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Accuphase Integrated Amplifier E-308 & Accuphase CD Player DP-67

The Golden Rule

by Holger Barske

It's champagne time again, although not in the alcoholic sense. The hi-fi fan will savour the golden prickle in the form of new audio devices from the house of Accuphase.

Sometimes it does frighten me to learn how time is passing so quickly. Actually I could have made a bet that the comparative trio-test with integrated amps from Accuphase, namely E-211, E-307 and E-407, had been carried out just a few months ago. But far from that, it already happened in issue 12/2001 of STEREO! In fact, the amps mentioned above can no longer be found in Accuphase's list of audio components whereby the model E-307 has just recently been replaced by the E-308 which is now on our test bench.

For this review we have the new CD player DP-67 at its side, which can be considered the presently biggest representative of this species in the line of digital sources from Accuphase. Firstly, it's because our longstanding top reference CD player DP-75V (STEREO 03/2000)

After four years, the new integrated amplifier E-308 has replaced the E-307, which over the time has become one of the brand's bestsellers.

has been discontinued in the meantime and, secondly, the hierarchically higher positioned DP-77 (STEREO 05/2003) is actually an SACD player.

I recall that in the lead-in of the DP-75V test we put into words "...definitely the last new CD player from Accuphase". Oh no, way off the mark! Certainly, the Japanese succeeded, like hardly any other manufacturer, in saving their "digital sinecure" into the SACD camp, but to do entirely without any CD-only specialist was obviously not realistic thinking, at least for the time being. Too marginal is the market share of this high-resolution medium at this time and too restrained the willingness of the clientele to spend extra money for playing back the super disc, of which the future is presently all but secured. And therefore the DP-67 can concentrate itself upon one medium alone. Neither does it need a one-for-all drive nor a complex clock generator featuring a load of various frequencies. It can well resort to the current elite of D/A converters without having to pay attention that there may be a DSD data stream on the lurk, waiting for its transformation to analogue.

With respect to "touch and feel it" the DP-67 seems to be on par with the DP-75V as well as the DP-77, although each of the latter two was and is twice as expensive after all.

The new converter topology in the DP-67 can be considered the third stage of evolution of Accuphase's proprietary MDS design.

Like in fact with all Accuphase-players it's a sheer joy to watch the absolutely silent work of the tray mechanism. One can't actually "listen" to it, due to the lack of noises. This overall appearance respectively brilliance put on display here can be matched by only very few competitive products in the world market.

Very nice - but what is now so particular in the DP-67, which its predecessor and also the bigger model cannot offer? It's in fact the new converter technology, i. e. the result of a continuous evolution at Accuphase, so to speak. In the DP-75V this was called "MDS" (Multiple Delta Sigma), in the DP-77 "MDS+" and now - you've guessed right!- "MDS++".

Principally, the aim here is to combine a more or less large number of converter chips in a way that in the end they yield a measurable as well as audible reduction of distortion and noise. I shall not bother you with the detailed differences of each stage of evolution, yet it is safe to say that the MDS++ converter topology is the first to employ the brand-new top-of-the-line AD 1955 chip from Analog Devices. Each of the four "midgets" incorporates a fully-symmetrical 24-Bit/192 kHz stereo converter. At their output, voltage and current are continuously added up in an alternating manner (so-called current and voltage summing) in order to receive at the end two extremely clean analogue signals. However, as these signals are still unbalanced, they have to be processed in a balancing buffer device to have them available at the XLR output connectors in the required norm.

In addition, the DP-67 features a "digital processor loop", which is a kind of tape loop for digital signals up to 24-Bit and 96 kHz. At this interface it is possible to connect, for instance, Accuphase's own DG-28 or DG-38 digital equalizers, or to utilize the converter for external signal sources - from Satellite-TV receivers to DVD players. Certainly, from a technical point of view this interface would also be able to serve all digital signals with 24-Bit and 192 kHz, yet it can be suspected that some strange copyright-mania is preventing this.

