

# I'm also a Berliner

*You find the headline strange? Well, that could be. And yet, for various reasons, it fits perfectly for this wonderful bastion of haptic media, the new large Accuphase DP-770 SACD/CD player.*

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Almost exactly 43 years ago, the world's first commercial CD production began near Hanover. Now, as we know, the CD has long since been replaced by non-physical media, especially streaming – which is antisocial towards the artists. In this respect, it shares the fate of the vinyl record, which brings me back to the headline. Because on May 20, 1851, a certain Emil Berliner was also born in Hanover. And that's the man who, among many other things, invented the gramophone record and, consequently, the gramophone. And since both gramophone records and CDs are now following a similar road, i.e. first into oblivion and then rediscovery, the once hostile media can well be regarded as kindred spirits – 'Berliners', so to speak.

In image hifi 1/2020 my dear colleague Ekkehard Strauss wrote about the DP-770's direct predecessor, the DP-750, and he didn't hold back with his praise. He began his review with a statement on the subject of reproduced music as a form of art and Accuphase's striving to keep doing more than justice to the CD – the last remaining physical medium apart from the vinyl record (leaving aside the tape machine as an absolute niche product). I can only agree with him and would also like to quote Guido Tent, developer and partner at Grimm Audio. At trade shows, he understandably demos with their streamer and amplifier. In private, however, he likes to listen to CDs and once said to me: “As yet, the CD format has not nearly been pushed to the limit.” Should I have ever seen a player that seems to have exhausted the CD format, it's the DP-770. I call it a CD player because I don't want to discuss the differences between CDs and SACDs here, partly because SACDs, unlike CDs, are simply a niche product – not in Japan, but that's a different story. And even though the competition is desperately trying to develop high-quality players suitable for the CD revival, they simply don't have a snowball's chance in hell against Accuphase. And why is this? Because they've been doing it for a very long time, and extremely well. Let's just take a look at what Accuphase has changed in the already outstanding DP-750, which was

introduced in 2018. Of course, nothing has changed in terms of the basic principles, such as the chambered design with the ideal electromagnetic shielding, discrete power supplies for the analog and digital sections including a proprietary mains transformer, the fine circuit board material, the special capacitors custom-made for Accuphase, or the production of its own drive. And yet, details have been consistently refined, as has been done in Yokohama for decades. But before I get to that – and I hope the P.I.A. company will forgive me because they don't speak about money there unless they absolutely need to – I must talk about the price of the DP-770. In a world of galloping (high-end) inflation, it is probably very unique that the 770 costs just €100 more than the DP-750 did seven years ago. Despite the, for us, favorable yen exchange rate, this is an extremely welcome development and demonstrates Accuphase's fairness.

What's new or what has been improved in the DP-770? For instance, the reference voltage source for the converter section has been ramped up and further stabilized. The drive, which was already fantastic before, has been completely redesigned and, just like its predecessor, is a 'monument', as Ekkehard Strauss had put it. I do love analog rituals, and in the digital domain, you simply can't get any closer to this world than with the DP-770's CD tray which slides out so calmly with some kind of a personal deceleration gesture. The entire appearance of the DP-770 with its noble champagne front, the subtle lighting and the polished wooden enclosure, exudes supreme class. As usual, the drive with its brushless DC external rotor motor, is mounted on a solid base plate. The viscoelastic damping of the laser has been redesigned to suppress vibrations even more effectively. And we hear: nothing. Is this the quietest CD drive ever? I certainly think so, and of course what Accuphase calls 'a major improvement' is more an academic one, for the DP-750's drive was also absolutely world-class and extremely quiet. With his measurements at the RBB Ekkehard Strauss documented that already the previous drive outperformed by far every other drive that is currently available or installed.

And I am certain that if you put the DP-750 and DP-770 side by side, you would not be able to hear any noise from either drive, not with your own ears, and not armed with a stethoscope. The drive itself weighs 6.6 kg and the solid base plate puts another 3.4 kg on the scales. The overall weight has gone up slightly because the shielding bridge above the drive, which is designed to protect against turbulences, now features an even more solid construction, as Accuphase states. By the way, this bridge holds a

puck which, by means of magnetic assistance, centers the CD perfectly, which explains the second meditative delay before playback is started.

