

# Forever Hanami

*Would you like to know how Accuphase succeeds in making already great equipment even better with every new product generation? Then you can look forward to new insights.*

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A wonderful, big cherry tree stands in front of our house to the right of the little crate which houses the garbage cans. When it's in full bloom, I sometimes lay myself under that tree and watch the sun shining through its leaves, bestowing some kind of outwordly character to this gift of nature. Sometimes I also carefully pick up a leaf to trace its infinite delicacy. The Japanese love the cherry blossom festival of Hanami, because here beauty, in the form of the short blossoming, and transience by the imminent withering are so close to each other. Along with the cherry blossoms, people now enjoy more pleasant temperatures and feel the awakening of Mother Nature's forces. Sure, the cherry blossom of 2018 is long over, but these associations come to my mind while I'm lying on my back in the living room and, amplified by the E-650, Pat Metheny's guitar notes on What's It All About (Nonesuch 4931741, CD, EU 2011) soar to the ceiling like little fireflies. I feel as if I could reach out for one of these tones, view its shimmer and shine from all sides. Yes, with the E-650 you can celebrate your audiophile Hanami cherry blossom festival all year long.

The Accuphase E-650 is a classic integrated amplifier, fully equipped and ready for all possible applications with its two optional boards to which I'm going to return later. Like all large Accuphase amplifiers it runs in class-A. With this operating mode, at least one amplifying component is permanently energized, which results in fewer crossover distortions and a better graded distortion spectrum. The drawbacks are a low efficiency and a very high temperature evolution. The E-650 puts out approximately 30 watts into 8 ohms, which is normally the end of the road for a class-A amplifier; the famous Pioneer M-22 power amps or the classic Sugden amps from England may serve as prominent comparative examples here. 30 watts in view of well over 25 kilograms of weight, thus casually formulated: just below one watt per kilo? This may seem to be paltry, but please forget those numbers games, for the E-650 has enough power, a power which it skillfully uses and which enables it to perform sovereignly with very different loudspeakers. For instance with my LS3/5a which is known to be glad about every extra watt. In line with this is the following story the workshop manager of Accuphase distributor P.I.A. once told me: One day a big class-A power amplifier arrived on his workbench for a routine checkup, and he was wondering about the prominent customer, the Fraunhofer Institute. So he called there and asked them why they needed such a power amplifier. They replied that there wasn't any other device on the market which could be operated down to 1 ohm in such a stable manner like the Accuphase. And precisely this stability can be felt in virtually all situations – you don't necessarily need to match it with extremely power hungry loudspeakers.

The E-650 doesn't fully represent the pure class-A doctrine, for it isn't a single-ended, but a push-pull amplifier – and even one that runs in triple parallel push-pull mode. In single-ended mode its output power would be significantly lower, and so Accuphase combines its immanent beautiful sound, a trademark of their class-A amplifiers, with the typical orderliness and structure of good push-pull amps. It draws its power from the parallel layout of the MOSFETS, which are wired in such a manner that only a fraction of their potential maximum power is requested. The comparison with a sovereign 12-cylinder engine suggests itself, because the E-650 plays both dynamically agile and unexcitedly stable, thereby mastering two real supreme audiophile disciplines. Compared to its predecessor E-600, Accuphase has modified primarily the activation of the power transistors in the new E-650 which, by the way, belong to a new MOSFET generation. Their driver stage was finetuned with bipolar transistors in such a way that the sound seems to come more from the center. Moreover, the whole circuitry now has a lower impedance design and an even lower noise floor, although noise has never been an issue with Accuphase devices anyway. Just for the record: compared to the predecessor, at 102 dBs the E-650's signal-to-noise ratio was improved again by an incredible 33 percent.

