

Revolutionary

With the E-480 Accuphase is presenting the successor to the E-470. But there's a lot more behind it than just a cosmetic facelift.

Already the visual differences between the new Accuphase E-480 integrated amplifier and its precursor E-470 are clearly obvious and immediately discernible to the sympathetic eyes of the beholder. The status LEDs are no longer concealed behind the display glass cover and have instead slipped onto the front panel. Many of the controls, which are hidden behind a massive flap and were formerly designed as pushbuttons, are now rotary switches and Accuphase has also changed their positions. In my opinion definitely for the better, because to me operating the E-480 seems to be even more intuitive than was the case with the precursor, which was already good in this regard. But with these words the upgrade from the E-470 – which made its debut in 2014 and which I had the pleasure of presenting in issue 1/2017 – to the E-480 has by far not been fully described yet. Because deep inside the integrated amp a lot more things have changed as well.

Those who are a little versed in electronic parts will know that for two decades the »mobile devices« of this world – at first the iPods, then the smartphones – have been controlling the demand and thus ruling the market. Genuine new developments of transistors for audio applications became rare a long time ago, but fortunately one can also strike a bonanza in the fields of medical, measurement or video technology. Nobody needs to tell Accuphase the importance of selecting the right components for a high-end amplifier; the Japanese already referred precisely to this fact in the brochure of their first power amplifier back in 1973 (long before the subject became popular over here, then gradually accepted among experts and finally totally overestimated).

Like all amp-builders Accuphase had once started using bipolar transistors, then step by step converted the driver stages to mosfets in the 1980s and finally also fitted the power stages with them in the 1990s. The class-A power amplifiers from that era – the A-20, A-50 and A-100 – all had identical power mosfets made by Toshiba on their heatsinks. The E-470, too, was still equipped with newer Toshiba's, even with the same types which are also doing service in the E-600 integrated big brother and the A-250 reference mono blocks. But recently Accuphase has turned towards other makers beside the long-standing favorite supplier Toshiba and started using power transistors from Fairchild in the A-75 and International Rectifier in the E-650 respectively. So it's only logical that the E-480 may now benefit from the current power mosfets of this manufacturer (IRFP 240/9240) as well.

The new power transistors can permanently deliver 20 per cent higher currents than the previous models. For them Accuphase has custom tailored a perfect driver stage to enable a 20 per cent greater damping factor of the power amp section at unvarying output specs. A new protection circuit also plays its part in this gain – I'm really curious about how this will affect the sonic result. The pre and power sections of the E-480 are fully separated (there is one balanced and one unbalanced preamp output), the power amp circuitry equals that of the A-75, but with three transistor pairs instead of ten. Moreover, the AAVA volume level control, in my view one of the best on the market, was optimized one more time. I keep wondering what can still be improved on such a concept, but the Accuphase designers will always detect something.

Upon my request the E-480 came fitted with the optional AD-50 phono module (1,010 euros) and the DAC-50 D/A converter card (1,260 euros). Personally I'm a fan of »slim« systems with only a few components, so I think it's great to have an integrated amplifier complete with phono board and converter. Of course, I'm aware that many audiophiles appreciate external components optimized for their respective purposes, but I strongly recommend them to lend their ears to the E-480 with both cards installed since their sonic performance will do justice to the Accuphase in every respect. A major advantage of the integrated solution is certainly the common ground which, as a side note, also reduces the risk of catching ground loop hum in phono operation mode. Plus you'll have to dig much deeper in your wallet for soundwise equivalent components.

There isn't much to say about the look of the E-480 – features, haptic, visual appearance and quality of workmanship are beyond any doubt. This is high-end at its best and typically Accuphase. So how does this electronically revised E-480 perform at the end of the day? Despite all our affinity towards technology, this is the essence of our hobby. Before the first serious listening session, the integrated amplifier was given plenty of time to warm up on the IsoTek filtered green energy from 100 per cent hydropower. Especially with the brand new phono board this was urgently needed – here the use of the IsoTek RIAA filter, combined with the enhancer CD, once again worked true miracles.

Since my review of the E-470 which I had attested that it can't be beaten soundwise in my system, the latter has undergone several changes. However, the acoustic tuning has remained the same, only the sound quality level has gone up. Now, how does the E-480 come off in this new environment? Will it be able to convince me in the same way as its precursor?

Right after the first notes over the Sonus Faber Olympica I, it becomes instantly clear: one basic quality of the E-480 is sovereignty, sovereignty and sovereignty again. Never would I have deemed it possible that an integrated amplifier in this price range can create an acoustic aura like big pre/power amp combinations. Already prior to the entry of the first tone one can hear the room »breathe« before a pitch-black backdrop. Okay, this has been written already a thousand times by members of our guild, but here it's definitely true.

Mark Knopfler, whose voice has matured over the years and also gained in expressiveness and sophistication, is a very good example of the E-480's grand

qualities. His voice is standing unshakeably and with full authority in the middle of the room, the dissociation from the instruments is absolutely convincing, and the emotionality of the music is conveyed by the Accuphase without limitations. No matter what Knopfler album of the past years I put in, whether »Sailing To Philadelphia«, »Tracker« or »Down The Road Wherever« – the E-480 makes the maturing process in Mark Knopfler's voice transparent and easily comprehensible.

In the treble range the Accuphase doesn't show any weaknesses, either. It delivers a phantastic resolution without ever overacting or getting nasty – by simply integrating the treble range into the musical flow to yield a perfect, holistic sound enjoyment. This was already a character trait of the E-470, but the E-480 can outdo it hands down. On »Children Of Sanchez« Chuck Mangione demonstrates exemplarily what the E-480 can do in the presence and treble range. The fireworks of the brass section has been recorded with a good deal of presence, and there is a permanent risk that the music might drift off towards the annoying side. Not so with the E-480: here the wind players sound brilliant, the sound is incredibly transparent, but always well balanced. Listening through this double LP turns into a total indulgence with this integrated amplifier.

To me the Accuphase E-470 has always been a milestone in amp-building so far, but what the new E-480 can add on here is indeed really impressive. In all aspects it sounds bigger, more sovereign and finer. In my system no better integrated amp has ever played. For me the perfectly equipped E-480 is one of the best sounding integrated amps ever and in my system environment undoubtedly the absolute reference. A dream that leaves nothing to be desired.

Bottom line

Accuphase has revised its already very good E-470 integrated amplifier in decisive criteria, and the result is absolutely smashing. The sonic performance of the E-480 has literally taken a leap into a higher class and now comes already close to their own pre/power amp tandems – and compared to the E-470, even at a more favorable price. Now that's what I call customer-friendly and sustainable.

Stephan Schmid