

Advantage Accuphase

The enthusiasm over a component is gone at the latest when it's surpassed acoustically by a lower priced unit. This will mark the end of the reference status. However, it is comforting that often it can take long years until then. In the present case even decades. But some day it's going to happen, all of a sudden, bluntly and out of the blue.

I am, of course, delighted that a number of industry people, who recently dropped by at the author's home, showed a remarkable interest in a preamp from the last millennium, which has been on duty for way over 20 years, and asked me if I'd like to sell it. But I wouldn't dream of it. Or more precisely, I didn't. Because so far no challenger could seriously shake the high-flying sonic merits of this old amp. Maybe my Cello Audio Suite, equipped with two line-level modules as well as one MM and one MC stage, needs to prepare now for its farewell or the long deserved retirement: since 1995 it has easily driven any contender out of the water; for the first time it now meets a sparring partner which outclasses it in many respects. Why is this so enormously important (to me)? Every chain is only as strong as its weakest link, as folk saying and hi-fi connoisseurs know.

Premiere of a legend and the answer to the question "which is the strongest one?" usually goes like this: depending on their audiophile orientation, some will refer to the pitfalls and chances of room acoustics first. Others (... probably the vast majority) will point at loudspeakers or sources, and a sometimes-militant minority believes in cables, accessories, and voodoo. But who should actually sit on the executive chair of tone? For me, after all those many experiences, it's definitely the preamp. Sure, anything else before, after, below, above and beside also contributes to the success of the whole, but the preamp is the boss. In the amplifier department it's the master, and the power amp acts as the slave. You may want to integrate the fastest, the most powerful

and, for my sake, most expensive power amp under the sun into your chain – as long as it is fed by some average preamp, it will starve acoustically and probably not be worth your money.

Setting priorities with an exceptionally good one very new perspectives are opening up: a genuine top-class preamp dictates even mediocre power amps what to do or not to do acoustically. For instance, my Cello got along swimmingly with a Tannoy TA 600 from the professional department – a gorgeously working constellation. And yet the investment into this power amp was very modest. As an enlightend reader you will know that the tonal description of a single component without any specification and, ultimately, an appreciation of the entire reproductive equipment is at least one thing, i.e. questionable. How often were you already disappointed when e.g. a lavishly reviewed device was at best living a shadow life in your chain? With the Accuphase C-2450 things are different. The output power promised in the HiFi & Musik Journal is certainly achieved hands down. Period. Because, see above, the preamp can dominate and rock a system if it plays in the Champions League.

Technical specifications are no end in itself At Accuphase it's part of the traditions that every new creation is compared to the previous model. Not acoustically or by using flowery marketing clichés, but with accounting sobriety with a view to technical specifications. One might argue now that decimal places in measured values such as signal-to-noise ratios or distortions say little or nothing about the sound that is to be expected – but through the years and device generations, these small steps add up and show the way which, in the case of Accuphase, always approaches the ideal in a straight line. This sound policy of small steps is comprehensible and will bear particularly ripened tonal fruit in the end which move forward high fidelity, department of »high-end«. Just imagine hi-fi as a multi-story building. In the basement you will find dubious, technically unstable fellows, on the first floor one abides by rules at least, and with every new – usually more and more expensive – floor the performance level will also rise. And at the very top, in the noble high-end penthouse, there is the ominous »final room«. Where the great master builders will not cease to keep shifting the walls by yet another iota. This is the home of Accuphase.

No level compromises with the C-2450 they make it very clear that the evolution in high fidelity is just not (only) turning in circles, but moving ahead. Thereby the 2450 benefits

from a device which in the hierarchy of the Japanese sits enthroned above it, the considerably higher priced model 2850 and, so to speak, the company's technology carrier. From it the 2450 has borrowed e.g. the sophisticated and unsurpassed volume control called AAVA, the fully analog circuitry of which »converts the signal into 16 differently weighted currents which, according to the position of the volume control, are combined to define the output level«, I can read in the brochure of the Japanese. Aha, I need to believe this, I can't verify it. Only that much: not only the feel of the large, smooth-turning level control is sublime, but even more the acoustical yield. I also treasure the Cello because it plays just as homogeneously with lowest as with maximum levels. The US amp realizes this with an armada of selected resistors. In my opinion, preamps with potentiometers or electronic controls, analog or digital, seemed to fully exploit their possibilities only within certain level ranges.

Less is more? No way! In most cases such a preamp will only wake up above »9 o'clock« only to leave its comfort or feelgood zone again at about »11 o'clock«. No wonder with economically priced or even cheap preamps, but also with the ultra expensive ones, notably the Dynaudio »Arbiter«, one had to accept those limitations. Not only does the C-2450 behave ideally in this discipline, the sensational S/N ratios should be further pleasure-enhancing – no later than that an aged Cello will fall behind in this respect. What has saved it so far from degradation as an »acoustical ace« in the proverbial sleeve, are its excellent phono modules for MC and MM processing. These do not sound exactly bad, but the optional AD-2850 phono module for just under 3,000 euros also achieves the same performance level with the slight benefit of better overall S/N ratios. Advantage Accuphase: Features like a selectable gain factor (12, 18 and 24 dBs) or the meanwhile again badly needed recording switches for recording to and playback from tape machines, another one for the phase, mono (!) and not least the defeatable, subtle working tone control stack, a practical »rumble filter« and even a loudness function bring us surprise and delight.

A mecca for vinyl fans The fact that the phono unit amplifies the signals from two pickups in a befitting way (by 30 or 40 dBs with MM and 60 or 70 dBs with MC systems) and that the input impedance of the moving-coil section is switchable between 10, 30, 100 or 300 ohms, emphasizes the claim to leadership of the Japanese. I was able to probe the C-2450 in various configurations including the now dusty TA 600. A perfect team – and one that beautifully confirms my theory of the integrated amplifier's

omnipotence. Likewise, the change to the other extreme, the »Frans de Wit Century« for an exorbitant price tag of 50,000 euros (test in issue 1/19 from page 36), confirmed me in the most splendid way. And in between, closer in terms of price to the Tannoy, but acoustically more on ear level with the »Century«, the Accuphase A-47. There's a trivial reason why it has to content itself with much fewer lines in this review than its preamp partner: I've ordered a second A-47 to check it out either in bridged or bi-amping mode. True, the output power of an A-47 should be sufficient for the vast majority of loudspeakers, but that's not the point. From days gone by I know that a bridged power amp from Accuphase indeed performs its task in an even nimbler, more sovereign and more coherent way. The reason why I think about approaching this experiment at all lies in the sound quality of already one A-47, which at 10,500 euros is expensive, but by no means overpriced. Forget for a moment the litany of the oh so cost-intensive components from Japan. When running the A-47 on various loudspeakers, for example the DARC 100 from Gauder, I consider the mentioned price as adequate, justifiable and, by contrast with the competition, even as »reasonable«. What potential may still be lying in wait here? Is it worthwhile saving for a second A-47? Which rank in the amplifier kingdom can be achieved that way? Perhaps, irrespective of the price, the topmost position. I wouldn't be surprised.

High-end is a mission that never ends: we personally put our components under the microscope, considering whether we did everything right and spent our hard-earned money wisely. It's a fairy tale that devices are built for eternity. But they last considerably longer than any car and, by way of comparison, they are most often significantly cheaper. But what's even more important: they do enrich our lives. So that this joy will not fade away, one should take a listen every once in a while, and see if there are no better components around than our own – and take appropriate action.

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