

Graduation

The top model among the Accuphase preamps is like a great wine: it keeps getting better with age.

Things are not going well for the culture in the land of poets and philosophers. True, we Germans do love basking in the glow of fame of our great composers, yet in the width there has been no lived life behind this unique musical legacy for quite some time. The façade begins to crumble, the music of Bach, Beethoven or Mozart is only leading a wallflower existence in German households and families. In the two years between 2017 and 2019, hence before Corona, the classical music market including downloads and streaming collapsed by 30 per cent in this country alone. The average German citizen spends a mere 47 cents for classical music – per year! Not even four cents per month, barely one per week. And even if you skip the group of people under 20 years, this won't hardly change a thing on average, just one cent per month would have to be added then. On the other hand, the gaming industry reported a sales volume of 6.2 billion euros last year. What a contrast, our wallets are betraying us. Woe to Germany.

»Because where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.« And so art is withering around us for a simple lack of appreciation. Wilhelm Furtwaengler once wrote that if people really knew what true art is, they'd gladly make every possible effort to come to it. From this we are miles apart today. But they still exist, those contemporaries for whom this applies. One of them is the proud owner of the first C-3900 delivered to this country. A true-bred music enthusiast, a longtime Accuphase connoisseur and ardent admirer of Japanese single-layer SHM SACDs (»by comparison, you can just forget about everything else«). Such a disk costs as much as 50 euros or more, so statistically the German John Q. Public would treat himself to such a disk only once in a hundred years, i.e. once in a lifetime – one should indeed never underestimate how mean the so-called average citizen is in many respects.

But now let's turn towards the object of desire, the Accuphase C-3900, an analog preamplifier. Since the onset of digital technology, this device category has actually

carried a misleading name because preamplification is generally not required with line level sources, and the correct functional designation would therefore be attenuator or level controller. In theory, one can spare it or outsource it to the digital domain. In practice, however, the world looks a little different although the question comes up whether such an analog preamp has not been maxed out long time ago. It has indeed, according to the actual preamp circuits already since the early 1990s. Already back then there were almost distortion-free and low-noise puristic concepts. This was, and still is, also possible with tubes. Since then the aim has been increasingly to give the electronics a zero-interference environment by using even »quieter« power supplies and to further optimize the original level control (i.e. the attenuator).

Accuphase has pursued this approach systematically over the years. For me the biggest step in this development was the C-3800 (see issue 4/2010) which marked a breakthrough. In line with the typical five-year development cycles for the top models, the Japanese launched the C-3850 (see issue 2/2016) and now the C-3900. Strictly speaking, these are revised editions of the basic concept introduced with the C-3800, and yet both incarnations are not just superficial facelifts, but come along with technical as well as sonic improvements. The above mentioned C-3900 owner had skipped the C-3850 version and remained loyal to his C-3800, but ten years later, as he disclosed to me, that was simply no longer possible for him in view of the C-3900.

Dual-mono layout with finest pc board material: the otherwise perfectly shielded »heart« of the Accuphase C-3900.

In the high-end history, preamp designers have always been striving for the best possible solution for the volume control. As early as in the 1980s Mr Mark Levinson was using wickedly expensive Penny & Giles potentiometers, Spectral has their exceptional »Super Fader« pot custom-made, Soulution and Convergent Audio rely on resistor networks. Accuphase on their part already replaced those passive solutions in the C-2800 by an active amplifier circuit, the »Accuphase Analog Vari-Gain Amplifier« or shortly AAVA. Regarding its function principle I'd like to refer to the report on the C-3800 where AAVA was first used in balanced mode.

For the C-3900 Accuphase has simply doubled their efforts in terms of AAVA once more, the volume control now takes places in »dual balanced« mode. This may be compared to the use of several DAC units connected in parallel in top-class converters

like the DC-950; in both cases this is to increase the linearity and reduce the noise level. Furthermore, Accuphase points to the relevance of a high gain factor of the input amplifier in multi-stage circuits as it has a massive influence on the noise. Also in this respect AAVA has been revised and expanded by the »AANC« noise cancelling system in the current/voltage converter. No less than four summation amplifiers are supposed to further optimize the S/N ratios in balanced operation. The revision of the rotary control for an even smoother feel comes on top as a little bonus.

