

# hardware

**LUXMAN** MQ-88 amplifier as reviewed by Danny Kaey



## Introduction - the aperitif

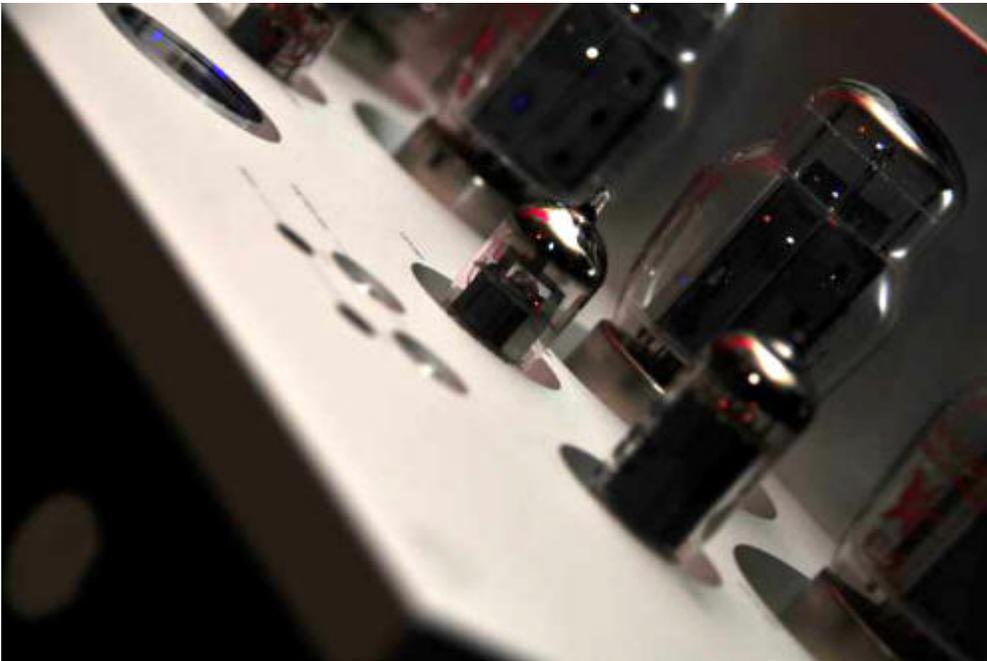
True story: some three or so years ago, I inquired through a friend (a well known audio distributor) about the famous Japanese Luxman line: "What do you know of the MQ-88 tube amplifier?" I asked. "Oh, I am sure it's a great amp, so-and-so has a high opinion of Luxman gear, alas, what does it matter, the line is unavailable in the US". Having dealt with a similar one off import situation a few years back, his comments resonated with a certain sense of immediacy with me. Truth is (as my distributor friend so eloquently put) who cares how good something is if its unavailable? Thus, for some three years, the Luxman amp remained but a pretty picture on my desktop, much like that gorgeous blond you know, simply unavailable.

Fast forward to late summer 2007, when my friend Philip O'Hanlon, previously of Halcro fame, offered exactly *that* amp for review. Funny how things go in life, eh?

Luxman of course, is no stranger in the world market of high-end audio components. The oldest marketed audio brand (1925) around, Luxman means serious business. A long heritage of solid state and tube based audio components abound; craftsmanship that is world class and elegant; from separate pre- and power combos to carefully designed integrated Class A amplifiers and state of the art, proprietary designed digital, what more can one ask for in an audio line?

## The hors d'œuvres are served

Within days, Philip dropped off a large and substantial box in my living room: "Philip, you sure this is the MQ-88 you brought? This box looks way bigger than what's supposed to be inside!" I suppose you can safely check off "bomb-proof" packaging if that's your concern with Luxman gear: heavy duty double boxed, massive shock absorbing foam all around, it looks as though this amp and box would survive a ten foot drop without any issues. A neatly packaged manual, white cotton gloves and most surprising of all, a *useful, premium* power cord awaits the newfound owner of the MQ-88.



