

CD Player Accuphase DP-500

The Incorruptible

by Wilfried Kress

The CD player DP-67 from Accuphase has been calling the tune for more than three years and the new DP-500 is certainly going to continue this recipe for success.

If there is currently something like a trend to be noticed in the hi-fi scene, then it's the one back to normality. People are in fact fed up with promises and the battle over formats, surround sound, the whole multi-caboodle and all kinds of suspense. They want to know again where they are standing and simply want to listen to good music. Upon all the confusion in the past years, reliable authorities are now required, i.e. manufacturers one can count on and from which one could expect good service even in ten years time. From a situation like this a renowned company like Accuphase can only take profit, and there is no denying the fact that the Japanese are having the right touch with respect to their model policy. Without question, for Accuphase things are going very well these days.

Another aspect of the longed-for normality is turning one's mind back to two-channel stereo. Evidently, there is no space available for multi-channel technology in a music lover's living room, just like in the old days when "Quadro" was once an issue. And since CD has obviously escaped as winner from the format race between SACD and DVD-Audio, you'd just have to add one and one together in order to realise why good two-channel CD players are the talk of the day. No matter what else may be coming across from the industry - one cannot go wrong with a pure-bred, high-quality CD player. Even more so, as such a player would be a save and practical investment for any music lover who owns a large CD collection, which ought to be preserved nevertheless.

However time is proceeding ever so quickly and eventually does force some changes, which means that the days of pure CD transports are definitely counted. This market is now dominated by the PC industry which has other standards and criteria to be set. One is wistfully thinking back to the times when laser optics had been mounted onto a stable die-cast platform. Yet all wailing wouldn't help much because those who want to design and build a first-rate CD player cannot afford any negligence. There are in fact two options only, either to get a run-of-the-mill PC drive under control or building a proprietary transport - provided one is capable of doing so.

Accuphase has chosen the second option. This deserves my respect and I'm convinced that money has been well invested; the more since a home-made transport is certainly not heaven-sent. Also, with its own transport Accuphase is becoming more independent in view of the sometimes annoying supply of spare parts. Just imagine your attempts in getting hold of a spare laser optics for a no-name PC drive in about ten or fifteen years time....

With the new DP-500 this should not pose any problem as Accuphase would have to risk its impeccable reputation, in particular with respect to its after-sale service.

More important however are the sonic properties of a CD transport, even though the definite proof of its relevance upon the final sonic results has yet to be established, and some "information scientists" would deny that anyway. As far as I'm concerned, I would, before and now, regard the transport something like the backbone of a first-rate CD player. Or to put it another way and a bit more conciliatory: a stable transport, which can read CDs freed from any internal or external vibrations, won't do a CD player any harm, right? Evidently, Accuphase has taken the same stance because its engineers have attached great importance to sturdiness and constructional stiffness of the transport.

The mechanism base, a solid metal frame, is firmly fixed to the bottom plate of the heavy player chassis (after all, the DP-500 weighs over 16 kg!). The black bridge-like hood above the drive doesn't only look good but is also taking care of additional stability. In contrast to this quite heavy compound, the actual laser unit has been mounted in a suspended manner and optimised for minimum weight. The principle is in fact the same as in a record player: provide a stable foundation (here, Accuphase has taken the route of high mass and stiffness) and decouple the sensitive pickup unit as effective as possible, which in the DP-500 is done with soft, viscous damping elements. As we have come to know from Accuphase, the case of the new player is once again separated into single compartments, which are to house circuit boards, power supply, etc. This measure, too, provides a strut-like construction for further enhancing overall stability. Thus the foundation has been established.

As far as converter technology is concerned one has to note that in these days there is a high quality level, indeed. D/A converters are available from various makers and all with outstanding specs. So, what can be made better still? Well, one could minimise conversion errors by having several converters combined in parallel configuration in order to achieve increased linearity while any remaining errors are deleting each other. At Accuphase this principle is dubbed "MDS++ (Multiple Delta Sigma) and had already been employed in the predecessor DP-67. For the DP-500 the Japanese have chosen the Delta/Sigma converter PCM1796 from Texas Instruments. Straightaway four such stereo components (i.e. altogether eight converters) are taking care of the very best specifications for all parameters, according to our lab report. And because Accuphase concedes the analogue filter to have "a significant influence on sound quality" it was elaborately made with totally separate analogue low-pass filtering for both balanced and unbalanced signal paths.

