

Reflections from the Silence

Can seemingly lifeless objects have a soothing effect on humans? Can an amplifier communicate tranquility and at the same time deliver a fascinating music rendition?

"Reflections from the Silence" (in the original: "Tsurezuregusa") is a little book with essayistic thoughts of Japanese officer, poet and Buddhist monk Yoshida Kenkō (1283–1350), which has survived the centuries as a canonical oeuvre of the Japanese society. In their standard work "A History of Japan", R.H.P. Mason and J.G. Caiger outline that Kenkō is "a wordly-wise gentleman with a distinctive sense of what is beautiful in this world of change". The folks of Accuphase Laboratory from Yokohama City also seem to have had this sense when designing their latest power amplifier.

Following my test reports of the Carmel 2 speakers (image hifi 5/2015) and the Accuphase M-6200 mono power blocks (image hifi 6/2016), I now have the pleasure to review yet another P.I.A. sales product, the P-7300. But this time the bar has been set higher. Of course I didn't have to do without the Accuphase reference chain of last time – the DP-720 CD player, the C-2850 preamp and the PS-1230 power supply (which keeps amazing me in terms of power cleaning and the deceleration and smoothing of the sound image that go with it), were once again at my disposal including an XLR wiring. However, this time I had to transfer my previous Accuphase knowledge to a different set of loudspeakers, because after nearly two years of reference status at the image listening room, the YG Carmel 2 is now in private service.

With four years of the development time for the P-7300 was shorter than the five years usually required. Perhaps it was due to chief engineer Takahiro Koyano who is only 30 years old and thus relatively young. But Accuphase's confidence in him proves that the company is open for fresh, new ideas and thinking ahead. After his studies, Koyano worked as a tester for semiconductor circuits at Yamaha. When he made the acquaintance of an Accuphase engineer at an Accuphase dealer show, he urgently wanted to switch to this traditional enterprise from Yokohama, something he succeeded to do so in 2013. Koyano-san is both an audiophile and a musician – he plays the violin. With the P-7300 he worked very hard to simplify the circuit layout of the power amp modules and their construction, especially with regard to the feedback loop. As a result of his design work, the signal-to-noise ratio, the distortion values and also the damping factor could be considerably improved, compared against the previous model P-7100. Koyano himself is a little amused when he recalls the design work was so much fun that he didn't sense the well over 50 kilos at all when he was constantly lugging the P-7300 around.

Talking about sensation. One of the biggest achievements of the entire topical Accuphase amplifier series, and of the P-7300 in particular, is their almost incredibly low noise. Following a hint from the distributor, and with the volume control fully turned up, I carefully held my ear at the tweeter of the DeVore Gibbon X loudspeaker, over which I was first checking the power amp prior to music listening. It's not that I really love doing such things, yet with Accuphase amps there is the safety that I will still be able to hear something afterwards. But I didn't hear a thing, absolutely nothing. The power amp is so quiet that you'll honestly need to check out if it's been turned on at all. Owing to this virtually total absence of a noise floor, one can undisturbedly follow the most delicate dynamic ramifications like, for example, on the soundtrack of Thomas Riedelsheimer's great movie "Touch the sound" (Normal N 267, CD 2004). The film is about the almost completely deaf percussionist Evelyn Glennie who, together with the Japanese drum ensemble Ondekoza, unleashes an overwhelmingly realistic drum firework on her percussion kit. How the heads of the relevant instruments are "hit", i. e. the way in which we can witness how the mallet hits the drums, evokes the wonderful film pictures in me again. On "Nha Sibitchi" on the CD Navega by the Capverdian singer Mayra Andrade (Sony Jazz 88697105642, CD 2007), Accuphase and the meanwhile connected Boenicke W11 SE+ are unfolding a soundscape which reminds me of a Kodachrome photograph: Almost more beautiful than the original, it sounds breezy, fluffy, danceable, and I can't imagine any listener wondering if he's just listening to canned music, not to mention to a CD. On Miles Davis' Kind of Blue (Columbia Legacy CK 64935, CD 1997, USA) I can quite easily comprehend the often barely audible bass runs while I enjoy the calmness of the sound image, the striking three-dimensionality and that overall purity of the reproduction without the faintest trace of sterility. Time and again, the notion occurs to me: "This is 'true' high-end."

