

The only way is up

Just like the gold rate, Accuphase's development knows only one direction: upward. With the new C-2150 and P-4500 pre/power amp duo the company has once again surpassed itself.

For quite some time we haven't got hardly any interest on bank deposits or time money. Which is why a lot of people are looking for more profit-yielding investments such as gold, for instance. So how about a high-end system which offers plenty of sound yield? Especially Japan's noble brand Accuphase allures by pledging to keep what the shimmering pale-golden front panels of their components are promising. Our own experiences, like those of numerous owners, suggest so.

Here the small pre/power amp combo C-2120/ P-4200 had turned out as a special highlight, scoring a big strike when reviewed in STEREO 1/15 – back then the pre conquered the reference class and the power amp was very closely behind. Although the set price of 14,500 euros (which, in the course of adjustments, recently rose to 16,500 euros) was high in absolute terms, buyers got a lot for their money: besides an exquisite sound quality also the posh workmanship typical of Accuphase, another typical comprehensive features list, and finally the stable value preservation resulting from all this which will make you smile in the event of a resale.

This might indeed be an option for some owners now because the manufacturer from Yokohama is replacing their success combo, and the follow-up models are supposed to raise the bar once again a little higher. Those who have been watching the soon 50-year company history, know about the engineers' tough struggle of always climbing up the quality ladder on tiny rungs by many small improvements to finally make a real step further up.

Exactly that way we will probably also have to figure the evolution up to the new C-2150 and P-4500 duo that will cost approximately 15,900 euros. As usual it takes a good look to identify the newcomers, because in spite of some visual retouching here and there, they strongly resemble their precursors. This design consistency is also highly appreciated by the loyal Accuphase fandom.

Precision owing to AAVA & ANCC

Behind the thick front panels we see the usual design, the common structure of a layout which has remained untouched for decades, whereby the power section in the middle with its fat mains supply and the power electronics, crowded together on the flanks of the distinctive heatsinks, ought to have the higher recognition factor. But ever since 2004, when Accuphase introduced their ultra sophisticated “AAVA” – stands for “Accuphase Analog Vari-gain” – volume control with the C-2000 for the first time (which, as an active part of the amplifier, adds 16 weighted currents in a specific way to produce thousands of intermediate values to allow an extremely sensitive and precise level setting), we have been used to the pc board banks in the heart of the preamps from Nippon.

In the C-2150, which runs no less than five separate amp sections simultaneously for the input buffering, the voltage/current conversion or the opposite direction as well as the output stage and finally the independent headphone output stage, already the fourth generation has been implemented. And recently an “Ultra Low Noise Technology” in the form of a secondary amplifier in the main circuit which is supposed to further reduce the remaining, already very low interfering components. With the “Accuphase Noise and Distortion Cancelling Circuit“, abridged ANCC, the developers are aiming at previously unachievable low noise and distortion specs.

Indeed most of the C-2150's distortion and intermodulation values show three zeros after the decimal point and thus turn out lower again by up to one decimal power when compared to the already splendid C-2120. In terms of noise the newbie outperformed its precursor at least with low signal voltages, i.e. in the normal listening range, by no less than up to four decibels of increased signal-to-noise ratio. Quite an accomplishment!

The fact that the C-2150 has a lot of features not found or maybe even missed on other preamps, is a “tangible“ bonus. For instance, besides tone and balance controls – the latter being realized by the AAVA without additional parts in the signal path – it offers a convenient mono switch, a 180-degree phase reversal for correcting inverted audio carriers, and even a switchable record out with tape monitor function. Add to this the headphone socket plus an ample supply of XLR and RCA inputs.

Super: the pre doesn't do anything!

Moreover, the C-2150's basic gain can be pre-selected in three steps. And this gain setting is more than meets the eye. We recommend the lowest 12 dB setting because it's not only totally sufficient for common line level sources, but also, more importantly, it produces the airiest, most natural sound. At 18 dBs the tone becomes a little more robust and edgier, which may be appealing in particular with pop music. Switching to 24 dBs, however, will produce slightly glassy mids with a light artificial touch. This can be checked easily by balancing out the 6-dB level jumps on the

AAVA display, which is precise down to a tenth of a decibel; hence the result is always exactly the same volume level.

