

Tour de Force

Accuphase has meticulously refined their class-A mono blocks. What added value do the new A-250s offer?

No, I can't stop myself from pushing the central »Power« button though not even the cables are connected yet. Then comes that full-bodied »clicking« sound! Sure, this is only a tiny, but nonetheless fascinating jigsaw piece of the demanding Accuphase universe, where great emphasis is put on manual-technical precision. The value of an Accuphase device can undoubtedly be grasped with the unaided eye. Conversely, the manufacturing quality of many other components, which are labeled as »high-end«, appears to be downright ridiculous. Of course, there's a concept behind it, because nothing will come from nothing. As Accuphase President Hideharu Ito explains, other makers like to see their failure rates in the single-digit percentage range, but he reverses that point of view: whenever an Accuphase customer has to complain about a failure of his gear, this is 100 per cent. Such is defined the ambition to exercise ultimate precision in the production process, and each device is thoroughly tested in the Japanese city of Yokohama.

Likewise the German distributor PIA is well-reputed for leaving nothing to chance. Therefore we didn't only receive the new A-250 mono amps for a review, but once again a complete Accuphase chain (DP-950 CD/SACD player, DC-950 D/A converter, C-3850 preamp). The »system idea« behind it has been cultivated for many years by Accuphase and PIA, and so I may speak of a grown tradition here as well. The A-250 mono power amps are the evolution of the A-200 (see issue 2/2013), a class-A design which had already been taken to the limit and the refinement of which has now consistently been pursued. Developments at Accuphase take place similar to the growing of a tree: little by little it keeps getting higher and higher. This refers primarily to the technical, objectively measurable advances which, however, are only implemented if the innovation is also reflected in the sound image. Continuity is thus maintained and nothing well-established is abandoned.

The most important starting points for the previous Accuphase amplifier generations were routinely the signal-to-noise ratios and also the damping factor. For the latter the Japanese carefully examined everything that follows after the power transistors: protection circuits, output relays, in fact every contact which could get in the way of the output section's internal resistance. For the A-250 Accuphase gives a damping factor value of 1,400, but only 1,000 is officially stated, just like with the A-200 which had already set a new lab benchmark with its excellent signal-to-noise ratios. Between ourselves, even Wilfried Kress had been wondering how Accuphase would want to exceed these one more time, but after the measurements he confirmed that the A-250 had seized the crown.

Regarding the output power, the A-250 is equal to its predecessor. Here and there the basis is a mighty toroidal transformer, flanked by two filtering caps with 100,000 microfarads of capacitance each. The highest form of construction meticulousness, which is aimed to transport the signal with as few losses as possible and to keep it away from any interference, becomes apparent in fluorocarbon resin coated GFRP printed boards with a low dielectric constant. For the input stage no less than four circuits are wired in parallel to form a dual »MCS+« (Multiple Circuit Summing) layout. I hardly want to imagine with how much expenditure of time the design engineers at the Accuphase research lab are meanwhile struggling for every decibel of S/N ratio.

As with its predecessor, 40 Mosfet transistors, which are wired in parallel and divided into two units with their own heatsinks for heat removal, deliver the output power. The increased damping factor achieved in this output stage should be audible. Upon leaving the A-250, the amplified signal sees one of the most solid connection terminals I've ever witnessed and whose brass core is gold-plated against corrosion. Due to the high tightening torque the use of spades suggests itself. Owners of bi-wiring cables will be happy with this dual layout.

The visually striking display elements were redesigned by Accuphase for the A-250. The LEDs are now bigger and easier to read. The numerical power indicator now offers an »auto range« function where the decimal point automatically floats with the respective output power. What sets Accuphase apart from many competitors even in this point is revealed in the lab: the power specs determined with our R&S UPV analyzer differ from those displayed by the A-250 by less than one per cent. Hence at 10 watts into four ohms by less than one tenth of a watt! In practice one can even check the flawless function of loudspeakers with such a precision instrument.

The A-250 are optionally fed through RCA or – more recommendable – XLR cables. Input switching is done on the front panel after the massive flap has opened at the touch of a button (see fig. above left). Here you can set the gain factor in four steps and also switch the meter functions of the power indicator.

But now the accurate A-250 bargraphs shall at last dance to the beat of the music. I had asked HMS to send me the missing Suprema XLR cables, which I gave a lot of break-in time. Although I hadn't moved the KEF Reference 5 by one inch, the first notes from the Accuphase system already surprise me deeply. For the first minutes of Tchaikovski's »Swan Lake« turn out to be a revelation. Owing to the A-250 monos at the end, the whole Accuphase chain exudes an enormous tranquility and stability. However, such an – actually desirable – sovereignty also bears the risk to create a distance between the music and the listener. Not so with the A-250s, au contraire; here a »gentleness that veils the instruments« can be noticed which I respond to in the most positive way and which hits me quite unexpectedly. Conversely one might also say that the sound image has no trace of cloudiness, there are no stressful passages – heavenly conditions for natural instruments and voices, I can't find any other words to express it.

Who takes the time to listen completely through Beethoven's »Missa Solemnis« will sense the wonderful energy of this music. However, only individual aspects will remain of it if the sound system mixes solo voices, choir and orchestra into a tonal smoothie. What the Accuphase mono blocks deliver here is phenomenal. First of all they reproduce the size of the recording room flawlessly; the timbres of the instruments, the clarity of the choir and of the soloists sitting in front of it, they are so

close to a live experience that the emotions caused by the music are equal. It may seem paradoxical, but this doesn't sound like »amplified music« at all.

These positive qualities also benefit the music of saxophonist Kamasi Washington. Intelligent jazz arrangements characterize his compositions that alternate with the greatest of ease between simplicity and complexity. While the shiny golden chain sends the listener onto a journey, an integrated amplifier we've brought in for a crosscheck tears the musical events apart almost beyond recognition. In the latter case I even dare ask why I'm listening to this »noise« at all. On the other hand, with the A-250s I'm living one exciting moment after the other.

Likewise, the rendition of Neil Diamond's »Hot August Night III« also seems to be not of this world. Of course, it's not only the sound quality of this live recording that matters, but the atmosphere and the realistic access to the vibes of this concert, and here the mono blocks develop a magical attraction.

Now I really want to know what's up and first swap the source followed by the preamp. Both steps I perceive as a clear sonic downgrade. First the tonal expressiveness and hues get lost, the sound is paler now and more anemic. With the C-3850 missing as well, not much of the sound image is left. Chastened I therefore quickly return again to the complete Accuphase chain.

In an awe-inspiring manner the Accuphase quintet says goodbye with Beethoven's piano concerto no. 5. Christian Zacharias has taken his seat at the grand piano, he is accompanied by the Dresdner Staatskapelle under the baton of Hans Vonk. From the very beginning his fingers are flying over the keys of the grand piano which, pictured in its true dimensions, stands in the middle of the stereo basis. With the joining of the strings the picture becomes by no means smaller; instead the room behind the speakers opens up, no, it tears open. And here, too, the A-250s prove to be masters of a detailed reproduction which is not sober, but comes along with a gracefulness that only benefits the work. Already now, while the final chord is fading, I miss this highly cultivated reproduction.

Accuphase masters an essentially insurmountable hurdle: the new A-250 mono blocks are both technically and soundwise a blockbuster. The extent of a cultivated and at the same time precise reproduction by this class-A design is unprecedented. Speaking of art with regard to the external and internal workmanship is a matter of fact for the Japanese. With the A-250s Accuphase once more sets new standards.

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