

A Large Piece of Happiness

What is happiness? Dipping your feet into warm sea water? Or waking up beside your sweetheart? The laughter of a child? The smell of freshly brewed coffee? Indulging completely in music?

Happiness is a very eclectic term which, among other things, has to do with the religious orientation of a society. The Japanese, for example, know very different concepts of happiness. For instance, *engi*, a short form of *inen seigi*, the Buddhist principle of causality, says that physical realities may have direct and indirect causes which should be in line with each other. Seen in that light, music playing devices can also be *mojos*, *engimono*. When on a splendid summer day the fully loaded transport van of P.I.A. distribution pulled up in front of our publishing building, it brought along a perceived ton of happiness to the desk. Joined by "our" much appreciated YG Carmel 2 loudspeakers came an Accuphase electronics dream team with their new M-6200 mono power amplifiers featuring as the stars. After I had cottoned up to a smaller Accuphase chain at our last encounter with the Carmel 2, which I'm going to come back to in a minute, the cardboard boxes were now piling up floor to ceiling in our listening room. So this might just as well turn into a review of a chain – yet in this case the focus was supposed lie on the power amps.

The mobilization of a complete reference chain is a statement of the incredibly consistent quality control by P.I.A. distribution with equipment reviews. Instead of having the products tested in connection with the equipment park of the respective author – which is difficult to predict in regard to quality and compatibility –, P.I.A. would leave nothing to chance and supply without further ado the entire system, including the speakers! Admittedly, the fact that we got the Carmel 2 for a second round was also due to my personal interest. In the following I'm going to describe the single components briefly before dealing in detail with the power amps. For the test I was listening through this chain to the same songs which had also served me as sound examples for my review of the Carmel 2 in connection with the smaller system comprising the DP-720 CD player, the C-2820 preamp and the A-70 stereo power amp. This time the distributor had sent us the C-3850 preamp, whose predecessor was in fact regarded as a non-improvable masterpiece, the M-6200 monos and also the DC-901 digital-analog converter plus the DP-901 CD drive, which serve as reference equipment for CD/SACD playback worldwide. They were complemented by XLR and digital cables from P.I.A. and the Clean Power Supply PS-1220 mains conditioner, whose appearance and weight create the impression of looking at yet another power amplifier. Whereas the preamp and the drive-converter combo were connected to the power supply, the power amps first drew their energy through a

high-quality power strip “straight from the wall“, because the power supply has only four inputs. I granted the lot a burn-in period of several days and was already enjoying the very good, but still a little reserved sound, when I got a call from P.I.A.: they suggested that I should also connect the power amps via power strip to the last remaining socket of the power conditioner – and not switch them on simultaneously, but in turn to avoid a possible overload. No sooner said than done. The result was impressive. The power amps sounded as if they were relieved and wanted to tell me: “Now that’s what we call fine working conditions.“

Owing to the dependable sound quality of the Carmel 2 which I’ve grown familiar with, it wasn’t a problem to make a clear statement about the new monos even in synergy with a reference chain I hadn’t known so far. In connection with the smaller system we were using back then, the sound from these speakers had been so overwhelmingly good that I could hardly imagine a thing which could still be done better here. This impression, which I documented in my review in image hifi 5/2015, was confirmed by many co-listeners. But to come straight to the musical point: it can still get better indeed! The new chain put the acoustic bar so high now that it makes me think back of Bob Beamon’s world record in the men’s long jump of 1968, which remained unbroken for 23 years and is still the Olympic record. For instance, when I put in the CD *Under Mountains* (Middle of Nowhere Recordings, SERMANNICD05, UK, 2014, CD) by the awesome young Scotswoman Rachel Sermanni as in the previous year and heard “This Waltz“ again, Rachel was standing so closely before me in her infatuating beauty and intimate authenticity, singing with all that fragility and openness which can make humans so attractive. To what extent this chain with the M-6200 power amps surpasses the smaller siblings soundwise, is not only noticeable in the bass which appeared a lot more agile and colorful; the entire presentation seemed to be “more matured “, it was more relaxed, clearer and consequently, after all, even more beautiful than the last time. It was almost as if your great love had returned from a sailing trip around the world and was now standing barefoot in a waving dress with radiant eyes before you. Moreover, while I was listening, a church hall seemed to open up in front of me which Sermanni was standing in. However, I quickly realized without thinking twice that it was a studio room with wood paneled walls.

