

Accuphase Integrated Amplifier E-260

Boy, have you grown!

By Matthias Böde

The new E-260 is “small” only with respect to the ranking within Accuphase’s line-up of integrated amplifiers. Furthermore, it has long since outgrown the image as premium “entry-level” amplifier.

It has always been considered the fairly reasonable entrance into the noble world of high-end audio: the smallest integrated from Accuphase. This was never before more true than with its most recent version E-260. It’s because never before has the Yokohama-based maker implemented so much high-tech and sound quality in its youngster, yet without having to increase the retail price at the same time. Well this may also be attributed to the currently devaluated Yen towards Euro or Dollar. Anyway, the new E-260 comes with coated side panels and a substantially more solid case than its predecessor. And like its bigger brothers this 20-kg-beauty now also features the numeric (dB) volume level display.

In order to make the E-260 a worthwhile investment for years to come – audio components from Accuphase are famous for their longevity – the engineers in Yokohama have employed only parts of the highest quality, like for instance gas-tight, decently clicking relays and even for this “entry-level class” have avoided conventional potentiometers as they might become susceptible to faults sometime in the future. Instead, the E-260 comes equipped with the ingenious, microprocessor-controlled “Accuphase Analog Vari-gain Amplifier”, in brief: AAVA, which by means of voltage-current amplifiers is to convert the incoming musical signal into 16 weighted current stages which are then activated or de-activated by subsequent current switches, depending on the position of the volume control knob. Thus, a sensitive adjustment in fine gradations is achieved over the entire volume range. Besides the long-term stability, Accuphase mentions lowest distortions and noise as well as absolute channel balance even at low volume levels to be the essential advantages of this AAVA concept, whereby the E-260 was to receive the most recent implementation.

Next to the current feedback circuitry for utmost phase definition up to the highest frequencies, the enhanced damping factor ought to be mentioned, which, when compared to the E-250, is to result in a much better and effective control of the speakers. When playing “*Wake me up...*” by the duo *Le Bang Bang* from Munich (STEREO Listening Test CD VII) we were indeed startled whilst the E-260 hammered the vehement and dry bass pulses into the woofers of DALI’s Epicon 6 speakers. Never before had we heard any small integrated from Accuphase playing with such verve and authority.

Attack and Enthusiasm

The short intro of “*Wake me up...*” didn’t promise too much because the sometimes plucked, sometimes stricken strings of the double bass in this song were vividly rendered with lots of tautness and springy agility. Also the brief and fierce drum beats in the subsequent “*Attempo*” played by the *Antonio Forcione Quartet* was displayed by the E-260 as if there would be a bunch of balloons just busting between the speakers.

“Dynamics” has ever since been a highlight inherent in amplifiers from Accuphase and this “small” newcomer is no exception. It has once again set a benchmark in this range – including a driving, straightforward pace of sheer music. We had the bigger E-360 running alongside, which, well, played a tad more relaxed, smoother and with aplomb, yet its little brother was definitely on par with respect to attack and enthusiasm. In fact a performance that sounded much more powerful than the spec sheet would tell us.

In order to sound like a big amp rendering music at a smoother pace, the E-260 needs a shake down for a certain time. This became evident when we listened to a piece by the Norwegian choir *SKRUK*, which is also part of STEREO’s new listening test CD. The singing usually comes over like a balmy breeze in summer but the E-260 just out of the box put a kind of icy gleam over the voices. The same happened with bowed strings and S-syllables. Well, no sweat! After some hours of operation these tonal restrictions are completely gone. Once played-in and switched on, the E-260 is up and ready after a few minutes while never becoming *gemütlich*.

Accuphase’s “big little one” prefers to display voices as well as instruments in a very precise manner which is supporting the impression of three-dimensionality. Furthermore, it defines the distance among the musicians on stage also in depth, like on a drawing board. The rendered sound picture is not excessively widespread but rather tends to the front edge of the stage and thus underlining its awesome directness. Overall a fearnaught, yet very detailed, which is likely to drive the wax out of a listener’s ear.

Pretty big, that “little one”!

That very listener however will soon fall in love with an amp that knows how to take a bull by the horn. He will also savour the smooth feel conveyed by the volume knob, although he might be aware of the fact that there is merely a pulse transmitter behind. Last but not least, he’ll enjoy the many operational features of the E-260 which in today’s spirit of time are so often sacrificed to high-end purism. This integrated not only offers quite a number of inputs but also comes with an excellent output for headphones, tape in/out with monitor function and the sometimes oh so useful balance control and mono switch.

Another speciality is the option slot at the rear panel which looks forward to either receive the optional high-class phono MM/MC module AD-20 or alternatively the brilliant converter board DAC-30 (24 Bit/96 kHz & USB). Well, in view of the sonic performance as well as the abundance of useful features this amp cannot be called merely half-baked, but in fact adult and ambitious? Exactly! And therefore, with a cheering smile at Accuphase’s youngest and smallest offspring, all we can say is: “Boy, have you grown!”