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Accuphase Stereo Phono Amplifier C-27

Haste makes waste...

by Stefan Gawlick

The new phono preamplifier from Accuphase has set a new benchmark.

Admittedly, the hefty price of the C-27 is certainly no trifle. Let alone for a phono preamplifier which is "merely" to be connected in between an analogue source and a "real" amplifier. This means for a small amplifier which alone cannot move anything but helping minute audio signals along. On the other hand, without a certain measure of quality in an analogue audio chain everything is nothing, whereby an "alibi solution" at this spot can be considered a waste of money anyway.

The Accuphase C-27 is one of those components which are emphatically telling you, respectively your ears, how important the phono preamplifier really is. And now I find myself in the awkward situation of having been allowed to write about a device which by far will be out of reach for me, yet which is - my ears told me that right after a few bars of music - without any doubt worth every single Euro.

But one after the other: Accuphase has once made a contribution to music reproduction from vinyl records with its own pickup cartridge and an MC head amp (the C-17). However for a quite a long time there were only phono boards available in order to optionally complement the pre- and integrated amplifiers of this brand. Over and over again these boards have given clear evidence that Accuphase has indeed got the necessary expertise in this technical segment as the phono boards were so inspiring every time I had the pleasure to test and audition an amplifier from this maker.

Likewise on a regular basis, I had the same discussion with members of the Accuphase distributor in Germany about exactly this issue: when, at last, could we expect the launch of an external phono/equalizer? Or at least a more flexible option board that would offer impedance matching beyond 100 Ohm? Well, two years ago a new phono board arrived, but again no impedance to be set above 100 Ohm. Nevertheless, this setting worked quite well with some cartridges and just went to show again the immense quality of the circuitry, although I still considered this solution not to be flexible enough.

Eventually, Accuphase has answered the audiophile's prayers by creating the C-27 phono/equalizer which evidently leaves nothing to be desired. Up to three (!) pickup cartridges can be connected and independently set up. There is the choice of either MM or MC for each input whereupon an input impedance of 1, 47 or 100 kOhms can be selected for MM and 3, 10, 30, 100, 300 and 1000 Ohm for MC respectively. Of course, the C-27 also features a subsonic filter and provides the facility to boost the output level by 10 dB. In particular with respect to all those very-low-output MC cartridges around, this installation can be valued as "sonic gold".

The terms "gold" and "value" also come to mind when taking a closer look at a device like the Accuphase C-27. I know of hardly any other manufacturer to offer more precise switches, smoother edges on the case and better finished wooden side plates. Everything about this golden gem emits "rays of value" and conveys the good feeling that one has encountered the ultimate device in the category of phono preamplifiers.

The rear panel of the C-27 provides a variety of connections: next to the three phono inputs (although unbalanced only) there are two outputs in balanced (XLR) and unbalanced (RCA) configuration. With two small slide switches on the right of the XLR sockets one can even select the pin assignment respectively polarity for the balanced output. Well, such features at hand are going to make you well armed for whatever is coming across.

The inside of the Accuphase appears as you'd have certainly expected in the meantime. It seems there was no need to economise in the engineering department whereby already the luxuriant power supply stage gives enough evidence of this because each channel is equipped with its own encapsulated power transformer, mechanically decoupled of course, after which the output voltages are elaborately filtered. Whilst one could regard this effort as reasonably normal it would not be true with respect to the actual amplification circuitry. As far as I'm concerned, I have yet to encounter a phono/equalizer which would offer completely separated amplifying stages, each for MM and MC. It's because for adapting a standard MM circuitry also to MC cartridges, nearly all others are equipped with an additional MC stage or step-up transformer switched to the input.

Accuphase has donated Teflon[®] circuit boards in order to provide the best possible conditions, such as low dielectric constant, low loss, etc., for the electronic components employed. If you look inside the C-27 you'll discover a circuit board for just one channel, with the MC section on the left and MM on the right. The other channel is located underneath this board.

Now, how does the C-27 sound? Unfortunately so, that I find myself back in the dilemma mentioned in the beginning of this review. Would it sound just a wee bit better than some phono preamps in the 3000-Euro price range (neither a bargain!) I'm quite familiar with, I could have put things simple, namely to rail against the "outrageous" price - and that would have settled the matter. BUT the C-27 is so far away from its competitors that I must praise it - and after a few minutes of listening honestly wanted to praise it for this: the differentiation of sound colours, the accurate soundstage, the resolution in particular at the frequency extremes and its cleanliness in general. It's in fact very enjoyable that Accuphase has built such a capable component, of which in my experience other more reasonable devices of the same breed could benefit sooner or later. Good to know what's possible in this field and I'm faithfully glad for every music lover who can afford such a dream phono preamplifier. And, yes, I get bloody angry when I remember my own bank account...

Sorry, no more lamenting, let's get definitely back to the sound. Holly Cole's album "This House Is Haunted" is rotating on my Transrotor and in the first place the Clearaudio "Da Vinci" is to send its MC signals to the Accuphase. It turns out pretty soon that 300 Ohms are the ideal load impedance for this pickup. What follows then

is so charmingly first-class which only a really good and well established manufacturer can offer. Already the introductory drum roll by the snares has so much body, grip and three-dimensionality I never heard before. By the way, seemingly without any effort the C-27 is resolving the snare drum sound into single hits, yet without neglecting the musical correlation. To put it in a nutshell: within the first seconds of listening this phono preamplifier offers me more information and at the same time more closeness than any other phono pre I've auditioned to this date - therefore, my rating for its sonic quality should be quite clear by now. The successive bars of the piece are to confirm my first impression lastingly.

Game, set and win within only ten seconds, that could well be a new record. Indeed, the nice thing with this test is that I need no longer search for the particularities of this amp - everything has been said - but can proceed to dedicate myself to the exceptionally brilliant musical rendition. And I shall be pleased to share my listening notes with you.

Richard Strauss "Der Rosenkavalier" (H. v. Karajan, Philharmonia Orchestra, Angel EAC 77217-20): with the C-27 I can hear into the vinyl, so to speak, and hence I'm closer to the event than ever before. Nevertheless, I can also hear the technical information inherent in this record, but rather more on the side. First and foremost however I can experience Elisabeth Schwarzkopf without restriction of any kind. She is lifelike standing in front of me and no detail of her wonderful voice gets left in the dust.

Dinu Lipatti, "Last Recital" (Angel 3556 B): one of my heart-and-soul records, which certainly cannot be excluded for this particular listening session, yet which - admittedly - I pick from the shelves only once in a while. It's simply a marvel as to how the Accuphase is capable of breaking down every single, however minute nuance of Lipatti's incredible sense for tempo and drive, and how it does resolve the complex, yet never hard overtones. This record plays three times in succession - and I still can't get enough.

Then comes Wagner's "Parsifal" (George Solti, Vienna Philharmonics, London OSA 1510): the fascination of Good Friday stands with a dignified, unconstrained weight in my room, whereby Solti and the orchestra evidently went through some magic moments - and the C-27 lets me hear, know and sense that...

Conclusion

So, how does the Accuphase C-27 sound now? Quite honestly: I can't tell you. Instead, I have come to know how my records, pickup cartridges, tone arms, etc. are truly sounding. Fortunately, and this is the only "fingerprint" I can attest this top-notch phono preamplifier, one is merely informed about the technical matters of a recording, yet it would never be overwhelming your ears with that. The Accuphase is simply too noble for doing this. It tells you the truth....but politely.