One is inclined to already distinguish the integrated amplifier E-308 with lots of unearned laurels because its conception implies that it is going to become a real winner. This may also be due to the fact that it owes at least part of its merits to prominent "parents", namely Accuphase's fantastic pre-/power amp combination C-2400 / P-7000 (tested in STEREO 01/2004). From a visual point of view a certain analogy to our top reference preamp cannot be missed: the E-308 is the first integrated amp from Accuphase in the middle (price) segment that may hide the lesser used operational elements behind a neat sub panel. And there are quite a few around, like those for balance control, tone control, loudness and mono, to name but a few.

However the technical arguments for the E-308 are to be found deeper inside and the key word here is MCS (Multiple Circuit Summing). Implemented the first time in the P-7000, the trick here is to bring distortion and noise down to a level hitherto unheard of. The circuitry is similar to the MDS converter topology (e. g. in the DP-67) and is hence called "Parallel Connection". Eventually this means that two complete amplifier circuitries operate in parallel configuration in each the preamplifier section and in the input stage of the power amplifier.

Like in the E-307 two pairs of bipolar Sanken transistors per channel are taking care of the power. In the best of Accuphase tradition the power stages are strictly channel-separated and modular built. In case of malfunctions - however unlikely this may be- exchanging these modules is a matter of minutes. A hefty 500VA transformer in cooperation with two electrolytic capacitors of 22,000 μ F each delivers 170 Watts of continuous power to both channels. More than enough, right? Although, by the way, its predecessor had about 20 percent more to offer here, in real life situations -as is so often the case- this turns out to be

absolutely meaningless. A situation in which the E-308 is getting to its power limits does simply not exist.

In our listening room the DP-67 did exactly what we expected in view of its constructive proximity to the DP-75V, but according to the substantial price difference it was certainly not to be hoped to such an extent. Well, it played absolute and one hundred percent flawless, and with a variability that makes it pretty difficult to allege any sonic character. The DP-67 is all but a scalpel that cuts out the details and puts them in front of the large musical whole. Right after the first couple of beats one cannot but notice that there is simply a great deal more happening than in the great majority of all other CD players: the integration of all kinds of fine sonic structures, the sorting of the most minute part into the right spot - absolutely no problem for this noble Japanese!

While one still marvels at the bone-dry bass which the DP-67 is able to deliver, can the next CD quite possibly make you aware of an aristocratic restraint in exactly the same region. It's because the dictates are simply coming from the disk, not from the player - and that's how things should be, shouldn't they? A typical Accuphase-sound with lots of resolution and a tendency to being overly brilliant? Forget it! The charming rendition of the DP-67 can drive you to tears.

The same applies to its capability of creating a soundstage. Here too it sorted out the splits between overflowing width and precise concentration on a single event, though only if requested. Soundstaging is rather more to the rear than towards the listener. Presumably this is, in most cases, also the route taken by the sound engineer at the mixing console. Certainly, there may be a handful of CD players out there which, I'm really not sure, may excel in this respect, but then you'd definitely not get them for the price of the DP-67.

The E-308 seems to perform in the same league as his companion from the guild of digital source devices. Already its predecessor E-307 was a component that had the makings of a great amp, and this applies likewise to the newcomer. While the older model can be considered one of the tonally most accurate amplifiers ever built by Accuphase, the new amp is once again revealing the willingness to independence or to a new approach - and thus a certain proximity to the brilliant combination of C-2400 and P-7000. Evidently, the MCS topology is supporting the E-308's musical rendition in way that it can deliver a little more opulence, as opposed to the E-307 which tended to be rather on the slender side. The E-308 can paint wonderfully rich and vivid sound colours, yet with a masterly controlled brushstroke. When it comes to rendering a soundstage the amp concentrates itself more on the depth than on the panorama, but that's perfectly in order since the musical presentation is enriched throughout by such an intimacy and conclusiveness that makes diving into its world of sonic events so very agreeable.

Continuous evolution pays off in the end: the E-308 comes close to the sonic picture of the big pre-/power amplifier combination.

As was actually expected, the two machines playing in combination are really going to hit the spot, and even more convincing when connected in balanced mode. In no way does the amplifier diminish the incredibly stunning resolution of the CD player while the latter seems to be fond of the amplifying counterpart which is able to garnish the provided precision with a dash of flair - no doubt, they like each other very much!

And once again here comes "The Golden Rule" which goes like this: "Accuphase" on the outside means top-class hi-fi inside - in this case even with a very enjoyable price-performance ratio.