

Accuphase Preamplifier C-2820 & Power Amplifier P-6100

The Investment in Gold....

by Helmut Hack

....may not be a good idea these days. The same applies to shares with all their unclear risks. Is there at all any type of investment that can be considered a safe one? Excepting Accuphase, of course.

I don't want to sound elitist, but still: the moment the masses out there are jumping onto something or John Smith is going to rob his piggy bank in order to transfer the savings for blocks of shares or gold bars, you can be sure he'll be taken to the cleaners and most likely going to lose a large part of his savings. If you remember, this was the case a decade ago when Telekom shares were sold to trustful citizens who were evidently not aware of the fact that this state-owned enterprise already belonged to them, as tax payers, so to speak. [...] But things are actually not so complicated in a free-market economy: prices go up with increasing demand and inevitably will fall again in a saturated market. [...] Now, where to go with wages and salaries, savings and inheritances? Luxury goods like Patek-Philippe or Rolex watches seem to have promises. Yachts and vintage cars are to cause pretty high storage costs. Also, not every young artist is to become famous in the long run. What I could recommend without restrictions are copper and rare earths whereby the former is again causing high storage costs and the latter really difficult to obtain. As far as I'm concerned, I like to invest in vinyl disks yet their increase in value seems to be rather vague, too.

All these thoughts and considerations came to mind while searching Ebay for Accuphase components. Actually, there aren't many on offer and if so, I would consider a twenty-year-old Accuphase integrated quite expensive still. Well, their increase in value does not appear to be an issue either, even if taking inflation into account. At least they seem to be more stable than the Euro and are not hidden in vaults like Fabergé eggs but do offer a palpable benefit: they are enhancing quality of life. Depending on one's religious orientation, there are different aspects to this but the likelihood that we all have got one life only is very high and hence making the best of it and improving its quality sounds reasonable, doesn't it? By the way, whilst all these odd associations are still haunting my mind there is an appealing guarantor for more groove standing in front of me, namely Accuphase's power amp P-6100. It was frustrating to realize that the complementary pre-amplifier C-2820 had to stay in the magazine's listening room, at least for the time being.

Nevertheless, P.I.A. [*Accuphase's distributor in Germany*] was so kind to supply the editorial office with a complete chain of Accuphase components. Well, no, they in fact insisted to start right at the wall outlet – of which we've got altogether six sharing three direct lines to the fuse box – in order to have the current well conditioned by the PS-1220 Clean Power Supply unit. This mighty "multiple socket" would even show you the degree of current contamination. With up to 3%-4% off the

rule, the line voltage appears pretty grubby, yet after conditioning it came as pure as fresh linen. This was rewarded by the CD/SACD player DP-700 with an audibly impressive black background in quiet musical passages. Although the player is not part of this review, I should still refer to a detail which in little and non-descript is to express nearly everything Accuphase stands for: open tray, put in CD, close tray, read data. All this takes place so silently that you can hear a pin drop.

Eventually, the super-preamp C-2820 arrived whereupon it also found a power socket at the P-1220. All has been said about the tactile and mechanical/electronic qualities of Accuphase components, but not from everyone. So, it's now my turn to marvel at the Japanese craftsmanship. Let me begin with the volume control which can be turned as smooth as a genuine high-precision potentiometer. While doing this it sort of collects a volume position which is simultaneously processed by a CPU. Conventional potentiometers, which are made to set the volume by means of variable resistivity, have not been used by Accuphase for quite some time. It's because they are said to also change the impedance of the amplification circuitry while turning the volume, which – in particular at low listening levels – would then degrade the signal-to-noise ratio. So what, has anyone out there ever heard a “noisy” Accuphase?

Anyway, the so-called AAVA circuitry was first employed about five years ago in the C-2000-models of Accuphase's pre-amplifiers, whereby this circuitry conveys its mode of operation in the unabridged name: **Accuphase Analog Vari-gain Amplifier**. Each music signal coming into the amplifier as voltage is initially converted to current and then divided into 16 weighted stages. A trick which is to take complexity from the circuitry because currents can be more conveniently added, later converted to voltage again and eventually applied to the balanced and unbalanced outputs of the amp. However prior to this the aforementioned 16 current stages are combined in over 65,000 states which is to result in a highly precise and entirely channel-separated volume level, whereby frequency and tonality of the musical signal remain completely untouched during this process. Well, this as far as theory goes.

A glance beneath the mirror finished wooden case reveals the dual-mono construction featuring two toroidal core transformers and four electrolytic capacitors of each 10,000 μ F. The discrete amplification boards are vertically mounted inside a compartment on some kind of shock-absorbers. A total of 16 such modular boards are arranged separately for left and right channel on a motherboard. They are embracing line input, balanced input, AAVA and other circuit stages as well as the headphone amplification – the latter likewise in a discrete layout, of course. As needed, a sub-panel smoothly opens like flowing honey and gives access to a number of additional functions: phase inversion for each input, loudness, tape monitor, to name but a few. The C-2820 can certainly not be accused to offer merely disproportionate purism. A worthwhile feature with respect to sonic enhancement seems to be the possibility of having the preamp's overall gain matched to the power amplifier.

Although the AAVA circuitry is said to have absolutely no sonic “finger print” I still had the impression that the C-2820 excels in rendering dynamic passages in the range between position 9 and 1 o'clock of the volume knob. I could enjoy this when listening to vinyl through the optional phono module AD-2820. In particular some vintage recordings can clearly display the meaning of musical dynamics. With the

Brinkmann "Oasis" turntable as source, the "Perla Musica" played a bit softer but also more restrained. However from an objective point of view neither of them was superior to the other which would rather speak for a synergetic effect than against this outstanding phono equalizer-amplifier with tubes from bFly (see review on page 28). That's just the way it is: each circuitry has got its ideal respectively optimal area of operation and in cooperation with the four-stage gain switch of the P-6100, the C-2820 makes even the most minor changes audibly perceivable.

