

Discover the Possibilities!

Nothing's changed? As if! With every new amplifier Accuphase exhausts its possibilities further. We went on a discovery tour with the recently launched E-480.

Groundhog Day! Another shibboleth, but on a serious note: whoever recalls the generations of Accuphase components – no matter what category – in one's mind's eye, may indeed get the impression that we see, at best, tiny variations of the very-same all the time. Undisputedly, the Japanese noble brand has always relied on evolution instead of revolution, yet has also succeeded each time to advance the performance of their products step by step.

And so it comes hardly as a surprise that we had once more a feeling of déjà vu with the presentation of the new E-480 integrated amplifier. We know this one, right? Yes and no, because the well-known concept was modified in many places. And, please take a good look, it now has a LED bar which indicates a lot of functions: no longer in the dark contrasting field of the switchable VU meters, but below them in the champagne front panel which makes it appear even more noble than the previous model, the price of which it even undercuts by 250 euros. Apart from such cosmetic retouches, the developers have refined and optimized the basic design in many places and put virtually every part to the test by checking out alternatives. The quality fanatics from Yokohama have documented the quintessence of their futile efforts in a photograph (see page 36) in which they placed all checked, but discarded parts neatly packed in little plastic bags before and around the finished amp. Those who see it may have a better understanding why in particular Accuphase devices regularly leave the impression of masterpieces elaborately arranged by fine fingers and perfectly balanced in all of their properties. Among the most striking differences are the new MOS-FET power transistors, which allegedly have an even faster rise time and are also more potent than the previously used types. Six of them per channel sit in groups of three in a parallel push-pull layout on each of the two power amp blocks, which are arranged as usual on either side of the central power supply.

Lush & thrilling even at low volume

Earlier than the lab check where the E-480 – a true-blue Accuphase here as well – easily surpassed the already generous power specs given by the manufacturer, we learned that the new Accuphase (the perfectly crafted exterior of which would rather point to the dandy who prefers a gentle sound to a punchy one) has plenty of power and can dish out mercilessly, too. Thus it was huge fun, for instance, to connect Burmester's new super turntable 175 to one of the two XLR inputs of the Japanese and let Kari Bremnes' ridiculously short and dry bass transients on her song "Spor" fire with a mighty volume level from the B&W 800D3s where it seemed indeed

as if the amp was holding the Brit's large woofers in a vise grasp. The announcement fits in the picture that the damping factor of the E-480 could be increased once more, which is why particularly the woofers of the connected loudspeakers should follow the amp's transients as precisely and vehemently as possible. At the same time the looming synthesizer clouds on this track could be heard floating lightly and lucid and also fully undisturbed by the superficial turmoil in the background, while the singer's high, clear voice appeared energetically dense and like pinned down between the speakers. The best and for everyday listening decisive fact is that even at low volume the amp didn't lose a bit of its thrilling fine and coarse dynamics and of its virile vividness. Discover the possibilities? Okay, we've understood. So for the moment we didn't do any more listening checks and explored instead the generous list of features. Unlike some other amplifiers with an emphatically puristic approach, those from Accuphase have always been oases of comfort. While a colleague recently complained about the frequent absence of formerly self-evident little helpers – not least disparaged often enough by our guild as dispensable sound killers, by the way –, the E-480 has them aplenty. Whether EQ and balance controls, loudness, muting, phase reversal or mono: it's all there! Nowadays even rarer to find is a, once common, switchable record out with a tape monitor function for triple-head machines, but the Accuphase has it. And on top also an excellent sounding headphone output, which can easily drive even models with a lower sensitivity such as the big Sennheisers. Furthermore, the two individually selectable loudspeaker pairs can be turned off completely. Despite the wealth of features one never loses track. For the majority of knobs and controls hide behind a large flap which gently swings down at the touch of a little pin. And no matter where you turn or press, the amp will often confirm your commands with a soft clicking noise from its long-term stable relays, which emphasizes the E-480's aura of delicate noblesse a little more. With the flap closed only the basic functions like the input selector and volume control remain accessible: the numerous sockets will accommodate even a larger equipment park, and if that still isn't enough, the E-480 also offers two slots for a D/A converter and/or a phono module (see box) or another high-level input respectively.

Precision as credo

Talking of volume: although the large volume control to the right turns so smoothly, there is no classical potentiometer inside, but only a magnetic pickup. The E-480 has none. The level is rather adjusted in fine increments by the different wiring of 16 differently weighted current/voltage converters, whereby orange luminescent digits between the meters indicate the respective value. The complex "Accuphase Analog Vari-gain Amplifier", briefly AAVA, is said to play with greater accuracy and better channel separation, less noise and fewer distortions than conventional solutions; and this reliably for many years to boot. Just as you can feed the power amp section of the E-480 from outside via XLR or RCA connectors, which simplifies its integration into AV chains controlled by a central multi-channel pre, the volume controlled preamp signal can be fed out e.g. in bi-amping configurations of both kinds. This, too, belongs to the multiple possibilities of the ultra flexible Japanese. A first taste of its sonic merits had already been given when, after an extended warm-up period, we were putting it through its paces now and again with little music appetizers. Honestly speaking, after 35 years of experience with Accuphase amplifiers I find it less alluring to trace its fundamental bias – which I do know –, but to see if and to what extent the manufacturer succeeded in moving the limits of what's possible a little bit once more. The credo for this can be seen in the brand name: "Accuphase stands for "accurate phase", thus the precise, time correct transmission of all tones from the deepest to the topmost pitch so that there be a realistic copy of the incoming signal. Sounds

simple, but it isn't by any means, and I keep wondering each time whether the explicit clarity, stringency and breathing vividness, with which also an E-480 captivates the listener, springs from its faithfulness to the original or rather from an immanent sound philosophy drawing attention to tiny details.

Vibrant liveliness

Anyway, the performances of the new Accuphase are so genuine and right to the point that it can take your breath away every now and then. I've heard the concise vibraphone beats in "Saturday Night" for instance by Red Norvo, who really loves dropping the vulcanite beaters of his mallets onto the metal bars, a thousand times already, but rarely ever so "naked", clear and out of nowhere like this time. One would even deem possible to perceive the texture of the materials. The amp also followed the steep bass transients on Monty Alexander's "Moanin'" with verve, giving them a tremendous drive. With gossamer-fine delicacy and fascinatingly "non-technical" came Beat Kaestli's "Day In Day Out", while the spectrum became fully detached from the speaker enclosures, and the stuffed trumpet in the interlude could clearly be heard outside to the left of the stereo base. The phase-accurate Accuphase can master such artistic tricks hands down. Although the E-480 is perfectly suitable for sound level orgies, it will as mentioned above train you for soft listening, because it can already then unfold its full dynamic, spatial and tone color spectrum. You're welcome to turn it up. But you don't have to, for it delivers excitingly lively performances even at low levels. An important point, because one can't or doesn't want to pump up the volume often. Hence for that reason, too, the E-480 qualifies as a full member of the family which represents the Accuphase concept as state-of-art and offers manifold possibilities in every respect. And if you should now plan your own discovery tour: thumbs up, it's guaranteed to be a pleasure trip.

Matthias Böde