For the tech nerds: The very tastefully illuminated displays do not only show the current sampling frequency, but also the bit depth of all input signals. These are read directly by a high-speed FPGA chip, but more on that in a minute. Digital and analog currents are, of course, processed and supplied separately in the DP-770. Please allow me to make a general observation at this point. There are different concepts about how to set up a sound system, and how much importance should be assigned to the individual components. There is no need to discuss that the source has to play the central function. What is lost there can never be recovered; it does not wait in monster cables or other investments, it remains lost. And this is why I can't praise enough a source device like the DP-770 as the ultima ratio. Owing to its magnificent converter, it is also so much more than 'just' a perfect SACD/CD player – the DP-770 can be the heart of a system where it will convert all digital signals in a perfect manner. Its versatility is therefore almost unlimited, and its price appears even more attractive due to the converter and the options resulting thereof. Please don't get me wrong, 19,200 euros is a hefty sum in absolute terms. But in relative terms, I believe the DP-770 is literally inexpensive when compared to the whole competition. Or can you name me a player and converter of this quality at this price? I don't think so.

Hence the drive is unrivalled, and the converter is also world-class. As usual, the Accuphase engineers go their own way with this device. They don't use the ladder DAC arrangement, which is highly esteemed among audiophiles and involves interconnecting numerous converter chips, most of which are no longer being made. Accuphase uses eight high-grade ESS ES9028PRO 32-bit Hyper Stream II Delta Sigma chips per channel and connects them in parallel. This is intended to improve distortion, noise, linearity, and noise suppression, among other things. The above-mentioned FGPAs (Field Programmable Gate Arrays) are programmable circuits which tell the converter chips exactly what to do. Accuphase programs them in-house because the engineers there know how to make such highly complex technologies sound good. With the help of the FGPAs and Accuphase's own MDSD circuit, which acts like a floating average filter, high-frequency noise is eliminated, which occurs especially with DSD and has a negative effect on sound quality. To my knowledge, no other company implements this in such a way that the DSD signals don't need to be converted to PCM signals for that purpose, and even with a flawlessly linear phase

response. This saves us one conversion stage and sounds better – if you know how. The MDSD circuit generates phase-shifted DSD signals and then transmits them to the eight channels of the 'MDS++' D/A converter. There they are processed and finally converted from a current to a voltage signal at the output, whereby they are, of course, also correctly summed again. CD signals don't need to go through the first step which addresses DSD signals; the MDS++ conversion will do for them. This extreme conversion, as I would like to call it, benefits CD and SACD users alike, but also those listeners who want to stream via the USB input or play back their favorite high-res files from the data carrier of their choice. This also applies to self-burned CDs or data discs, of course – you only need to make sure that the data have been finalized before, then the DP-770 will play everything.

Did you just wonder if the DP-770 also has a Bluetooth module? Forget it – Accuphase won't bother with such lossy standards. In addition to the MDSD technology, a circuit called ANCC (Accuphase Noise and Distortion Cancelling Circuit) takes care of any noise that may occur. This is done by a special-designed amplifier module which uses phase-shifted currents to detect and eliminate the culprits at the input of the current-voltage converter. Exactly how this works remains a company secret.

As mentioned above, its four digital inputs make the DP-770 the heart of a world-class digital solution – even for an adequately converted TV sound via optical fiber. Moreover, it offers three outputs so that the DP-770 can be used as a drive. In between, you can use the proprietary HS Link connections and cables to slave in the so-called Accuphase Voicing Equalizer. This is an ingenious tool for adjusting the sound to the room conditions. Did the Japanese really think of everything? I have the strong impression they did, because you can even compile playlists via the remote control. As was to be expected, the DP-770 offers both unbalanced and balanced analog outputs and even a phase switch for them. There is no headphone output since Accuphase simply does not like to accept compromises and offers this feature adequately located in their preamps and integrated amplifiers.

