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Luxman B-1000f Mono Amplifiers

 by **Marc Mickelson**

"Reviewers' Choice -- in overdrive -- for the B-1000f."



I am no true believer in the allure of vintage audio equipment, but I do concede that there are aspects of the "old gold" movement that are appealing to me. Certain kinds of products have held up over the years, and it's empowering to find one of them at a garage sale or thrift shop, especially if I could never have afforded the item when it was new.

I recently made such a discovery at a garage sale, where I bought a Yamaha YP-D8 turntable. This was one solid, lovely piece of Japanese audio art from the early 1980s. Its MDF base is fully veneered, and its S-shaped tonearm has a few features that were surprisingly forward-looking, including VTA adjustment and weighted antiskating. The cartridge mounted on it looked like a cheapie P-mount, but it was actually a Bang & Olufsen MMC 20CL moving-iron cartridge with a sapphire cantilever and line-contact stylus. The 'table weighs over 30 pounds, and it runs perfectly and silently. I had to adjust the automatic turn-off circuit, which didn't always do its job, but that was a small price to pay given the even smaller price I paid for the 'table and cartridge: \$15.



Back in the early 1980s, if I had been able to upgrade from my lowly BSR turntable to this luxe Yamaha, I would have dreamed about matching it with a Luxman amp and preamp. One of Japan's most distinguished names, Luxman was once well known here in the US, only to disappear, causing us Yanks to wonder if the company had gone under. Well, it hadn't. Luxman products were poorly distributed in the US, then not distributed at all. But Luxman was still a prestige name in Europe and Japan, where its digital products especially were celebrated, but it was a no show in the US for more than a decade.

That changed late in 2006, when Philip O'Hanlon of On a Higher Note began bringing Luxman products back to America. Philip had previously distributed Halcro in the US, and I'm sure the Luxman product line represented a big change for him. Halcro had a few amps and a preamp, while Luxman has multiple amps, preamps, integrated amps, and digital components, along with a phono stage and a headphone amp -- almost two dozen products in total, some fully solid state and others using tubes. When Philip first visited me on his way to a dealer seminar, his minivan was packed to the ceiling with Luxman boxes; he would have needed a trailer to bring along an example of every current Luxman product.

But as anyone who knows him is aware, Philip is all about the music, including recordings that few people have heard -- high-resolution versions of well-known albums, unreleased mixes, demos and the like. "Have I played this for you?" and "I can't give you a copy of this" pepper his talk whenever he visits. On a recent trip, he brought along a ReVox reel-to-reel player, some of the magnificent tapes from the Tape Project, and some line-topping Luxman products: the C-1000f preamp and B-1000f mono amplifiers. We installed the electronics first, did some listening to CDs, and then moved on to the tapes. After just a few cuts, it was apparent to me that I needed to write about the Luxman electronics, so

Review Summary

Sound "There is nothing vintage or nostalgic about this monster amp's sound, which has the kind of neutrality expected from today's best solid-state amps along with the power to make any speaker give in to its authority. However, none of this comes at the expense of body or presence." "There is also tremendous low-end detail, the ability to start and stop with the music and control even big woofers with seeming ease." "The B-1000f has a core set of musical strengths that even a committed tube lover like me can appreciate -- and value."

Features "All of this leads to an amplifier with some impressive specifications, including a 250-watt power rating -- the first 30 in class A -- that doubles as impedance is halved." "Let's start with the EI transformer -- a 55-pound handmade power plant. Instead of having a core wound from round copper wire, as is usual, the core of the B-1000f's transformer is made from paper-covered flat copper bar." "The circuit boards look unusual. Then it hits you: The traces have no right angles, every one of them curving gracefully around the other. Again, the engineers at Luxman simply like how this sort of board layout sounds."

