

Luxman M-800A

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To many 50-year-old+ audiophiles, Luxman Corporation is perhaps most favorably remembered for its M6000 power amplifier of 1975, an avant-garde design that was the company's response to the emerging high-end, high-output solid-state amplifier market at that time. To many vinyl connoisseurs, the company's visually stunning and highly collectible PD-444 turntable of 1977 was the engineering feat that has yet to be surpassed even to this day. Yet, the avid digiphile among us could never forget the day when Luxman's L-105u tube CD player hit the market in 1985, not to mention the drool we've all splashed over the incredibly photogenic C-05/M-05 preamp/power amp system of the same year.

Then there was the company's mysteriously irresistible, engraved insignia on the metal faceplate on which countless of us might have even left his fingerprints all over at least once sometime ago.

Luxman is also most unique and infamous among industry insiders for the new brands founded by its employees, such as E.A.R. by Tim de Paravicini, Airtight by Atsushi Miura and Leben by Taku Hyodo. In this regard, the very competitors Luxman help create can only serve as a testament to the immensity of its corporate appeal, as well as the talents that it allured and developed.

Founded in 1925, Luxman celebrated its 80th Anniversary in 2005 with the launch of its latest series of electronics, among them are three universal digital players (DU-50 \$4,500, DU-7i \$6,600, DU-80 \$9,400), four integrated solid-state amplifiers (L-505u \$3,500, L-509u \$10,000, L-550All \$4,500, L-590All \$9,000), three solid-state control amplifiers (C-600 \$8,500, C-800A \$16,000, C-1000f \$30,00), three solid-state power amplifiers (M-600 \$8,500, M-800A \$16,000, B-1000f \$48,000/pair), one solid-state MC/MM phono stage (E-1, \$3,700), a solid-state MC step-up transformer (MT-88, \$1,500), a vacuum tube phono stage (EQ-88, \$1,500), a tube control amplifier (CL-88) and a tube power amplifier (MQ-88).

The company also offers a compact, affordable, complete system solution dubbed NeoClassico, consisting of the \$2,000 D-N100 CD player, the \$3,000, 12Wpc/6Ω SQ-N100 integrated tube amplifier. While Luxman explored the market of multi-channel home theater amplification in the past, it is now concentrating in the two-channel home audio segment.

TECHNOLOGY

The subject of this review, the M-800A, is the stereo version of the company's flagship model, the B-1000f monoblock. The B-1000f sports a 141lb chassis measuring 23 inches deep and 17.25 inches wide, while the M800A weights an equally serious 107lb, with a more manageable chassis measuring 19 inches deep.

At the heart of Luxman's latest amplifications are the EI transformers and the bi-polar transistor modules. Both the B-1000f and the M-800A are adorned with what Luxman dubbed as super regulation EI transformers, wound with 2mm thick flat OFC solid bar for superior stacking density, thus yielding superior saturation and loss ratios. The B-1000f employs three of the higher-output versions of the transformers, each capable of a 2,400VA nominal output, with a maximum rating of 4,800VA. The M-800A is equipped with one such transformer of a 1,400VA with a maximum 2,800VA rating.

The transistor modules designed for the B-1000f and M-800A contain sixteen bi-polar devices each, and whereas the M-800A is adorned with two such output modules, each of the B-1000f is allocated with four.

Equipped with such extravagant considerations, both the \$48,000/pair B-1000f and \$16,000 M-800A operate in pure class-A mode, with the B-1000f sporting an output of 250W/8Ω, 500W/4Ω, 1,000W/2Ω and 2,000W/1Ω. The M-800A, on the other hand, outputs approximately one-fourth of that of the B-1000f in standard stereo operation outputs, and is also stable even into one ohm, churning out 60Wpc/8Ω, 120Wpc/4Ω, 240Wpc/2Ω and 480Wpc/1Ω.

It is noteworthy that power consumption by a single B-1000f and a stereo M-800A is identical at 439 watts. The M-800A is also nearly identical to the B-1000f in its output into 2 ohms when operating in bridged mode, outputting 960 watts. The B-1000f is thus the most immediate choice for readers who have loudspeakers the impedance curve of which dips near one ohm.

The extent to which Luxman's engineers ensure the M800A of AC power is inspiring. An extra thick OFC bus bar is uniquely connected to the power transformer via a "hard wire link", forming a highly stable connection that the company claims indispensable in sustaining peak dynamic transients and colossal volumes during climaxes.

