

Luxman C-700u/M-700u

by Jason Kennedy

Luxman long had more cachet than many rival Japanese audio brands. It sits in a relatively underpopulated strata it shares with Accuphase, positioned above the mainstream of Yamaha, Pioneer, etc., but more widely known than esoterica made by the likes of Kondo or Robert Koda. Luxman has achieved this by dint of perseverance and consistently high build and sound quality. The company was founded in 1925, but didn't start building finished audio components until 1959 when it introduced the MA-7 valve amplifier. Before that, Luxman made components and kits for the radio age.

Luxman's evolution has been marked by changes in ownership that have not always been favourable: the brand was sold in 1984 to car-audio giant Alpine, which attempted to broaden Luxman's mass-market appeal with what might best be described as 'mixed' results. But six years ago, Luxman was acquired by International Audio Group, the Chinese owner of QUAD, Audiolab, Mission, et al. However, unlike other brands in the IAG group, Luxman products are designed and made in Japan, which is one reason why fit and finish is among the very best in the business; you will be hard pressed to find a European or American brand that can build to the same quality at the same price. Luxman has a wide range of products presently comprising 47 models, including SACD players, valve amplifiers, DACs, turntables, and more. It is a bigger range, in fact, than most high-end brands in our industry.

The C-700u is the penultimate preamp in a range of five, while the M-700u sits a bit further down the pecking order in a line-up of six power amps. Both are luxuriously executed components with the sort of controls that makes audiophiles go slightly

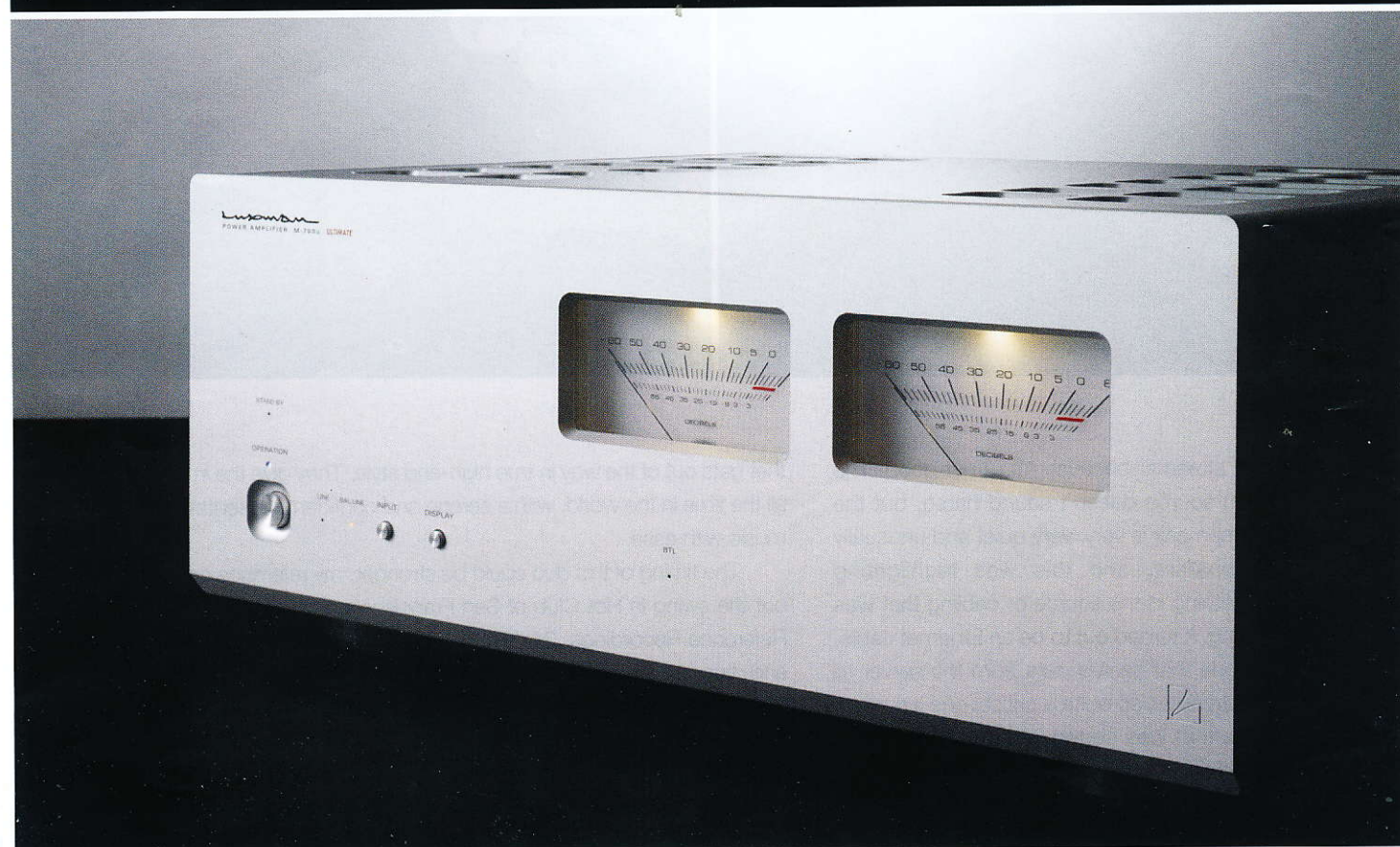
weak at the knees. The C-700u naturally has the advantage in this regard, thanks to the two knobs and various switches it sports, not to mention a dimmable display that indicates status with what at first appear to be random orange dots. Look more closely (or turn up the backlighting), and you can see these dots actually relate to legends inscribed on the glass.