Having unboxed the MQ-88, I was quite surprised by the hands-on, visible quality this \$8000 Luxman amplifier exuded. The surprise wasn't negative at all; to the contrary, there are components and then there are *components*. The MQ-88 is certainly among the finest made amplifiers to have graced my audio room. I don't say this lightly, but the Luxman line in general and the MQ-88 in particular appear to be at least as well made as say my Brinkmann Vollverstärker, which I consider to be *the* finest made line of components I know. Don't even get me started on the LaGrange / Balance turntable—that's saying a lot! Styling wise, the MQ-88 is rather unassuming at first; at least, until you carefully unscrew and dismount the tube cage. Thereafter, you are looking at an exquisitely designed and visually appealing, modern day tube amplifier. The 5/8<sup>th</sup>s thick, massive aluminum panel onto which everything is bolted features beautifully sunk tube sockets for each of the KT88's, 12BH7's and ECC83's. A gorgeous looking, watch-glass like blue lit display shows voltage status as well as providing the necessary status for each of the four bias attenuators; it's a fixed bias design, but one that needs little maintenance. The effect of the blue light is pretty cool and neat: at night, or when ambient light is low, this display and shimmering glow of the tubes make for a very nice and visually striking scene. Finally, a high quality, Alps actuated level control sits beneath the aluminum chassis, allowing for a single line level signal to be level adjusted without the use of a pre-amp (though Luxman also makes a matching CL88 tube preamp).

The back end of the MQ-88 features heavy duty spade and banana plug compatible speaker connectors, the aforementioned variable and fixed level line input and—most surprising of all (didn't I say that somewhere else already?)—a polarity tester to perform quick and reliable checks of your AC wall outlet's polarity. Lastly, a selector allows you to switch between line level and variable outputs.

### **The meat and potatoes...**

Overall, the parts quality, build and visual appeal of the MQ-88 are truly first rate. This is one of those rare components which embodies perfection throughout the various design stages to its fullest: for example, all electronic components are "hung" from that massive 5/8<sup>th</sup>s thick aluminum plate, in order to keep vibrations and resonances to a minimum from the delicate tube electronics. Rather than going for ultimate higher output, Luxman's engineers went the route of longevity and ultimate musical performance: the KT88's are run in a classic tetrode design, thereby performing with higher linearity and lowering distortion levels. Remember that very same MQ-88 I lusted after a few years ago? Guess what: Luxman has in fact continuously upgraded and further tweaked the output transformers each year. At 50-watts most people should be served well by this amp; I don't foresee any issues unless you are running truly esoteric and exotic low 80's db efficient speakers. Should *that* be the case, you can easily bridge the amp and turn it into a monoblock. All that is required is a second MQ-88 and a wiring harness.

Pretty much since day one of this review, the MQ-88 was connected to my system via my Kubala-Sosna Emotion series reference cables, that is, KS cables went from preamp to amp and via 8 foot speaker cables to my Zu Definition Mk2's. The only non KS cable was the aforementioned Luxman supplied power cord, which is quite possibly the highest performing stock cable I have ever auditioned with a component.

By now it should be clear that Luxman has taken their approach to building audio components very, very seriously indeed. Honestly, how many companies do you know out there design and build (mind you, not outsource) their very own power supplies and transformers? Or supply their carefully crafted components with *proper* power cords? Hint: not all that many.

### **The Truffles...**

What does it sound like? For starters, the MQ-88 is a very neutral, dynamically extended and full sounding amplifier. I hate to use cliché words, but boy, this amp almost screams for one: "non-tubelike". What I mean by that is the Luxman manages to sound much like a powerful, high quality solid-state transistor amp with all its qualities, yet also adds a warm, human like midrange quality which makes it sort of a best case scenario, best of both worlds type amplifier. Further, it is also solid state *quiet*, i.e. it produces no more noise than any transistor based amp I currently have in my arsenal, be it the

Brinkmann, Lavardin or Threshold. Certainly, this must be a testament to the premium parts quality and the overall in-house designed power supply and transformers.



Through the Zu Def2's, images were rock solid in their stability; both soundstage depth and width appeared to stretch for miles (provided with the proper source material), or, appeared as good as the best I have heard in my system thus far. Recordings that warrant truly large landscapes and spaces would simply shine through the Luxman. Varese's *Ionization* (two disc Decca), for example appeared exactly as the composer intended: the ever distant percussion instruments unfolded from away, yet were rock solid in their structure and spatial resolution. Speaking of *that* track; dynamically, the MQ-88 is quite able to resolve the various percussive elements; in and of itself a superb performer, ultimately however, it doesn't have the sublime authoritative heft and weight of something like say the mighty Threshold. Then again, you would be hard pressed to notice this without the T400 being around, and, the Threshold takes second place to the MQ-88 when it comes to vocals and midrange performance in general.