While engineers at Accuphase tend to employ only the most up-to-date D/A converters, they resorted to the well-known operational amplifier type 5532 to be used in the output stage of the DP-500 (by the way, an interesting parallel to McIntosh as they've got stuck to the same type). We did compare the output stages through identical interconnects: slightly more compact and perhaps a tad more "dashing" was the first sonic impression we had with the unbalanced RCA variant (this output was slightly louder, too), but as a friend of classical music you'd in any case prefer the well-balanced nature of the XLR-output - if necessary even with adaptors from RCA to XLR - because it simply sounds more refined and elegant.

Before we proceed to the assessment of sound, let me say a few words about the craftsmanship the DP-500 is blessed with. Well, it is by far better than anything else hanging around in the 5,000-Euro price class. It begins with the immaculate surface quality of the case, goes to the massive buttons with clearly defined action point and ends in the nearly noiseless movement of the CD tray. This is how CD players are build and then may also claim the status of being a luxury product. It's true that some may consider this subordinate "externals", yet with the DP-500 I simply know already before it's going to play the first tone what I've spent good money for.

Have you seen Brian de Palma's movie "The Untouchables" of 1987 which in this country was dubbed "*Die Unbestechlichen*" [The Incorruptibles]? The Accuphase DP-500, too, is such an "incorruptible": straightforward, resistive to seduction and in a loyal manner following the hi-fi ideal of unspoiled signal transfer. An honest soul, which is not going to sweet-talk you in order to win your short-termed favour. But it sure knows how to convince you of the fact that it is incredibly more difficult to sound balanced and neutral than creating nice sounds. Each CD played through the DP-500 is giving enough evidence, only that you'll have to gradually experience this yourself. Once the penny has dropped, though, the respect for the DP-500 will grow from day to day and from one CD to the next.

A neutral music reproduction, which is free of any sensationalism, will in the first place sound rather unspectacular. Perhaps better with one recording and not so good with the other - but never always the same. It's really bloody hard trying to give this player a bad name. Okay, this Accuphase is not a "groover", because the McIntosh MCD 201 for instance is able to render basses more springy, although on the expenses of a less powerful fundament. This may have some advantages when Frank Sinatra performs "I Get No Kick Out Of You", but when it comes to rendering a Steinway Concert Grand the Accuphase is clearly miles ahead, owing to its unaltered sonic balance: more stature, more energy and more control are resulting in a more believable presentation of the piano.

This sovereignty, which comes astonishingly close to the level where DP-78 or ML 390S are to be found, is the trademark of the DP-500: music obtains stature and power as well as flawless tonal balance whilst having a calming effect on the listener. The more complex the musical happening, the firmer the grip of the DP-500 in getting things sorted out. There are absolutely no signs of disintegration or smearing the sonic picture, even during a hefty crescendo. And it also knows how to distinguish sound colours and punch in the basses.

It can well be assumed the sheer weight and physical stability of the player both holding a share in its performance. It would therefore be advisable to also consider where and on what it is to be placed. I personally would tend to a light yet rather stiff support and/or would give it a try in combination with SSC Netpoints. Generally speaking, it might be a good idea not to place a CD player in the league of the DP-500 just anywhere. And at the first best opportunity you should also donate a decent mains power cord. In the time the DP-500 was here we provided the Gran Finale from HMS.

Regrettably, we had no DP-67 at hand for direct comparison, yet eventually this was not the end of the world. The DP-67 is history now and any competitor will have to challenge the DP-500 instead, which most likely is going to be as much a

hard nut to crack as was the DP-67. Those who are seriously reflecting about the acquisition of the "last CD player" cannot but put the DP-500 on the shortest list of possible candidates. This brilliantly made CD machine may currently have just one handicap: if you are going to place an order now you are likely to encounter a certain delivery time. For a two-channel CD player in the year 2007, that is. Who would have ever thought of this?

Summing Up:

In the sum of its properties and performance, the DP-500 is, like already its predecessor, the benchmark at which other CD players in the 5,000-Euro price class will have to be measured. With exactly this well balanced overall properties and sonic authority the DP-500 is going to fascinate you in the long run. The craftsmanship is absolutely first-rate and this is in fact how a "dream component" has to look like.