The C-700u is a line stage: a preamplifier without appendages such as a phono stage, headphone amp, or onboard DAC. This is a purist analogue component, albeit not one that's stripped to the bone; there are, for instance, that anathema of flat earth thinking... tone controls. You have the option to adjust bass and treble, which – if we are truly honest – is something that can be very useful with many recordings. It's easy to bypass these with the 'line straight' setting if you want to maintain your hairshirt image. Settings also exist for phase selection on the balanced inputs and 'loudness': another unfashionable feature that obviously still has its fans in some parts of the globe.

Inputs are plentiful and come capped with plastic covers. There are five RCA pairs and two XLRs, plus two of each flavour on the output side. AV processors can be accommodated with the 'external preamp' input and there are monitor and record terminals for the tape fraternity. Control is aided by a handset with a comprehensive array of small buttons; thankfully there aren't too many buttons, and the volume is easily located.

The M-700u power amp is a substantial if not quite back-breaking piece, but you do need to respect its 27.5 kilos on installation. It's rated at 120 Watts per channel into eight Ohms and nearly doubles this into four. Alternatively, the M-700u can be bridged to deliver 420 Watts in mono. Switches are provided on the rear for changing the phase of the XLR inputs and choosing stereo/mono operation. The speaker cable terminals are particularly chunky and only accept spade connectors. The side you see more often has an input selection switch and a display dimming option, although why you wouldn't want to see those glorious VU meters glowing escapes me. Under the lid, this is a Class AB amplifier with a three-stage Darlington bipolar transistor output stage and a 550VA, EI type power transformer. The M-700u bears a strong resemblance to its bigger brother, the M-900u, but the fully-balanced nature of the latter along with its ability to double output into a halving of load would suggest that it's family resemblance is only skin deep.

I set the Luxman pairing up with my resident PMC fact.8 speakers and got such good results, there didn't seem to be a need to change to anything else, after I took a closer look at the orange indicators on the C-700u! After spending half an hour thinking that there seemed rather more bass and treble than usual, I noticed that the preamplifier was running in 'loudness' mode, confirming that it always pays to watch the details when installing a new piece of equipment! After the bumpy start, things quickly got more revealing, even if the sound initially seemed rather hard edged. I was using the Naim NAC N-272 ►



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▶ as a streamer because it's rather good. The Naim source doesn't sound harsh, but the Luxman pair is very, very quiet and unusually transparent, and this was highlighting something in the source or cabling that was grating. It turned out to be an Ethernet cable, the one that carries data from the server to the streamer, so quite a critical one it seems. Once that was sorted, the streamer let the amplifiers strut their stuff with gusto.