Due to Corona we received the C-3900 this time without the normally obligatory visit to the editorial office, but I had also asked for the precursor to be able to make direct comparisons in my system. After all, both the C-3800 and the C-3850 were way up high on my preamp list where Mark Levinson shines with balance, Soultion with control and precision, Spectral with richness of detail, and Convergent with tube aura. Owing to its enormously palpable and atmospheric reproduction, Accuphase scored already with the C-3800 in this high-carat pool. The C-3850 in return put on weight as to resolution and effortless transient imaging, and this is precisely the road the C-3900 now keeps on following. It is undoubtedly the most detailed, most colorful and most transparent of the three Accuphase top models of the past years and still hasn't lost one iota in terms of plasticity and musicality.

However, my meticulous comparisons did not satisfy Olaf Sturm fully; he felt we should repeat them in an all-Accuphase chain, too. Probably there was also a good deal of curiosity involved, but he first snatched the C-3850 from under my nose, then the C-3900 and finally used the location advantage of his near distance to PIA distribution in Weiterstadt and thus »organized« the DP-750 SACD player and the A-75 class-A power amp. So I'm going to hand over to him now and let him describe his own experiences.

For a direct shootout between such preamp giants the prerequisites must be not only correct, but perfect. So one has to avoid set-up mistakes, and therefore I'm double-checking the phase of the mains outlet although it's already marked. No unused devices are connected to the power strip and the whole system has already been left on for some days before we can start. Wired by HMS, the Accuphase team was playing over the formidable Dynaudio Confidence 30.

Before comparing the two preamps I wanted to adapt my ears to the system first. However, this didn't work out as planned because instead of the preamps, I'm rather

staring at the A-75. The sheer bass energy which this power amp delivers is simply breathtaking; never before has the Dynaudio been grounded on such a solid bass fundament.

Then comes the moment of truth for the preamps. And it begins with »A Taste Of Honey« by Ulf Wakenius, an acoustic guitar piece with a wonderful reverb that's spreading like ripples after throwing a stone into the water. The C-3900 works out the details of the plucked strings meticulously, and when the bass and drums join, the trio is swinging through the track with utmost naturalness. The change to the C-3850, for which I didn't turn off the power amp, also creates an exact, three-dimensional room, but the precision right down to the reverb is definitely not on par. The delicate playing appears to be a bit slower and lazier, the C-3900 delivers undoubtedly the more vivid, more focused result here.

With the high-energy song »Ja-doo« by Klaus Doldinger's Passport the reproduction over the C-3850 leaves nothing at all to be desired, Doldinger's saxophone comes in over the driving rhythm backing of drums, organ and bass. But here, too, better is the enemy of the already excellent: over the C-3900 the instruments seem to bloom with enhanced imaging, the fiercely pulsating bars have been gifted with more energy, and the timbre of the saxophone comes to the fore with greater clarity – what a listening experience.

A final highlight is then provided by »The Blue Danube«, performed by the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra under the baton of Willi Boskovsky. After switching to the C-3900 I'm briefly trying to regain my composure, for it doesn't only play with even greater plasticity, also the shimmering strings which come like out of nowhere now are sublime.

No doubt, both metrologically and soundwise, Accuphase has once again lifted their top preamp to a higher level. By comparison the C-3900 has an edge over the previous model; that marvelous three-dimensional imaging the C-3850 can create as well is now enhanced by utmost transparency which, however, doesn't do the slightest harm to the harmonic ensemble. And it has also become clear that it's not a mistake if, because of the unique sound culture of the Japanese, we also go for an Accuphase as our power amp.

Wilfried Kress / Olaf Sturm