one I experience with physical disc replay than ever before. The sound is not white or unnaturally etched but fluid and natural, with a smooth, almost creamy feeling reminiscent of the stereotypical analog replay. Norwegian pianist Tord Gustavsen is an outstanding example of Scandinavian minimalism in the field of jazz. Together with Harold Johnson on standing bass and Jarle Vespestad on drums on the album *Being There* (ECM 2017) this inspiring trio issued their sixth album on the famous ECM label. Initially relaxed easy listening music, but when listening closer it becomes clear that these masterpieces are put together very cleverly, full of the typical Norwegian melancholy. Next to Tord drummer Jarle impresses by turning his drum kit into a true melodious instrument. The beauty of this Accuphase trio is that the components don't in the least detract from the musical message, and one can enjoy the music in sometimes almost tube like fashion, undisturbed for hours at end.



A lot more visceral are the Hatfield's End recordings that Paul Hattink made himself, and even if the by now a little older original CD's are succeeded exceedingly well and today still provide the necessary musical enjoyment, the original master files on the AudioAanZee Reference Flow music server go quite a bit further still, and that feeling is further enhanced by the extra recordings that were never released to the public. Driven to the extreme by this extraordinarily dynamic material, the golden trio once again shows with verve what measures of expression it is capable of. Wow, the A-47 amplifier really can reach dynamic extremes with tiger-like ease and plasticity. Worthy of mention is that this manner of playback absolutely does not sound like common known Class-A playback quality and is much more an ideal mix of the best of Class AB (authority, articulation, neutrality and speed) with the best of Class A! Great form, extremely well done and a huge compliment to the Accuphase engineers who passionately keep on improving the products!

## Conclusion

It was a true pleasure to have been able to enjoy products of this quality for such an extended period. Usually reservations crop up over time but this time around there were absolutely no downsides to be noted! Although the combined devices cannot be considered a bargain the price/performance ratio really is excellent.

The C-2120 is the central control device of the trio and it performs its task in total calmness with the best possible precision. Apart from the enormous stability, longevity and engagingly musical and natural sound signature, the ability at either low volume or high volume to change only the sound level and nothing else is absolutely highly valuable. All elements of the sound remain rock solid in place and the soundstage does not wander back or forth with changes in volume. The DC-37 DAC, that handles both PCM and DSD files with aplomb, joins perfectly. Like the pre amplifier a highly practical switching unit that besides offering a wealth of optical feedback and having a perfect layout of control elements, also soundwise manages to fully convince. The DC-37 does not offer the extreme transparency and resolving power of the dCS Rossini or EMM Labs DAC2X. But just like the Accuphase pre amplifier, the DAC-37 is once again the epitome of evenness and above all offers a harmonious combination of resolution and musical emotion which makes it easy to enjoy the music. Star of the bunch for me is the gorgeous A-47 Class A power amplifier.

Not only visually exceedingly beautiful but also soundwise most innovatory. Rarely have I heard a Class A design that not only offers such a stable balance irrespective of volume level, but also manages to combine the best aspects of Class A/B with the best of Class A. What we have here is the musical soul, full tonality and majestic nature so typical of Class A, combined with the speed, neutrality and control of Class A/B. All this packed in an exclusive, super-sustainable and beautifully stylized package. With this trio Accuphase threads unbeaten roads and with these correctly priced models they mark the state of the art and define high end audio as it was meant to be!

Text: Werner Ero

Translation: Christiaan Punter  
www.hifi-advice.com

Photos: Accuphase

ACCUPHASE DC-37	€ 8.500,-
ACCUPHASE C-2120	€ 7.300,-
ACCUPHASE A-47	€ 9.999,-

HI-FINE, TEL: 06-1 3672 768  
E-MAIL: INFO@HIFINE.NL, WWW.HIFINE.NL

▶ END

