



hardware

luxman

DU-80 Universal player

as reviewed by Robert H. Levi



Back with a bang, Luxman returns to America with a complete line of beautifully crafted and designed gear for the upscale audio and videophile. I still have my Luxman K-8 cassette player in my system working flawlessly since 1979! The DU-80 is Luxman's top universal player at a weighty 50 pounds and a costly \$9400. Smooth, sophisticated, focused, flexible, and a bit sexy, it's one of the tip top universal players I've auditioned in my system or in any other system. Nothing I tried tripped it up. It plays all the formats I've ever heard, except LD. Its ultra low distortion and unfussy sound is both musical and addictive. What a beauty!

Sporting a mountain of outputs with balanced and single ended choices, gold plated circuit boards, two sets of user choose able DACs for CD fun, hotrod two channel playback, elegant front panel controls, a very good remote, and more, I spent a week just roaming the various functions and choices. The drawer is fast and smooth and the workings are dead silent and quick. Mechanically, it's as good at it needs to be, and more.

ROBERT H. LEVI'S SYSTEM

LOUDSPEAKERS

Avalon Eidolon and REL Stadium III subwoofer.

ELECTRONICS

E.A.R. 324 phono preamplifier, E.A.R. 890 amplifiers (ran as monos), NuForce Reference 9 SE V2 amplifiers, E.A.R. 912 preamplifier, and an E.A.R. 834L Tube Line Stage.

SOURCES

VPI Scout/JMW 9 tonearm, VPI SDS Controller, ZYX R-1000 Airy 3-XSB phono cartridge, E.A.R. Acute CD player, **ModWright Sony 9100 Player with tube power supply**, ModWright Sony 9100ES with Signature Truth Modifications, Mod/Bybee Filters and Revelation Cryo Silver Umbilical. Alesis Masterlink 24/96 Recorder/Playback Deck, and the Benchmark DAC 1 revised. Grado Statement Phono Cartridge. Pioneer DVL 919 LD/DVD Player, and a Marantz DV8400 DVD/SACD/CD player. Magnum Dynalab MD-108 Reference Tuner, Marantz 10B FM Tuner, Day Sequerra Reference FM1 Tuner, and Scott 350B FM Stereo Tuner, AQ 7500 FM Antenna, Stax 7t Electrostatic headphones, Grado Reference 1 headphones, and a Grado headphone amplifier.

CABLES

Kubala-Sosna Emotion, Harmonic Technology CyberLight, **Harmonic Technology Magic 2**, Dual-Connect interconnects, **Dynamic Design THB Nebula**, Soundstring, Kimber Select balanced, Kimber TAK phono AG, Kimber Hero balanced and single ended interconnects, and Acoustic Zen Silver Reference II balanced interconnects. Kimber D-60 Digital Interconnects. Kimber Select 3038 Silver, **Kubala-Sosna Emotion**, and **Harmonic Technology Magic Reference Silver** speaker cables. Kimber Palladian, Tara RSC and Decade, Tice, Soundstring, and **Kubala-Sosna Emotion** AC power cords.

ACCESSORIES

Monster Reference 350 Mark II v2 Power Conditioner, World Power Power Wing, Tice Clock, and Audio Prism Quiet Line IIs. Cable Cooker 2.5, Winds Stylus Pressure Gage, Bedini Ultra Clarifier, VPI Record Cleaning Machine

Compared to the Linn Universal and Esoteric Universal pieces I've encountered here, though I did not directly compare in all fairness, I can recollect flaws in those units not present with the DU-80.

The Linn pieces were a bit cool, dry, and not quite as flexible. The Esoteric pieces were more vivid, while being a bit etched and a touch relentless. I was not shaken with any serious flaws in CD, SACD, DVDA, or DVDV playback with the Luxman. Any quibbles were fairly subtle and, frankly quite forgivable. Though it does not advance the state of the art when compared to SACD/CD specialty players, it is always predictably musical and harmonious when called into action.

I utilized the same superb Kubala-Sosna Emotion interconnects and power cords as used on all my other digital sources. I began the listening with single-ended Emotion interconnect, but later switched to the balanced version. I did let the DU-80 fully break-in for a week before testing.

CD Playback

The Luxman is an 8.5 on a scale of 10 [10 would signify the very best available.] The Luxman designed Fluency DACs are gentle, agile, and sweetly musical. They also offer a Shannon DAC choice, but it's a bit vivid and less mellifluous—in my opinion, this is not the best option for playback. Even so, a front panel button lets you compare the two DAC choices on the fly. Very good imaging, soundstaging, quietude, and definition are obvious with the Fluency DACs and top CDs sound quite winning.

Meaning that the Luxman is a real contender with Redbook CDs—the most available source there is. That's a very good thing! Lot's of dynamic range is readily apparent and ambience retrieval is quite fine. But, the best CD only gear is richer, more highly textured with more fleshed out "you are there" realism to offer. The differences aren't huge, but they are more than subtle. The Luxman's level of performance is satisfying and eminently enjoyable, plus it is a cut above its price-point competitors.

