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Accuphase Class-A Power Amplifier A-60

Up please!

by Joachim Pfeiffer

Since generations amps from Accuphase have always remained true to their visual appearance and from a sonic point of view have become better and better over the time, though, to this date, in small steps only. What follows now is a quantum leap.

Why a power amp like the new A-60 from Accuphase? Let's ask someone who should know, namely AUDIO's speaker tester Knut Isberner. It's because hardly anyone else could gain as much experience with the predecessor model A-50V from the same maker. For him the "50V" is simply the best choice when it comes to driving his own, highly critical Infinity Kappa-9 speakers (yes, I do mean those aged amp-killers...). The efficiency of the "9" is certainly not a good one, yet in some way acceptable. What makes the Kappa the enemy of nearly all amplifiers is their impedance curve in the so-called "extended position" which has always been preferred by my colleague. In this position the speaker impedance drops way down to the extreme value of around 0.78 Ohm in the ultra-critical bass region.

For this reason any power amplifier that is to be hooked up to the Kappa should be able to provide an ultra-stable, perfect voltage-impedance cube (see lab report on page 128) without any sign of collapsing at whatever spot. Otherwise the speaker divas are going crazy while quite a few of those little amps are waving "good-bye" and, in the worst case, go up in smoke. It's not really sensational that the A-50V is driving this Infinity-legend without flaws. Other amps with a similar price tag can do that also - and quite laid-back nevertheless. What made the A-50V so fascinating to Knut Isberner was not what it was capable of doing, but how it eventually performed. Smooth, consistent and with an unusual differentiated rendition of sonic colours did this combination conquer Isberner's listening room and thus his audiophile heart as well. This may well be due to the fact that the A-50V, its predecessor A-50 and now the successor A-60 sweat away in Class-A mode of operation.

Big power meaning lots of glory?

This mode is certainly favoured by audio connoisseurs as well as the board of directors of your local electricity company. Maximum bias is a principle here and duly requested to take care of low distortions. Or in other, somewhat more technical words: because of the amount of current that is continuously flowing through a semi-conductor the latter can always operate in the optimum range of its characteristic curve.

So, what's new and how are A-50V and A-60 distinguishing themselves with respect to handling and technology? Actually, the power stage is nearly identical with the exception that in 2004 new power MOS-FETs are shining from the two meticulously equipped circuit boards. The circuitry itself has not been changed. What is indeed new is the input stage which Accuphase have dubbed MCS: Multiple Circuit Summing. This means that three separate

amplifiers for the input signal are connected in parallel in order to downsize noise and distortion to another record level.

One thing is for sure, namely that all these measures have nothing to do with saving money on the side of Accuphase, although one could have this idea as the amp comes a few hundred Euros less expensive than the A-50V, but this may be owed to the presently better position of the Euro against the Yen.

No "saving money" can also be recognized by the more or less relevant details, whereby a new conception can be noticed on the board for the speaker terminals, yet not from outside, although number 60 now does accept banana plugs too. The positive changes are rather to be discovered inside the unit. In order to achieve a more careful and pure signal transfer to the terminals the respective circuit board has been designed substantially more elaborate. This feeling of "getting more for the money" continues if one looks at the features of comfort. In particular the gain selector at the front panel -for attenuating the gain factor by 3, 6 or 12dB- makes a lot of sense indeed. Especially for all those dedicated hi-fi aficionados who wish to employ this Class-A amp exclusively for the treble and midrange and a mighty high-power booster for the basses. Nevertheless, such a quite acceptable configuration has been reasonably feasible only with a blend of Accuphase's own power amps. Now, with the launch of the A-60, this one-brand-purity-law has eventually become history. The amp's flexibility ensures a good sonic marriage with other foreign amps - as long as their amplification factor is compatible.

Then we find a little button at the front panel which we believe is not really necessary at this place. By pressing this button the A-60 switches from "unbalanced" to "balanced" mode of operation, meaning from RCA to XLR (inputs). Another innovation has absolutely nothing to do with acoustics. As opposed to Accuphase's P- and M-series of amplifiers (all working in Class-AB mode of operation) which are showing off their power by means of over-dimensioned meters, the A-series, including the new A-60, has been equipped with a numeric display. It is assumed that most users are going to switch it off, because a rhythmically dancing meter indicator may be a joy to look at, but certainly not the figures of a digital readout. Hence it's good to see that something has come back with the A-60, i.e. something that has been banned from the hi-fi world for years. Namely two LED bar graph indicators which can optionally be made to flash in concordance with the music. This you wouldn't want to be deactivated, would you?

The listening test took us an unusually long time. Not that the scoring had given us some headaches. No, this was more due to the fact that my colleagues from the AUDIO team simply couldn't get enough from the music playing through this amp. One CD should be particularly mentioned here, yet it's one that cannot be acquired from a main street CD shop. "Try A New Way" is the title of this disc and it's running time is a mere 21 minutes. Played on a Steinway Grand by Martin Vatter, the music on this CD is ingeniously composed as well as superbly recorded and produced (available through www.martin-vatter.de). Via our top notch audio chain in which the A-60 is playing the central role, it becomes immediately evident that this sound carrier has hardly any audible digital cuts. A tone and its multiple harmonics are simply better joined together than on most other silver discs and thus are supporting the flow of the music.

This Accuphase-amp can definitely show it all, and more so can convey the size of the Steinway and its uniqueness of sound colours. The A-60 can render the musician's incredible pleasure for making this music and it can yield much more than you'd ever expect. Considering its capability of pleasing the listener with the rendition of music as a whole, the A-60 is, at this time, the most reasonable offer in the league of the best. If it could have generated a tad more control in the bass region, it sure would have become our top reference power amplifier....

SUMMING UP:

It really knocks me off: with the A-60 Accuphase Laboratory Inc. are probably building the best pure-bred Class-A amplifier of the present time and with it may face a strong competitor under the same roof. The more than twice as expensive monos M-8000 are outdistanced by the small heat power station in several aspects: the latter is better in reproducing voices and moods and in no way does it sound like hi-fi. More so, it sounds 100% like real music. More fun with basses I have when I listen to the M-8000 and, no question, this one can play at much higher levels. But that's about it and hence I do consider the A-60 the better choice.