While the M800-A's class-A operation ensures continuous reproduction of both the positive and negative cycles of the signal, the company developed the ODNF (Only Distortion Negative Feedback) technology to cancel out only noise and distortions at output. The ODNF technology, now in version 2.3A status, is the company's most advanced form of the patented GNF (Global Negative Feedback) technology of 1955 that has become the standard mode of amplifier operation in many of the industry's designs even to this day. For the latest models including the M-800A, Luxman's latest ODNF is of "*ultra-wide range, ultra high slew rate and ultra low distortion that it does not use phase compensation for the music signal amplifying circuits.*"

Luxman claims the design of the latest circuitry is so well-balanced that the M800A is able to dispense with the use of DC servo circuits altogether, realizing an even higher level of sonic purity.

My favorite item in the overall design of the M800A is the use of specially fabricated, gently curved signal paths. All primary signals in the amplifier's circuitries traverse on these specially printed routes with curved turns that resemble miniature race tracks. The PCB on which these beautiful signal paths are pressed is of specially prepared peel-coat type that is peeled off once the traces are printed. This PCB is then further coated with a 100µm-thick gold-plating to preserve the low-impedance and frequency response characteristics of the signal path against corrosion. (Note: "µm", micrometer. 1,000 µm=1mm.)

Luxman's fanatical engineering efforts on the M800A didn't stop here. The company is also of the opinion that magnetic field caused by the robust flow of electrons on the new circuit boards will contaminate signal purity as well. Therefore, for housing all the delicate innards, Luxman devised a "loopless" aluminum chassis that the company claims has the unique property of suppressing the formation of internal magnetic field as caused by the electron flow, thereby preserving sonic purity.

On the M800A's rear panel, a LINE PHASE SENSOR is provided next to the AC inlet. Once pressed, the M800A detects the phase of the electricity it is receiving, and will warn you with a red LED if the polarity is off. My AC passed this test, thankfully.

SETUP

Power amplifiers, especially gigantic ones, are not suited for front-seat placement in a sound system, and are thus usually relegated to bottom shelves and out of sight. The Luxman M800A, in this case, features a smooth, silver chassis, contained heat sinks, rounded corners and an artistically sculpted center amber display with user-selectable modes, which allures its owners into exhibiting it at the front of his system. No one could resist the M800A's contribution to interior décor, and neither could I.

The M800A was thus placed on the right half of the top shelf, taking residence where space is reserved exclusively for digital front-ends, transports and remote-sensing preamplifiers. In the same shelf were the 47 Lab PiTracer CD transport, the Wadia 931 Digital Controller of the Reference Series 9 Decoding Computer, and a Pass Labs X.02 pre-amplification system. For readers considering putting the M800A into a cabinet, the amplifier did generate substantial heat, thus ample ventilation is essential.

Both RCA and XLR connections were experimented in using the M800A, with the Audio Note Sogon silver RCA, the Virtual Dynamics Testament Series 2.0 copper RCA and XLR cables assuming their roles.

While Audio Note's high-strand Sogon silver interconnect has demonstrated a more detailed and layered tonality consistently over other RCA interconnects, balanced connection via Virtual Dynamics' copper Testament Series 2.0 proved repeatedly to be the choice in exploiting the potentials of the Luxman. Whether it was driven directly from the Wadia DAC or the Pass Labs preamp, both with concurrent RCA and XLR outputting capability, the Luxman produced a more dimensional spatiality in XLR inputs distinctly than the RCA, albeit with a softer tonal edge. Hence, the Virtual Dynamics was the reference cable in this review.

The Harmonix Reimyo single-wired copper HS-101 SLC and Audio Note bi-wired silver AN-SPx speaker cables were used respectively on different speakers. Furutech's Reference Power III N-1 AC cable powered the Luxman directly from the AC outlet.

AUDITIONING

The M800A may be specified to output only 60 watts into an 8-ohm load, visually its physical immensity is rather suggestive of a disproportionately progressive aptitude. And the playing provided all the proof.

Whether it was driving the 91dB/4Ω, single-wiring Bosendorfer VC 7 or the 95dB/8Ω, bi-wiring Tannoy Churchill Wideband loudspeaker, the M800A exhibited an enormous capacity in dynamic scaling that belies its modest 60 watts/8 ohms and 120 watts/4 ohms rating, at the same time imparting the complex orchestral scales in the “Respighi/Queen of Sheba Suite/War Dance” track from FIM’s *This Is K2 HD Sound!* CD with an authority and weight unheard of from a mere sixty or even hundred twenty stereo watts. The explicit sense of propagation ease was undoubtedly attributable to Luxman’s extraordinary measure in a robust power supply and unimpeded signal transfer.

