

Stereo Power Amplifier Accuphase P-6100

A Journey to Elysium

by Matthias Böde

The new amplifier set C-3800 and P-6100 from Accuphase is promising a trip to the land of Hi-Fi bliss. We were on this trip – and tested the power amplifier.

It's always the same questioning myself when I'm to test components from Accuphase: can this noble maker – famous for first-rate craftsmanship and sound quality – further enhance all this? As a general rule – yes, but it needs effort as well as some framework requirements in order to achieve this. P.I.A., the Accuphase distributor [in Germany] leaves nothing to chance. After all, they've just recently been awarded with the treasured trophy "*Distributor of the Year*" from STEREO and our PREMIUM PARTNERS [selected Hi-Fi dealers in Germany].

"With our new amplifiers we are to conjure up an Accuphase experience like never before", was the P.I.A.-team wholeheartedly announcing, whereupon they also came up with the following preconditions: the reviewers of STEREO are to audition the super pre-amplifier C-3800 together with the stereo power amp P-6100 not only with their tried and tested in-house equipment but moreover in a complete Accuphase chain. To which belongs the big SACD player DP-700 as well as the power station Accuphase PS-1210. The latter was called for protecting the entire chain against corruptive interferences from the mains. Taking the energy from the wall socket, it can be loaded up to 1,200 Volt/Ampère whereby it configures a new current supply in form of stable 230 Volt/50 Hz which is practically free of any interferences or distortions in and from the mains power supply. Well, we had no objections and – fortunately – there was still Finite Elemente's active rack "Emperor", tested for the previous issue, standing around in the large listening room. For highest performance in sound there is arguably no better component platform around these days.

Accuphase spare no efforts

Until the installation has warmed up – at least a bit – we can have a closer look onto the amps. The C-3800 is reflecting the ultimate ambition of the Japanese which however is not merely assigned to the typically champagne-coloured, painstakingly crafted front panel and the silkily polished cabinet made of persimmon wood. Those who have become aware of the very high price for this preamp of entirely dual-monophonic construction are likely to be awestruck whereupon they would hardly dare to touch the high-precision switches and control dials which convey the feeling of stirring the spoon in a honey pot.

When compared to the hitherto top pre-amplifier C-2810, which, by the way, is going to stay in Accuphase's portfolio, the C-3800 not only comes with a fully balanced circuitry layout from input to output, but also with a fully balanced AAVA circuitry for the left and right channel. The "**Accuphase Analog Varigain Amplifier**" is a proprietary development and speciality of the Japanese. This laborious design yields a very fine graduation of the volume range in altogether 65,536 steps. The AAVA circuitry in fact converts the music signal from a voltage into a current, alters gain by means of current switches and reconverts the current into a voltage. Thus, the amp itself becomes an integral part of the

volume control.

This processing, carried out in the analogue domain, is said to reduce noise and distortions to an absolute minimum. In the meantime Accuphase employs AAVA in all pre- and integrated amplifiers, even in the entry-level model E-250, yet nowhere as elaborate and consistent as in the C-3800.

The new P-6100 is entirely in the tradition of the big power amplifiers from Accuphase. A distinguishing feature are the two large power meters, which by means of a rotary knob can be switched to "Off", "Normal", "Peak Hold" for 3 seconds or infinite. Then there are those really solid handles on the massive front panel. Certainly not meant for decoration only, they can be pretty useful when it comes to carry the amp's 45.5 kg about, preferably with the help of a good (audiophile) friend. The opulent heat sinks at each side are distinct ingredients for the power amplifiers from Yokohama, as well as the hefty speaker terminals at the rear panel, which some time ago have fortunately been made compatible for banana plugs also.

Once again High-End business as usual with this new amplifier? Not quite, because there is an important modification when compared to its brothers P-4100 and P-7100. With this modification the Japanese are getting the P-6100 closer to their big monophonic power amp M-6000 and at the same time are building a bridge between their Class-AB and Class-A amplifiers. Like the latter and the M-6000, the P-6100 employs MOS-FETs instead of bipolar transistors. MOS-FETs are known for their high linearity, thermal stability and input impedance, thus unloading the preceding driver stage. Altogether 16 MOS-FETs are working in each channel, whereby 8 are arranged in pairs and switched in parallel push-pull configuration in order to get a tight grip onto the speaker drivers, in particular the woofers. A reference point for this is the damping factor. Lo and behold, the P-6100 has indeed set a new record in our testing lab!

