

Review in **hifi & records** magazine (Germany), issue July 2006

Super Audio CD Player Accuphase DP-78

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Mr. Perfect

A digital masterpiece for CD and SACD: sound, craftsmanship, operational ease and outstanding lab results - it's all in the Accuphase DP-78.

It actually began quite promising: when Sony's top management including president Nobuyuki Idei himself presented in the illustrious setting of the Berlin Philharmonics the "Super Audio CD" to the gathering European press, it was clear to even the strongest sceptics that SACD was to become reality. Being aware however that CD cannot, even in the long run, be simply pushed aside in favour of SACD, Idei-san explained where this new medium is to be established, namely above CD and for those people who can perceive and appreciate the sonic differences between a conventional CD and SACD. As we know today this man was oh so right in his vision. Well, the mass market has hardly taken any notice of the new high-resolution formats and would rather crave for (free) MP3 downloads. The better sonic quality of SACD however has in the meantime been acknowledged by the audiophile clientele.

It's in fact a story of missed opportunities because when looking back we realise that the support for SACD from the high-end camp was rather mediocre, to say the least: no SACD players from Mark-Levinson or Burmester and Audionet have moved to DVD anyway. In this country it was the Lindemann firm to blaze the trail for SACD and then Krell launched a player in 2003. Obviously, the most important thing was to wait and see (an attitude that was to be emphasised by Sony's later move to "multi-channel"). Nevertheless, there is a noble manufacturer which right from the beginning has opted for SACD stereo, namely Accuphase Laboratory Inc., Japan. Already during the High-End 2000 in Neu-Isenburg, P.I.A. (the German Accuphase distributor) presented the DP-100, the "world's first SACD drive".

I can fully understand the early decision by Accuphase pro SACD because the production chain from DSD recording and re-mastering to SACD playback sounded "bloody analogue" indeed from the first day. SACD everywhere, that would be great! Even at the risk of repeating myself over and over again: if I had three "hi-fi wishes" for someone to fulfil, of one I would certainly make use to help the two-channel hybrid-SACD to a definite break-through. A pure sound carrier, in stereo that is, with high-resolution 1-bit technology, which eventually is to send the CD packing.....is it only a beautiful dream?

The situation of SACD is actually not as bad as the rumours may have it, albeit it's true that after the resignation of Philips it's now exclusively up to Sony to carry on the standard. On the other hand, Marantz have in the meantime pushed the technology down to the 600-Euro retail level and there are many small labels (and a few bigger ones nevertheless) busily producing hybrid-disks in so far that we can

currently look upon approximately 3,500 titles (under www.sa-cd.net you can check for yourself how things are going with respect to your favourite music). Compared to all this DVD-Audio seems to have gone up in smoke. Owing to several "political irritations" in the past years this format can no longer be considered the successor to CD. And as far as our high-end sector is concerned I personally see no other medium "established above CD" but SACD in stereo.

Obviously, Accuphase had a good nose right from the start and thus could set off against the competition. The Japanese can presently offer the drive/converter combination DP-100/DC-101 and two integrated CD/SACD players, namely the DP-85 and our test object DP-78, which may be regarded the entry level into the exclusive Accuphase SACD programme and which was made to become the successor to the DP-77. No other noble maker can currently display such a "bandwidth" as far as SACD is concerned.

Already the initial encounter with the DP-78 will have you get stuck to this dream player. It's built like a tank and has a weight of over 18 kg. To me it appeals ultra-solid, yet the massive front panel gives you a great sense of ingenious, straight-forward elegance which in no way looks "designed". The display, which supports text data also, is a feast for the eyes. Very informative but visually pleasing and decent. Each push onto any of the buttons conveys the feeling of quality. A speciality is the solid and smoothly turning knob for title search, which turns out to be really useful in particular when a disk contains lots of tracks. Simply put, this is all very well made (although two additional skip-buttons would have made things even more perfect). The overall operation is a revelation and the CD tray pops in and out quieter than in the already exemplary DP-67.

When it comes to reading the disks and switching between CD and SACD the DP-78 is very fast at it. It takes only a few seconds to have the disk ready for play. Since the optical system employs a single lens for each CD and SACD pickup mechanisms one can hardly notice the difference to a CD-only player. Ok, the DP-67 is faster here still, but the DP-78 would certainly not ask you for a "minute's silence" or so for SACD.

Inside the DP-78 is strictly divided into three sectors: in the centre you'll find the drive mechanism and two shielded transformers. The right compartment contains the digital control circuitry whereas the left sector accommodates the D/A circuitry and analogue output stages. Accuphase have equipped this machine with many digital interfaces. For instance, it would allow separate use of the SACD/CD transport section and digital processor section. Optical (Toslink) and co-axial (RCA) inputs and outputs are provided and thus make the DP-78's converter section accessible for other digital appliances (maximum 24-Bit / 96 kHz). Anyone asking for more could resort and upgrade to an optional board with balanced AES/EBU interface, or perhaps an optical ST-variant, or even Accuphase's proprietary HS-Link system. For this purpose the DP-78 features two dedicated option board expansion slots at the rear panel.