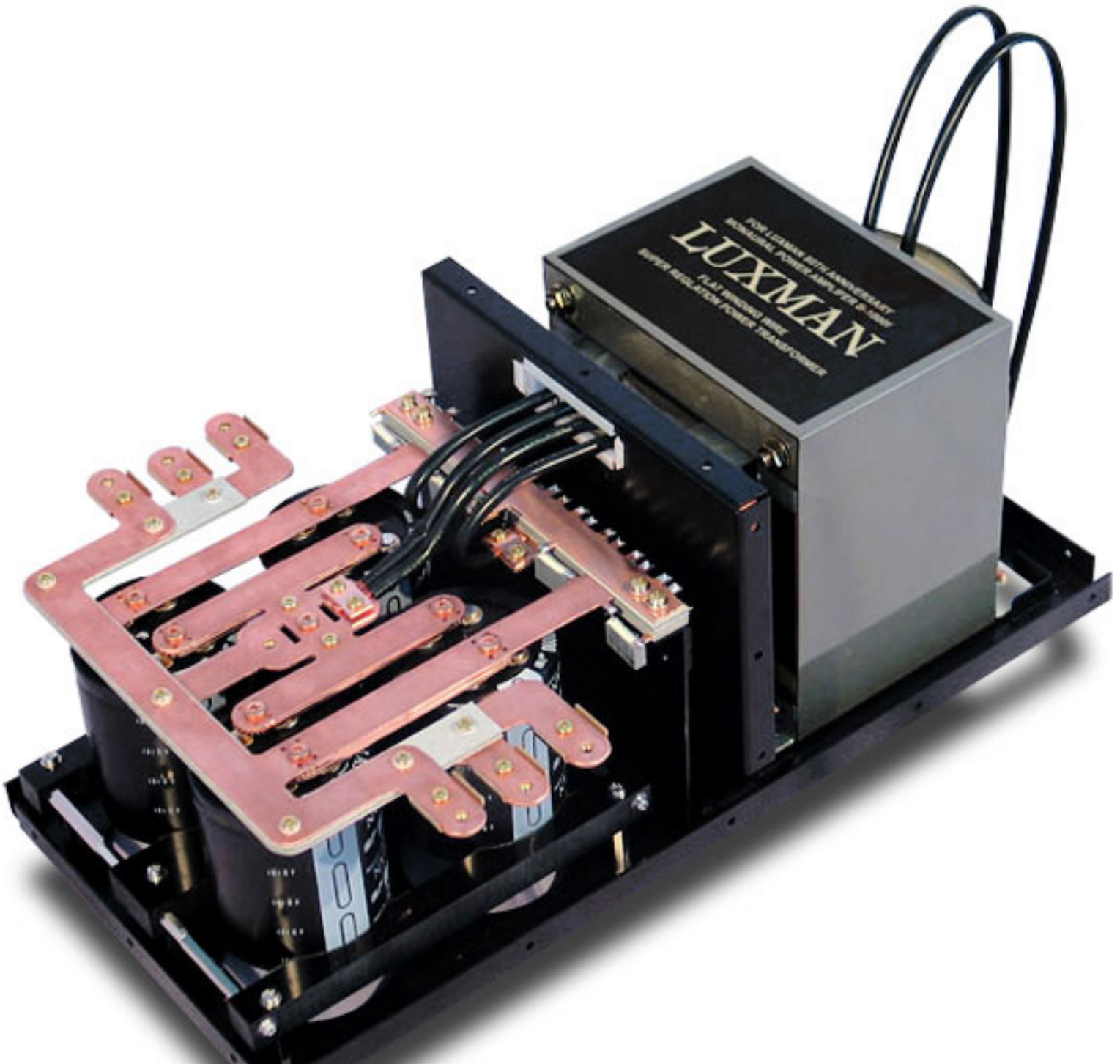
Use "The B-1000f amps need ample warm-up time before they sound their best. Figure on at least 45 minutes from standby to music playing before the amps achieve liquidity, ease and openness."

Value "Such engineering expertise and sonic performance don't come cheap, but Luxman's product line is deep, so there are choices appropriate for just about every budget."

obvious was their sonic appeal. Philip agreed to leave everything with me -- he's trusting on top of being a musical omnivore -- and let me decide what I wanted to write about. While both the preamp and amps deserve some coverage, I chose the B-1000f's, because, well, you'll see why.

Heavy metal

The B-1000f mono amps are massive -- measuring 17"W x 21"D x 11 1/2"H and weighing somewhere north of 140 pounds each -- and massively expensive at \$48,000 USD per pair. Such prices aren't out of the ordinary for top-of-the-line mono amps today, especially ones coming from foreign countries, but when you discover some of what goes into a B-1000f, you start to understand why *this* amp costs so much, even if you still can't write the check for a pair.





The B-1000f's transformer module.