There are so many good things in the new Accuphase amp that one can almost feel the long time experience in every detail: from the gold-plated signal paths on GFK circuit boards up to the complex "Multiple Circuit Summing" technology - in brief MCS+ - in which several identical circuitries are sharing the work in terms of precision and reliability. For testing in the listening room the rear selector switch for operation mode was set to "Normal" which makes it a customary stereo amplifier. Switched to "Dual Mono" the left channel is linked to both power stages in order to facilitate bi-amping. Of course, a second P-6100 is then needed for the other side. The same applies as soon as the left and right power stages are "Bridge"d and thus forming a fully monophonic amplifier.

We made the C-3800 work at medium gain (18 dB) in which it played very relaxed and delicate, while the P-6100 was likewise set to a relatively insensitive position. Because it wouldn't make much sense to first dampen the rich output voltage of the DP-700 in the preamp in order to have it then augmented again in the power amp – including all drawbacks like distortions and noise inherent in high amplification factors. The adequate "transmission ratio" ought to be the goal here, whereby approaching things from the lower gain means a more coherent coupling followed by a gorgeous sound. No matter which top speaker we employed, this Accuphase chain had them all playing at optimum performance, although it seems that from a certain class on the sphere behind the notes is virtually more important than the comprehensible parameters.

The meaning of this was brilliantly demonstrated by the Accuphase trio and the P-1210 when we played the ocean sequence in Rachmaninow's "*Études-tableaux*" (Reference Recordings): quietly and with three-dimensional rendition, the orchestra was

coming in from the depth of space, gently nuanced and with splendid tone colours while it developed the impressionistic picture the composer had in mind, namely of a wide, deep horizon in the obscure light of a Nordic shoreline with seagull screaming and salty breezes. When the music came to a crescendo it deemed that one could overlook from a distance the broad swell rolling in to rest on the shore under dark clouds. Such magic moments come into being only when everything is right on the spot. This Accuphase team can indeed evoke them, yet at the same time appears like being uninvolved in this vividly breathing world of magic - entirely detached from the speakers.

Beyond established benchmarks

And this has nothing to do with any musical preferences, as one is to perceive intimate moments whilst listening to “*Audiophile Voices*” from the FIM sampler with the same name and afterwards is overwhelmed by the rendition of “*Rage Hard*” from Frankie Goes To Hollywood. The P-6100, of which the measured power is considerably exceeding the rather conservative specification published by the manufacturer, reveals a sensitive love for details as well as genuine punch. In each situation, it fills the well arranged and confidently organised musical spectrum with lots of energy, yet at the same time remains oh so airy and smooth and, yes, almost gracious. Hence, it is more obvious to compare the P-6100 with its Class-A colleagues than with the rather granite-like and rigidly performing P-7100. Without any loss of resolution, the new MOS-FET power amplifier conveys a dash more loveliness and musical understanding during the recital.

Those who are going to tear this Accuphase dream set apart for separate evaluation of these perfectly complementary components will have nothing to cut back from the above statements. Nonetheless, one is soon to become aware of the exceptional sonic status of the C-3800, which in these days is causing tizzy and enthusiasm not only among the bunch of Accuphase fans out there. In case of a rating it would have effortlessly ousted our current top-reference pre-amplifier and put itself on top, far ahead of the rest, that is. It's because the C-3800 plays so relaxed, natural and thus puts itself in a terrific manner far beyond any comprehensible benchmark. However, its price tag is also beyond the domain in which sonic points and percentages and also the competition are playing a certain role. They simply do not have a meaning anymore.

The same could be said about the wonderfully musical and technically fascinating P-6100, which is in no way vulnerable from whatever side one is looking at it. Already after a few cross-checks with the amps from Accoustic Arts and Soulution, it was clear enough that the P-6100 deserves to be positioned among the very best. And of course it was in full cry with the MBL-Pre 5011 which, although trying hard to catch up with the C-3800 in many aspects, could eventually not reach it in terms of consolidation and magnificence. For the ancient Greeks, the ulterior Elysium was once the venue for uppermost blessedness. Well, we know of such a miracle place in the here and now: it's the listening room of STEREO with the Accuphase chain inside.

P-6100 Features

Switchable output meters (selective peak hold mode), RCA and XLR inputs, 4-stepped gain selector, bi-amping and monophonic operation possible, two pairs of speaker terminals for single or common operation. Selectable PIN-assignment of XLR input.

VERDICT STEREO TEST

Sonic Rating:	100%
Price/Performance Ratio:	Very Good