Mechanically and electrically the DP-770 is on a stellar level, but what about the sound? In my opinion, it defies every categorization. I'd almost say it creates its own category, but how would I name it? In an extremely subjective attempt I would describe its sound as 'correct'; it doesn't overwhelm you with details, it rather integrates them perfectly, and it plays neither dryly neutral nor overly euphonious. I have just a single SACD, but I also checked the qualities of the DP-770's converter with high-res files

and other data from my hddisk on which they are stored loss-free. It will come as no surprise when I tell you that I have never heard them sound so good and that the DP-770's converter outperforms every previous converter in my system handsdown. However, as I own a large CD collection, my sound samples were created almost exclusively with these, for the CD playback stands exemplary of its sonic capabilities. Think of the Accuphase DP-770 as the Roger Federer of digital technology: it makes difficult things seem easy, turns the playback of digital signals into a completely natural exercise and lets them sound totally natural. By the way, Accuphase puts every new device to multiple blind tests before it is actually launched on the market. If it fails to pass one of these tests, it goes back to the development department, as Takaya Inokuma, Accuphase's chief product manager, explains in a long video interview.

With CDs from the pioneering years of this recording technology, the DP-770 sorts the wheat from the chaff and immediately exposes poorly transferred recordings; they simply turn out to be unlistenable. By the mid-1990s at the latest, the quality of transfers and recordings had improved significantly. Surprisingly, however, already with the 1987 transfer of Errol Garner's *Best of* (Mercury 830 695-2, Germany 1987, CD) it manages to convey the boundless charm of 'Misty'. I've never heard Garner so elegantly sparkling, so stylistically confident and barn-storming. Even better – finally I understand his status beyond mere courtesy tinkling. Next, I grab Billie Holiday's *Lady Sings The Blues* (Verve / PolyGram 833 770-2, Germany 1995, CD). Her laconic voice is hovering so tangible in the room as if Billie herself were holding on to a microphone stand right there while singing "I've Got My Love To Keep Me Warm" in an utterly intimate and touching way.

Bandleader Tony Scott's silky smooth clarinet blends into the soundscape just as beautifully as Charlie Shavers' soft, classically bright trumpet. On this late album, Billie interprets some of the pieces she had already performed 20 years earlier. But here she sings so differently because life had written itself into her interpretations. She comments on this herself: "I can't even copy me."

Can Accuphase copy themselves? No, only surpass, and they do so by not looking at other companies, but only at themselves, because this and nothing else is their benchmark. That's exactly why I'm pulling my ace off my sleeve now, my only SACD and one of the richest sounding recordings I know: Archie Shepp's *True Blue* (Venus Records VHGD-39, Japan 2014, SACD). Scanning and reading SACDs is even way more complex than with CDs. But even here, the DP-770 shows where the golden

notes are, and I can welcome Archie Shepp to my living room concert. Shepp's typically brittle blowing sounds as if I was wearing the producer's headphones. His low notes hit me in my stomach area, and it's precisely them which take on a pithiness, an unobtrusive presence that I find truly unique and which strikes me time and again. Shepp, who exclusively plays tenor saxophone here and, unlike on his other Venus recordings, doesn't hold back with freer passages, shines through the DP-770 with a partly almost frightening plasticity and presence: can this still be reproduced music? Isn't he playing here with me, just for me? If there was a lack of resolution here, even this superb recording could indeed sound flat. But not with the DP-770; it makes every note sound like a delicately woven fabric. Images from Daniel Day-Lewis' final movie, *Phantom Thread*, come to mind, where the very finest materials are woven together with accomplished perfection and dedication to form a big picture. This I've never heard in such a way before, and the CD I listened to for comparison sounds flatter and less nuanced. Now I can finally understand the fascination with SACD.

Sure, I also need to listen to one of my favorite CDs: Dino Saluzzi's *Rios* (JPC 7531571, Germany, 1995, CD). Right at the beginning of 'Los Them', Anthony Cox's bass sounds so soft, yet perfectly contoured that it reminds me of the best panna cotta I know: well-defined, but not too solid, creamy, yet with structure and a divine taste – that's how it sounds. Another gem is *Night and The City* by Charlie Haden and Kenny Barron (Verve Records 539 9961-2, Germany 1998, CD). From the first moments of 'Twilight Song' I notice that calm, the majestic pausing, the complete sovereignty. That's the analog idea, away from key clicking and track skipping, all the hectic fuss of the modern world, that's a Berliner. If I had the money for the Accuphase DP-770, I would get it for myself. But perhaps I'll buy it anyway, because with it I could enjoy my CDs and everything else the digital world has to offer on an ultimate level for the rest of my days. My cohabitant said that was a device which completely withdrew out of the action, and she couldn't remember ever having heard music in a better way, regardless of the technology. A bow.

*Christian Bayer*