

Accuphase Integrated Amplifier E-460

Of Long Standing Nobility

By Holger Biermann

For quite some time sonic revolutions have not been on Accuphase's agenda. The Japanese are rather commemorating evolution, i.e. the continuous betterment of the already good. And the new E-460 is arguably the most splendid implementation of this noble tradition.

In some way time is moving at a different pace there in Yokohama where Accuphase has the headquarters. About 70 employees are working, tweaking and researching in an entrepreneurial sector where the air has become pretty thin these days: the absolute High-End. Since the Japanese – with evidently rare persistence – stick to the tried and tested regarding technology and design, relatively new components, like in this case the E-460, are more or less conveying a *déjà vu* experience. Even the digital volume level indicator, which its predecessor E-450 does not have, has already been gracing several power stations from Accuphase, like for instance the monophonic amplifier M-100 from the year 1981 - (see also "*Vor 30 Jahren*" [30 years ago] on page 10).

The preoccupation with components from Accuphase, i.e. this wonderfully lush click when selecting the inputs or the still unique sense of solidity I perceive when turning the volume knob is every time inducing in me the languorous feeling of "coming home". Similar to what Mercedes-Benz intent with the S-Class, Accuphase too is taking the time of about four years until they are to launch a successor. And in spite of the rather long developmental period the differences are seemingly not really big. By the way, P.I.A. [*the German Accuphase distributor*] is providing a most interesting retrospect into the history of Accuphase. The link www.pia-hifi.de/History allows you to browse a wonderful vintage compendium as well as instruction manuals.

All cut from the same cloth?

As we know from the past decades the differences between the E-460 and its various predecessors are not really spectacular. The connections are identical and likewise the weight, power supply and average output power. 201 W into 8 Ohm respectively 332 W into 4 Ohm are almost exactly corresponding with those figures of the E-450 and E-408. Then it goes without saying that these amps nearly look alike but that's part of the traditional concept.

Back to MOSFETs

Nevertheless, one has to take a closer look in order realise that the engineers at Accuphase have indeed accomplished some remarkable changes. First, there is the remote commander unit which is now made of metal instead of the hitherto rather unworthy plastic material. Then there are a number of down-sized circuit boards inside which by means of SMD technology are to counter earlier critics who have

been complaining about some signal paths within the circuitry being too long. We discover a fine tuning also in the processor-controlled AAVA volume control which is now generating even lesser noise, owing to more modern parts employed. In particular however the engineers have returned to the comforting, warm sound of MOSFETs. A step into the right direction because it's without question that these particular solid-state devices have after all founded the sonic reputation of the big amplifiers from Accuphase.

Yet apart from all this progress it would make sense to also reconsider the already well-proven features, for example the pre-out function. An additional power amplifier could be connected here in order to get the best possible sound from one's speakers in a bi-amplified setup. In the past couple of months *STEREOPLAY* has gone through quite a few experiments in various configurations which eventually led us to the conclusion that in nearly all cases the sonic advantages of this mode of operation are clearly compensating the extra expenses. Since all amplifiers respectively power stages from Accuphase (including the integrated ones) come with a built-in gain factor of precisely 28 dB, there will never occur the problem of differing volume levels between the driven frequency ranges (high and low) when using any additional Accuphase power amp.

The largely balanced design of the E-460 implies the preferred use of balanced connection leads. Well, we cannot fully agree with this because during our listening tests we found the classic RCA leads in no way inferior to the XLR variants. In fact, the opposite is true.

The two installation ports at the rear panel of the E-460 should absolutely be regarded as an invitation for musical enjoyment in form of the excellent phono stage AD-20 or of the even more interesting D/A converter board DAC-30. We had ample time to audition the AD-20 as it was part of an extended E-450 test some time ago. This is why for this review we've dedicated ourselves more intensively to the DAC-30. Put in a nutshell: this option board sounds marvellously detailed and open, no matter which digital data processing format came in from the source. We took the T+A DAC 8 (tested in issue 09/2011) for comparison purposes whereupon both were involved in a most challenging duel. In the end the Accuphase DAC-30 won by a slight margin owing to its better rendition of low-level dynamics.

Gentle power

Anyway, whether T+A converter or option board, the new Accuphase integrated made quite clear right from the start that it inherited the power directly from its predecessors. In the meantime a hard disk with music from vinyl sampled to 24/192 kHz has taken a permanent residence in our listening room. Among many others it also contains such bizarre pieces like Charlie Antolini's "*Knock Out*". Although, musically speaking, of rather humble value I must admit that I listened to this drummer show with once again great enjoyment. The E-460 managed to hammer the load of drum beats into our listening room with verve, great precision and stunningly powerful nonetheless. Well, I got almost carried away by the illusion of "live"!

Certainly, it was not only the sheer power fascinating me, but even more so the ease the E-460 is able to convey. With its rather warm yet well tempered and perfectly executed rendition it is to overwhelm the listener with wonderful music. Voices are a pure joy because this amp has got the ability to push the envelope very

far without ever becoming sonically obtrusive. At the end of a hectic day in our offices I found myself still sunken in music for another half an hour or so – and yes, I was to owe this to the E-460.

The beauty of the sound is reminding me of very good valve amplifiers, its energy potential however is in a quite different league: how explosive and stunningly detailed the E-460 could unravel the percussions in Monty Alexander's "*Hurricane Come And Gone*" was simply breathtaking. Whilst its predecessor E-450 may have still got the virtual attitude of a "bruiser" the successor presents itself distinctly more cultivated, matured and balanced. Indeed, the engineers at Accuphase have achieved a brilliant fine-tuning which without any doubt makes the E-460 the best Accuphase amplifier I've heard to this date!

Summary

The E-460 is further enhancing the success story of the big Accuphase amplifiers. Sonically on the smoother and more subtle side when compared to its predecessors it is to outperform each of the amplifiers below 10,000 Euro that have so far been tested by *STEREOPLAY*. This integrated amplifier is the audiophile's dream.