

Accuphase E-270

The Whole Nine Yards!

“With all the goodies, please!” In the league of puristic amps the new Accuphase E-270 remains the feature wonder. And it has cutting-edge technology on board.

It was kind of a coup when the then brand new E-370 integrated amplifier from Accuphase made its debut in STEREO’s listening room precisely one year ago. Not only did it outperform its direct predecessor, the E-360, unusually clearly in terms of sound and thus commended itself as an excellent choice, it also had a much smaller price tag what made the hi-fi sensation perfect. This was due to a lot of fine-tuning e. g. of the “Accuphase Analog Vari-Gain“ (AAVA), that unique potless volume control which adjusts the level actively through extremely finely graded changes of the gain factor in the preamp section.

But that is not all: with the 370 the manufacturer from Yokohama made the transition from the previous voltage to a current feedback which was to improve the phase stability and the damping factor of the amp once more. To avoid the loss of even the smallest detail, the fat speaker terminals were now mounted directly onto the pc board which drives them and also contains the protection circuitry. Instead of relays the Japanese relied on MOS-FET semiconductors for an even closer, more durable contact between the sockets and the power transistors.

Boredom of perfection

Why all this litany again? Because Accuphase’s newly launched entry-level amp E-270 has inherited these goodies from its big brother, but doesn’t cost a cent more than the superseded E-260. Equipped with soft-touch pushbuttons for many functions that operate relays, it also has an incomparably fancier appearance than the old model which still used rather rustic press keys for this purpose. A stepped edge gives the front panel, traditionally shimmering in pale gold, an even nobler look. The digital volume display below the Accuphase logo backlit in turquoise also received a visual brush-up. All trifles, sure, but they make a difference.

Otherwise nothing’s changed and thus we see the same “boredom of perfection” typical of Accuphase. From the impeccable quality of workmanship to the flawless functionality to the top-class lab values the E-270 is a smooth-edged integrated amplifier.

The sumptuous range of inputs is completed by an extra slot for the optional DAC-40 D/A converter board, which also accepts data from a computer via USB and is entirely highbit capable, or the adjustable AD-30 phono board for a turntable with an MM or MC cartridge (ca. 1,260/1,010 euros).

Where the competition mostly relies on purism, the E-270 spoils its owner with tape out, mono, muting and loudness switches plus balance and tone controls. There is also a powerful headphone socket which delivers up to seven volts into an output impedance of merely two ohms. "One could easily hook up speakers here", explains "lab boy" Uli Apel.

For decades Accuphase amps have been shining with those amenities, so we are hardly surprised to find them in the new entry-level amplifier as well. Much more interesting is the question if and how the Japanese advanced the E-270 compared to its predecessor. And how big is the gap to the E-370 which could thrill us so much for an attractive price of the E/270?

You bet that in the listening room we put both devices, the E-260 as well as the E-370, side by side with the new Accuphase. All components were placed in the same rack and connected true-phase using identical power cables. There was no need for a level calibration, for at equal decibel reads on the display all three subjects showed exactly identical volume levels – we did a re-check.

A glance at the measured specs is hardly eye-opening: apart from the distortions, which were at least improved by one decimal power, and the S/N ratios or channel separation respectively now optimized by a few decibels, not a lot is happening here. One exception is the damping factor. As promised, its value shows a considerable upward step from 110 to 140.

Outperforming its predecessor

In practical use the picture's changing: while we had praised the E-260 for its precise, lean performance back in our review in the June 2013 issue, its successor still put more wood on the fire in exactly those criteria. Despite its lush bass the chunky "Homeward Bound" by the Blues Company is walking on nimbler feet and appears to have a more delicate build. In direct comparison the expressive piece almost sounds a bit clumsy over the E-260, not quite as tight and fluent as over the E-270, which at the same time blows a little more air into the act.

This was also well audible in the effervescent "Saturday Night" by the Red Norvo Quintet, presented on the STEREO listening check CDVI as well. Admittedly the newbie sounded neither more dynamical nor more colorful than the proven E-260, but it showcased the bone dry vibraphone hits with more pinpoint precision and sharper contours. Moreover, the E-270 carved out more facets and shades in the complex live performance. In a direct shootout the E-260's performance seemed to be a little coarser and once again rhythmically not quite as jauntily prancing. Perhaps no major differences, yet gladly accepted in view of the fact that the relief also gained visually and doesn't cost more.

And a welcome occasion to check out on the AD-30 phono board. The selection between MM and MC is done on the front panel, and with moving coil pickups a red LED goes on. We fed the phono board with signals from both pickup types,

whereby the results were particularly captivating in connection with MCs that sounded fresher and crisper than notably balanced MMs, something they were not to be blamed for.

In any case the AD-30 is a neat choice, especially as external solutions at a similar price hardly sound better, one therefore saves a high-grade cable connection and – a frequently overlooked advantage which must not be underestimated – since the pc board lies on the electrical potential of the amplifier, parasitic compensating currents are not bound to occur.

Superb Accuphase entry

One can tell that the newbie is able to pull clear of the E-260. But how close does it approach the E-370 soundwise with which it shares some technical refinements? Surprisingly the differences are the smallest in the bass. Regarding blackness and chiseled contours, the E-270 is close on the bigger model's heels. In the upper registers the costlier amp justifies its agio with even airier highs and greater nonchalance. But this doesn't leave any scratches on the E-270's image. Never before did the entry-level class of the Accuphase amps offer so much class!

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