Let's start with the EI transformer -- a 55-pound handmade power plant. Instead of having a core wound from round copper wire, as is usual, the core of the B-1000f's transformer is made from paper-covered flat copper bar. Thick and unyielding, this is actually hammered into place, allowing for a tighter wind. Luxman prefers the sound of its copper bar to that of any round wire and, in this application, dislikes the sound of any outer coating other than paper. There is only one person at Luxman who makes these transformers, and each one is so time-consuming to produce that he spends his week making all of three. Even I can decipher this math: Three transformers means that Luxman can produce a maximum of three B-1000f's per week.

The fanaticism doesn't end at the transformer. The circuit boards look unusual. Then it hits you: The traces have no right angles, every one of them curving gracefully around the other. Again, the engineers at Luxman simply like how this sort of board layout sounds. Like other companies, Luxman is picky about passive parts, but this is taken to a new level, as Luxman even chooses the paint that appears on the resistors it uses for reasons having to do with the paint's effect on the sound. I admire such devotion to sonic purity, even if I can't quite get my head around the way in which paint may make one resistor sound different from another.

All of this leads to an amplifier with some impressive specifications, including a 250-watt power rating (the first 30 in class A) that doubles as impedance is halved. More math: This means the B-1000f will output 500 watts into 4 ohms, 1000 watts into 2 ohms, and 2000 watts into 1 ohm -- a punishing load, but one this amp was created to drive. Quoted frequency response is DC-150kHz, with a 118dB signal-to-noise ratio that pushes theoretical limits. Each amp draws 439 watts at its rated power, though there is thankfully a standby mode that keeps important circuitry warm, the amp drawing less than 1 watt.

In comparison to the front panel of most amps, which sports only a power switch, the B-1000f's front panel is packed with features. There are pushbuttons for choosing the balanced inputs (the B-1000f is fully balanced, so you should use these if you can), absolute phase (pin 3 hot is the default, which is in phase in Japan but out of phase here in North America) and -4dB attenuation (which lowers the amp's voltage gain). There is also a lighted meter that pulsates with the music, roughly indicating the power output of each amp. I didn't find the meter bothersome, and there were times when I thought an especially big transient was struck, and looking at the meters confirmed this. But I listen mostly with eyes shut. If the meter bugs you to no end there's a button for turning it off. There are also pushbuttons for turning the amp on and taking it out of standby.



What will first catch your eye around back are the sturdiest gold-plated five-way binding posts you'll ever see. Their caps are like small doorknobs, and they allow you to torque down on speaker cables without the use of tools. There are two sets, making biwiring easy. There are RCA and XLR inputs along with an IEC power-cord inlet that's near the bottom of the amp, so the cord isn't in the way of the other connections. Even the IEC receptacle isn't left well enough alone, beginning with high-purity brass parts that are plated once with non-magnetic nickel and then gold. A feature I've never seen on any piece of electronics is a line-phase sensor, which, after you push it, will glow red if the live and neutral lines of the outlet into which the B-1000f is plugged are reversed. Luxman included a pair of sturdy handles on the back panel. You can pick the amp up with these, but enlist the help of a strong friend instead of going it alone. There are also jacks for remote turn on and off of the amp.

Even the packaging is fanatically designed, with boxes that make packing and unpacking an easier job. The boxes have illustrations on the outside showing how everything fits together. As a final touch of luxury, Luxman packages a custom power cord along with each B-1000f -- no computer-grade throwaway included for the sake of completeness. The owner's manual is in Japanese only at this point, but Philip O'Hanlon is busy translating.

Used with...

The B-1000f amps were hardly slumming it in my system; they were surrounded with likewise pricey and extreme equipment. Speakers were Wilson Audio MAXX 2s or Alexandria X-2 Series 2s, both of which reached some new sonic levels driven by the ultra-beefy B-1000f's. Preamps were the matching solid-state Luxman C-1000f, which costs a cool \$30,000, an Audio Research Reference 3, and an Aurum Acoustics CDP preamp/CD player. Digital sources were the Aurum CDP, an Ayre C-5xe universal player, and a Zanden 2000P CD transport connected via Zanden's I²S cable to its mate, the Model 5000S DAC. Analog playback came courtesy of a TW-Acoustic Raven AC turntable on which were mounted a Graham Phantom tonearm and Dynavector DRT XV-1s stereo and mono cartridges -- one Graham armwand for each. Phono stages were the highly flexible internal one for the Aurum CDP, a Lamm LP2 Deluxe, and an Audio Research PH7. Other amps for comparison were Lamm M1.2 Reference monoblocks and an Audio Research Reference 110 stereo amp.

