

Traditional Styling, Contemporary Performance

LUXMAN L-550A II CLASS A INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER
AND DU-50 UNIVERSAL MUSIC PLAYER

Paul Seydor



Founded in 1925, Luxman is one of the most respected of all Japanese audio manufacturers and was a name to be reckoned with in the seventies and eighties owing to a series of very highly regarded tube amplifiers, still much in demand on the used market. In 1984 the company was acquired by Alps, which tried to market Luxman products with those of Alpine, a strategy that failed dismally, resulting in the loss of distribution in America and Europe. Luxman, nevertheless, continued to develop innovative electronics for the Japanese market, and in 2007 acquired American representation once again, now through On a Higher Note (the original importer of Halcro).

Despite respective \$4500 and \$4000 retail prices, the integrated amplifier and universal-disc player considered here are entry-level models. By way of anticipating my conclusion, if performance this high represents the “bottom” of Luxman’s line, I can scarcely conceive the stratospheres the upper models must occupy.

L-550A II Integrated Amplifier

I was favorably disposed toward this integrated amplifier from the moment I laid eyes on it. The traditional styling and ergonomics hark back to the classic designs of the sixties: Large source and selector knobs, the ones most used, flank a pair of meters; less-used controls handling a number of equally traditional functions, such as balance, tone controls, loudness compensation, and mode switching (i.e., stereo, mono, left, right), are arrayed in a neat row across the bottom, with push-buttons on either side. The only visual clues of contemporary provenance on the handsome, substantial chassis are the remote handset, a pair of balanced inputs, and heavy-duty binding posts. Attention to fit, finish, and detail, obvious even before fire-up, places the L-550A right up there in McIntosh league. And though the large front-panel meters are yellow rather than blue, the homage to that great American giant is clear.

Once you do fire it up—break in a mere day's worth—you feel an immediate confidence in the silken rotation of that volume pot, the light but firm push-buttons that engage and disengage a satisfyingly quiet “click”—again, shades of McIntosh—to let you know a command has been completed. But make no mistake: If

the look is retro, the performance is as up-to-date as the current state of the art allows. Its 20Wpc into 8-ohm, 40Wpc into 4-ohm rating may seem light beside many of today's brutes; but this is pure Class A solid-state, so it plays louder than the numbers suggest. And Luxman's are very conservatively rated watts that one lab measured at nearly four times the nominal specification before clipping. Driving Wilson Duette loudspeakers revealed no problems with levels as loud as I typically employ. Indeed, the amp didn't falter until the volume drove me out of the room. And I mean “falter,” not “fail.” Certain instruments, e.g., bass drums or pianos in their lowest register, were merely robbed of some impact in a presentation otherwise clean, controlled, and unruffled.

I couldn't wait to try the L-550A on my Quad ESLs. Ruthlessly revealing, inefficient yet with limited power handling, they should prove an ideal match for a modestly powered, immodestly performing Class A amp. Nor was I disappointed: highs smooth yet crystalline in their clarity and airiness, midrange natural and neutral, bass of satisfying warmth, definition, even power. And, of course, transparency galore. Hardly unexpected. As I've observed in other reviews, contemporary solid-state electronics of competent or better engineering rarely display

any tonal signature unless it's been designed in (Bob Carver's Sunfires with their presence dip or any number of moderately-powered British amps that aim specifically for a “punchy,” “tuneful” mid-to-upper bass).

No, the special virtues of the Luxman lie elsewhere, beginning with a really lovely purity that holds up and down the scale from the quietest of settings to the loudest, provided you don't get stupid about loud levels. Perhaps because my reference speakers have been Quad ESLs of all vintages these many years, I may appreciate the virtues of moderate levels more than the typical audiophile. In my medium-large room (over 2600 cubic feet), a moderate level—by which I mean conversation possible but not easy during loud passages—from the combination of the L-550A and any of my Quads yields the ideal “window onto the concert hall.” Find the right volume—Peter Walker argued that there is only a small range of “right” playback level for a given recording—and everything locks into place within a soundfield that is solid in the root meaning of the word *stereo*. (As I did most of my listening on Quads, I've asked my colleague Robert E. Greene to comment on the L-550A driving several, very different dynamic speakers he has on hand.)



I've not heard a better and rarely enjoyed a more user-friendly integrated amplifier than this Luxman

Belafonte Live at Carnegie Hall demonstrates this as well as anything, and something more besides. Belafonte's voice has real body in addition to presence, warmth, and naturalness. I know there are audio critics who insist that solid-state cannot do "body" in the way that tubes can, but every time I listen to my reference McIntosh C46/MC402, they fling that prejudice down upon the floor and dance on it. Likewise this Luxman.

