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Accuphase Super Audio CD Player DP-78

by Heinz Gelking

How carefully the man from the parcel service is heaving the cardboard box with the orange Accuphase logo through the door. Don't get stuck! Accuphase stands for expensive hi-fi as much as Leica for costly cameras or Porsche for expensive sports cars. Evidently, this is also anticipated by people who are not linked to the audio trade.

This may perhaps be due to the fact that Accuphase was already existing in the years when hi-fi fans were quite important and represented a large group. As I was taking over the box and signed the electronic receipt book the guy from UPS dropped just one word: "Äkjufäiss". And there was this certain timbre of acknowledgement in his voice which no million-dollar marketing campaign can buy from one day to the other. Accuphase, the Japanese luxury brand, have won this reputation since 1972. A different era indeed. No PCs, no fitness centres and merely three TV channels. And the compact cassette, the "data-reduced" medium of that époque, auditioned through the tape deck in a run-of-the-mill hi-fi chain sounded so much better than today's MP-3-files via "active speakers" linked to a PC from the discounter. Those days have seen benchmarks for good sound. Nobody ever grasped music as being a conglomerate of data and nobody would have accepted the sound of tiny plastic speakers as standard.

I certainly do not want to moan here and I'm also far from telling you that everything was better then, with the exception perhaps that this might be true when we are listening to reproduced music. Apart from photography there was actually no technically oriented hobby to devote oneself as much as to hi-fi. Whereby both hi-fi and photography always contained a kind of cultural component, too, namely the pleasure an effective photo or listening to good music was to give us. This made the hobby so distinguished from tinkering around with cars.

It was the time when Accuphase started the business in Germany and I would not further waste my words if I wouldn't consider Accuphase still having a foot in those golden hi-fi times. The cooperation with the German distributor P.I.A. HiFi Vertriebs GmbH was founded in 1975 and from the same year on Koichi (Nick) Iguchi was taking care of the technical service for all "official" Accuphase components. The quality of the P.I.A. service has become a legend, by the way. "Wish I also could rely on such a brilliant service at any time" I'm typing - with a sigh - into my keyboard after a two-and-half day struggle with the service & support of my online provider (still named Deutsche Bundespost in 1975) and their unexpected yet definite sacking me from the Internet. Eventually, I could solve the problem on my own initiative and two days later I was fortunate enough to have this review e-mailed to Gröbenzell just before deadline.

Accuphase and tradition: the front panels have the colour of champagne and the displays demonstrate a playful joy of putting luminous figures on stage. The typical ambience of colours - orange letters, smoked glass, champagne-coloured aluminium and the deep dark brown housing - is conveying harmony and furthermore is, in my humble opinion, not at all philistine. Something similar you can get only from McIntosh. When trends are chased after by cool design-trailblazers, yet sooner or later are to become outdated, the front panel from Yokohama will still be around to demonstrate and tell you as before: look, I am Accuphase! At the same time these Japanese have a bloody good nose for something developing against the tide. In the age of DAB and other radio transmission formats, who would have thought of someone other than Magnum Dynalab to launch a really big and really expensive FM-tuner to the market? - There you are: Accuphase have recently come up with the T-1000 just like that, albeit a conservatively conceived and perhaps risky component in view of the current discussions about shutting off FM for good. Nevertheless, it does continue the proud ancestor's gallery of great Accuphase tuners. And the T-1000 is a thousand times more interesting for me than a new six-channel power amp, like for instance the PX-650, which is leading me to Accuphase and progress: it is, so to speak, their tradition to be always ahead of the crowd when it comes to technological developments. Besides amplifier design there are in particular the digital sources where Accuphase succeeded in the past years. The Accuphase DP-77, which is finally taking us closer to the actual issue of this review, was likewise a digital source entirely up to date. It had a proud 192/24 signet on its front panel, yet it is now replaced by the DP-78 nevertheless.

DP-77 and DP-78 can barely be distinguished when viewed from outside (that's the tradition) yet substantially from inside (where the progress is hidden). The new big integrated is said to be based on the know-how Accuphase acquired when they were developing and building the ultimate drive/converter combination DP-100 and DC-101 (image hifi 2/2001). The drive supplied by Sony is now located and well shielded beneath a metal plate which is not only to subdue the drive noise but also to fight excitations coming from the outside world. The essentials for the sonic progress however are said to take place at the level of digital signal processing. As opposed to the DP-77, which featured four D/A converter systems per channel, the DP-78 comes equipped with even six Delta-Sigma-Converter type AD1955 from Analog Devices, per channel that is! For further signal processing the output signals of the AD1955 array (normal and inverted phase) are combined in a way that conversion errors can be substantially reduced (Accuphase are claiming factor $2.4/\sqrt{6}$) before the signals are sent through the current- and voltage-adder stages and alternatively made available at either balanced (XLR) or unbalanced (RCA) output jacks at the rear panel of the player. By the way, this measure did in no way alter the technical specifications: quite like its predecessor, the DP-78 also works with a sampling rate of up to 192 kHz/24 Bit (PCM, two-channel) respectively 28.224 MHz/1 Bit (DSD, two-channel). After all, Koichi Iguchi of P.I.A. assured me that the signal-to-noise ratio as well as the dynamic range could be further improved.

