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TEST
ACCUPHASE DP-550

tested

The high-end Disc player with extended DAC functionality

ACCUPHASE DP-550 SACD-PLAYER

The Japanese noble brand Accuphase was founded in June 1972 by the former Trio-Kenwood co-founder Jiro Kasuga and his older brother Nakaichi. In the same year the Kasuga left brothers namely Trio-Kenwood, with the idea of hifi components of the highest caliber to go manufacture. Unlike abroad where brands like McIntosh, Audio Research, Mark Levinson and Revox set the tone. Was the Japanese offer in those years actually mainly low to medium-priced products at best mediocre quality. The ambitious plan was an extra push in the right direction by the oil crisis in 1973. Investing in sustainability and high quality products that easily could go long, with become the new motto. An ideology that even today continues unabated. Accuphase in all its products will continue and where the tested here DP-550 Super Audio CD player is a wonderful example of

The first thing that I experience when unpacking the substantial and weighty box (25 kg) of the DP-550 sa (CD) player, is the extremely serious impact in which this Japanese company always manufactures its products. Of course, there are still more manufacturers that offer beautifully finished and carefully constructed products now. As far as I am concerned, very few go as far as Accuphase does. Not only has every detail been thought of thoroughly, but also the materials used and the techniques are particularly solid and durable. Even to the extent that the devices will still function

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in the same hassle-free fashion in 20 years from now, or even longer. Just go and visit another manufacturer, and this way of production is exceptionally environmentally friendly in the long term! When I lift the player from the double box and remove the soft fabric cover, I am deeply impressed by the appearance of sheer quality and the completeness of the delivery package. The first thing that comes to mind, in addition to words like respect and awe - especially the view that a product is actually always supposed to look like that and that it should function; I also realize immediately that this quality in daily practice is unfortunately achieved by very few companies. With its typical champagne gold colour, Accuphase is, just products like by, for example, McIntosh, Audio Research and Spectral, recognizable as such from a kilometre distance. The DP-550 thereby breathes 'pride of ownership' from every pore. And because this fortunately once again, pertains to a real high-end disc player, makes the party complete for me.

Besides the champagne colour, it is impressive, especially the massive solidity of the housing, controls, connections and remote control that are immediately striking in a positive way. And then; the CD tray! Here is, again in a

positive sense, that wonderful flexibility and stability that were still commonplace with so many brands in the eighties and partly in the nineties. A CD was still a medium of which you could really be proud. Fancily presented in the record stores and still neatly packaged in the famous uniform 'jewel cases'. Besides the incredibly beautiful and almost silent running disc tray of the DP-550, the player initially looks like a 'simple' sa(CD) player, or, in other words, only suitable for playing CD and SACD recordings. However, looks can be deceiving. Because, in addition to the known analogue RCA and XLR (with adjustable phase!) outputs, this Accuphase offspring is also equipped with a true arsenal of selectable digital inputs and outputs. Inputs and outputs that are provided: USB 2.0, optical, coaxial and an HS-link. This latter connection is meant to be an ultra-high, high-speed digital connection. This also allows processing 2.8224 MHz/1-bit DSD signals in addition to a maximum of a 24 bit/192 kHz signal. In addition to playing CDs and Super Audio records in this DP-550, it is also possible to play DSD discs with files that are recorded in the DSF file format. When I view the player

subcutaneously, it seems, according to the Accuphase, the newly developed drive is capable to read 100% (!) of the recorded data. One of the reasons that Accuphase dares to say this is the enormous attention to detail that has been paid to this mechanism. Thus, not only have the vibrations that may occur during the moving parts been eliminated as much as possible, but the insensitivity to external vibrations have also been further improved. The extremely accurate readings have subsequently occurred, together with the totally newly designed single lens with dual laser diode and fast access time. The digital signal processing proceeds, as it has been doing for many years at Accuphase, by means of the so-called MDS+ (Multiple Delta Sigma +) system. A principle in which the DSD converted signal is converted directly to the various D/A

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converters in a parallel configuration. After the conversion, the signals of the converters are added joint, causing conversion errors to be greatly reduced. The DACs in the DP-550 contain the latest Hyperstream™ ES9008 type of ESS Technology, where no less than four of these chips are connected in parallel. If I look at the player without the top panel, it can clearly be seen that the device is strictly separated, sub-divided into four compartments. Thus, the power, drive and the digital and analogue sections are built entirely separately. When I, lastly,

take the remote control for a moment, it seems that even a conservative brand like Accuphase is effecting small improvements constantly. Not only are the look and the layout of this gem a lot more modern and rigid than I'm used to in this brand, but it also seems that the two tilt switches, for example the track and volume selection (a Accuphase amplifier can also be operated with it), work tremendously well in practice. It seems a simple thing, but finally one or numerous tracks can be skipped backward or forward now without having to search for pushbuttons. Ideal!

