

美しさ – Utsukushi- sa (Beauty)

Who rolls out an SACD/CD player for almost 20,000 euros in 2019, has either missed the trend of time – or knows exactly what he's doing.

Our modern daily routine is marked by dealing with computers. This is not only true of the professional environment, but goes on after work in our listening studios – software optimization, stable internet line, streaming DAC and audiophile switch are but a few cues. Because the probing question – if the audio file right before us is indeed an unmodified DSD or simply a correspondingly manipulated file based on the CD standard (or even on an mp3) – makes us involuntary beta sound testers. Who doesn't know the inexplicable acoustic differences with the very same recording in allegedly identical resolution from different streaming providers and the A/B comparisons resulting thereof?

Here also the question arises as to how long the artists will stand back and watch this situation, because the creative part of the music scene has not been able to subsist on the license payments from streaming and download subscriptions for quite some time. A whole industry is changing – recording studios close their doors for hardly any artist can still afford them, the production quality is on the decline – and we hi-fi disciples see ourselves forced to savor productions which, often without expert help, were somehow patched together between bedroom and kitchen table by so-called home recorders. If art means nothing more to us than the equivalent value of an unlimited streaming subscription, we're in fact busy sawing off the branch on which we all sit together! From this viewpoint a physical sound carrier, which is already subject to a

production process based on certain technical standards and also offers a functional billing model for the creative folks, represents an investment in the future.

Of course, I'm hearing the numerous voices of people who would enthusiastically open their doors for the vinyl record any time, yet with regard to the much-hated CD only shake their heads at the buzz word "digital sound medium". This brings us to the present situation of a seemingly dying device category – the high-end SACD/CD player. Together with no more than handful of competitors, Accuphase undoubtedly deserves a first rank today because of their seriousness and thoroughgoingness in dealing with this topic. The immense efforts taken by the exquisite Japanese manufacture with regard to CD playback are readily apparent from the fact that they designed their own drives, optimized for CD and SACD tracking, and have integrated them into their noble champagne-colored devices for quite some time due to a lack of seemingly adequate third-party solutions. In the brand-new top model DP-750 this striving for perfection materializes to its current peak in the shape of a colossal drive weighing in at 10.5 kg [23 lbs]. You need to check it out for yourself to get an impression of this masterpiece! It starts already with the full-metal tray moving in and out that looks as if it had been milled from a solid block: almost silently it slides majestically on its massive stainless-steel guides to read out the data medium just as silently then. Even when holding your ear directly to the housing, you won't hear any running noises from the scanning unit which is decoupled by four viscose foam damping elements. I simply couldn't help but compare this drive on a CD measuring facility of the public service broadcasting with a perfectly calibrated Philips measuring drive installed. The same test CD went into both drives and each readout process was metrologically captured. The result: with the DP-750 Accuphase achieves sample values that outperform the reference drive in every respect. According to the metrologists, this is nothing but sensational in this day and age, where the majority of manufacturers use computer CD-ROM drives! A data readout from the optical media as error-free as possible is the basis of all what's happening in the subsequent signal flow: the less drive-induced jitter and reading errors must be corrected, the closer we get to the ideal of utilizing all information stored on the medium for the further digital processing.

So, after a non-stop break-in phase of a good 10 days, I'm sitting pretty confused before my sound system and listen to the first notes of Nick Cave & The Bad Seeds' masterpiece *Push the Sky Away* (Bad Seed Ltd., BS001CD, Europa 2013, CD), played back by the DP-750. A first soundcheck turns into a listening session and, between goose bumps with pleasant shivers and outbreaks of sweat, I am either sprawling