Now let's hear what this so reformed E-650 can do with my LS3/5a. Is *The Trentemöller Chronicles* (Audiomatique Recordings AMCD01/02, 2-CD, Germany 2007) actually techno? I'd rather say it's electronic music with soul, smoothness and finesse. How cool this sounds over these little monitors, how delightful it is to pump up the volume more and more so that many critics of these speakers would be surprised at how loud, undistorted and dynamic they can play when set up correctly and driven in such a way.

Next I put *Erik Satie early piano works volume one*, performed by Reinbert de Leeuw (harlekijn holland 2925 508, LP, Holland 1975) on the turntable. These recordings are among the most idiosyncratic and most beautiful piano recordings of which I know. Satie, the melodic composer; Satie, the rogue; Satie, the innovator – de Leeuw covers them all like a soulmate. With the "Gnossiennes", those miniatures cryptically named by Satie, explorations are taking place which go far beyond conventions without breaking them completely. These are meditations in their own measure of time and as such they are fragile: if the musical flow is not kept going, they lose their magic. But with the E-650 I embark on some kind of acoustic raft and let myself drift on this river of tones, following with the greatest enjoyment the most subtle dynamic nuances of touch, that dance-like ebb and flow. The development and decay of single notes is so wonderfully shaped and illuminated that I can imagine: yes, Satie himself would love to hear his dreamy pieces in such a way. And once again I feel like trying something new. *Krokofant* (krokofant RLP3154, LP, Norway 2013) is also highly unconventional music. – But what kind of genre is this? Jazzrock, power avantgarde? I don't know. I only know that the E-650 unaffectedly joins in this extreme change of mood and triggers headbanging stimuli in me. The hard guitar riffs, the tormented saxophone and the hyperactive drumming will give you no rest – and for the first time I understand why. They illustrate the agony of modern man who, forced into an invisible corset of hardships, is struggling to find his way to himself, out of the postmodern pseudo freedom. This is not necessarily beautiful music, it is often burdening, yet at times also shining charmingly and full of hope, and it's always full of energy. This is how it sounds over the E-650 and it makes me realize the message, the heart of this music. – As always the biggest compliment I can pay to a component.

I have chosen this musical diversity to document that the E-650 is not merely a class-A palliator as one might assume. It exists indeed some sort of Accuphase “dilemma“. Their excellent devices have been constantly improved over decades, so with every new product generation, the engineers face the challenge of how to refine e.g. a very good integrated amplifier like the E-600 so that it won't lose its many plus factors. A view into the English version of the excellent Accuphase website will help you to get a better understanding of this critical process. Individual protagonists do not count for Accuphase, but the company as such with its products does. The section “Company Profile“ explains its philosophy in an astonishing and surprising way. Surprising because it's often about subjects which tend to remain inaccessible to a streamlined technician. In one paragraph captioned by “The Future of Audio“ we can find phrases like: “Music is not a tangible thing that can be touched or seen, but it has enormous power to move the soul.“ And in the section on sound differences (“Why sonic differences?“) we can read: “And it is just this expression (i.e. being able to reproduce fine musical nuances) that determines the value of the product. However, even with the most advanced measurement tools, it is as of yet not possible to fully analyze these differences in expression. (...) Therefore we have chosen an approach whereby elements are replaced individually and music is then reproduced again under the same circumstances, allowing us to judge the effect by ear. (...) Through this demanding and painstaking process, where judgment is entrusted to human sensibility, we carefully and gradually hone the musical expression of a product. At Accuphase, repeated listening tests at this stage are allocated about as much time as technical development. (...) Audio products (...) are of course not a necessity of life. (...) But music on the other hand enriches our sensibilities and is an essential part of what makes us human.“ – I was very happy to read those explanations, after all they give me a reason why the products from Yokohama do not only offer a phantastic quality of workmanship and extreme realibiliy, but also a superb sound. Because they are obviously designed with heart and mind as well as with soul and ears.