In principle, the P-7300 is to be understood as the stereo version of the M-6200 mono power amps. It's the most powerful stereo power amp in the Accuphase class A/B family which deviates from the pure class A path in favor of a higher output. For comparison: the A-70, the biggest class A stereo power amp in the portfolio, is rated at 65 watts into 8 ohms, the P-7300 boasts a hefty 125 watts. Although exactly identical in weight with its predecessor P-7100, the P-7300 is a little smaller and more compact. The die-cast aluminum heatsinks on both sides, which hold the amplifier modules, provide a very efficient heat dissipation – the amp gets just about lukewarm. Moreover, the frame profiles are screwed to the front panel and the chassis to form a super solid entity. The P-7300 is equipped with ten bipolar power transistors working in parallel push-pull mode (thus 20 pieces per channel) – in the M-6200 monos there are eight of them. Among other things, they ensure a very high current capability, even so they are not fully driven, but only run at about a quarter of their potential performance yield. This is supposed to improve the synchronization, extend the transistors' life and reduce the noise even more – provided it was audible at all before. Here it's not only about the ear-evident practical utility of the missing noise, but first and foremost about the freedom from undesired intermodulations,

2

hence, in the final conclusion, the clarity and precision of the reproduction. At 12 mV the signal-to-noise ratio of the P-7300 lies on the same possibly record-breaking low level as with the M-6200 monos (11 mV) – the value of the earlier P-7100 has thus been halved. This is particularly remarkable, because such a value can't be realized as easily in the far more cramped environment of a stereo power amp as in mono power amps. So you could use one or two – also mono bridgeable – P-7300s in a high-sensitivity (horn-loaded) multi-channel system without a hitch.

The acoustic eight-cylinder engine of the M-6200 monos has turned into a 10-cylinder version which, metaphorically speaking, produces lightning-fast dynamic jumps and whisper-quiet, subtlest information due to its enormous torque.

I can't remember ever having seen such a huge mains transformer like the one in the P-7300: it weighs in at 14.6 kilograms [32.2 lbs.]. Why do people do such things? Accuphase appreciates power reserves so that their amplifiers can be "revved up" in a laid-back way. It is flanked by two gigantic 56,000 mF power supply electrolytic caps (actually designed for hybrid cars). Like the mains transformer, they have been tuned for minimal vibrations. The simplified ground routing was borrowed from the mono power amp sisters, just like the driver stage with its discrete differential amplifier for fully balanced signal paths, as it can also be found in measurement devices.

Sven Boenicke's loudspeakers are equally some sort of measurement device for amplifiers. The W11 SE+ are different in character from the YG Carmel 2, but hardly less fascinating. Concerning the amplifiers that are a good match for them, both speakers are similarly demanding. It's not by chance that Sven Boenicke likes to do demos at hi-fi shows using his own 400 watt class D power amps. With the P-7300 he would now have another fantastic option. This becomes particularly evident with Thomas Newman's soundtrack of the modern movie classic "American Beauty" (DreamWorks Records 0044-50233-2, CD 2000). Newman's music has certainly influenced more (film) composers than any other in the past 20, 30 years – right up to pre-prime-time programs and ringtones. The spectacular extended dynamic range of the recording has already brought quite a few loudspeakers and also some amplifiers down to their knees. On the contrary, the Japanese-Swiss team is sailing through all musical obstacles in such an unaffected, sovereign way – starting with "Dead Already" and its meanwhile famous Marimba theme – that I can only marvel. Likewise I'm amazed at the seemingly endless room which is spreading on Don Grolnick's "Pointing at the Moon" on Hearts and Numbers (HipPocket HD 106, CD, US 1985). The build-up of suspense and every dynamic nuance can be experienced like live at the studio. Steve Jordan's drum power and the sound of his cymbals are standing in the room with the same presence as the complex rhythmical variations in his interaction with Will Lee's bass runs. With this amplifier-speaker combination, so it seems to me, probably any kind of music is bound to turn into a sheer delight.

