DE-LUX

In Japan, Tannoy Dual Concentrics are de rigueur for well heeled audiophiles – but what do they drive them with? Well, large high end transistor integrateds like Luxman's L-505f are popular, and John May finds out why...

Whilst Japanese giants like Sony, TEAC, Pioneer *et al.* have all made some stunning stuff – the equal or better than anything else - when the fancy takes them, the fact that they also make plasma screens, Dictaphones and/or DVD players does not invest their brands with audiophile kudos, at least in the minds of those outside Japan who rarely see their statement products.

However, the Japanese hi-fi market is a huge one, and there is space aplenty for specialist manufacturers like Luxman. It's a small to medium sized company in Japanese hi-fi terms (although would be considered relatively large in Brit specialist standards - think Naim Audio), and has consistently produced interesting and highly competent products that always stand out from the crowd. Indeed, "Lux' has been around since 1925 [see LUX LIFE]. Also like Naim or Quad, Luxman engenders tremendous brand loyalty; customers keep coming back for more, and the secondhand resale residuals are high.

The Luxman L-505f is precisely the sort of thing well heeled Japanese audiophiles aspire to it. It's actually the baby of the 'f' range, which also consists of the L-507f and L-509f models. Not that you'd know it by looking, though...

The Luxman L-505f boasts heavyweight (21kg) construction, studio-style front panel power meters and brushed titanium-gold aluminium front panel – all of which hark back to some of the classic Japanese designs of the 1970s. This behemoth (467x179x440mm) sports a claimed 90W RMS per side into 8Ohms. Fit and finish is top-notch, and inspires confidence the way the switches and knobs all have a positive and smooth action. The brushed golden finish of the thick aluminium front panel is very impressive, giving the amplifier a real sense of class, and looks especially nice in tandem with the backlit front panel level meters.

If this latter feature gets the purists tut-tutting in disgust, then they'll not be happy to learn of the (shock, horror!) tone controls and loudness button. Fear not though, dear reader, as these are easily defeatable, though one should not dismiss these items so readily. In addition there is also the inclusion of a 'Subsonic' filter button for use with LPs, and also a Record Selector switch which – again – is also defeatable. A quality headphone socket and MM/MC phono stage are also included in the package as standard, plus a rather tacky looking remote.

Around the back are some pretty standard-looking gold-plated phono sockets, as well as a set of Balanced Line Inputs which should result in even higher sound quality with a source equipped with the same. One nice option is the ability to separate the pre and power sections of the amp by removing a link between phono sockets. This allows the L-505f to be used either as a pre amplifier or a power amplifier, though the performance is so good as an integrated unit I really don't see the point.

Whipping the top cover off, internal construction is first-rate in true high-end Japanese fashion. Component quality is high with plenty of Nippon Chemicon and Elna capacitors being used and – somewhat uniquely these days for a solid-state design – carbon film resistors! According to Luxman every component has been especially selected on the basis of sound quality which gives it more of a 'hand crafted' appeal rather than some generic bunch of parts thrown

together ad-hoc. Most of the parts are custom-made for them as well, which really does make this design something special. Special mention must also go to the huge mains transformer and bank of PSU capacitors which supply some 9400uF capacitance per channel. Apart from the shared PSU the design is a dual-mono one.

The most interesting and groundbreaking facet of this new design is what Luxman describes in their literature as the ODNF circuit. According to Luxman their new design alleviates the need to have phase compensation circuits or negative feedback in the musical path. This, say Luxman, results in a circuit which 'accurately isolates distortion components from music signals and completely cancels them out' (sic). 'The circuit features such an ultra-wide range, ultra–high slew rate and ultra-low distortion that it does not use phase compensation for the amplifying circuits of music signals.' Their new technology also ensures that the need for a DC servo circuit is alleviated, again improving sound quality. All very well and good in practice then, but the proof of course is in the pudding. How would the L-505f taste?

SOUND QUALITY

I started the Luxman out with a slice of Van Morrison from his 'Moondance' CD, and was greeted with a very monochromatic and hard edged sound which lacked any sense of life or emotion. This was after three days worth of constant running in. Oh dear I thought – it looked like a case of beauty being only skin deep for the L-505f. It really did sound like an Old School transistor design from the nineteen seventies! Being a studious sort, I decided to give it another week of running in before I started listening critically. Coming back to the amplifier after a week was like listening to a totally different design - the rough edges were mostly gone and the sound had opened out beautifully. It was so 'day and night' that it was almost disturbing; those who do not put much stock in the 'running in' phenomena would surely change their minds after hearing this…

In some respects this still sounds like a solid-state amplifier – more on that in a moment – but I was delighted to hear such a delicate and grain-free midrange performance. It wasn't showy or brash as solid-state can be, and just allowed the music to speak for itself. Listening to Debussy's 'La Mer' one could quite easily distinguish the various 'characters' of each instrument being played – the patina that transforms the music into a living, breathing entity. String tone in particular was very smooth and free from the 'sheen' which taints lesser equipment. You could really see into the performance.

Stage depth and width were equally delivered in this same effortless – but never boring – manner. Its midrange performance reminded me of a good valve design such as the Quad II Forty, no less. Treble quality wasn't quite up to the midrange performance, possessing a hint of typical solid-state brightness which could cause problems with some partnering equipment, but didn't detract from otherwise fantastic job the L-505f was doing elsewhere. Each CD I played I listened to all the way through, and enjoyed. I can't really give the L-505f any higher praise than that!