casually in my lounge chair or sitting on its edge like frozen while focusing on the music. A single track extends into an entire album, the album into a pile of CDs – and only the time of night and my social conscience did finally stop me. In order to describe the sound of this exceptional CD player, I would like to use a picture for comparison which already after the first few bars of music had settled in my mind's eye: there is a prima ballerina on stage, modern expressive dance is on schedule. With apparently infinite lightness the svelte dancer is moving through the most difficult passages of the choreography – every acrobatic highlight appears ever so natural, so carefree ... one should assume that for this delicate creature there up on stage the laws of gravity have been suspended. At the same time, one realizes how her muscles are tensed under the close-fitting ballet costume. There is always more body strength at call than what is actually needed, so any impression of strain would never come up. On the other hand, the precision with which the dance follows the rhythm and little musical accents are translated into movement, is nearly surreal. An almost erotic motion interpretation of the music is building up – perfect beauty and grace. For me, this picture describes the sound of the DP-750. It's futile to expatiate on individual disciplines, paraphrase the frequency response from the bass to the highest frequencies with words or shine a light on both the coarse and the micro dynamic skills, because all this will fall short. Here an entity is developing, something that cannot be dissected any more. This digital machine steps back completely from scrutiny. Like when the stage curtain goes up, the audience is gradually falling silent and then finally the first note is to be heard – simply touching. How did Accuphase manage to do it, how is it possible to make a "simple" CD sound like this???

At the same time the outward appearance embodies the antithesis to the acoustic events. Heavy, incredibly heavy this digital giant is standing in my listening room – its almost 30 kilos [66 lbs] distributed adamantly onto custom-made cast damper feet, totally unimpressed by any external influences. This is complemented by a housing like I've probably never witnessed one in such a deep vertical range of manufacture: the finely brushed front panel with its ultra-tight fitting controls is so incredibly well-crafted that associations to automobiles in the absolute luxury segment suggest themselves. No screw is to be seen, the elegant high-gloss wooden enclosure looks as if it was made of one piece together with the player. Looking under the prestigious hood of this powerhouse, the high-end fan will almost be faced with a general cultural property: like the other CD players from the long-established company, the DP-750 has been built using a chamber-type design. Three large compartments offer the

layered PC boards of the various sections a maximum of electromagnetic separation. Two stately, fully shielded mains transformers ensure a galvanic isolation between the analog and digital signal paths. For the filtering stages in the DP-750's power supply specific custom-designed low-emission capacitors were developed by Accuphase. The extreme attention to detail culminates in a special board material: the so-called "Direct Balanced Filter Section" consists of fluorocarbon resin which shows certain similarities to glass fiber reinforced plastic and excels by an extra high dielectricity.

With digital-analog converters two different philosophies are currently pursued in the field of the acoustically most outstanding devices. One relies on multi-bit converters from NOS ("new old stock") supplies, for the most part in a non-oversampling topology. A completely different approach is to reconvert the digital data streams into analog signals by using the latest chip technology in the form of freely programmable FPGAs (Field Programmable Gate Arrays).

With their new flagship Accuphase decided to go for the second option and thus gave filterless designs a clear rebuff. Here the incoming DSD data streams are not converted into PCM – a consistent approach the thwarting of which by the designers of the software for the SACD mastering process (except for the Sony Sonoma system and the Sonic Solutions DSD workstation) killed perhaps the best digital standard of our time back then. In the sense of a totally unimpaired DSD data stream, Accuphase has chosen the only correct way. However, this is easier said than done, because if you want to use digital filters to fight high-frequency signal contamination, as it is immanent in these data streams as a matter of principle, you'd be up the creek without a paddle. And conventional designs can only handle PCM data.

Consequently, the decision for a totally independent filtering solution was taken in Yokohama, based on a multiple converter system or, more precisely, four 8 ES9028 Pro converter chips from digital specialist ESS per channel to which the data streams are fed, each time-displaced by half a clock interval. The result is a phase-inverted signal that will later eliminate data errors in the summation stage. This eightfold differential circuitry is supported by a special programmable filter in a "linear phase topology" which, due to its high slew rate, frees the signal from HF interference without the dreaded pre-echoes. Of course, that is only possible with so immensely high sampling rates if you have a freely programmable CPU (central processing unit) carry out this task. Here Accuphase relies on a custom-programmed filter in floating point arithmetic which enables the pure DSD data stream to be processed in correct phase

and without any further conversions. In combination with the multi-differential circuit and the clock-skewed signal processing, an enormous degree of signal purity is achieved, even with extremely low-level signals. Sure, the manufacturer is well aware that the repertoire of SACDs which can benefit from this exemplarily pure signal flow is very limited, which is why this superb D/A converter is not only available to the DP-750's sophisticated drive: via the rear USB port the player can also be used as an external converter unit. One may understand this as a wink into the direction of those among us who already own large archives of digital high-res files or would indeed feel like utilizing the DAC for streaming. Signals from CD drives or other digital gadgets, which can be docked to the player's converter section via the additional S/PDIF interfaces (optical and RCA), are converted once from PCM into DSD and treated just like native DSD data streams.