Listening 1st round

Because of the many digital inputs and outputs, I decide to start immediately with streaming audio applications in a first round. Still a relatively new product where I, seemingly in contrast to the necessary other colleagues, still have trouble with the sound quality regularly. I often experience the presented sound image as rather artificial and synthetic, not to speak of the striking discomposure in the sound. I am obviously very curious how this Accuphase will handle this, and I am actually



already being served immediately after unpacking and connection. Importer Paul Hattink is, in addition to his Benelux distribution for the Accuphase, Leben and Verity brands, also a respectable musician who already has many international productions to his name. Albums that, in addition to their spontaneous musical message, also know how to convince in an audiophile sense. Music lovers who already have one or more albums of Paul do not always know that many regular, subtly processed acoustic sounds have often been recorded by himself! To illustrate this, he quickly opens his laptop after connecting and turning on the champagne-coloured Japanese. And after having installed the correct driver, communication is then quickly established. Paul suddenly pulls a seemingly serious face. 'Werner, you're hereby really the first one, apart from me, who is going to listen next to the following sound clips. These are recordings that I've made earlier this year during a visit to Costa Rica in the tropical rainforest and they are absolutely spectacular in their purity and realism.' When the first recording is started via the laptop, the greatness of the circulating air in a large forest is the first thing that strikes us both.

We have all read once in a book about a deafening silence, but, with this recording it has really become reality! Yet, this silence does not last long and suddenly it's torn apart like a vicious dagger by the, very loud call of a howler monkey. My neck hair then also immediately stands up and a shudder goes through my whole body involuntarily. Not long after that other animals react all around us to the loud cries of this monkey, and at a certain moment, it is a real cacophony of other sounds that are precisely localizable. Just as quickly as the sounds came, they disappeared again and that overwhelming, brooding silence descends on us again. Just as we are musing about this, a rooster suddenly crows from approximately 30 meters away. A call that is answered quickly



by a congener on the other side of the valley. The cry echoes a few times at the forest edges and walls of the valley, after which Paul then stops the recording. Very special. Another fragment contains a Costa Rican singer/guitarist in the style of Ry Cooders Buena Vista Social Club. Then recorded completely pure and only with his own guitar as accompaniment. The special thing about this recording is that Paul has recorded it consciously in the outdoors and you hear only the vocals and guitar without any reflective environment. Once again, a chilling realistic occurrence unfolds before me. The pitch of the voice, guitar, huge dynamic contrasts and again that huge precise placement. You will never be able to hear this music and sounds in this capacity. However, Paul has devised a plan

to process them soon in a few albums that are coming out in the future. In fact, he made more recordings of this local guitarist and a completely separate album will probably be devoted to this. After this very successful own recording, Paul let me have a listen to his own high-end internet channel Hi-On-Line. A true successful project that has already even been on the air for 24 hours for some time now! I have now already listened to this particular station in his studio as well as from home,

but once again, we both suddenly fall completely silent. The physical presence of musicians who are projected completely loose and especially focused in my listening space is once again an impressive piece of illusion. And it's especially the version, which sounds much better than I have ever heard before with this channel, that is curious.

Listening 2nd round

Also in the beginning of the second round I continue to principally stay with the streaming audio happenings. Paul's Windows laptop has made room here for my Apple MacBook Pro with Pure Music software. Also with my own music and my own source configuration, the qualities identified earlier of this Accuphase DP-550 disc player/dac are continued to be fully maintained. One of the

main features that keep on standing out is the extremely precise 3D focusing and positioning of voices, sounds and instruments in the stereo image. Also the lack of 'hifi' graininess and other annoying artificial qualities are a great thing. In addition to the USB connection still used until now used, I also tried the coaxial connection and the HS-link. Where coaxial is already one step better than USB, in the sense of timbre and a more natural sound, the HS-link has my absolute preference and I hear





the same kind of purity, fluency and naturalness in the version, as I always hear in the i2^S connection that connects my North Star Design CD drive and dac. In this listening session, the in-house Accuphase E-560 Class A integrated amplifier provides the necessary strengthening so far and, as expected, it matches really well with the DP-550 player. As far as I am concerned the sound is consciously natural to some extent and even tuned somewhat unspectacularly with these two Accuphase roommates. Because of this, it is possible for the listener(s) to focus all attention

on the music as much as possible. Music that tunes in totally to this is the album *Insides* by the English producer and musician Jon Hopkins. Hopkins has worked on albums of, amongst others, Coldplay, Brian Eno and David Holmes. *Inside* is his third studio album, which came out in 2009, and that contains the necessary electronic dance influences. For people who do not often listen to this musical style, a first acquaintance might perhaps have an alienating effect. But, those who are looking for music that only surrenders its beauty after repeated listening are at the right address here. Even though there are influences of the Danish multi-instrumentalist Trentemøller audible here and there,