For the synergy with the Boenicke the extremely high damping factor of the P-7300 is very important. Of course, the value of at least 1000 represents merely a relative quantity which becomes only effective in the interaction between amp and speaker. But here this figure manifests itself pretty fast. As confidently as the M-6200 monos were dealing with the highly demanding YG Carmel 2, as casually the P-7300 is now dancing its tango with the Boenicke W11 SE+. Because, as was already indicated above, the Boenicke imposes comparably high requirements on amplifiers: they must be voltage stable and show themselves unimpressed even by mean impedance dips.

Another very important "sound factor" is the sensitive feedback in the power amp, referred to as "Balanced Remote Sensing" by Accuphase. It was refined once again and, according to Accuphase, now almost behaves like a zero-feedback circuitry, which is to benefit the fine, smooth sound – also because the distortions could be further reduced. The overall gain is the same as in the P-7100, yet weighted differently: in the input section it was increased threefold, whereas it was lowered in the power section which, combined with the fully discrete input layout without any ICs in the signal path, resulted in a further reduction of the noise floor. Yet all these technical merits I've just listed would be nothing but hot air, despicable marketing gossip, if devices like the P-7300 didn't produce such a wonderfully infatuating sound that is reminiscent of the very finest tube amplifiers for blending gentleness and structure, control and airiness. Sometimes I really do feel that modern Accuphase amplifiers are made for listeners who'd love to buy a tube amp, but don't dare to go for it.

Music shall once again serve as proof. On Gianmaria Testa's possibly best album *Altre Latitudine* (Le Chant du Monde 2741253, CD 2003) his voice was recorded slightly compressed. Over the Accuphase-Boenicke duet, however, it appears like relieved. As if he had been kept in political imprisonment, singing to his admirers through the bars of his jail window so far, Testa is now stepping out into the open, into the sun, finally able to unfold vocally. The muted trumpet is standing right in the middle of the room; at the same time the guitar can present its individual sound and the big drum its true size. This sounds so good that I want to continue listening through the songs one by one. How softly am I touched by the ever so delicate blow of the saxophone on "Solo Per Dirti Di No", and how deeply is the music graduated in the room by the brisk percussion! Did I ever really notice on "Tuareg" how the steel strings of the second guitar are plucked?

Finally I lend my ear to Daniel Lanois' *Here is what is* (Red Floor Records, CD 2008) at a very low volume, and I witness the music with Accuphase and Boenicke like through an acoustic magnifying glass. It seems to me as if I were running through a dark forest by night and had to adapt briefly to the contrasts, which stand out all the more clear-cut then. „Bladesteel“ merges Brian Blade's rhythmically intricate second line beat drumming with Lanois' heavenly played pedal steel guitar and its flowing, spherical wealth of overtones. On "Sacred and Secular" even the very highest notes and their harmonics are utterly precisely defined in the low-level mode: soft, when

played softly, hard, when hit hard. Thus it goes on and on. The gospesque "Joy", once again with the unmistakable grooves by Brian Blade, takes me to the old Unterfahrt, to the Muffat Hall, into the Ampere, all of them Munich clubs and locations where I saw and heard Lanois, Blade & co. several times during the past 30 years. While I was dealing with the P-7300, a very special event came to my mind. After a documentary on arte about Anne-Sophie Mutter early this year, I bought tickets for the Salzburg Pentecost Festival – at 170 euros each my most expensive tickets ever. But the concert was so fantastic that I will never forget this experience. Likewise, the P-7300 is an investment in comparable and even repeatable experiences. Yoshida Kenkō writes: "How deplorable I deem the idea that all things that constantly surround us will survive us unaffectedly, as if nothing had happened." Is this really deplorable? My Accuphase components would be welcome to survive me, if only I had any. And I'm sure, they would. The experiences which the P-7300 gave me and the tranquility that goes with it, the silence that spreads out in me while I'm listening to music, are by all means priceless.

Christian Bayer