Cables were mostly AudioQuest William E. Low Signature speaker cables and balanced interconnects, augmented with some AudioQuest Sky interconnects. Near the very end of my time with the Luxman amps, I was able to connect everything with Shunyata Research's new Aeros-series interconnects and speaker cables. Tonearm cables were a Furutech Ag-12 or AudioQuest LeoPard. Power cords were either Essential Sound Products Essence Reference or Shunyata Research Anaconda Helix or Python Helix in both Vx and Alpha variations. As I mentioned, Luxman supplies a nicely wrought power cord with each B-1000f, but I stuck with the other cords simply because I know their contributions to the sound of my system. Everything, including the amps, was plugged into a Shunyata Hydra V-Ray power conditioner or an ESP Essence Reference power distributor.

The literal centerpiece of my system is a Silent Running Audio Craz 4 Reference rack, which is a rock-solid platform for the TW-Acoustic turntable and its 100+ pounds. The Lamm amps likewise rested on SRA platforms. A pair of Harmonic Resolution Systems M3 bases supported the Zanden transport and DAC.

The B-1000f amps need ample warm-up time before they sound their best. Figure on at least 45 minutes from standby to music playing before the amps achieve liquidity, ease and openness. In use, the B-1000f's run hot to the touch, but they don't emit a noticeable amount of heat. My room is very big -- 20'W x 29'L with a 10' ceiling -- and only the toastiest of tube amps make a dent in such square footage. Once the amps were powered up, I generally left them on for the day, their partially class-A output no doubt putting a dent in our power bill. The amps were perfectly stable and made not a discouraging sound for the two solid months they were in my system.

Japanese muscle

While Luxman may be a grand old name in high-performance audio, the B-1000f proves that the company's best products are not in the past. There is nothing vintage or nostalgic about this monster amp's sound, which has the kind of neutrality expected from today's best solid-state amps along with the power to make any speaker give in to its authority. However, none of this comes at the expense of body or presence. While I wouldn't call the B-1000f a tubey-sounding solid-state amp, neither would I liken its

sound to that of some of its solid-state competition, which can sound sterile, more like a piece of laboratory equipment than a power amplifier. The B-1000f has a core set of musical strengths that even a committed tube lover like me can appreciate -- and value.

Where the B-1000f's ability to "double down" -- double its power output as load impedance is halved -- has obvious effect is in the bass, which is where things can get a little (or a lot) hairy with speaker impedance, especially when multiple woofers are involved. The B-1000f's bass simply goes lower and with greater linearity than that of any amp I've heard. There is also tremendous low-end detail, the ability to start and stop with the music and control even big woofers with seeming ease. The Wilson Audio MAXX 2s and X-2 Series 2 speakers can provide bass depth that outclasses that of most subwoofers, even some that are highly touted, and when driven by the B-1000f's, these speakers can almost literally rock the house.

Back when I was in college, one of my roommates played side one of Talking Heads *Stop Making Sense* LP [Sire W1-25186] every morning before class, often while I was still sleeping. I grew to know the throbbing bass of those songs -- "Psycho Killer" to "Girlfriend is Better" -- better than the lyrics or melodies. So when I found a very clean copy of this album at a garage sale, I couldn't wait to hear what the Luxman amps could do with it. The bass range was completely devoid of the loudness-control bloat burned into my memory, and it was replaced by snap and punch that were impressive for their pistonic start and stop. When I wanted to test bass depth, I pulled out Tracy Chapman's CD *Where You Live* [Elektra 83803-2] to hear the throbbing tones of "3,000 Miles." Other amps bring more weight to this very low bass, but the Luxman monoblocks tracked this energy down to its very bottom, pressurizing my listening room like an incoming storm front. There is no trick to such bass, no adornment that impresses at first but becomes tiresome after a while. In the B-1000f's case, the bass is further evidence of the amplifier's dominant neutrality -- the ideal of conveying what's recorded with the utmost faithfulness.