### **A dash of cracked pepper please...**

Upping the ante even further, one of my first rate demo tracks is Yello's unforgettable "Planet Dada Flamboyant Mix" (*The Eye*, Universal). Quite a bit of a system's overall performance can quickly be assessed from this track. Speed and agility are among the quickest and easiest to notice: if the pro-tools derived whiz-bang effects appearing throughout the track seem to sound *slow*, you have a problem somewhere. Likewise, if the ever-increasing dynamic ride appears in anything but Technicolor, Cinemascope and *Stereophonic* sound, you *know* there are issues. Not so with the MQ-88 driving the Zu Def2's; the Luxman is in dead heat with Threshold—no joke! Quick and super fast, it reacts to the signal instantly, the MQ-88 fully being able to keep up with the early 90's silicone monster. For a tube amp of any vintage, that's saying a lot—believe me, I've had examples here where you could easily go to sleep half way through this track.

Cueing up a delightfully fun, female vocal track of recent discovery, Once by Joanie Sommers, was perhaps the quintessential deal breaker for me: holy cow, this is stupendously groovy music! Joanie's refreshingly youthful lyrics make the MQ-88 really shine *and sing*. There is enough human like midrange glow that Ms. Sommers just jumps at you. A 50's full-track mono recording, it exemplifies the meticulous recording qualities of those early "golden era" productions. The space (yes, a mono recording has plenty of space, contradictory as it may seem) around Joanie's voice was reproduced very well; backing

instruments by Shelly Manne's band took on a lifelike size and weight, but it was really the magic of Joanies vocals, the natural timbre, warmth and liquidity that really won me over for the MQ-88.

### **A touch of scotch...**

I recently received the first six master tape dub releases from the audiophile Austrian jazz label Quinton, produced in cooperation with the German AAA (Analog Audio Association). Masterfully transferred in real time onto ¼" 15ips CCIR 2-track, these tapes, when played via my Telefunken M15a, truly make you re-examine and re-evaluate your source and playback chain. These tapes offer breathtaking sound with an immediacy and *truth* that has up until now been reserved to a select few mastering engineers. One particular set of reels (each album comes on two 10" reels), Sabina Hank's *Blue Moments*, is of exemplary demo quality: through the Luxman, Sabina's vocals take on a *lifelike* weight and realistic warmth that not even my trusty original pair of Quad II's can manage to reproduce. The sound was utterly devoid of any signs of transistor harshness or congestion. Dynamics in general and from this particular master tape cut in particular, where handled with great authority and slam, save the final say on bottom octave extension and definition. I suppose if an amp has to give *somewhere*, it might as well be there. On the Zu Def2's, this isn't really such an issue anyway, since one can run the quad 10" woofer array on *each* tower via a separate eq'd amp (typically massive transistor or class D), thus mitigating any shortcomings of the main amp in the bass department.



### **Finally, a good Monte Christo**

Substituting the *stock* Luxman supplied power cord for a KS Emotion series cable made for far less earth shaking improvements than I am typically accustomed to. Historically, the stock cords are your basic garden hose variety that simply can't match anything I have in my arsenal otherwise. While the Luxman cord is obviously no real competition for the KS Emotion cable—the KS trumps it in every regard, particularly in the dynamic department—it is a testament to Luxman's quality and seriousness of their mission what they want a customer to see when first unpacking the MQ-88.

While I have heard and even own amplifiers that do a little more of this and a few bits added there, none of them match the *overall* quality the Luxman MQ-88 offers. From its drop dead gorgeous looks and absolutely superb build quality, to its foolproof reliability and ease of use (in several months of operation not one hiccup) this Japanese amp is the real deal. Tune after tune gets played with just the right

musicality and you never feel as though you are in need of something more. Through my Def2's, it can play plenty loud, hitting 113db+ peaks without problem and it does so with great authority. Yes, it isn't the bargain one would hope for, especially with the ever-growing number of inexpensive tube amplifiers coming out of the Far East, China in particular. At a price of \$8k it *is* a component that will have to be evaluated and judged on its merits.

A precursor to my final say, I gave this amplifier *PFO's* Writer's Choice Award for outstanding tube amplifier in 2007. Happily, the Luxman MQ-88 works for *me*, so much so that I ended up purchasing the review sample. Highly recommended. **Danny Kaey**



***Sidebar: further insight by Robert Pincus, aka. Mr. Record!***

When Danny called me a while back and said I would really love this new [Luxman MQ-88] amplifier, I assumed he knew that a trek to my house was on order so I could give it a quick Mr. Record once over.