The Luxman’s lower- to upper-midrange spectrum was so densely layered that it energized the 6-driver Bosendorfer loudspeakers to produce the most vivid 3-dimensional spatiality in memory. The reverberating vocalization of Esther in the FIM disc’s “Kinderpiele” was realized with a tonal warmth and spatial fullness I had not encountered in solid-state amplifications, and the Luxman’s remarkable propensity for the preservation of minute dynamic transients produced the most touching and contagious effect in Esther’s tenderness.

Particularly noteworthy was the Luxman’s reproduction of the piano.

Via the Bosendorfer’s twin front-firing tweeters and a quadruplet of side-firing, low-midrange drivers in reproducing the Steinway piano in Evgeny Kissin’s SWR-Studio-produced 20-bit RCA Chopin discs, the rich harmonics of the hammered strings attained a rare softness in my experience of solid-state amplifications. Unlike in any other partnership, the Luxman/Bosendorfer system’s reenactment of the piano offered the most unmitigated bottom-end incisiveness, while concurrently achieving the unprecedented task of purveying the silkiness and smoothness of the upper registers.

It was as if the Luxman/Bosendorfer partnership conjured up profound magic of a sound which seemingly has a warm and fuzzy molten core that radiates outward, and as the scale and weight of the lower registers began to unfold, the reverberating higher registers in the sense of a series of soft but expansive ripples of lightness would permeate continuously. The Bosendorfer had been driven by a multiplicity of

amplifications, and the result of its pairing with the Luxman was the most memorable thus far.

If the sound of best SET amplification is to be pursued because of its tonal vividness, then the Luxman deserves to be noted not just for its SET-like tonal magnificence, but also for the abundance and the degree of complexity within it.

Then, there were moments during the Luxman's pairing with the Tannoy Churchill Wideband that revitalized my perception of the British loudspeaker's potential.

The comprehensive and exquisite manner in which the Luxman amplifier energized the Tannoy's drivers and their attendant crossover network in reproducing the 1722 Petro Guarneri violin in the FIM disc's "Vivaldi/Four Seasons/Spring" was the most prevalent sensation I have had every time I listened to the system.

For the 15-inch Dual-Concentric drivers as energized by the Luxman discerned a distinct level of organic cohesion in a most comprehensive range of frequencies, and audiophile-grade music such as the K2 HD sampler proved most indispensable toward recreating the instrument. Despite the crossover's cutoff frequency of 1kHz for the main drivers, the Tannoy was compelled into articulating a most encompassing 1722 Petro Guarneri violin for the first time, revealing a tonal radiance from the violin and a breathtaking level of textural sophistication for the most intense and satisfying listening experience.

CONCLUSION

For good and obvious reasons, many audiophiles hold Luxman's vacuum tube amplification in extremely high regard. However, the company has also chosen to position itself to compete effectively in the global arena of powerful amplification, and it is doing so with the solid-state operating principle as its ultimate product offering.

The company's flagship, the B-1000f, begins at 250 watts into an 8-ohm load and churns out 2,000 watts into 1 ohm, is colossal in its physique and uncompromising in its design. If the M800A serves as any indication, there will probably be no peers of the B-1000f that can match its powerful suit of armor. Yet, it retails for only \$48,000 for the pair. In today's high-end currency, the pair of Luxman monoblocks are among the more affordable bunch.

It becomes high crime, then, for Luxman to release the M800A stereo amplifier of 60 watts as the second in line of succession. Or is it?

With the M800A amplifier, Luxman has ushered the art of amplification design categorically into a new era. It is no longer simply about putting the highest number of discreetly matched MOSFET's with the highest-capacity of energy storage in the shortest signal path, but the level of technological insights and resourcefulness a well-established company can translate into real-world engineering.

The Luxman M800A excelled at portraying glossy tonal shadings as deciphered by first-class digital sources. In this case, the exceedingly meticulous sonics of the 47 Lab PiTracer/Wadia Reference Series 9 digital system provided the most consummate nucleus of excellence for the Luxman to expound upon.

Though immense, the M800A was comparatively modest in size next to many of today's powerhouses, and its output of 60 watts into 8 ohms would excuse itself from the company of super amplifiers. Yet, the aesthetically alluring amplifier's capacity of doubling the output at every halving of impedance attested to an uncontested practicality in today's highly competitive marketplace.

Hence, Luxman's offering of a 60 watts amplifier as its second-to-the-top design was indicative of a marketing principle that holds the well-informed audiophile with familiarity of Luxman's historical reputation as its major customers. Indeed, today's audiophiles are better informed and many will surely embrace the M800A's sound of prowess amidst delicacy, speed amidst exuberance that is rare in any price class.

It would seem that Luxman has indeed successfully delivered a product of considerable stature in the solid-state stereo amplification category to commemorate the company's 80th Anniversary celebration.