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Luxman DU-80 Universal A/V Player

Late in the review period for the Luxman L-509u integrated amplifier that I wrote about earlier this month, Luxman's gregarious *bon vivant* Philip O'Hanlon dropped in for a listening session. In addition to his usual fistful of personally compiled demo discs, he brought along Luxman's DU-80 universal player (\$10,500 USD). In addition to Red Book CDs, the DU-80 plays SACDs, DVD-Audio and DVD-Video discs, CD-Rs and Video CDs. It is also capable of handling both two-channel and multichannel recordings. For decoding the digital datastream, the DU-80 employs two proprietary DACs that can be selected via a button on the front panel: the Fluency DAC for Red Book CD and the Shannon DAC for SACD and DVD-Audio. The Fluency DAC is a time-coherent design that is said to produce a stress-free sound closer to that of analog reproduction. The Shannon DAC is frequency coherent, capable of delivering the extra resolution, greater transparency and enhanced ambience retrieval of DVD-Audio or SACD discs. My time with the DU-80 involved evaluating only its stereo audio performance.



O'Hanlon recommended that I start with Red Book CD and allow the Fluency DAC a few days to warm up and settle in. After some casual listening to some favorite jazz CDs, I got down to business. First up was the remastered version of the classic *Who's Next* [MCA MCAD-11269]. Having listened to this album, first on LP and then on CD, regularly for more than 25 years, I know it probably better than any other in my library, but via the DU-80 it sounded fresh and vital. The DU-80 didn't just flaunt its resolving powers; I heard *deeper* into the recording, as if vocal was layered upon guitar, guitar upon bass, bass upon keyboards, and everything upon the drums, without any sense of confusion or congestion, even at high volumes. Even better, the musical ebb and flow -- the ability for the music to simply appear without seeming forced out of the speakers -- were the best I have yet heard from the CD format. With classical music, the sound was even more impressive, with such acute reproduction of reverb and decay that the hall sound was as realistic as I've heard with CD. On "Fanfare for the Common Man" from a remastered Gershwin/Copland performance conducted by Lorin Maazel and Zubin Mehta [London 417 716-2 LM], the opening tympani-mallet strikes were so forceful as to be startling, then as the brass began the majestic fanfare, the sound ricocheted off of the hall's walls, throwing a very wide and deep soundstage that was almost spooky.

Prior to my review of the Wadia 581ise, my experience with high-resolution formats was so limited that the Wadia player really served as my introduction. And honestly, while the differences between Red Book CD and SACD were apparent, they were most perceptible with symphonic music and live jazz recordings. Not so with the DU-80. One of the SACDs that I used to evaluate the 581ise was the Rolling Stones' *Beggar's Banquet* [ABKCO 95392]. While both the CD and SACD layers sounded superb through the Wadia player, I didn't notice an appreciable difference between the two layers. With the DU-80, not only was there a noticeable sonic improvement with both layers over the 581ise, the SACD layer differentiated itself from the CD layer with more tightly focused, three-dimensional images and a much deeper soundstage. The same thing could be said for the late Michael Brecker's final album, *Pilgrimage* [Heads Up HUSA 9095]. On my favorite track, the harmonically dense "Tumbleweed," as Brecker plays his solo, Brad Mehldau's piano playing can be heard as a subtle accompaniment, his piano runs intertwining with Brecker's sax. The SACD layer clearly delineated all of this.

I have even less experience with DVD-Audio and have no DVD-A discs in my library, so I had to rely on some compilation DVD-As that Philip provided. Although I was unfamiliar with the music, I had similar feelings about the overall resolution and soundstaging. As to which was the better format, I'd have to say it was a toss-up in light of the limited time I spent with the DU-80.

Although the high-rez formats exceeded the resolution of Red Book CD, all did share one common trait with the DU-80: There was a relaxed presentation and a more natural flow to the music than I've experienced with other players. The Luxman DU-80 is the most analog-sounding digital player I've ever heard, with ease and liquidity that never once approached becoming analytical or mechanical. These qualities were even more noticeable when the DU-80 was paired with the L-509u, perfectly complementing its finest qualities with regard to pace, rhythm and timing.

To hear the DU-80 is to want it, and boy do I want it!