As of late, I have had a bit of a love-hate relationship with tube power amplifiers. A couple of months ago, Danny bought my beloved vintage pair of Quad II amplifiers. The reason for the sale was simple: no matter how much I truly enjoyed them, they simply were a lousy match to my somewhat power hungry reference MB Quart speakers. In Danny's system however, driving the mighty Zu Definition Mk2's, these puppies truly shine like a star; so much so, that I have discovered an even greater admiration for their sonic qualities.



In my system, (mostly) full time power comes from a pair of Channel Island D100's. These class D, Hypex powered cubes deliver the most transparent sound I've ever heard from any non-tube amp. That's saying a lot! None of the large backbreaking, heat-sinked monsters I have tried, including Threshold's T400, or a Mark Levinson 26 come even close to what the D100's do so well. In my humble opinion if you don't want to use tubes to drive your speakers, you would be seriously limiting yourself by not looking at these California made amplifiers.

Having said that, most of my experiences have been with retro style, classic design tube amplifiers. These include the original vintage pair of Quad's, a McIntosh MC240, a McIntosh MC225, a Grover updated Dynaco ST70 and most recently, a Leak 50. All of these amps do something wonderful; at the same time they all have faults that eventually get on me somewhat unnerved at times. After a week or two with any of these amplifiers in my system I keep reverting back to my CI amplifiers. As a result, my expectations for the Luxman were quite high. To be fair, I did not have the chance to spend more than a day's visit with the MQ 88, but what a visit it turned out to be! Allow me to make one thing perfectly clear: this is not warmed up vintage sound. As much as I like the Leak, it sounds like an "old amp" next to the Luxman. There are those who want a tube amp to sound warm, up-front, and typically "tubey". I admit, even I at one time was in that group. It's hard not to get suckered into it: silky, creamy and buttery midrange on something like say, Blue Grass, is indeed quite stimulating. Now however, imagine an amplifier with all that seduction, but with 80% of those *colorations* (some would even call it distortion) surgically removed. That's exactly the sound the Luxman gives you.



What the Luxman does so well is give you an "open window" to the all important midrange. It is a compliment to both the designers at Luxman and the guys behind CI amplifiers that neither really embarrasses the other. They each have their strengths. Both make music sound believable, alas, in a different way. The D100's have a little better bass, although the Luxman's bass is very fine and not at all "tubey". I suppose you would really only notice this in a direct side-by-side comparison. Again, make no mistake: this is not your yesteryears caramel colored tube amp. If that is in fact the sound you are looking for, then the Luxman MQ-88 is obviously not your right choice. Now if I could only figure out how to keep this thing... **Robert Pincus**

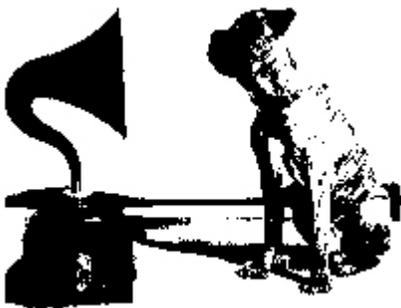
**MQ-88 amplifier**

Retail: \$8000

**On a Higher Note**

website: [www.onahighernote.com](http://www.onahighernote.com)

TEL: 949. 488. 3004



## DANNY KAEY'S SYSTEM

### LOUDSPEAKERS

Zu Audio Definition Pro Lautsprecher.

### ELECTRONICS

Nomad Audio Niagara amplifier, Yamamoto AS-08 amplifier, Quad II (original) amplifier, Brinkmann Vollverstärker, Brinkmann Fein phono, and a Rane PEQ55.

### SOURCES

Slimdevices Squeezebox, ZeroOne Ti48 HD Transport/CD player, ZeroOne Ar38 DAC, Technics 1210 M5G, Zu DL-103 cartridge, Denon TU-460 tuner, Lector CDP-6 CD player w/ RCA Blackplates, ReVox H-1 cassette tape deck, Technics RS-1700 reel to reel w/ custom Tim d.P. electronics, Dolby 330 professional Dolby B noise reduction - custom Tim d.P. modification, and an AEG/Telefunken M15A reel to reel.

### CABLES

Full compliment of Kubala-Sosna Emotion and Fascination cables. Full compliment of Audio-Magic Sorcerer and Clairvoyant cables.

### ACCESSORIES

Townshend 5 tier seismic rack, Townshend seismic sinks (1x component sink, 2x Lautsprecher sink), Grand Prix Audio 5 tier Monaco Modular rack.