

Accuphase Integrated Amplifier E-560

Noblesse Oblige

by Lothar Brandt

The biggest and most noble integrated amplifier from the House of Accuphase is cultivating a rather conservative attitude. Because its rated output power is strictly limited by Class-A. “A” like “Accurate” or “Awesome”.

The *Duden* Dictionary of Foreign Words defines the word “accurate” as “meticulous”, “precise” or “orderly”. When in 1972 the brothers Jiro and Nakaichi Kasuga were searching for an appropriate name that might be internationally approved with respect to their newly established noble company, they came to the term “accurate phase”, or simply “Accuphase”. Now, it goes without saying that correct phasing is a worthwhile goal to strive for in any amplifying circuitry because a focused spatial rendition of instruments and voices as well as precise pulses are without any doubt some audiophile virtues. But the name Accuphase has ever since been standing for much more, namely for exquisite sound quality in a top price range – Accuphase can never be cheap!

And then there is that excellent workmanship by means of the most noble materials with timeless champagne-coloured visual appearance as well as stable value and reliability. Last but not least, there is a standard in service which has already set a benchmark in this country, owing to a distribution policy miles away from the ordinary. Certainly, this all does cost some money yet is invaluable in the long run.

Accurate in Phase

In this context, the German distributor P.I.A. did not merely hand over the new integrated E-560. No, P.I.A.'s sales manager Winfried Andres arrived here in our listening room with some measuring equipment in his luggage. Whereupon he was taking care that each component in the chain was in accurate phase, in particular those which need to be connected to the mains with correct polarity of the power cord.

The background: the lower the electrical potential between the component's casing and the protective earth conductor the lower the equalising currents among the components via the employed interconnecting leads. For the “phasing” procedure the man from P.I.A. is using a power cord with masked earth conductors (never try this yourself, please!) and measures the voltage between the outer edge of an RCA jack and the earth contact of the wall socket. He would then turn the power cord plug by 180° and measure again. The position that yields the lower voltage value is the correct one. For this phasing procedure it is mandatory to have the component to be measured switched on and any interconnect leads detached.

By the way, for a correct communication with other components each input as well as the output signal of the E-560 can be switched to match the absolute phase – a consequence à la Accuphase. Befitting the rank of this integrated, we had no other choice

than to have our reference components Accuphase DP-800/DC-801 cooperating as source. This brilliant digital combination was allowed to feed on some perfect 230 V provided by the power conditioner PS-1210 from the same maker. Yet there were still more things to do: Mr Andres spared no efforts to position our monitor speakers KEF Reference 207/2 exact to the centimetre in order to have the acoustical phase of the sound from the left and right speakers being accurately equal at the listening position. We opted for the formidable KEF also because of their rather high efficiency.

Moderate in Power

As noble and weighty the E-560 is entering the stage as modestly does it specify its sheer power, namely 30 watts per channel. According to our lab report however this figure can be considered a nice understatement. Like its predecessor E-550, this 24-kg beauty can indeed be counted among the “weaker” representatives of its price class, in spite of the huge energetic capabilities of the power supply. It's because a large amount of this energy is blown in order to keep the transistors under full steam by means of high bias currents. In fact, more than half of it is blown through the heat sinks and hence the usable power reduced. But the wasted heat (perhaps not quite “ecologically correct”) generated by the so-called Class-A circuitry is otherwise taking care that cross-over distortions are definitely avoided during push-pull operation. In pairwise push-pull one transistor is responsible for the positive and its team-mate for the negative half-wave of the signal. At the cross-over point, transistors working in the energy-saving, low-bias Class-B mode are subject to certain distortions which would yield a rather harsh, uneasy sonic picture.

As opposed to its predecessor, the E-560 is equipped with an even more powerful gigantic toroidal transformer plus an additional current-feedback circuitry in the power stage, which is typical for Accuphase. The latter is taking care of a fully balanced signal processing in the power range. This trick is said to provide a completely distortion-free signal and – *nomen est omen* – an absolute accuracy in phase up to the highest frequencies.

The new top model comes with many technical delicacies, of which the unique AAVA volume control deserves a particular mention. Other features like the excellent headphone amplifier – yours truly has never before encountered a better one in any other integrated amplifier – or the exquisite option boards for D/A conversion (DAC-20) and phono amplification are perfectly convincing. For instance, those who are going to insert the AD-20 phono board might be worried about anticipated sonic improvements only from Linn's external phono pre-amp Linto (at 1,350.- Euro, that is) and beyond.

Breathtaking in Sound

With the E-560, aficionados of the silver disk may have found the ultimate amplifier as long as they are not inclined to generate ear-deafening volume levels by means of low-efficiency speakers. Mind you, what the biggest and dearest “integrated” from Accuphase - in combination with the KEF 207/2 - demonstrated in our listening room was among the best we ever heard, even when compared to pre- and power amp combinations in a much higher price class. And we could play at volume levels which even audiophiles in privately owned houses would hardly get up to.

We played all the audiophile SACDs listed on page 102 of this issue, i.e. their stereo tracks, in a gigantic and effortless listening session. From Mozart's Symphony to the opulent “Alps Mountains” by Richard Strauss, from the gentle solo parts in Brahms' “Alt-Rhapsody” to the overwhelming piano and orchestra attacks of a Prokofiev concert. Well,

the big Accuphase was committed to this music with phenomenal aplomb. In particular the thundering percussive passages of Prokofiev's third piano concerto were really breathtaking. Who ever thought that tight rhythms can only be heard and felt with rock music will have to change his mind because what we felt in this respect through the E-560 was not less than stunning.

The ineffable melancholy of the woodwind motive in the slow movement of Mozart's g-minor symphony was heart-warming in such a way that made you want to jump up and hug the solo flautist. Finest gradations in volume level and thundering dynamics are unleashed by this noble amp with an implicitness like a bolt out of the blue. One could almost forget to be merely attending a prosaic listening test!

Although the indicators of the power meters were reaching beyond the 0-dB point quite often whilst the volume control knob was still in the 10-o'clock position, the E-560 was amazing us with an effortlessness that we came to ask ourselves if perhaps its much more powerful "little" brother E-450 had accidentally been hooked up to the speakers instead.

Perhaps the dearer one was a bit reserved when rendering a piece containing brute bass drums, yet with respect to the illuminating power of all sound colours, the pinpoint three-dimensionality of the soundstage and the pure presence of the sudden roaring sound from a blues guitar, the E-560 excelled the tried and tested (in fact, our daily workhorse) and truly powerful E-450 in every respect! And in comparison with its excellent predecessor E-550 the latter sounded rather sober and constricted.

Don't get me wrong: we are not talking about the notorious "two different worlds" here. And of course only a brilliant source like the super combination DP-800/DC-801 could bring all the nuances to light. Nevertheless, our verdict goes like this: for all enthusiasts of most accurate sound colours and inner dynamics the new No. 1 among integrated amplifiers is called Accuphase E-560.

Conclusion

Noblesse oblige – and Accuphase has once again carried out its duties in an inimitable manner. The most noble and dearest integrated amplifier from the House of Accuphase has come to rank on top of AUDIO's "List of the Best". The E-560 is indeed one of the world's best integrated amplifiers, whilst being more even-tempered and effortless than all the rest. Besides that, it is the best equipped and most exquisitely crafted integrated amp, with arguably the most stable value anyway.