Proof that the PSU design in the Luxman was a good one was evident on the bass drum which begins Fleetwood Mac's 'The Chain'. It was very powerful and full-bodied, but without any hint of strain – the sound just emerged from the speakers as if the band were

VERDICT £

Superb bass punch allied to a natural midband makes for a great listen, although bright treble rewards careful matching. Excellent build, looks and feature count make this brilliant value for money.

LUXMAN L-505F **£2,295**
Select Audio
+44 (0) 1900 813064
www.luxman.org

FOR
- transparent midband
- bass clout
- looks and build

AGAINST
- occasionally bright treble
- plasticky remote

LUX LIFE

Luxman began life in 1925 as a radio equipment department of the Kinsuido picture framing store! Their radio book proclaimed, "Read it once and you're a radio expert", and ran for fourteen editions. Despite releasing various highly regarded output transformers, and several radio sets and phonographs, it wasn't until 1958 when they released their first vacuum tube monobloc amplifier however, the MA-7A. This was followed in 1961 by the SQ-5A Stereo valve amplifier. The former premiered the use of negative feedback, which Lux holds worldwide patents for. The latter used their unique tone control design still used to this day. Other highlights through the years included Output Transformerless amplifier designs, motion feedback designs, Vacuum suction turntables, High Speed 'fluency' DSP DAC design, the 'Luxkit' range of DIY audio products and much more.

REFERENCE SYSTEM:
Naim CDI CD player
Mission M72 loudspeakers
Chord Company cables

there and the speakers weren't. The temptation was to turn up the volume control. The sense of power and grip over the speakers was quite addictive and resulted in more than a few rock albums being played at above average listening levels as I cackled with delight next to the volume control! Hi hats on this track were quite startling in the sense that they seemed to be in the room with me. There was no dynamic slurring or overhang to mar the impact of the sound.

Being very picky there wasn't quite the tonal colour on vocal harmonies that you'd get with a very good valve design, but I can see many preferring the sound of the Luxman. It's certainly an even-handed, crisp and dynamic performer. Again my attention was arrested by that smooth and valve-like midband. It seems that Luxman's ODNF circuit really does make a worthwhile difference to the sound and I'd be intrigued to hear what the other two models in the range sound like.

Briefly trying out the MC phono stage I was greeted by essentially the same even handed and open presentation as the line stages. The sound was uncoloured, expressive and powerful with a firm bottom end delivery. This is a quality phono stage and not an afterthought, I'm pleased to report, which adds real value and alleviates the need for an external unit, unless you're looking for a truly special one such as the Whest or its Trichord Diablo rival. Brief mention should also be given to the tone controls that actually worked surprisingly well, and have always been well designed on classic Luxman products, in the same way that Quad's tone controls have. Overall I still preferred the sound quality with the unit switched to Direct mode, though.

CONCLUSION

I was mightily impressed with the L-505f, and am genuinely going to miss having it around. Those that like the 'valve sound' but the power and punch of solid-state may well have found their perfect amplifier with the L-505f. My only criticism is that slightly bright treble, though I suspect that after a few more months running in this would be sufficiently tamed to be barely noticeable. The only other negative point is the very plasticky remote which lets down the side somewhat, but is a minor gripe all the same. Considering this amplifier is so sonically capable, well built and presented, boasts a fine MM/MC phono stage as standard, and – knowing Luxman – will probably run without a hitch for at least the next thirty years, it makes a great case for itself. Few, if any, rivals offer so much at the price.

MEASURED PERFORMANCE

The Lux L-505 f has plenty of muscle, producing no less than 120W per channel into 8ohms under measurement, and 182W into 4ohms. This is a low distortion design, by which I mean it has been designed to deliberately produce minimal distortion under all conditions, whereas these days the situation is sometimes managed to achieve slightly differing aims. We measured just 0.0014% at 10kHz, at 1W output into 8ohms - a very low value. The worst case was 0.014%, achieved at full output into 4ohms.

There is a phono input, where both MM (47kohm) and MC (100ohm) are accurately equalised, but MC had stronger bass. Both reach down to 9Hz, but there is a switchable warp (subsonic) filter. Noise was very low on MM but could have been lower on MC. Overload levels were high. MC sensitivity was for high-ish output types, not for low output esoterica.

The tone controls were very neat in the equalisation applied at spectrum extremes, and there is a loudness contour too.

The Lux is very well engineered, turning in good results in every area.
NK

Power	**120watts**
CD/tuner/aux.	
Frequency response	**4Hz-50kHz**
Separation	**105dB**
Noise	**-101dB**
Distortion	**0.002%**
Sensitivity	**200mV**
Disc (MM)	
Frequency response	**9Hz-70kHz**
Separation	**68dB**
Noise (e in)	**0.11uV**
Distortion	**0.007%**
Sensitivity	**3mV**
Overload	**154mV**
Disc (MC)	
Frequency response	**9Hz-35kHz**
Separation	**66dB**
Noise	**0.13uV**
Distortion	**0.01%**
Sensitivity	**0.46mV**
Overload	**21mV**