SACD Playback

Bold and powerful, SACD playback retains the musical nature of Redbook CD playback, but is not as compelling as other SACD specialty gear. I'd grade it an 8 on a scale of 10. I liked its iron fisted control on loud complex passages, slam and boom when called for, and delicacy in soft quiet times. This is very good SACD playback. The equal of about the best I knew of just a few years ago. I just find the SACD playback less interesting and involving than the CD playback. The problem is that other high-priced specialty SACD players go further than the Luxman in detailing and life-like imaging, though other universal players may come up a bit short compared to the Luxman in my recollection. I'd gladly tell you if I'd heard a better universal player out there, but I haven't. Luxman does have two other models that cost much less than the DU-80, so there may be trickle down benefits. Stay tuned.



DVD-A Playback

I finally got to enjoy my AIX disks, and they are fabulous. Except for a slight softening of transients the playback, DVDA is a 9 out of 10. I loved the AIX and Classic discs on the Luxman and would have been quite happy to live with its performance if I had a large DVDA collection. But I don't. I only own six! Oh well. If you acquire the Luxman, there are no worries about playback of this format—that, I can assure you. By the way, this is the first player I know of that lets you access DVDA playback without a monitor. I was able to go to menu choices and select tracks from the remote using the readout on the front panel. Very fine performance here!

DVD-V Playback

I own quite a few of these DADs from Chesky and Classic and with this format I'd rate the sound as an 8 out of 10. They sound musical, detailed, and always delightful on the Luxman, though specialty players just have more spot on imaging, openness, and verisimilitude. This is basically a dead format, but AIX and Classic continue to offer it to the audio community. The musicality of the Luxman appears to be innate and intrinsic to every format. I like this level of quality and musicality and consider it a requirement at this price point.

Obviously, the Luxman has 5.1 outputs which I did not test ...choosing instead to use the two channel hotrod function at all times. I will leave that to others. I noticed a slight improvement in sonics with the display off, so I kept it off for testing. I settled on the balanced two channel outputs with the Kubala-Sosna Emotion cables and noticed a small improvement in noise level which brought out added definition over single-ended hookup. The Kubala-Sosna Emotion makes a great combo with the Luxman and is most highly recommended.

Luxman utilizes a custom proprietary amplification stage with their own DACs that bears some comment. It seems to me that Luxman must have listened carefully to their DACs and amplification during development, in that there is a high level of musicality present that is oh-so rare to these big universal players. Lesser players have a mushiness, crispness, or coolness to their sound. Neither of these is present in the Luxman. That certain charm and beauty of tone, which I hear in specialty digital gear, is present here too. Sins of omission, rather than commission, are less bothersome and this is the situation with the Luxman. Meaning that there's a bit less of everything: from highs to super lows, to detailing, to textures. However, lack of digital artifacts, an elegance of tonality, and a strong sense of consistent neutrality (with just a hint of sweetness), all combine to create a delightful and insightful musical experience, particularly on CDs.

I can't answer the big question regarding value. There are universal players as low for a few hundred dollars, but even so, to my mind and ears, the top Luxman makes a strong case. I can think of universal players that cost more, but perform less well than the DU-80 does for the perfectionist. The final judgment is yours.

In Conclusion

Luxman is back and their top of the line Digital Universal Player model DU-80 is a combination of superb construction, excellent design, custom DACs on gold circuit boards, truly universal playback and flexibility, and very fine musicality with all

sources. I give it an average grade of 8.375 out of 10 for overall sonic performance with the 4 digital formats I tested. Yes, specialty players with limited functionality can best the Luxman sonically. No, I can't think of any other truly universal players that are this consistently good with all of these digital formats. Luxman, welcome back to the U. S.A. This time please don't leave! **Robert H. Levi**

Specifications:

- Compatible Formats: DVD audio, DVD video, SACD (multi-channel, stereo), and CD
- Audio DACs: Shannon: CS4392 dual use (192KHz/24bit), Huruenshi: FN1242A dual use (192KHz/24bit), DSD: CS4392 dual use (2.82MHz/1bit)
- Audio Decoder: DVD audio stereo & multi-channel, SACD stereo & multi-channel, Dolby Digital and DTS
- Frequency Response: 4Hz~45KHz (DVD audio, SACD), 4Hz~20KHz (CD)
- Harmonic Distortion: 0.001% (DVD audio, CD), 0.002% (SACD)
- Dynamic Range: 115dB (DVD audio, SACD), 106dB (CD)
- Signal-to-Noise Ratio: 125dB
- Video DAC: ADV7314KST (216MHz/14bit)
- Progressive Processing: 2:3 pull-down and 3D adaptive motion processing. Pure Cinema Progressive Scan
- Dimensions: 18.3" W x 5.8 (H) x 15.6 (D)
- Weight: 46 lbs.

DU-80

Retail: \$9400

Luxman

web address: www.luxman.co.jp

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