

Accuphase E-600

The summit is golden

The biggest integrated amplifier from the dream brand Accuphase has been around for some years now – and has good prospects. A paragon of sustainability. The reason for this report.

The best stories are still taken from real life. This is the hallmark of our magazine, this is our program. When I think of Accuphase, two incidents come to my mind. One of them occurred before my professional career as a hi-fi journalist.

Back then I was a collector who kind of put every available Deutschmark into his hobby: I was addicted to devices, the sheer smell of new components stimulated euphoric reactions in my brain and purchase actions at my dealer's. Probably for this reason I owned not one, but two Thorens TD 126 turntables, one even with an EMT configuration. Finally there were three (!) tape machines rotating on the shelf, and my last acquisition in the early days was a Nakamichi Dragon, a cassette recorder for a mind-boggling 4000 Deutschmarks. Since my former expert retailer plausibly assured me that amplifiers actually didn't produce any sonic differences, I went for a Luxman amp which I used to drive Cabasse loudspeakers. So that's how my equipment looked in the end. An end which I hadn't foreseen.

A dull day in the mid 1980s. November weather – perfect for hi-fi. Without concrete buying ambitions I was heading for my new dealer, some sort of a guru who, in marked contrast to his rather prosaic predecessor, had of course found and was preaching about huge differences in the realm of amplifiers. It was him who recommended to me a used amp combination from Accuphase, »just for a trial check«.

Without overly high expectations I was hauling the units, which had a champagne finish already back then, into my apartment and – at the first note played over the combination it was crystal clear that I had made a mistake. My whole collection turned out to be a succession of errors. What the cozy Luxman had withheld, slurred or sunk, was now revealed by the Accuphase amps with a naturalness I had never known at all. With one of my tape machines (Tandberg TD 20 A SE) the sound image was airy, floating, and only the turntable brought resolution, space, color and dynamics into play.

This had consequences, in fact for life. Because instead of buying now the second-hand Accuphase amps, I sold off my entire system tutto completo. A mix of wrath and cognition: next time I wanted to do everything right and focus on the sound – this marked the birth of a high-ender.

Since that time I haven't had merely some vague notion, but a precise idea of »sound«; this is due to Accuphase. My friends were wondering then why, after selling my stuff, I didn't put up a »budget« replacement system. I couldn't have endured its sound, hence the complete waiver. Some years later I realized my conception with an adequate audio system which was indeed aimed at the sound. The amplifier came from Accuphase.

A decision which I made all alone, neither affected by test reviews nor by my dealer's missionary zeal. And even less so by all the arguments which I heard years later in the daily editorial routine. That the service of the distribution was excellent and even after long years older devices could be brought back to top condition time and again. In the late 1980s I didn't give a fig about this. Or that a second-hand Accuphase would hardly go down in value. How should I have become aware of that back then?

Sustainability, this term didn't even exist in those years of the former Federal Republic. Today it is vital, because people like you and me are essentially willing to spend a lot of money for a commodity only if the investment pays off: by means of durability and value maintenance. And not by dwindling fun.

A second and yet untold episode regarding Accuphase shows more than any previous reviews, including my own, why the products from the Japanese manufacturer are so incredibly stable in value.

In the early 1990s the Accuphase C 280 V preamp served as reference in the listening room of my editorial office at the time. Every day it was called in for delicate acoustical decisions – and at the end of its stressful job it looked accordingly »battered«: the fine wooden enclosure showed scratches, the permanent setup and removal in the listening room had left their marks.

Had my great moment arrived? Its performance didn't suffer in the least from that. Therefore I had a hard time parting with this gem: it had always been able to defend its reference status and was unthroned only by its successor C 290. When I asked them if I couldn't buy the ex-champion I got an unexpected answer: by no means would they sell it in its current cosmetic condition. This would only be possible after a complete restauration, however at a price that wouldn't be attractive for me. Got that? Nobody, above all no journalist, will ever get something even a tadbit cheaper from the German Accuphase distribution office; no percentages, no discounts and, as a matter of principle: no gifts. Others also make good products, yet this consistent sales demeanor ensures the value maintenance. Simple and efficient.

Sublime sound, durability and nonetheless maintenance of value, these are the criteria. And for this reason alone you can't go wrong with the purchase of an E-600. But what makes it stand out against the smaller integrated models and also the separate pre- and power amp components next in size? Are we speaking of nuances or are we talking about acoustic worlds? As paradoxical as it may seem: both is true. The currently most expensive and at 25 kilograms (55 lbs) also the heaviest₂

integrated amp from the Japanese brand comes as a class-A amplifier. Instead of amplifying the negative and positive half-waves in class A/B mode with a variable quiescent current as usual, the class A mode takes care of the sine waves in their entirety.

Class A has its price Roughly simplified, this works with a continuously high quiescent current. Hence the A-class draws quite substantially on the public mains grid. In order to keep both the heat development and the costs within an acceptable limit, the power output is rather modest on principle. Specifically the E-600 produces no more than 30 watts per channel. Which are either fully sufficient – or not. This depends primarily on the choice of loudspeakers you wish to drive and also a little on the favored music genre.

If, for example, the latter is dominated by synthesizer basses and shall be played back at extreme levels, an E-600 threatens to hit the brick wall. In that case a less expensive, but more powerful Accuphase might be the better option.

Nuances or worlds? But this is not the rule. Objectively – here my veteran hi-fi dealer was right somehow – the sonic gradations between amplifiers, especially if they come from a manufacturer like Accuphase, are small. Just nuances. To turn them into »worlds«, each must conquer for themselves. »Enrich life through technology« is the motto of the Japanese. The high-end lover is open-minded, he takes the time and allows himself to be taken on musical discovery tours, literally »working playfully« on this world. Here the E-600 is a wonderful companion to him, a door opener into the concert halls and studios of these, past and future times.

Subjectively (and for the owner also objectively) the gaps to less sophisticated amps will get bigger and more important solely through dealing with this matter. The interesting fact which is mocked – because not understood – by non-high-enders: an integrated amplifier such as the E-600 does not obstruct the way up to the next level, i. e. the separation between pre and power amp. In the royal class this life-enriching game will begin once more. A game that, with Accuphase, knows no losers. This excellent E-600 can be the end of all dreams or merely a step towards this goal.

It is important not to go round in circles (like I did with my first chain before Accuphase), but to gain more experience and musical understanding with each new step.

How we evaluate I have been listening intensely to the E-600 for several months. Attesting a notable strong suit in one of the typical audio disciplines to it, is not just difficult for me, I'm simply running out of words. Or maybe that way: the E-600 does everything right and this with an absolute naturalness. How well it performed, becomes evident only after it's been removed again and other components take its place. For instance, this total silence from the speakers in »idle« mode, without any hum or noise artefacts. Or if afterwards you are running a preamp which undoubtedly sounds fantastic, but whose volume control can't compare regarding the sheer tactile quality of that on the E-600. Those are virtues an Accuphase owner knows and appreciates. Coupled with a musicality which redlines or – equally fatal – favors no genre. The 600 is the culmination of integrated amp building. It's the end of the road.

Which is why we have presented it in this issue. At the very front.

Joachim Pfeiffer