The converter section can be considered the "cream gâteau" of the player because Accuphase have further refined its "Multiple Delta Sigma" (MDS) technology. The most recent upgrade can be identified by the two "+" characters which means that Accuphase have increased the number of converter chips in parallel

configuration. Six modern AD1955 D/A converters by Analog Devices have been implemented. They are capable of processing both 24-Bit / 192 kHz and 1-Bit DSD (2,8224 MHz), and since each chip is made for stereo the MDS++ configuration is embracing altogether six converters per channel. According to Accuphase the converter output signals are then added whereby the inherent conversion errors are subject to a mutual cancellation and thus improving all relevant aspects of the conversion process.

As we already know from other Accuphase devices, the output stage has once again been constructed by employing operational amplifiers (JRC 2114 and 5532) and there are unbalanced RCA as well as balanced XLR output jacks available at the rear panel. We do however recommend the use of the balanced output. In fact, it doesn't sound bad via RCA, yet we perceived the sound through XLR to be more consistent within itself as well as more balanced and simply more convincing (even through rather mediocre interconnecting leads). So, if you are dependent on driving the unbalanced (RCA) input of your amplifier I would suggest you acquire an interconnecting lead equipped with plugs for the DP-78's XLR output and RCA plugs for your amp's CD input. We tried this also during our listening test and it worked very well.

I would have loved to compare the DP-78 as CD player with Mark-Levinson's 390S but the latter was unfortunately not available for the time we tested the DP-78 (we would certainly follow this up if the Accuphase could stay here for another while). Instead we picked the DP-67, as a benchmark so to speak, for comparison purposes with CD. After all, it was tested in issue 02/2004 and I can hear Stefan Gawlick still raving about it: "the best CD player I ever had in my audio chain!". The third member of the party was the multiplayer C-5xe from Ayre in order to guarantee a comparison at the highest level.

Yet such a comparison is not as easy as it looks. One of our readers, who owns the DP-67, told me the other day that it needed a "burn-in" time of one week whereupon "all of a sudden it started blossoming like a rose". This means our candidate would likewise need some time to develop. Even so, I walked into another trap: during the play-in time I wanted to get a first impression and was wondering why I could hear a surprisingly clear sonic difference between DP-67 and DP-78. That's not like Accuphase at all. Eventually, I found the cause, namely the power chords which I randomly (although phase-correct nevertheless) plugged into the outlet. For the "serious" listening test however we made sure that two Gran-Finale-Jubilee power chords by HMS were taking care of equal opportunities.

Let's start from "above" with the rendition of SACD. Simply marvellous! The DP-78 plays Super Audio CDs unerringly honest and therefore absolutely convincing: tone colours, details, smoothness and musicality - it's all there. Not the slightest trace of "digital", no artificial layers, no "CD-grey". In a direct comparison the Ayre was a tad more involving and sounded rather soft-harmonious whereas the DP-78 was tighter in the basses and displayed more details. Both players are superbly rendering music and hence I trust that the more "audiophile" oriented listener would go for the Ayre and those who appreciate "sonic neutrality" will in any case prefer the Accuphase. It's because when playing hybrid disks the latter can exemplarily demonstrate what is still possible "above CD".

For your own comparison we highly recommend to resort to modern DSD recordings, albeit by listening to Eric Bibb's "That's why I'm here" [Just Like Love, Opus 3 CD 21002] it became clear that even with an SACD made from the analogue master, there is simply more colour, smoothness and the harmonious flow of the music possible, or simply put: more naturalness. Upon hearing all this you may be inclined to say a quick "audiophile" prayer in order to have the software industry eventually reaching an agreement for the expansion of the SACD catalogue.....

The voluntary SACD exercise was brilliantly passed by the DP-78, but what about the compulsory exercises with CD? Here too, this one-in-a-million player was not to miss a thing. Absolutely nothing. Please allow me to remark that I can now fully understand Stefan Gawlick's enthusiasm for the DP-67 better than ever. Even more so, I share this enthusiasm with him. It's indeed a first-rate, honest-to-God CD player, i.e. simply marvellous. But the DP-78 is unconditionally superior when playing CDs as it is able of conveying even more colours and plasticity (coming pretty close to SACD) whereby it's combining all this with the higher resolution. The track from Reference Recording's "Nojima plays Liszt" [RR-25 CD] is giving the lie to the prejudice that good digital recordings were not possible in the eighties: without question, this Steinway has been impressively recorded by Prof. Johnson. When playing "La Campanella" we could hear that the DP-78 was giving the felt hammers more body and colour and the piece sounded more analogue than via the DP-67, which was a tad more analytic here. The DP-78 can only achieve this thanks to its higher resolution and certainly not by leaving things out or through a kind of softening effect. To wit: we could hear that there was also more soundstage and atmosphere in the rendered music.

As good as the DP-67 may sound, the DP-78 is simply in a class of its own even with CD. With clear conscience, Accuphase could offer this machine as "CD player with SACD option", the more since there are absolutely no "multiplayer deficiencies" inherent in the DP-78.

Summing Up:

From today's point of view it may well pay off for Accuphase in so far that they have once opted for stereo SACD. With the DP-78 the Japanese have set a new SACD benchmark in which the CD performance is certainly not lagging behind. For this reason the good old award as "Reference" would be more than justified because the DP-78 is without any doubt the best SACD player I've ever heard. World class indeed!