

Interview in STEREO magazine (Germany), Issue 01/2013

**with Shigemasa Saito of Accuphase**

## **Living his dream**

By Matthias Böde

**Accuphase is considered one of the finest high-end brands worldwide. And Shigemasa Saito plays a major role in that. Since the foundation of Accuphase his name is closely connected with the noble maker from Yokohama. He told STEREO how his dream came true.**

The times are long ago when Shigemasa Saito was looking with fascination from Japan to overseas. In 1958 he began the work as young engineer with a manufacturer that was later to be called Kenwood. There he occupied himself in particular with valve amplifiers and for this reason also travelled the U.S.A. in order to study the secrets behind the then predominant brands, such as Marantz, McIntosh or Fisher. To follow suit all these archetypes or to even outperform them was to induce a passion in the man who henceforth asked to be called "Jim" and furthermore had his business card displaying this name, too.

And he was not alone. Also Jiro Kasuga, who founded the enterprise in his name already in 1946, aspired to higher things. The corporate dream was to establish a Japanese high-end business which ought to be on par with the big players of the trade. The project started in 1972 when Kasuga left Kenwood and founded Kensonic. Right from the start Jim Saito was a member of the management and at the same time head of the technical department.

### **Accuphase – that was "sounding" appropriate**

The name of the manufacturer has remained the same until today yet became generally known in our country as Accuphase. "Kensonic" was apparently "sounding" too sober and arguably would not have conveyed what Kasuga and Saito had in mind, namely to build the world's best audio components. Then, on the occasion of Kensonic's 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary, they ultimately switched to Accuphase which stands for "accurate phase", meaning a stable time response over the entire frequency range. The accurate phase, so to speak, is to express the highest technological standards to which the company has stuck to this date and in combination with impeccable craftsmanship and sonic excellence has constituted the outstanding reputation of Accuphase.

"Actually, no restrictions were given to us engineers whereupon we could develop whatever we considered the optimum", recalls Saito-San. "Likewise, costs were initially no object at all as long as we could achieve the ambitious aim", he added. The result was the well-renowned 100-series consisting of tuner T-100, preamplifier C-200 and power amplifier P-300, which today are regarded as milestones in hi-fi history and with which the lovers of classical music have set themselves an early benchmark. However prices were in the same way out of the ordinary, and Yasumasa Ishizuka, already head of Accuphase's European distribution network at that time, was anxiously asking himself: "How am I going to explain them

to my esteemed customers?”

Nevertheless, those customers living in the quality-minded country of Bosch, Leica or Mercedes have all understood and eventually well received the high-end concept behind Accuphase. For instance, they appreciated that a volume knob is still turning as smooth as the famed spoon in the honey pot even after many years of operation. Or to perceive the almost erotic click of a relay which was coming along with many functions in the components from Yokohama.

You get what you pay for! Perhaps the Accuphase approach was even more “German” than everything that was made at and delivered from domestic workbenches nearly 40 years ago. The Federal Republic of Germany is indeed one of the most important export markets for Accuphase, whereby it is quite a surprise to learn that approximately 70% of the production is sold in Japan. Certainly, one doesn’t get very far if things are concentrated merely on the outside appearance. Therefore Accuphase was and still is constantly searching for the best possible technological solutions provided by bordering industries, such as communication and medical engineering, as well as the implementation of electronic components of the highest quality. Also: the Japanese were among the first to focus on the development of fully complementary circuitries, e.g. the balanced design of push-pull power amplifiers with two “hot” terminal posts.

### **Measured data in focus?**

And of course, the engineers at Accuphase have been paying great attention to details right from the beginning. Sloppy work was in no way an issue. A nice example is given by the so-called “wire wrap” method in which the bare conductor of a connection lead is wound around the solder pin on a circuit board before solder was added. By means of this elaborate work possible cold solder joints could be avoided in the long run. This may be one of the reasons why components from this maker are lasting so long. Furthermore, Accuphase puts an emphasis on the fact that even oldest devices can still be serviced and repaired.

While other hi-fi manufactures would often tend to have a lesser esteem towards measuring data or perhaps would rather consider them a by-product (which may not necessarily be a drawback), Nippon’s audio industry put them into focus and at the same time extracted a part of the hi-fi fascination from these data. Harmonic distortion, signal-to-noise ratio, frequency response – they all have been perceived by the audio community in quite a different manner. Here, too, Accuphase may be regarded as the spearhead: whether in its product information or in our test lab, components made by Accuphase are generally shining with optimum values.

Whereupon Saito-San would emphasise that specifications are in no way ends in themselves but rather the result of diligent developments. After the basic design the work continues on the auditive side. For example, the sonically best transistor for a specific application can only be determined by the discriminating ear and it is simply impossible to design outstandingly sounding components on the desk and with the help of a PC. In this respect the attitude of Saito-San seems to coincide with those of other high-end luminaries.

Teamwork was and is essential for Accuphase. Although the company has ever since been putting the effort on electronic devices only, i.e. ignoring record

players or loudspeakers, there is no “mastermind” to tell the team where to go. It’s all going through a team consensus which is so typical for Japan. Among the nearly 90 employees of Kenosonic there are 35 engineers after all – a ratio that can hardly be encountered anywhere else.

### **Strong power of development**

This issue is of particular interest for us: if so many engineers and designers are involved in the development, then how can someone generate a continuous sound philosophy as can be observed, or better still, auditioned in components from Accuphase, which all are standing out regarding impulsivity as fast as a lightning in combination with great distinctness and sensible fine dynamics? “Our engineers acquire their know-how in all electronic sectors”, explains Saito-San the principle of a kind of internal rotation within the engineering department. There is no such thing like *the* dedicated expert for pre- and power amplifiers or perhaps a single nerd working on CD output stages. According to Saito-San, there are always several insiders responsible for the devices and functional circuits and all following the same line.

If necessary, the sheer manpower would come out with a genuine statement, which in fact occurred in 1986 when Accuphase presented the ultimate CD transport and D/A converter combination DC-80/DP-90 to the astonished hi-fi world. Not really happy with the sound of earlier CD players it took the engineering team about four years of hard work until it could launch a combination that was to become the benchmark of CD rendition for many years. And only recently the Japanese came out with the MC pickup cartridge MC-5, which, although developed in cooperation with the Japanese pickup specialist ZYX, is clearly demonstrating the sonic fingerprint of Accuphase.

“It’s important to always seek new challenges and to overcome boundaries”, says Saito-San and this might suggest the secret of the success of Accuphase. A British hi-fi magazine once wrote that Accuphase components are arguably “over-engineered”, whereupon Saito-San replies with sardonic laugh: “We are investing a lot of time, money and brains in order to progress. And then we read this allegation! The truth is that one can actually never do too much.”

What will be the next objectives, a superlative streaming device perhaps? Saito-San denies and refers to the possibility people have these days to play music from computers via USB. A pure streaming concept has not been taken into consideration. How about SACD? This system will be furthermore maintained, not least because it’s so popular in Japan. Generally, one tends to stay rather conservative. How about the dream of Saito-San? It has long since come true.....