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Accuphase Integrated Amplifier E-350

The Consequence

by Matthias Böde

Accuphase has recently upgraded its top-of-the-range integrated amplifiers whereby the technological highlights have now also been implemented in the smaller E-350. However the question remains if it's going to beat its predecessor.

Last year when STEREO brought together all four integrated amps from Accuphase to be family-tested for our December issue, the E-308, which we originally presented and reviewed in the middle of 2004, was actually on the way to be discontinued. And as already heralded at that time, its successor E-350 has in the meantime been launched to be established below the newcomers E-450 and E-550.

You probably will have to look twice in order to distinguish the E-350 from the E-308: a narrow, slightly recessed surface beneath the thick, champagne-coloured front panel and the operational buttons now being round instead of square (of which most are hidden behind a flap anyway). They are the most obvious changes, apart from other rather small cosmetics details. In fact, the E-350 can be distinguished from its more expensive brother E-450 only by the lesser output power and the name plate.

Because the enterprise from Yokohama is nevertheless offering the same features also in the E-350, which are switchable tone controls, six high-level inputs, of which two are of the balanced variety, two full-function tape circuits including the facility for monitoring, separation for pre- and power amp and last but not least, an output jack for headphones. Yes, of course, the power meters, which are oh so typical for Accuphase, are also on board but can be switched off if not needed. Certainly, this amp's got all the trimmings! Don't look for a phono input, though, because there isn't any. Yet for vinyl aficionados the Japanese can provide the optional MM/MC phono board AD-20 which is to be installed into a dedicated slot at the rear panel. A D/A converter board dubbed DAC-20 for external digital sources is likewise available as an option. Both had been thoroughly tested during the family meeting last year and they really offer an outstanding value for money with respect to technology and sound. Indeed and ideal addition to the E-350.

All this however could be found in the old E-308 as well. So, can the change to the new model merely be considered "old wine in new bottles"? No, certainly not, because for the E-350 Accuphase donated one of its most eminent, proprietary technological achievements of recent years for pre- and integrated amplifiers, namely a volume control according to "Accuphase Analog Vari-gain Amplifier", in brief AAVA. Like in the E-450, the new one also received the improved and more precise version of the second generation (AAVA-II).

While in the E-308 a conventional potentiometer is taking care of the volume control, the volume knob of the E-350 is controlling a compact circuit board spangled with electronic components which through an analogue process is regulating the volume by means of 16 voltage-current converters in altogether 65.536 steps, depending on the position of the volume knob. This is perceived by the ear as a smoothly sliding up or down of the volume. According to Accuphase this measure is to yield the lowest possible noise, the highest precision in left/right channel tracking and eventually a long-term reliability. The first two claims could be clearly verified in our lab and as far as the third claim is concerned, well, that should be the least of your worries.

It's because in our experience all amps from Accuphase seem to be made for eternity. This is based on a manufacturing concept that has been tried and tested for decades and was continuously refined over the years. Just have a look inside an old E-303 from the beginning of the eighties. It's construction and layout is basically the same as in the E-350. It's therefore no small wonder that amplifiers from Yokohama have in the meantime reached a high grade of perfection.

And it takes indeed a real technological progress to beat a high-calibre like the E-308. In the daily practise we appreciated the E-350's new speaker output terminals which would now also accept banana plugs. And like any other high-end component this amplifier, too, needs a considerable play-in time, in which its high-grade components inside are getting accustomed to each other in a mysterious manner until the most minute unevenness of homogeneity and friction losses in the musical flow have been polished.

As a consequence the new Accuphase will then be playing in the best of its family tradition: fast, slender and knobbly, with a rock-solid soundstage and sensitive feelings for fine dynamics and the shading of tone colours. In particular the latter aspects are to yield the impression of maturation and the sonic superiority inherent in so many components from Accuphase. Yes, indeed, the E-350 is seamlessly getting in line with them. Just listen how this amp is going to unravel the tender weave of Michael Hurd's "Sinfonietta Concertante" (Naxos) without loosing the look at the melody and context. Or likewise with the dense bustle of instruments in the live recording of "Carpet of the Sun" by Renaissance. That's really brilliant!

But isn't the E-308 also capable of performing such artistry? Well, it goes without saying that we did compare both integrated amps under identical conditions. After all they are - with the exception of the volume control - nearly technological look-alikes. Depending on the music we played, the differences seemed to be either distinct or rather marginal. However they became particularly evident whenever demanding steep pulses or rapid changes of tempi were present in the rendered music. Under these circumstances the E-308 audibly played more leisurely, less springy and in the basses a tad grumpy when compared to its successor, which excelled with crystal-clear and punchy beats in the lowest frequency region. For instance, this could well be heard with the hefty drum attacks in David Sylvians "Taking the Veil". Those drum kicks exploded through the E-350 like from nowhere, whereas the E-308 rounded them off a bit and sounded slightly more tame overall.

No question, the E-350 is developing more speed and spontaneity. It's also creating - in every respect - a more differentiated and agile picture of the sonic

happening and thus is hard on the heels of the bigger E-450. Owing to its higher power output, the latter seems to play slightly more laid-back but hardly more committed. Yet with AAVA-II the E-350 can play the same trump as its bigger brother and for this reason the results are quite logical.

Summing up:

The E-350 follows in the footsteps of the higher integrated amplifiers from Accuphase, technically as well as sonically. Compared with its predecessor E-308, it renders music more differentiated, more sensitive and right away hands-on. And the brilliant volume control surely delivers more precision. It's only the price that has remained the same.