By the way, the Belafonte came via Classic Records' vinyl reissue, straight into the Luxman's built-in phonostage from a Sota Cosmos/Graham Phantom/Ortofon Rohman combination. Clean, quiet, dynamic, and rather eye-poppingly detailed (that Carnegie Hall crowd a collection of individuals, not an undifferentiated wedge). Make no mistake: This is no tossed-in, okay-for-the-money phonostage; it's genuinely excellent. (The mm circuit has the standard 47k load, the mc 100 ohms—an excellent compromise value in the absence of options.)

Two old-fashioned features I both applaud and appreciate in the L-550A are the tone control and loudness-compensation circuits pregnant pause here...that vortex-like sucking sound you just heard is, I'd guess, the last of what little credibility I have left with the purist crowd going right down the tubes. Sure, a badly

designed loudness circuit—there were plenty of them in the old days—is useless. But a well-designed one, such as Luxman's, does an excellent job restoring a pleasing and—yes, why be afraid to say it?—realistic sense of bottom-end warmth and weight for very quiet listening. As for tone controls, many of my favorite recordings from the early days of stereo with their peaked microphones—whatever the admitted virtues of classic Mercury recordings, surely nobody actually *likes* that 11kHz peak?—and their souped-up upper-midrange and lower-highs really do sound more natural with some treble pull-down. (So, for that matter, do any number of modern recordings with their ultra-close miking.)

Let me provide two specific examples of what I am talking about. Leonard Bernstein's 1962 Mahler Second Symphony with the New York Philharmonic, a desert island performance if ever there was one, has reproduction that is actually quite superb in many ways: great clarity and transparency, extraordinary inner detail, real atmosphere, even impressive dynamic range (tremendous weight and power in the climaxes). But like so many Columbias from this period, it's rather fierce in the upper-midrange and lower highs, which the Luxman treble control tames very nicely. A before-and-after demonstration forced a purist-audiophile friend to admit the correction significantly reduced glare to more musically pleasing and natural effect.

One quiet night, listening at an equally quiet level, my wife and I were comparing recordings of Beethoven's Op. 132 quartet. Now Danielle's favorite instrument is the cello, which she likes reproduced with its full richness, nearly impossible at very low volumes. Pulling up the bottom end with the bass control brought a nod of approval. Then, almost as a lark, I added loudness compensation to the bass boost. The smile on her face told me all I needed to know. Suddenly the entire performance took on a richness, weight, and depth not just of sonics but of deepened *emotional* meaning, of extended *musical* expression.



Robert E. Greene comments on the L550-A II

With Class A operation and extreme attention to detail in design, the Luxman offers pure, clean, clear, neutral sound, with the "first watt" purity beloved of single-ended-triode people but with none of the SET's inherent colorations and limitations, and a lot more power than SETs are likely to have. While the amp could run out of steam with low-sensitivity speakers, large bass signals, and big rooms combined, it offers faultless sound for many applications. And its elegant appearance and all-in-one character attracts. My wife Paige wants to keep it—wonderful sound without, she says, the audio-laboratory look of "all those wires." The by-passable tone controls are a plus (they really are!), and, nowadays, when DSP designers are getting all excited about "dynamic compensation," as if it were something new, here is a reminder of how well the old analog "loudness control" can actually be made to work. Built with exquisite quality, this unit is essentially the proverbial perfect sound forever, and in a most attractive package.

Luxman's tone controls, centered at 100Hz and 10kHz, with ± 10 dB of boost or cut, are so well designed that it may be impossible to make an unmusical sound with them if they are applied with taste, discretion, and judgment. (Purists need not worry: A button bypasses them entirely.) Perhaps no one except real music lovers would be tempted to purchase the L-550A amplifier for features such as this alone. However, when you figure that they're not alone but come with a truly outstanding amplifier and control center, perhaps you will understand why I recommend this product with the highest possible enthusiasm. I've not heard a better and rarely enjoyed a more user-friendly integrated amplifier than this Luxman.



DU-50 Universal Disc Player

The importer prefers to market the DU-50 as a universal *music* player because it lacks an HDMI output. But inasmuch as it will accept any five-inch disc on the planet except HD and Blu-ray, it is by any reckoning a universal player *de facto*. And HDMI or no, it superbly reproduced (via component outputs) several movies I've edited, over which I also supervised dubbing and observed timing.