If the new Accuphase preamp didn't have such a terrific sound, we would not mention this detail at all. But what the C-2150 offers in terms of unfeigned naturalness – I just can't think of a more suitable word –, is simply marvelous and outperforms the talents of the superseded C-2120 once again. Where the latter still blew a gentle whisper of artificial residual brightness over the notes, this is now completely absent and the performance happens in a sonorous and homogeneous way against a pitch-black backdrop. Moreover, the Japanese lacks whatever might seem to be tarted up, trimmed or re-colored. The absence of tiny noise fringes or artefacts is also noticeable within voices and instruments, which otherwise could have been attributed to the recording and which we suddenly pick out on other preamps simply because the Accuphase doesn't have them. The sonic events rather appear to be extremely coherent, absolutely "untechnical" and credible, giving the breeding ground for the paradox that the enthusiasm over its appearance is feeding exactly on the fact that this pre somehow doesn't do anything.

That an Accuphase plays to the gallery in an airy, nimble manner and with the very finest of dynamic shadings is nothing to write home about; it's a habit. But the fact that it celebrates these qualities with such a tonal coherence as the C-2150 can do, is indeed worth mentioning. Not only with Maria Pihl's "Malvina" from STEREO's soundcheck CD VI (which we've already listened to umpteen times), the Japanese was able to deliver a top-level performance with vivid colors, a perfect imaging of the three-dimensional spectrum and a peerless tonal integrity. Delicately chiselled highbit files with soft hi-hat tails blowing away into the audiophile nirvana were among the Accuphase's favorite food.

Well, I am certainly not a fetishist of measured values, but this conjunction of superb purity and silence with the given, I'm saying it again, naturalness gets me ruminating as to whether the extra zero after the decimal point is maybe not just academic after all. Or am I so totally off track now on the rungs of the Accuphase ladder?

Okay, let's go over to the power amp and its almost sensuously oscillating pointer instruments which are gently dampened in their return motion. Those who don't like this fidgeting can turn it off together with the illumination. The P-4500 also shows halved distortion figures, particularly with the intermodulation values. It may well be that the 43 per cent of noise reduction, compared to the old P-4200 and specified by Accuphase, were achieved in the balanced input amplifier. However, in the overall measurement the amp could not undercut the excellent S/N ratios of the superseded model any further.

As usual the power electronics is mounted directly on the lateral heatsinks. Four bipolar power transistors are run in push-pull mode with two "hot outputs" per channel as favored by Accuphase, whereby the consistently fully balanced approach is realized. MOS-FETs serve as ultra long-term stable switches in both speaker

outputs which are secured against e.g. overload or short circuit by a watchful protection circuitry and end in solid terminals.

Goosebumps with “Tres Luceros“

We were mostly interested in one question: would the power amp be able to keep up the sound level of the sensational preamp, or could it possibly turn out as a limiting factor? The answer: not at all! What the P-4500 yields in terms of conciseness and speed, is to be congratulated. Like out of nowhere it made the hard, precisely accentuated vibraphone hits on “Saturday Night“ by the Red Norvo Quartet pop up between the speakers while providing definition and timbre within those tiny little explosions and staggering the mumbling audience in the correct depth spacing to the band who was really having a ball.

The Accuphase didn’t care much about over which loudspeaker it was doing its thing. Whether B&W’s demanding 800D3 or the phenomenal Confidence 50 from Dynaudio – traditionally the Danish speakers love the amps from Yokohama –, the P-4500 was parading any program so well arranged as if sorted by delicate fingers and also finely graded in space, but at the same time shining with supple insistence and vigorous drive. And it was even good for genuine “goosebumps moments“.

For example with the “Tres Luceros“ on our UHQ soundcheck CD IX. After an incredibly realistic guitar prelude we’re mesmerized by the voice of Sandra Rumolinos which is shortly after complemented in the bass by driving percussions. The listeners felt shivers going up and down their spines: touché and sunk! Hence the power amp is equally capable of building up musical suspense like its pre partner. So it’s true of both Accuphase hits: “The Only Way Is Up“!

Matthias Böde