What experiences would I be in for with brilliant singer and piano player Andy Bey? Once more I listened to “River Man“, the timeless classic by Nick Drake on *Tuesdays in Chinatown* (12th Street Records/Minor Music, 801099, Deutschland, 2001, CD). I’ve seen Bey perform live several times and can judge well if a system is capable of communicating the full spectrum of his 4-octave voice and his lyric, expressive piano play. The Carmel 2 is able to trace all emotions and suspense curves in this music in an absolutely realistic manner and at the same time back out completely as a musical intermediary. In teamwork with the M-6200 power amps and the other new components, it now seemed to me as if Andy Bey was singing the ode to Nick Drake, who passed away so early, with his 4-octave voice right in front of the wide open pearly gates of heaven. Please take one deep breath.

Concerning Accuphase I’m a late beginner. Until the review of the YG Carmel 2 I knew the products from Yokohama only from afar. Yokohama is Japan’s second largest city after Tokyo and, since the inauguration of its huge seaport in 1859, a symbol of Japan’s opening towards the West and the associated intensification of the

trade relations. In the truest sense of the word, the Accuphase company represents conservative values: they preserve what is good and gently evolve it further; development cycles last about five years on average. The company name, a portmanteau word of the terms accurate and phase, meaning "true phase", relates to the fact that even the early days of the company history were marked by pre- and power amplifiers. Already one year after the company foundation in 1972, the first exclamation points were set with the C-200 preamp and the P-300 poweramp. Since then a lot has happened – yet again, in a certain way it has not. According to P.I.A., there are still many happy owners of older Accuphase components, which is also substantiated by the rather small and high-priced choice of second-hand equipment.

As a basic principle, there are two families of power amplifiers made by Accuphase: the pure class A devices which are reputed to have a particularly "beautiful", round and pleasant sound, and the class A/B family which, in favor of a higher performance yield, deviates from this path. The A-70 power amp falls into the first-mentioned category, the M-6200 into the second. What are the differences between the latter and its predecessor M-6000 launched in 2008? To begin with, new bipolar transistors from Toshiba have replaced the formerly used MOSFETs. The widespread view that such transistors are inferior to MOSFETs soundwise is but an untenable statement, because it's always the interaction between the circuitry and the applied components which is responsible for the overall result. Wired in parallel push-pull mode, the eight bipolar power transistors run on just one fourth of their output power which increases both their service life and synchronism and also reduces residual noise. So, effectively, you get dual-mono per mono block. To some extent one has to picture this as an acoustic eight-cylinder engine: its smooth running and performance yield are significantly improved, the greater torque ensures a lightning fast dynamic power release. Expressed in figures, we're talking about a hefty 150 watts which the M-6200 delivers into 8 ohms or 300 watts into 4 ohms; in bridge mode those values will even quadruple. Another effect shall not go unmentioned: the sixteen transistors (two times eight) per channel are mounted directly onto the oversized, elegantly crafted heatsinks. That way they will hardly become lukewarm, which in turn benefits performance and durability.

The ground routing was simplified and a new driver stage was also developed to ensure a new dynamic activation of the power amp. In particular a very linear differential amplifier at the input with a discrete layout for fully balanced signal paths, as it is also used in measuring devices, contributes to a significant further noise reduction compared to the previous model. The afore-mentioned P-300 stereo power amplifier from 1973 had a signal-to-noise ratio of 40 microvolts. Well over four decades later, the M-6200 power amp boasts a mere 11 microvolts, which equals a decrease to almost 25 per cent. How dramatic this improvement is can be seen from fact that even in comparison with the direct predecessor M-6000, the reduction is more than twice as high. Thus an M-6200 may also serve very well as a high-frequency amplifier in a bi-amping or active system. As distinguished from the earlier models, a crucial indicator for the enhanced quality of the latest power amp generation by Accuphase is their much greater damping factor which is specified at 1000 – the highest value in the company history. This has been achieved by lowering the internal resistance and by further improving the moderate negative feedback called *Remote Sensing*, which picks up the signal very close at the speaker terminals and feeds it back. Another new feature are faster MOSFET switches for the speaker

overload protection – the mechanic relays used so far are now obsolete, since their contact-making properties and durability were both below standard. Apart from their influence on the damping factor, the much more sophisticated MOSFET switches also shine in terms of reliability and bass dynamics. A massive choke on the output board cleans the signal from HF interferences as they occur more and more often due to computer networks. The fact that the speaker terminals are mounted directly on a pc board with no wires also helps raise the damping factor. The power supply houses an even bigger mains transformer with a differently wound coil core plus two huge 48,000 microfarad electrolytic capacitors with gold-plated connectors. Here, too, one takes the conservative, technically solid approach of maximum noise suppression combined with a good current capability. The precious metal is, of course, not applied for visual reasons, but for its much lesser corrosion susceptibility in contrast to copper and silver, which are actually better conductors. The core of these golden shining parts consists of copper. Finally I'd like to mention one minor detail of the really phantastic attention to detail and quality of workmanship of these devices which are still handcrafted: Because the circuit boards, which are made of glass fiber reinforced plastic with fluorine carbon resin, can produce annoying stationary waves in the signal flow, Accuphase relies on a compensation circuit here which is supposed to minimize such influences. Which other manufacturer applies such a lot of effort?