It would actually be a great pity to make this elaborate and expensive converter section not accessible for other digital sources also, wouldn't it? Well, Accuphase did make it possible by having provided two digital inputs (optical and coaxial) which can receive foreign signals from vintage CD players, DAT recorders, MD players or digital radio appliances, as long as the mentioned devices are equipped with a digital output.

On the other hand, who is going to put a CD into an old player if the DP-78 is standing next to it? No-one who can flawlessly count up to three, or unless it's going to be meant an experiment. In the end we get to the same arguments like during the test of the Audionet CAT (image hifi 5/2005): it would be a tremendous waste if this brilliant converter section could not be used for other applications! Therefore, the digital inputs of the DP-78 yield a true added value for Accuphase customers, in particular when compared to many competitive components which do not have this feature.

We need not talk about the entirely independent power supply each for digital and analogue signal processing as well as the spatial separation of the two sections. That goes without saying. With respect to digital sources - the combination of DP-100 and DC-101 has been an absolute benchmark for some years - Accuphase were to lose their excellent standing. The wonderful sound machine in my rack however is certainly not to threaten this reputation. Everything here is a splendid achievement up to the solid and exquisitely crafted housing. The lid, covered with a Nextel-like material, wins the knuckle test with my applause as it tops the Krell SACD Standard which itself is built like a fortress. The DP-78 stands on four large, damped feet made from metal and carbon. In between I also tried some alternative supports, yet except for the Harmonix feet at prohibitive prices, I found nothing this SACD player sounded better with than in its own standard shoes.

Let's get to the emotive issue "digital formats": the DP-78 would not accept CD-ROMs, DVDs, SACD-multi-channel and CD-RWs as it was made an SACD/CD player for pure two-channel operation. Which brings us to the rather unpopular question of self-assertion: what's coming out of this confusion, i.e. SACD versus DVD-Audio? I really have no idea. I don't even know if I'm doing anyone a favour if I bring this issue up for discussion every time I'm reviewing a digital component. So here are just two observations: firstly, I own several hundred CDs, perhaps thirty SACDs and maximum five Audio-DVDs. Now, what's interesting for me in the first place is the top-class rendition of CD and then the sonic virtues of SACD. Secondly, in the past two years the bigger classic labels (first and foremost Universal) have been sending me review copies on CD only, while before they provided me first with the CD and then - evidently knowing that our gentle and sonically demanding readers might be interested also - a few weeks later the respective SACD was sent. Today it's only with the small labels (like Audite) or the budget-sellers (like Brilliant Classics) to push this sound carrier, which without any doubt sounds superior to my ears. My very personal opinion about this? - Well, those global players, which are oh so heavily moaning these days, should have completely switched to SACD and eventually dropped CD, or sell them off dirt cheap as long as they would last. Better sound on SACD with a price tag similar to that of a regular high-priced (as opposed to "nice price") CD, I'm quite sure, would make the discussions about the present crisis of the music industry obsolete! Anyone out there listening to me? And what could be the conclusions drawn from these observations? As far as I'm concerned, a digital player must, above all, present itself as excellent CD player and then as exquisite SACD source.

So, I'm setting up the DP-78 and while connecting it to the mains I think they could have marked the IEC socket for correct phase. I let it warm up overnight and in the morning a CD is loaded. The DP-78 however plays much too soft although the

volume knob on my preamp was turned up pretty far and still I could hardly get beyond the normal room volume level.

With the help of the non-German and not so clearly arranged owner's manual I could eventually get to the bugs: the DP-78 features an adjustable output level control (0 to -60 dB) which just then was set to -32. I turn it up to 0 and from this very moment on the sun is coming into my room. In the daily practise the DP-78 turns out to be very user-friendly. The drive noise is lower than the one coming from the Krell SACD Standard, the access time to tracks shorter and last but not least, the buttons on the front panel (albeit not on the remote control) are more ergonomic owing to their size, form and fine action point. You feel at home or like sitting in front of the dashboard in your favourite Mercedes. I'm only missing the meter for the oil temperature.... Everything seems a bit conventional yet totally reliable. This in mind one can fully concentrate on the route for the journey through one's CD collection.