The P-6100 has been designed as the stereo variant of Accuphase's monophonic power amps M-6000. It incorporates the same instrumentation amplifier technologies, a form of differential amplifier, which, as opposed to rather ordinary operational amplifiers, yields the advantage of better common-mode rejection. However in order to have a real benefit from this technology in audio applications it is mandatory to resort to specially selected parts and components for the circuitry. The P-6100 is likewise embracing a discrete circuit topology with partly parallel working identical circuits and eight power MOS-FETs in parallel push-pull configuration per channel. A small negative feedback signal is returned to the inputs by means of a feedback amplifier. This is the reason why the P-6100 is free of distortions at even very high frequencies. A switch at the rear panel can transform the amp into a monophonic one or allows for either horizontal or vertical bi-amping.

The sound of Accuphase is bewitching me since I'm leading a hi-fi life. As if it was yesterday, I remember the incisive experience I had with an active and enthusiastic hi-fi dealer in a small town I used to live in. I was about 15 years old then and looking for an integrated amp with the wilful intent to get the best sound for my humble funds. However one could read in my face that the funds would by far not be enough to carry the combination of Accuphase C-270 and P-500 home. Nonetheless, they were demonstrated to me via the huge Quadral "Titan" speakers (so to speak the flavour of the month in those times) because I was evidently too curious. Well, this was an afternoon that has firmly occupied my sonic memory until today and which made me fully aware of the fact that high-end and the blare from ordinary "stereo gear" have absolutely nothing in common. Then upon a bashful glance at the price tag the next insight hit me: the world is unfair! Today, I've got at least an orange-coloured band with Accuphase lettering gracing my bunch of keys. In the meantime it has become pretty grubby and frayed and the lettering looks worn.

But when in our listening room I'm going to squeeze Gamut's silver speaker cables into the massive binding posts of the P-6100 I still know exactly why I've got hooked on this brand. This power amp is emanating perfection and aplomb in every detail. Admittedly, one neither can acquire it these days with the salary from a holiday job. The world's still an unfair place, isn't it? In some way I have the sincere hope that all the efforts on the side of P.I.A. with respect to solid, well-working dealerships, meticulous product presentation and last but not least a strict sales and service policy will eventually have a meaning in so far that with such demonstrations of musicality masses of teenagers worldwide could become dedicated followers forever. I do wholeheartedly wish this to Accuphase and all young people.

I was lucky enough to audition this amplifier combination in our listening room for several months at various speaker systems. The amps are to seduce everyone to eavesdrop into oneself in order to get the best out of it. The McIntosh MC601 or

Gamut's M250 mono amps had the Gamut M7 more tightly grabbed in a headlock, yet these elegant floor-standing speakers sounded perfect in form and melodious only after the C-2820 and P-6100 had been hooked up. The former got to their profound results as well-grounded as a knock-out, i.e. like a boxer they applied their weightiness as a striking argument whereas Accuphase seems to follow a completely different approach and philosophy: the art of yielding or how to transform the strengths of a combatant into one's own – Jiu-Jitsu hi-fi, so to speak. The two music machines did not intrude into the liveliness displayed by Ikon Akustik's "Avance Evo" speakers but with gentle hands would rather teach their horn tweeters some good manners.

Karolina Strassmayer and her quartet "Klaro!" are actually not performing my most favoured music but their CD *Joining Forces* (Lilypad Music) is a wonderfully audiophile jazz recording. Lustrous clear, pure and perfectly transparent is the sound from the internationally renowned saxophone player spreading out in our listening room. The rhythm section is following her seamlessly and with exact timing. The arrangements are a bit too conservative and harmonious for my taste; blood, sweat and tears are missing as well as jealousy and passion. Nevertheless a really good CD. Jazz for senior teachers, produced by an expert hand.

This well-balanced rendition cannot be bettered by the "Avance Evo" when playing in other configurations. Likewise Rega's "RS-10" (see review on page 114) which was going to commit a deep symbiosis with the P-6100. Eventually this was the reason why I took both home to be auditioned with my system in my own environment. Laid-back, yet on the move at any time, the P-6100 could support the lively manner of the English speakers and furthermore add those dabs of colours the "RS-10" was otherwise leaving aside in its hyperactive dynamic rendition. *Seductive Reasoning* by the sisters Maggie & Terre Roche (Speakers Corner/Columbia, LP, KC 33232), recorded under the aegis of Paul Simon at Muscle Shoal Studios, is sprouting from the "RS-10" like the awakening of spring. Uncertainty and self-awareness in the feminist era of Aquarius are speaking from the lyric words of the two young ladies whilst their bell-like harmonious singing "*hart wie Marmelade*" (Extrabreit) [*hard as marmalade*] is hovering above the soulful folk rhythm from the legendary studio.

In particular when shaping midrange and high frequencies this Class-AB power amp has absolutely no limits. Further down it plays articulated and flexible whereby it does not kick the basses but has them coming along and lets them run with full thrust into the blank – then having them shattered at the membrane in just the right moment. The balanced interconnection of DP-700, C-2820 and P-6100 is to create a dream team which in its harmonious and symbiotic willingness to cooperate with nearly any speaker system is indeed very hard to beat. Most often, when other amplifier combinations in the listening room played at the Gamut M7 with excellent and emphatic performance and thought they may have left the Accuphase-trio behind, the latter has already arrived at the finish. "The gentle and weak conquers the hard and strong", said Laotse – I call this Jiu-Jitsu hi-fi. Banzai!