

Review in **AUDIO** magazine (Germany), Issue March 2007

Accuphase SACD/CD transport DP-800 & digital processor DC-801

Best of ?

by Joachim Pfeiffer

A CD player in two housings which are to make a balance scale indicating almost 50 kg! What's going on here?

There are phases in the life of a high-ender in which he simply can't get enough. He doesn't want to just read about some noble high-end equipment, no, he wants to own it right away. Eventually, this may become very expensive in particular if a smart hi-fi dealer has recognised his potential client being acutely infected by the hi-fi bacillus. No, this dealer would certainly not talk you into buying the products around. He would rather order the absolutely best and therefore most expensive components while holding them ready until said client would come back to his shop - by next Saturday the latest, you bet.

Pure fantasy? Not at all, because exactly this happened to yours truly many years ago. One day I bumped into some gems lingering about in the shop. "I've ordered them just for you", said the dealer with a smile. "How much?"...."Forget it. Never in my life. You must be crazy!" And then I saw me carry them home in order to have them tested over the weekend, without obligation, of course. They really did hit the spot and various plans for financing them were fully occupying my brain already on Sunday afternoon. Well, that dealer never saw them again....

This episode came back to mind when I borrowed the new SACD/CD combination Accuphase DP-800/DC-801 for the Christmas holidays to have them auditioned and compared to its predecessor DP-100/DC-101 (tested in AUDIO issue 11/2000). My first impression: the new ones are certainly more pretty than the previous ones. Like in the old days they are once again provided with a housing made from noble wood, which is reflecting the design language of the very first separate components DP-80/DC-81 available ca. 1986. I notice that the weight of the SACD/CD transport has been substantially increased when compared to the DP-100. For the latter Accuphase had to resort to a CD drive from Sony which was sonically tuned in one or the other spot. The DP-800 however features a drive entirely developed by Accuphase themselves.

The somewhat unwieldy top loader, which took an annoyingly long time to read a CD, is of the past, finally. The new drive is now doing its job in a front-loading array - very good! The smooth action of the tray reminds me of bygone days when, for instance, Sony launched CD players like the 777, which after some tuning by Swoboda were not only solidly looking, but musically convincing as well. That's died a death as in these days nearly all CD players are provided with oh so contemptuous PC drives.

According to Accuphase, they have been considering their own home-made drive for ten years, but, eventually, it had been developed only within the past three years. The making of the necessary tools alone has generated cost which are probably on par with those to be spent for the preparation of a one year's production, whereby the royalties Accuphase had to pay to a specially hired expert are not part of this calculation. They take it serious indeed but still would never waste a thought as to offering this heavy 8-kg component to other manufacturers also.

The converter: good, better, Accuphase.

A lot of things have been done inside the DC-801, which quite like its predecessor was made to play SACDs in stereo. Certainly not a mass market, but this niche is still alive nevertheless. We at AUDIO have great respect for the Japanese in view of the consequent realization of this highly demanding task. In order to transform the DSD signal generated by the SACD into melodious analogue signals, it is first routed through an upsampler which is lifting it from 2.8224 MHz/1 bit up to 5.6448 MHz/1 bit.

Immediately thereafter, at a quite unusual stage that is, the processed signal is passing the digital volume control whereupon things are getting really complicated: the eight digital D/A converters per channel are headed by a tiny time delay in a way that the first one is receiving the signal without delay, the second a tad later, the third twice the tad later, the fourth three tads later, and so on. Summing-up the signals after they've gone through each DAC yields a digital low pass filter which can principally be found in any other SACD player, yet never before realized with such a perfection. This highly elaborate signal processing is certainly not necessary for the rather good-natured CD: its PCM data are neither subject to upsampling nor to a time delay but are directly handed over to the DACs.

On December 23 the new Accuphase combination could already suckle at the mains sockets in my flat, and the first sonic impressions were indeed brought to me on Christmas Eve. Could it be that this machine has pushed open a new acoustic window? Could it be that it renders music more analogue in the best sense of the word as well as softer, rounder, with seemingly more relaxed voices and a timing that was more thrilling and, simply put, just right? At least, the new ensemble was putting the predecessors into the shade. No small wonder though, as the old masters saw the light of the audiophile day already seven years ago.