The E-650 was delivered in 2017 as a Christmas bonus to the dealers and thus followed the E-600 after nearly four years. It contains a carefully thought out mix of discrete elements, OP amps and SMD technology and, owing to its compact layout, combines this with extremely short signal paths. It's the first integrated class-A amplifier to feature the so-called “Balanced AAVA“ volume control, an ultra precise level adjustment about which alone one could write a comprehensive technical paper. It enabled a consistent, fully balanced signal transfer from the inputs to the speaker outputs. As I already mentioned, the E-650 is lavishly and reasonably equipped and yes, one needs both optional boards, period. The notoriously secretive technical department revealed to me that, in terms of sound, with the AD-50 phono board one could already come close to the meanwhile legendary C-37 phono preamp. Which I've never heard, but I readily believe it because for me the sound not only leaves nothing to be desired – I am thrilled with the AD-50. And this compared against my outstanding Air Tight ATC-1, which has a separate RIAA fixed level output. The differences lie in the range of personal preferences and are not worth mentioning. The DAC-50 board doesn't differ at all from my very expensive tube-driven DAC in terms of quality and only marginally with regard to its sound. And now let's be straight: who wants to install extra devices for joyful music listening if he or she has gone for an integrated amplifier like the E-650? No one, and luckily no one has to. The entire amplifier is a triumph of sonic refinement. Top-class workmanship and feel has always been, but such an airy, delicate sound quality previously hasn't.

With *summerwind* (ACT 9871-1, LP, Germany 2018), (Lars) Danielsson and (Paolo) Fresu recorded their first common album, which I received from ACT already before its publication date. The music of these two masters creates the impression as if they had always been playing together. Their version of “Autumn Leaves“ on track one catapults them straight into the top 20 of the most beautiful interpretations of this classic: seemingly simple, timelessly beautiful, played with infinite calmness and once more with this majestic sliding. – Do you remember my “12-cylinder“ comparison? The Accuphase presents Fresus’ soft flugelhorn and Danielsson’s woody bass like through a Leica lens. Room, depth, feel, everything is there aplenty. And so I listen through this wonderful album completely in one go on this last day of the summer vacation, while outside my window a huge rainbow is spanning across the Isar. And because the mood of the setting sunlight is leading me there, I put on Miles Davis’ *Ascenseur pour l’échafaud* (Fontana 0660213, LP, RE France 1988). The different takes of “Nuit Sur Les Champs-Élysées“ fill my listening room, and the following fragments of thought come to my mind: “perfect film; perfect soundtrack; perfect reproduction.“ Those style-forming cooljazz recordings are definitely cooler than cool and still don’t sound cool in the least. The E-650 keeps the tension alive without weaving additional tensions into the sound image. All instruments come up like from a dark backdrop and then disappear again, only stepping into the limelight for the duration of their solos. This is nothing short of magic. This music appears like a mass, it sounds beautiful without having been beautified, precise and yet friendly. It’s a wonderful, truly human sound which recalls another passage of the Accuphase website. Under the headline “The future of high-end audio“ we can read: “In view of social factors such as the declining birthrate and advancing age of users, a market expansion cannot realistically be expected. But music has unlimited possibilities, and it will be around for as long as humans are alive. If the aim of Accuphase is defined as nurturing the audio culture necessary to the human race, the future of audio no longer seems uncertain.“

Writing reviews like this is not at all easy, even though they may appear to be a sure-fire success. For what do people say about a perfect product? The thoughts which Accuphase has collected on their website have reassured me enormously in my perception of their appliances. What I had anticipated already before, has now turned into a certainty: the devices from Yokohama have a “soul“, they are capable of taking the essence of musical messages to the listener. And the Accuphase engineers have the right tools which enable them to keep optimizing even seemingly perfect products in the spirit of an ever more sublime reproduction. There would be no other way to understand that they succeed in finding time and again a set-up which fully meets their sonic DNA, only to refine it again. Sometime next spring I’m going to lay myself under our cherry blossom tree once more and dream of the E-650.

*Christian Bayer*