The DU-50 has one feature unique in my experience: a pair of onboard DACs, front-panel switchable. The first is a standard, albeit very-high-quality Red Book DAC that also serves dual use for DVD-A. The second, called the Fluency (FE) DAC, is claimed to "recreate" some of the ultra-high frequency extension lost by the brick-wall filters mandated by the 44kHz sampling rate. That's about as much as my competence in function-interpolation and other digital theory allows me to explain. Sonically, the FE DAC is a little warmer and more relaxed beside the slightly cooler standard DAC, though I still find my outboard Benchmark DAC-1 slightly more accurate than either.

But as Tom Martin observed recently in these pages, good CD players tend to sound remarkably similar to one another, all else equal. When Red Book gets it basically right, there's not a lot of difference from one player or DAC to the next (virtually none in tonal balance), and what differences there are tend to cost a great deal of money. But there *are* differences. Tom in his report concentrated on high frequencies, but there is another area that separates the routine from the truly extraordinary, a characteristic I've mentioned with respect to the integrated amplifier: body. The Oppo DV-981HD, highly praised in

this magazine and elsewhere, sounds very nice and takes your breath away when you recall its \$229 price, which includes stellar video-performance. Yet I hardly ever use it to play music because by comparison with what else I have in house, it simply lacks body. (It also has the most unreliable ergonomics I've encountered in any digital player.)

I've been listening to a lot of piano music lately, especially the sonatas of Beethoven in performances of various magnificence by Serkin *père*, Goode, Rosen, Richter, Uchida, and Lewis. Put on the last movement of the "Waldstein"—Beethoven at his most heaven-stormingly virtuosic—and the Oppo does nothing wrong... except when you listen to it beside a really serious player, such as this Luxman. Suddenly you hear weight, power, and drive to rivet the attention and tickle the hairs on the back of your neck. With the Oppo and others of its ilk, there is by comparison a thinness—I am not referring to a tonal issue here—that lends the presentation a vague but unmistakable feel of insubstantiality, almost a "papery" character.

All my listening was done in two-channel, still the way to go when it comes to purity of reproduction. The DU-50 allows SACDs to shine in all their easy superiority. Take *Waltz for Debby* from Acoustic Sounds—so delicate, nuanced, and beautiful, with atmosphere to burn, you might not even miss its vinyl alternative. Harmonia Mundi USA's Anonymous Four swansong *Gloryland*, again SACD, sounds edgy if your system is, confused if it loses control. But if everything is dialed in correctly, the performers come alive in your room, as regards both presence and imaging, each singer easily distinguished with respect to vocal quality and position in the soundstage. I don't have much in the way of DVD-A (does anyone?), but the DU-50 brought Dusty Springfield to life

in Classic's *Casino Royale* DAD.

In other respects describing the sound of this player is to repeat everything I said about the L-550A regarding tonal neutrality, dynamics, resolution, and detail. The price of the DU-50 lands it squarely in a highly competitive segment of the market. It's been awhile since I've had super-expensive digital playback in my house, say, a dcs Elgar or the two-tiered McIntosh setup (\$15k). Nor can I claim to have heard even a representative sampling of what's available out there in universal players. What I can claim is that nothing in my wholly satisfying review-period with this player—and its companion amplifier—ever made me want anything "more" or "better." It's at least *that* good. When you factor in its superb functional characteristics that make it the most elegant and intuitive-to-use player I've had in my system, the adage that you get what you pay for is once again validated in no uncertain terms. Neither the L-550A nor the DU-50 is inexpensive, but they do represent the best kind of value, the kind that brings you truly lasting satisfaction. **TAS**

Specs & Pricing

Luxman L-550A II Integrated Amplifier
Power output: 20Wpc @ 8 ohms, 40Wpc @ 4 ohms, Class A

Harmonic distortion: 0.03% or less

Signal-to-noise ratio: Phono mm, above 91dB; phono mc, above 75dB; line, above 106dB

Dimensions: 18.3" x 7" x 17.1"

Weight: 48.4 lbs.

Price: \$4500

Luxman DU-50 Universal Music Player

Formats: DVD-Audio, DVD-Video, SACD (multichannel, stereo), CD, MP3, Dolby Digital, DTS

Frequency response: 4Hz–45kHz (format-dependent)

Dynamic Range: 106–115dB (format-dependent)

Dimensions: 18.3" x 5.2" x 14.4"

Weight: 28.6 lbs.

Price: \$4000

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