

What is so special about this?

Alright, one doesn't have to be an insider to recognize the C-2120 and P-4200 as Accuphase amps. But what makes the amps from Japan's noble forge so special? Stereo took a closer look.

Stupid question Mr. Böde, no? After all one can tell the origins of this Pre- and Power Amp combination on first sight: thick champagne colored front plates with very fine brushed surfaces, the classic structure of input selector and volume control, distinctive meter on the power amp as well as a perfect construction – of course, this can only be an Accuphase.

Indeed! And still there is much more here, that the Japanese do differently than everyone else, and which earned them not only a specific identity but also a special place in the market. With consistency and sometimes even against the going trend – which prescribes audiophiles and especially high-end products a strict minimalism. “Comfort costs sound” is the essence of this dictate.

Accuphase doesn't care for such things and hence the pre-amp C-2120 offers many features.

Within those are many things which one can hardly find anywhere else: an always-practical mono-switch, loudness, inverse phase, a tape-selector with ... even a natural tone control with two selectable turnover frequencies.

That high-end customers dislike such things doesn't bother the Japanese. And did you notice how few power amps still offer a headphone connection? The C-2120 has one and it sounds excellent.

For the pre-outputs can be switched off, and are partially available in duplicates of RCA and XLR.

Furthermore there is an entire armada of plugs for larger equipment. No question, this is a case of hifi opulence instead of abstinence.

AAVA-typical Accuphase

In spite of all this variety, to avoid ruining the conservative nobel price winning performance, the Accuphase Pre-amp hides the majority of its operating elements behind a wide flap, which glides softly down upon pressing a button. Red LEDs in the display indicate the chosen function and in contrast to its predecessor the C-2110, the C-2020 received the numerical level meter of the manufacturer's more expensive Pre-amps. The level meter is up to the 10th Dezibel accurate – our laboratory checked very carefully.

Extreme precision is anyway the goal of the AAVA named volume control, which was introduced a couple of years back and in the meantime can be found in various stages of complexity in all pre- and integrated amps. The abbreviation stands for “Accuphase Analog Vari-gain Amplifier”. During this process the music signal is weighted individually for each channel by a voltage and current transformer in 16 steps.

Out of the similarly variable selection results a well-portioned total volume; no one else does it this way. Next to extremely low noise and distortion as well as effective channel separation,

what the measurements can attest to, Accuphase demonstrates long term stability as advantage of the AAVA. Especial attention deserves the three level "GAIN" switch, with which one can adjust the ground amplification. It also defines the sound character of the C-2120 and validates simultaneously the HiFi wisdom, which warns from little accentuation. Then the Pre-amp only offers in the "12 dB" position maximum, roomy, light and fanned out sound patterns. Already at "18 dB" it sounds a little tighter and more compact, what can be exciting with pop music, but doesn't transfer as exhilarating and airy as before, furthermore the mid tones gain a little more severe diction.

"24" dB might allow to enhance consumptively pale sources such as Portis, but the C-2120 in turn loses much of its audiophile qualities; they are indeed considerable. It could even get very close to the ideal Pre-amp, which reproduces music in all its details and shades. Completely unveiled, clear and dynamic as well as tonally differentiated, the C-2120 presents every program. So open, fluid and roomy - not even some top references could perform the same way.

Master of the naturalness

Surprising too, how exact this pre-amp defines tone color. The sonorous wooden sound from Anja Lechner's cello on the recently published ECM-CD "Moderato Cantabile", Jimmy Cobbs cornet in "We'll Be Together Again", which came from the STEREO Hörtest-Edition III, or the manifold string and percussion instruments on the Reference Recording's fantastical "Tutti"-sampler, here as a breathtaking good SACD passed on from the DP-550 – always the Accuphase not only presents itself as master of the situation, but more as master of naturalness, which is distinguished through its breathing, graceful finely drawn virtually feathery sound characteristics. The entire scenario it presents with the matter of course.