My route begins in Lisbon with *Madredeus* and the voice of Teresa Salgueiro. Certainly, this production by EMI from the year 1990 cannot be considered an audiophile CD. Too much keyboard sound (all of us audiophiles do love "natural" instruments, right?) and a microphone which was in no way complimenting the voice but rather added a tad of extra harshness to the already sharp tones of Teresa Salgueiro's singing, the latter however being quite typical of the Mediterranean area. I trust to have perceived the difference between the natural sharpness of the voice and the artificial sharpness of the microphone and therefore can certify the high-resolution capabilities of the DP-78, at least for the time being and without having to blame it all on this mediocre production.

The route continues to Paris and there to the Olympia. First, Patricia Kaas sings "Les lignes de nos mains" followed by "Dans ma chair". Here, the French Sony Corporation too did in no way succeed in coming out with an audiophile CD in 1998, but I know of hardly any other live recording conveying such an abundance of atmosphere, such a plausible, huge soundstage (in a pop concert!) and this fantastic punch in the basses. Absolutely thrilling. I do not know yet which findings about the specific characteristics of the DP-78 I can draw for myself. Nevertheless, against my original intention I auditioned this 2-CD set until the last track was over. That huge soundstage however is a completely different matter which I'll have to evaluate once again!

Up the north to Amsterdam. Chailly is conducting Messiaen's *Turangalila Symphony*. This is the first SACD to feed the DP-78 with. The Concertgebouw Orkest is producing sound colours which were in fact hidden when I listened to the CD-layer through Audionet's ART V2. No question, the fantastic recording sounds still very good with this player, but when the DP-78 is reading the SACD track the last bit of graininess has gone. I quickly fetch and play the SACD with marimba virtuoso Katarzyna Myæka, which I introduced in the previous issue. What I hear is the art of dynamic distinction in its utter pureness! Garlands of single tones are exploding and vanish between a hard beat and its breezing away. The Krell SACD Standard also could do that or was perhaps even on par. Yet with the DP-78 the rendition of the background is more silent and that's why it sounds less spectacular than the Krell. I trust it's exactly this measure of silence which even after some extended considerations implies a rather silly comparison, which however seems to be in place here: the sound of the DP-78 conveys something that among digital source components only a selected few from the top league are capable of doing, like the

Reimyo CDP-777, I recall. What I mean is the unshakeable (background) silence of the best analogue turntables.

What's next, Thielemann in Vienna with Strauss or him with "his" new orchestra in Munich and Bruckner? OK, once again Vienna and the Philharmonics with a live recording of the *Alpensinfonie* by Richard Strauss. In no way does this CD sound outstanding when heard through a mediocre player. The DP-78 however opens such an acoustic space I've heard and remember from only two other digital sources, namely the above mentioned Reimyo CDP-777 (image hifi 3/2003) and the emm-Labs DCC2 (image hifi 4/2004).

The odd thing is that when I listened to the DP-78 and also while writing this review, I never asked myself voluntarily what it is capable of doing. I had to concentrate on such questions over and over again whereby I never had the feeling that the DP-78 can "objectively" read more details from the silver disks than, say, the Krell SACD Standard. Perhaps it doesn't do that at all because with respect to any hi-fi criteria the Krell is extremely good already, for half the money, that is. Still, I prefer to listen to the DP-78. Why that? - I know it should be my duty to give you an answer on this but I can't. The "darkness" of its background? The three-dimensionality of its sound pictures plus the rock-solid stability of the latter? The oh so relaxed rendition? Maybe the peculiarity is as simple as this: I've fully trusted the DP-78 from the very beginning and never asked what could be bettered in any way and anywhere. Well, I certainly do not encounter something like this every day.

Now back home to the *Ruhrgebiet* [the "Black Country" of Germany]. Claude Frank, whose Beethoven cycle of 1970 had been introduced in image hifi by Matthias Kornemann, was giving a concert in the Essen Folkwang Museum, of which the recording is available on CD also. Claude Frank's students play first then he takes over with Schubert's sonata in B-Major D 960. Him a pianist in his Eighties with arthritic fingers but a master nevertheless. This recording will hit you all the way into the spinal cord, presumably even when heard over a car radio. There are certainly piano recordings around sounding better than this document. But that doesn't matter.

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What I like:

Of the three best digital source components I've heard to this date, this one is the least expensive.

What's missing:

Nothing.

What a surprise:

With respect to the already most complete features, it's the possibility of further upgrading by means of option boards.

What to do:

Those who are looking for merely a CD player, i.e. a "specialist", should not miss to audition the DP-78 also.