While the B-1000f is going to give you the truth, it won't do so in the way that some other amplifiers present it. Solid-state amps often take a hit for their gaunt midrange, vocalists losing all sense that there's a body behind whatever they sing. In contrast, the midrange of the B-1000f has some weight and palpability -- not so much that they season every part of the musical signal or are even plainly obvious, but just enough to make you move on to consider something else about what you're hearing. Warm recordings, whether analog or digital, sound warm but never to excess, while the leanness in other recordings will be duly noted, not force you to look for something else to play. *This* is the truth --

The littler Luxman

Intrigued by the B-1000f's but don't have the nearly \$50k required to buy 'em? While not exactly a budget-minded product at \$16,000, the Luxman M-800A is one-third the B-1000f's price, one-quarter its power output (60Wpc versus 250 watts each) and about 70% of the B-1000f's performance contained in a similarly well-designed and attractive package.

Sonically speaking, what you get from the M-800A is much of the low-end prowess of the B-1000f, along with the more expensive amp's matter-of-fact midrange and way with space. Tone and timbre are fundamentally neutral and true to life, with piano well delineated and portrayed authoritatively in its lowest registers, where the power reserves of this amp become apparent. I especially enjoyed the moody jazz of the ECM label with

the sense that a recording sounds as it should and that that the Luxman amplifiers don't push it to excess one way or another -- and it's one of the most endearing things about the B-1000f monoblocks, something that will lead to long-term happiness and lots of listening.

Piano comes alive with the B-1000f's, likely because of their effortless power and ability to delineate instruments from each other, casting them in whatever sense of space is captured on the recording. Again, neutrality rules, the B-1000f amps not adding in or subtracting from what's recorded. Hampton Hawes is maybe the most under-appreciated pianist from jazz's heydays in the 1950s and '60s. Hawes was a sympathetic interpreter who played *into* tunes, turning them into something that connected on a level below cognition. He made a series of trio recordings, plainly subtitled *Vol. 1, Vol. 2* and *Vol. 3*, not to be confused with the three *All Night Session!* recordings. The trio collections are among his very best, and on *This is Hampton Hawes - Vol.2, The Trio* [Fantasy OJC-318] dynamics were portrayed with realistic scaling, the ability to soar from soft to very loud, and the notes popped, enhancing appreciation of Hawes' elegant playing.

Small and large-scale dynamics were another obvious strength of the Luxman amps. At low levels, detail was never absorbed by the amps' noise floor, which is very low, even by the ear-to-the-tweeter test, but when the music roars, the B-1000f's presented it in all its raw power. Here again, piano was a great test, as the same instrument that is capable of delicacy is also able to convey thunderous power. The Luxman amps handled the extremes with ease.

What you won't get from the B-1000f really comes as no great surprise: the midrange sophistication of a great tube amp -- the unique combination of warmth, texture, and roundness that can bring music to life. Of course, the question is whether these are pleasing colorations -- things an amplifier adds to the signal -- or recorded treasure somehow buried from the unerring neutrality of the solid-state B-1000f. I know what

the M-800A. These recordings can sound dry, but they worked with the M-800A, which conveyed the unique mixture of atmosphere and challenging music on Dino Saluzzi and Anja Lechner's *Ojos Negro* [ECM 1991] with a tube amp's spatial acumen.

What I found most surprising, however, is that while the M-800A is rated at 60Wpc, it never compressed dynamically or gave other signs of running out of power with the Wilson Audio MAXX 2s. Speakers and amp played at nearly rave-approved levels for as long as I could tolerate it. On the other end of the volume spectrum, M-800A was very quiet, never obscuring fine detail amidst its own noise. Where the B-1000f monoblocks pull ahead is in the effortlessness of their sound at all levels, their ability to find another level of bass depth with speakers that have it, their slightly greater midrange purity, and their standard-setting dynamic range. Still, it's obvious that the M-800A comes from people with the same mindset: push the limits of dynamic expression while delivering a clean though not expressly lean or bleached tone. The M-800A accomplishes this better than any amp other than the B-1000f.

The M-800A also gives you an intriguing platform for even greater sonic performance: It can be bridged to mono, in which case it quadruples its power output and, I'm sure, inches even closer to its very big, very impressive brother. Still, with many speakers and at sane listening levels, you won't need any more amp than this.

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I like, and I like an attention-grabbing midrange; still, while I listened to the B-1000f, I never felt deprived.