In the large STEREO-studio the new Pre- and Power amps performed in combination with the Accuphase SACD-player, DP-550, as well as the „Power Cleaner“ PS-1220 for clean energy.

And the Power amp is practically from the same kind; it's sensitive power meters, which already at a middle level reach far to the right and thus suggest the soon to be maximum capacity, which is nonsense, direct the rhythm. If one would like they can turn the twitchy meters off. Or one can freeze the peak levels, for the purpose of subsequent control.

Like how with the P-4200 during Jen Chapin's Stevie Wonder adaption from "You Haven't Done Nothin" (24/192, Hörtest-Edition III) one can still hear the room behind the singer in three dimension as well as the wonderfully seizing saxophone sounded from further out left of the loudspeaker base, what only a component with an accurate phase can achieve, was world class. Exactly for that stands „Accuphase“.

Energy and exact performance shall be secured by six high performance transistors which are mounted on a huge protruding heat sink, and are working in a cascaded parallel configuration in two groups of three in a symmetrical circuit. The Japanese call this their MCS-Principle ("Multiple Circuit Summing"). In the P-4200 it even encases the driver stage, what should minimize it's noise floor further.

The from bi-amping to mono operation switchable Power amp, which requires a second P-4200, possesses a potential power supply and remains therefore even during excessive volume levels relatively cool. It's gain selector with the positions "MAX", "-3 dB", "-6 dB" and "-12 dB" lowers just the input signal and not the tonal brisance of the "GAIN" – switch of the Power amp.

This metal remote control is supplied with the Preamp.

Firm as a rock the 30kg heavy P-4200 defies any impetus and leads thank to her high damping factor especially the bass drivers, which are connected to huge speaker terminals, on a short leash, whereas the bass sounds more dry and gnarled than smooth. In spite of their power the power amp reacts as light footed as Mohammed Ali fighting against Joe Frazier; gracefully she sashays following the swing of the music and strikes during the first opportune impulse suddenly and without hesitance.

During its performance the Accuphase-duo displays exactly the kind of show, for which this brand is known: professionalism without embellishment and not the tiniest trace of uncertainty even during the most difficult passages. We can call it audiophile artistic. Such skill in connection with elaborate electronics and a solidity made for eternity certainly has its price. But the German distributor reacts to the low Yen rate: C-2120 and P-4200 are priced as a set around 2100 Euro lower than its predecessors. There is even more to it!

Matthias Böde

Best options for top sound

Accuphase owners watch out! Even one who is not interested in the reviewed C-2120 can upgrade their Accuphase preamp or integrated amp with the addition of a phono-board and DAC-board. Lots of questions to us are focused on these option boards. What can they do? Can they replace external components? With the current versions AD-30 and the DAC-40(around 1010/1185 Euro) we search for answers. The rule is: It is an advantage that the modules lie on an equal power line potential same as the amp. Furthermore disturbing cable lines can be avoided.

The AD-30 with two cinch sockets and a ground connection equipped phono-board allows to switch the input resistance via a DIP-switch between 30, 100 and 300 Ohm. The GAIN factor for MM cartridges is 40, for MC cartridges 66 dB. In terms of little noise floor but also sound wise the AD-30 is superior. Vinyl records sound dynamic, fresh and three-dimensional. Our cross tests show, that external phono-stages with the same quality cost hardly less, use up a lot of space and even need costly power line and interconnect cables. Whoever wants more sound quality, has to invest at least double. In most cases the AD-30 is more than enough.

We were not only positively surprised from the sound quality of the DAC-40, which is equipped with an USB-interface, but also its ability to handle high bit-files with 24Bit/192 Khz resolution. Hence it transformed these files tonal and dynamically smoothly graded and with audiophile grand air to the listening ear. We have compared the performance of the DAC-40 board with the digital and analog connected DP-550 top player for 10450 Euro. Thereby both played with almost equal quality of sound, with the mid tones of the DAC-40 more striking while the music seemed more even and more relaxed while listening to the DP-550. Final conclusion is: an outstanding performance!