Before devoting myself fully to the sound of the new M-6200, I wanted to get some information from the distributor about the sonic signature of its predecessor M-6000 which I had no first-hand experience with. According to accounts received it was very distinct from its follow-up model, especially in the treble range. Not every loudspeaker could handle the high-frequency energy of an M-6000 well; examples include ultra high-end titanium or diamond tweeters. With the M-6200 such restrictions are history: in particular the treble range shines with exemplary openness, complemented by a velvety tone quality. A note on the higher damping factor: the mere figure does not represent an only saving criterion, meaning the stricter control of the connected loudspeakers should happen without a vise-like grasp as is sometimes the case. Here they've done a good job, I would call it a firm, loving embrace.

Want some examples? Not far from the editorial building there is an Italian restaurant whose padrone Vittorio had always wanted to know what we are actually dealing with at image hifi. So he came to visit our listening room together with his nephew, and the two of them couldn't stop marveling, for they had never heard or seen anything like this before. I put *Électronique Noire* (Jazzland Recordings, 558 128-2, Norwegen, 1998, CD), the magnificent album by Norwegian guitarist Eivind Aarset, into the player and gave the C-3850's incredibly smooth-running volume knob a good clockwise turn. One can hardly escape that spell which already the first song "Dark Moisture" deploys. Resilient bass waves are flooding the room, joined by Nils Petter Molvær on trumpet and Bugge Wesseltuft on the Fender Rhodes piano with such an overwhelming, crystal clear drive that more than once Vittorio asked me if the Carmel 2 were the only speakers in the room. Meanwhile the music was literally taking off, yet the rendition stayed nuanced and transparent down to the finest detail, despite massive dynamic jumps and complex layers of sound.

When I'm alone again, I put in *Blick aufs Mehr* (Buschfunk, 08002, Germany, 2011, CD) by Axel Prahl & the Inselorchester. "Schön, dass du da bist" ["I'm glad you're here"] had caused tears to well in my eyes back then, and even today it is touching me deeply again, but this time the fretting noises of the guitar are also dawning on me. Other than the last time I'm listening now to each track of this masterpiece with utmost fascination, it doesn't matter which emotional state, which dynamic mood or which complex composition it deals with. "Tanz!" ["Get Dancing!"] gives me so much pleasure that for the first time I'm actually listening to this song all the way to the end, whereas formerly I used to skip to the next track. The polka has a relaxed character with driving dynamics and spurs me on to join the dance. But then again no, I won't go that far. In the evening I take my time to listen through Anouar Brahem's phantastic Souvenance suite (ECM Records, ECM 2423/24, Germany, 2014, 2-CD) again completely. Souvenance means remembrance, the memory of the events in the wake of the Tunisian "Jasmine Revolution" in the years 2010/11. A seemingly infinite room is now spanning up, a freedom somewhere between Heaven and Earth. How Klaus Gesing's bass clarinet sounds so ultra precise on "Deliverance", bone dry and yet never sterile, or how Björn Meyer's electric bass dishes out almost brutal attacks and stops in the title track, this also goes way beyond the memorized sound of the other chain. More than ever before this suite turns into a narration, and I pay much less attention to individual disciplines like e. g. dynamics or resolution. I devote myself entirely to listening and only return into the physical reality after the music has already faded away some moments earlier. As always when hi-fi components prove to be really outstanding and can handle the integration of the individual sonic aspects particularly well, technology takes a back seat. You experience nothing but the music and will be able to grasp its substance to such an extent you've never known before.

At the end of my final listening session I still remain seated for a little while. Meanwhile it has gotten dark long ago and I hear myself breathing deeply once or twice. A happy smile is spreading over my face, a sense of the happiness I'm completely imbued with in this moment. Yes, I'm a romantic. But maybe only romantics can experience such a piece of happiness in that form which is brought to them by way of technical means. "Enrich life through technology" is the Accuphase motto. Indeed, I'm feeling enriched. This is truly high-end, a thought is crossing my mind. In view of all the presumably short-dated, yet nevertheless extremely high-priced equipment we are receiving today from all parts of the world, devices like the Accuphase M-6200 monos are priceworthy in the truest sense of the word, authentic, durable and of lasting value. You can't get enough of looking at them, and certainly you will never get tired of listening to them. Whether loud or soft, they play on world class level and are a genuine reference. Who has ever picked up with such Accuphase products will be in for a lifelong friendship. The fact that this friendship can be upgraded time and again through constant evolution is, by the way, another piece of happiness.

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