

Accuphase Integrated Amplifier E-308

In the best of tradition: Accuphase

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For more than 30 years Accuphase have been building amplifiers with excellent craftsmanship and best sound. The new E-308 however can be considered one of the best solid-state amplifiers of all times.

Only very few audio manufacturers have been maintaining their independence and market presence for decades. Accuphase is one of them, yet it goes without saying that their success in Germany cannot be solely attributed to the excellent distributorship and perfect service of P.I.A. No, devices from Accuphase possess their own particular fascination which for years has made them rest at ease in view of the many "shooting stars" coming and going.

Certainly, one reason for this is the proverbial craftsmanship with which the new integrated amplifier E-308 is shining also. Already the honey-drop-like, smooth downward movement of the massive flap that hides the lesser used buttons and switches is impressing not only the aficionados of this brand. Or the decent, noble-distinguished overall appearance with (switchable) output power meters. All this is greatly appreciated by the connoisseur and thus every Accuphase stands up from the crowd of most audio components, which more and more look alike and sometimes are even "faceless". Who is then to turn the smoothly rotating volume potentiometer or to switch the input selector with sonorously clicking relays....well, only despisers of quality can withdraw themselves from this fascination.

Yet the phenomenon "Accuphase" can only partly be explained by its craftsmanship and brilliant appearance. A high sonic quality and technical perfection are as well essential reasons for the fact that even 31 years after the company's foundation these products are playing in the premium league. With respect to the E-308 the high-tech approach is already recognized in the input circuitry where it becomes evident that the numbers of transistors had been doubled. A good yet quite elaborate trick to improve the signal-to-noise ratio. If transistors are operating in parallel configuration their inherent noise is eliminated nearly to zero. This so-called "Faulkner Circuitry" has already been tried and tested in many MC input stages. Accuphase however went a step further ahead by not merely paralleling single transistors but, with a second set of electronic parts, the entire input stage! Of course this measure yielded doubled cost but, according to some researches done by Accuphase, has significantly improved the sonic precision nevertheless.

It's however understandable that the E-308 was not to be designed with a fully-balanced circuitry like in its bigger and almost twice as expensive brother E-530 (stereoplay 02/03, score 57 points). The latter has got separate amplifier stages for the inverted and non-inverted signals. For the E-308 this would have meant to double once more the number of electronic parts and components, i.e. four times as many as in a normal amplifier. In the E-308 the Accuphase-typical balanced (XLR) inputs have been realised by employing so-called IC-amplifiers.

In the E-308 too the power supply plays an important role in the function topology and in combination with the high-current, bipolar transistors from Sanken a more than sufficient pulse stability is guaranteed. Known from other Accuphase amplifiers we tested in the past there is the possibility to increase the number of high-level inputs through option slots. Or to enhance the sonic rendition of aged or lesser expensive CD players by means of the optional digital board DAC-10. In this respect we carried out a comparison with the NAD S500 and Arcam's reasonably priced 72T. Well, there were indeed some stunning sonic advantages audible in favour of the DAC-10 and we therefore would strongly advise every E-308-owner to give this digital board a serious try.

Another option are the analogue phono boards which for the E-308 are available in two versions respectively qualities. The AD-10, designed for accepting MM as well as MC pickup cartridges, comes with selected parts and components and is in fact a derivate of the AD-9. For the discriminating listener however we recommend the sonically superior AD-10 because it is able to deliver more refined trebles and their harmonics and in addition can convey a more stable soundstage. We first equipped both the E-308 and, for comparison purposes, also its bigger brother E-530 with this noble phono-board and then proceeded to audition various vinyl records and CDs. Eventually, this ended in a big surprise.

Because the E-308 did not climb down but brought the big brother into quite some difficulties. To wit: Kurtis Blows "Throughout Your Years" sounded wonderfully fluent - forceful basses, lively hi-hats, precisely strummed guitar chords and a piano run with perfect timing. The E-530 was not quite up to this utter precision but could in return offer slightly more sonorous voices and the sound of cymbals with an even higher resolution.

The differences became bigger when we played Saint-Saëns "Dance Macabre" (Decca SXL 2252). Here, if no exceedingly high playback level was required, the E-530 excelled in simply putting some more life into the solo violin and in having the orchestra positioned more distinctly on stage, while overwhelming us with even more natural sound colours. Yet the distance between the two on our sonic scale is just one tiny point: the E-308 and its lively, sparkling rendition, which is lacking neither sound colours nor bass power, moved up to the absolute top class in our ranking. There it stands now next to the "big guys" of the transistor amplifier guild: a brilliant amplifier, a solid investment and a genuine Accuphase!