In fact, the more I listened to these amps, especially in conjunction with the matching top-of-the-line Luxman C-1000f preamp, the more *I liked* them, which is a rare occurrence with solid-state gear in my system. I began playing more vinyl with the Luxman electronics, marveling at the imaging, the spaciousness, and the whomping bass. At no point did I want to switch to other electronics, even to hear how a different amp or preamp might portray a particular recording. More than any one thing about the sonic signature of this gear, I will remember the weeks of listening I did with the B-1000f's, only considering what equipment I was listening to when my reviewer subroutine was running. And I can do with less of that!

Monoblock y monoblock

My admiration for Vladimir Lamm's amplifiers -- all of 'em -- remains absolute: I have owned Lamm amplifiers, which I have used as my reference, for a very long time, and their pairing with Wilson Audio speakers exists on a level where synergy gives way to something greater -- a sympathetic idea of what great reproduced sound is. Above all, Lamm amplifiers sound organic and whole, able to convey the detail on recordings in an intimately real way that I find especially meaningful. Even after reviewing other amplifiers, some of which have impressed me greatly, I am always happy to revisit the Lamm amps, which bring me home, sonically speaking.

These days, after longtime use of Lamm tube amps -- the ML1.1 and ML2.1 -- I have settled on the M1.2 Reference monoblocks (\$22,290 per pair). Because of their hybrid circuit -- tube input, solid-state output -- and greater power, they are more widely usable for reviewing purposes than their tube mates, and they always sound like a Lamm amp, giving me extreme pleasure in the rare instances when I'm listening for the heck of it, not to suss what a review component is all about, Alfie.

So, right in the middle of my very enjoyable time with the Luxman amps, I reconnected the M1.2s. People often write me wondering how one product *compares* to another, when in reality it's the *contrasts* that they're really wondering about. With the Luxman and Lamm amps, the contrasts were striking. I immediately responded to the M1.2s' midrange warmth and bass weight, writing in my listening notes, "Boy, I miss all that." These things give the Lamm amps a full, palpable sound that's different from that of the Luxman amps, which sound lighter and brighter though never lean and bleached. In the bass, the Lamm amps counter the tremendous depth of the Luxman amps with greater apparent heft, which can actually give the illusion of greater bass depth. The Luxman amps just dig deeper, remaining honest to their very depths and giving no sign of sonic additives. Still, the weight of the Lamm amps' bass can be very pleasing, especially with LPs like *Stop Making Sense*, though the Luxman amps clearly go deeper -- and go deeper clearly.

In the mids, the tubes of the Lamm amps are all the more obvious when the sound of the amps is set against the fidelity of the Luxman monoblocks. The Lamm amps cast a full, physical soundstage, one that's not short on recorded space, while the Luxman amps cast solid images amidst a spacious soundstage. This might seem like a picky distinction to make, but it's not. You first note the physicality of

the Lamm amps, while with the Luxman amps the physicality comes from the substantial way the musicians are rendered within the recorded space.

More than the great difference in price, the choice between the Lamm and Luxman amps comes down to the view of music that appeals to you: obvious physicality versus obvious neutrality. With the Lamm amps, you get enough power to drive most speakers, while I seriously doubt the Luxman M-1000f's will run out of power with *any* speaker. I'd like to own both sets of amps, but I'm happy to have just one.

Then and now

Next month I will finish my tenth year as the editor of *SoundStage!*, and I can only guess how many reviews of amplifiers I've written over the course of that decade. As I think back about all of the amps I've heard, or at least the ones that come easily to mind, I can remember none that seemingly incorporates the strengths of them all better than the Luxman B-1000f. It has a fundamentally neutral signature, standard-setting bass depth and linearity, and doesn't display obvious colorations that will cause you to revoice your system to overcome them. There's no solid-state leanness or tubelike warmth, no bass bloat that gives the illusion of power, no zingy treble. There's just an open window on the intrinsic sound of the recording, a sonic character that passes on the signal fed to it with great detail and dynamic expression. Such engineering expertise and sonic performance don't come cheap, but Luxman's product line is deep, so there are choices appropriate for just about every budget.

With the B-1000f, Luxman has returned to America with a bang. Just as in the automobile industry, the established names in American hi-fi -- Mark Levinson, Krell, Boulder and others -- now have some stiff competition from Japan. [Reviewers' Choice](#) -- in overdrive -- for the B-1000f.

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Luxman B-1000f Mono Amplifiers

Price: \$48,000 USD per pair.

Warranty: Five years parts and labor.

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