I say gusto, but Luxman is not that type of product: it's a calm and clean sounding pairing

that gets out of the way in true high-end style. They give the impression of having all the time in the world, with a serene and confident presentation that serves the music with ease.

The timing of this duo could be stronger; my reference control amp brought out the swing in Hot Club of San Francisco's 'Hot Lips' [*Yerba Buena Bounce*, Reference Recordings, 24/176.4], while the C-700u made it sound more open and dropped the noise floor, but was less coherent overall. That said, the Luxman is a compelling preamplifier that pulls out nuances that many miss; the bass line on James Blood Ulmer's 'Crying' [*Live at the Bayerischer Hof*, In+Out Records] is clearly defined in the context of a substantial kick drum and the massive scale of the venue, as reflected in the vocal. It's a remarkable recording, and this combo lets you know as much without trying. ▶

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► As a pair the Luxmans are positively sumptuous without being overblown, sweetened, or smoothed, and anything with tonal depth sounds more convincing than usual. That goes for voices, kick drums, trumpets... anything, and this, combined with the effortless delivery, makes for very articulate, full-flavoured vibes. The bass line on Herbie Hancock's 'Chameleon' [*Head Hunters*, Columbia] has a darkness and fullness that is reminiscent of liquorice; rounded and shiny doesn't really begin to cover it.

The Luxman pairing's ability to reveal detail is largely because the noise floor is so low: put on a multi-layered recording and you hear all the layers, all the effects, and the precise nature of the image. This occurred with many tracks, but was blatant with James Blake's 'Retrograde' [*Overgrown*, A&M]. What can often seem like a simple vocal performance turns out to be two clearly differentiated lines albeit by the same voice. The bass line is also rather more complex than many amps reveal; the presence of ambient maestro Brian Eno on production is abundantly clear.

The M700u taken alone is a powerful and subtle beast. It's not quite as emotionally engaging as the best examples of the breed, but considerably more revealing than the majority. I particularly loved the combination of control and fine detail. There is no sense of the amp gripping the speaker, but the layers it uncovers in the mix show that distortion is being kept well at bay. It's not an iron fist, but its grip is smooth and firm.

Luxman remains a brand to be contended with; its sound is ultra refined, which mean that it can deliver a fully rendered, high-resolution sound that is tonally stronger than a great many solid state designs. This combined with world-class build and finish quality make the C-700u control amp and M-700u a very attractive proposition for anyone looking to discover what we mean by high-end. The price to performance and build ratio is impressive and should ensure that this venerable brand goes on to make its name with a new generation of music lovers. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Solid state line-stage preamplifier.

Analogue inputs: Five RCA single-ended inputs, two XLR balanced, AV processor input (via RCA jacks)

Analogue outputs: Two pairs of XLR balanced outputs, two pairs of RCA single-ended outputs, one pair of single-ended RCA tape outputs

Input impedance: single ended

46kOhms, balanced 67 kOhms

Output impedance: single ended

50kOhms, balanced 100 kOhms

Bandwidth: single ended +0, -0.1 dB/1V, balanced +0, -0.2 dB/1V

Gain: not specified

Distortion: Not specified

Signal to Noise Ratio: single ended 125 dB/ balanced 122 dB

Dimensions (HxWxD): 130 x 440 x 430mm

Weight: 14.5kg

Price: £6,995

Type: Solid state stereo power amplifier

Analogue inputs: One pair XLR balanced, one pair RCA single ended

Analogue outputs: One pair of speaker taps (via binding posts)

Power output: 120Wpc @ 8 Ohms, 210Wpc @ 4 Ohms

Bandwidth: 20Hz - 20kHz +/- 0.1dB, 1Hz - 130kHz +/- 3dB

Distortion: 0.009 % or less

Signal to Noise Ratio: 115 dB

Dimensions (HxWxD): 190 x 440 x 427mm

Weight: 27.5kg

Price: £6,995

Manufacturer: Luxman

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