Christmas all year round

One CD after the other was to rotate in the DP-800. Then on Boxing Day towards 4 p.m. there was one thing quite clear for me: had I once again borrowed this combination from a dealer, he would have never seen it again. The most stunning thing is the extraordinary pleasure you get when listening to audiophile CDs and SACDs. And then it's absolutely fascinating to feed the transport with rather questionable sound carriers, like for example my considerable collection of "Hi-Fi Vision" oldie-CDs which had been produced up to the early nineties. Next to some really good copies Harald Kuppek, once responsible for the mastering, evidently had to resort to some cassettes or perhaps worn vinyl for the CD mastering, too.

This is so exciting because you are actually anticipating all this but it doesn't bother you at all. Via the Accuphase duo it's so easy to recognise the adversities and simply fade them out. What remains is pure music. The rendered openness will remind you of the very best analogue turntables but it is not paid with a (slight) subduing towards the higher frequencies (like in the Wadia, for example). These components should be first choice for any wealthy hi-fi aficionado searching for the ultimate in digital music reproduction - that's what I thought to myself and therefore proceeded to take them back to our publishing house....

A couple of weeks later I met DP-800 and DC-801 again warming up in the AUDIO listening room whilst waiting for the currently reigning champions TEAC Esoteric P 03/D 03. It's good custom with us that if any component is to claim the No. 1 position in our ranking, everyone from the team has to follow the call to the listening test. In order to prevent that personal preferences may perhaps falsify the results, the blind test is also part of the procedure. And that's how it was carried out: Lothar Brandt and Joachim Pfeiffer were sitting spellbound in front of the challengers and defending champions. Having been started simultaneously, each transport played a sample of AUDIO's Super-Tutorial CD-5 (issue 01/07, with Bose). We were listening to the track "Au Large Du Gueveur" by Louis Capart and the Duo Balance, rendered via the two competing DACs and Accuphase's preamplifier C-2810 which was driving the mono amplifiers Marantz MA-9 S2. The unerring JBL Array 1000 (see AUDIO 11/06) was serving us as monitor speakers.

The verdict by blind test

Bernhard Rietschel joined us and was all ears. My colleague could very well remember how the TEAC combination was head and shoulders above the integrated player Accuphase DP-78 and eventually managed to push it from the throne in October 2006. Now, is the same fate going to hit the new family members also? Well, it seemed so in the very beginning because one of the combinations was really taking off whereas the other one grew pale in all aspects. If two "dream teams" are competing with each other and one of them sounds just a tad better, then objectively small differences may well be blown up to subjectively big differences. In our case one combination allowed a bright and very clear view onto the performers whereby the rendition of the other one was perceived like through a veil. Even more obvious was a sonorous male voice as well as some softer female singing being rendered by candidate A nearly lifelike while with candidate B it rather sounded like a mere transfer of this. By comparison the sounds were like original and forgery (Ok, a bit exaggerating here). Another clue was given when listening to lower registers: Candidate A developed rhythm and springy movements while B remained more static and marking time, so to speak....

It's all quite relative, isn't it? Well, all you need to do is to have candidate B competing with the lesser sophisticated model C. What you get is a similar description of the sonic virtues as above, although this time in favour of candidate B. This is in fact what happened when TEAC's transport & DAC combination gave the DP-78 a run for its money. "Quite as clear as last year" is the remark of colleague Rietschel. A is beating B, only that this time it was the Japanese model pupil to take revenge, namely because there was the Accuphase DP-800/DC-801 duo hidden behind position A. TEAC will now have to clear the top ranking place they've conquered not so long ago. Well, that's what was going on here.

SUMMING UP

It's not really surprising that Accuphase and the new digital combination are playing again in the highest league. However the stunning thing is how clearly they distinguish themselves from the previous reference. In view of all this it may well be assumed that by launching these formidable components the further development of highest-quality CD- yet in particular SACD players may have come to an end here, as Accuphase has definitely got to the very end of the flagpole.

THE AUDIOGRAMME

Accuphase DP-800/DC-801

The superlative combination with the absolutely best rendition of CD to this date.

Sound CD/SACD: outstanding 140/140 (score)

Features: very good

Operation: very convenient

Craftsmanship: outstanding

AUDIO overall rating: outstanding 140

Reference Class (5 ears)

Price/performance ratio: good