Insides has a completely unique identity by mixing instruments such as the violin, viola and piano with organic keyboard sounds. When I start with 'The Wider sun', I hear direct, dry, as well as realistic sounding acoustic stringed instruments. After some time the audio, panorama disperses widely and the atmosphere in the music changes altogether. It is a kind of atmosphere that you think you experience when you jump from a cliff with a paraglider or when a parachutist takes a jump from an airplane. The one moment

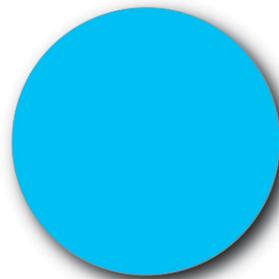
everything is still there, just to disappear quickly from sight the next moment to. All of this subsequently finally ends up in a highly rhythmic, dynamic and especially electronically created apotheosis. The DP-550 knows how to retain the full overview even at these types of eruptions and renders almost stoically the data that the file contains.

Listening 3rd round

In this last listening block, I listen to the qualities of the familiar media, like a CD and SACD and especially the latter came,

Used components

LOUD SPEAKERS	Raidho D1, Master Contemporary C, Wilson Benesch Arc
(SACD)-PLAYERS	Ayre DX-5, North Star Design T192 + North Star Design Extremo DAC
OTHER SOURCES	Apple MacBook Pro WITH Pure Music
INTEGRATED AMPLIFIERS	Accuphase E-560, Ayre AX-5, Unison Research Performance
Audio rack	Finite Elemente Pagode Master Reference HD12
Interlinks	Siltech Royal Signature Empress, Sonore Reference (RCA AND XLR)
Digital CABLES	North Star Design White Gold I2S, Nirvana Digital, Sonore Digital Reference, Audioquest Carbon USB
LOUD SPEAKER CABLES	Nirvana SX, Sonore Reference, Sign Audio Technology Pass series, JK-Acoustics Type III Net
Cables	Nirvana PG, Kemp Reference, Essential Audio Tools Current Conductor,



of Modern Cool and also a whole series of 'normal' CDs have also been played. As is often the case with SACD players, the SACD option simply sounds better than the CD layer with this DP-550. The sound is thus a bit smoother, more open, it contains less graininess and is dynamically less compressed. The CD indeed still sounds very good on this player. It is balanced, flexible and completely in equilibrium. In other words, it is a great all-rounder.

Conclusion

What seems to be an ordinary SACD player from a conservative Japanese high-end brand at first glance, seems to deviate quite from its others brothers at closer examination. Not only is this DP-550 really packed with possibilities, but this device also knows how to get a lot of qualities from every medium, even if the player cannot quite free streaming audio from that unwanted, somewhat corroded sound signature. However, the player does offer enormous stability and focus here and the hi-res files allow one to hear their added value very clearly. But, this player fortunately allows one to hear the omnipotent benefit when playing 'old-fashioned' disc media. Finally thus; something for everyone and for Accuphase, especially in this price range; a big step forward. So, for those who want to buy a multiplayer that will function in 20 years as it did when it was purchased will make a regal purchase with this DP-550.

Text: Werner Ero

Photography:

Accuphase

saw and conquered as far as I'm concerned. After the fully digitally recorded studio album Café Blue by Patricia Barber in 1994, sound and balance engineer Jim Anderson wanted to follow a different route with the next album, Modern Cool. Not that Café Blue did not sound good or sold badly; on the contrary. However, he and Patricia wanted to create a more intimate and fuller sound for Modern Cool. To achieve this, the digital resolution was increased for this album and, depending on the desired sound, recorded both analogue and digitally. In addition to this, other (vocals) microphones with a fuller midrange were used for this other album. Because I find this the most beautiful sounding version of the album myself, I make use of the MFSL SACD version (UDSACD 2003) for this test. And when I start with 'Let It Rain', I immediately hear the difference within a few seconds when

I play the same number via streaming audio. The SACD version simply has more colour, more tranquillity, natural tones and a smoother playback. Besides that, Modern Cool also has a very recognizable sound balance. Indeed considerably fuller, more direct and more powerful than that of Café Blue, although unfortunately, through this directness the often accentuated 's' sounds with Patricia come through more explicitly. Let It Rain is also a nice understated and very atmospheric song with space for each soloist and the DP-550 certainly does justice to this music. In my experience, this player has thereby a more nimble and more drawn out tonal balance than I can remember from the older Accuphase models. In addition, that's something that further enhances the universality and interchange ability, also with other brands and components. In a final comparison, the CD layer

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