How Accuphase managed to leverage PCM-based signals to such an excellent grade cannot really be grasped by simply enumerating technical subtleties. In the end it's not just hightech which makes this player a gold standard, but rather the kind of its acoustic fine-tuning that leaves me totally dumbfounded. For the DP-750 sounds neither "digital" nor "analog", it follows an esthetic of sound which until today I have never experienced in this particular manifestation. Antagonisms join together which normally would seem to be incompatible. This player has the mastery of a warm pace, the beauty of which would rather make us think of an analog top-class turntable than of digital electronics. Yet you will neither miss finest details, nor will it seem to be dynamically curbed or even rounding off transients. The opposite is true: the wealth of detail is overwhelming, the velocity with which soft as well as brutally loud transients are passed on to the rest of the chain, is going to take your breath away. Micro just like macro dynamics appear so enormously real and are only limited by the loudspeakers or the other components in the chain. Room imaging and locatability are also among the most impressive I've heard so far in a digital environment. The spooky detachment and three-dimensionality of the events will enchain the listener to the music in a downright magical way. And whenever you think to have grasped what this technical masterpiece can deliver soundwise, the DP-750 will surprise you once more.

When listening e.g. to the velvety tone of Anne-Sophie Mutter's violin on *Jean Sibelius' Violin Concerto* (with the Staatskapelle Dresden under the baton of André Previn, Deutsche Grammophon, 447 895-2, Europe 1995, CD), a recording which is still based on digital standards of days long gone by, one can hardly believe that the very same device renders these sounds just as infatuatingly as it places the brutal transients by

the Einstürzende Neubauten on the album *Alles wieder offen* (Potomak, 2007/9, Germany 2007, CD) into the room out of nowhere and with a mind-boggling dynamic attack which gets you totally absorbed emotionally in each case. What makes this player so outstanding in the end, is the incredibly fine balance between the most diverse properties: everything is so precisely equilibrated, seemingly placed with pinpoint accuracy on an imaginary edge so that the DP-750 always finds the very true timbre – absolutely breathtaking! As to its features, the designers have given this CD player a pleasant purism to take along. Reading the user manual is definitely not necessary here since the device explains itself to the proud owner. Almost all important controls are arranged so clearly and logically on the front panel that its daily use is a unique enjoyment. In spite of a likewise commendably designed all-metal remote control I often find myself pressing the haptically wonderful pushbuttons on the actual device. However, apart from the usual functions the volume level is only adjustable via the remote which predestines the DP-750 also for direct operation with a power amplifier while bypassing the preamp – a mode which, incidentally, works really great since Accuphase keeps the output impedance so low that the player is compatible with any halfway practically designed amplifier (be it a pre or a power amp) and can drive longer cable runs easily, too.

A note on placement: treat this device to a solid surface in your hi-fi rack. Yet the use of absorber bases or other tuning accessories needs to be questioned here, for with each of my experiments its phantastic harmony suffered. Accuphase has actually taken all the necessary steps to decouple the DP-750 effectively from its footprint. Those who will scratch their heads in irritation over the price asked are simply advised to first visit their nearest Accuphase dealer to get a first-hand impression of this machine and then calculate in their minds the costs for their analog turntables including pickup system and tonearm. In times when sums of 8,000 euros and more are already charged for an MC pickup, the asking price for this exceptional player seems to be absolutely fair!

During music playback over the DP-750 a feeling sets in that most of us will probably not know any more: with this piece of digital technology we have reached our ultimate goal – nagging doubts as to whether things could still get a little better will definitely belong to the past now.

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