

SoundStage! Ultra

Luxman EQ-500 Phono Stage

autor: Tom Mathew | 7.2016



Recently, I was lying on my back in savasana (corpse pose), at the end of the 75-minute sweat fest also known as my Sunday hot-yoga class. As the teacher first placed a cool stone on my forehead, and then, on my face, an ice-cold, lavender-scented towel, I found myself drifting into a state of blissful relaxation. This was healing balm after a hectic work week, and as the relaxing sounds of sitar and tabla wafted into the room, I melted into dreamland.

Yoga, the scent of lavender, Indian classical music -- three welcome antidotes for the anxiety and stress generated by weekday life. Every yoga class typically re-creates the cycle of life by starting with an exercise called child's pose, and ending with the corpse pose. During this class I had found myself formulating a personal soundtrack of meaningful songs about love and loss that I wanted to play on vinyl when I got home. It has been a year of sadnesses -- two music icons, David Bowie and Prince, whose music formed a large portion of the soundtrack of my youth, had gone, and between their passings had come my father's.

Driving home from class in my father's car, I turned on his CD player and was delighted by memories of our shared passion for music as the familiar, energetic double scratch of Lindsey Buckingham's guitar launched Fleetwood Mac into "Second Hand News." That album, *Rumours*, was blasted routinely through the enormous Cerwin-Vega speakers that dominated our Boston living room in the 1970s. The next CD on his car player took me further back in time, to the '60s -- the whining sounds of jet engines on an airway tarmac reminded me of some of my earliest childhood memories, of our immigrant Indian family listening to the Fab Four playing "Back in the U.S.S.R." on my father's reel-to-reel player in Coventry, England.

The eminent neurologist Oliver Sacks, who passed away in August 2015, explained why music has such power to help us through grief. In his wonderful book *Musicophilia: Tales of Music and the Brain*, he wrote of an experience he had shortly after 9/11:

On my morning bike ride to Battery Park, I heard music as I approached the tip of Manhattan, and then saw and joined a silent crowd who sat gazing out to sea and listening

to a young man playing Bach's Chaconne in D on his violin. When the music ended and the crowd quietly dispersed, it was clear that the music had brought them some profound consolation, in a way that no words could ever have done.

Music, uniquely among the arts, is both completely abstract and profoundly emotional. It has no power to represent anything particular or external, but it has a unique power to express inner states or feelings. Music can pierce the heart directly; it needs no mediation. . . . And there is, finally, a deep and mysterious paradox here, for while such music makes one experience pain and grief more intensely, it brings solace and consolation at the same time.

Addiction researchers will tell you that an addict finds much pleasure in the ritual that precedes the fix -- the anticipation of the pleasure primes the flow of dopamine. Vinyl lovers probably start secreting dopamine as they clean their records -- perhaps even, as in my case, on their drive home to their record players. Now I had another reason to be turning on my dopamine faucet, for waiting at home was Luxman Corporation's EQ-500 phono stage (\$7490 USD), which Philip O'Hanlon, of US distributor On a Higher Note, had sent for review.



The EQ-500 phono stage is Luxman's flagship analog product. I've admired the Luxman line for years -- their design aesthetic, lustrous cases, huge VU meters, bodacious rotary dials, and iron-fist-in-velvet-glove sound -- lush, powerful, controlled, and sweet -- led me to make the Luxman L590-AX my integrated amplifier of choice. It's a vinyl lover's delight, with a wonderful built-in phono stage that gets along quite famously with my high-output Dynavector 10X5 moving-coil cartridge, though for optimal sound with my low-output Miyajima Laboratory Shilabe and Zero cartridges it requires the benefits of Bob's Devices' Sky 30 MC step-up transformer. Bob's Devices are simply tone monsters. Via e-mail, Bob can recommend a specific Bob's Devices SUT to pair with your favorite cartridge and phono stage. His devices work beautifully in my systems, and are simple, unfussy designs that punch way above their modest prices. If you're an analog lover, you need to make friends with Bob, who's usually garbed in mad-scientist attire -- white hospital coat and stethoscope -- and is a main-floor fixture at most audio shows.

A few years ago, Bob gave me a crash course in turntable setup at my house -- and I vividly remember the night he came over to help me set up the Miyajima Zero he'd sold me. We played the mono version of the Rolling Stones' *Flowers* (LP, London LL 3509), and as "Lady Jane" washed over us from my Jamo 909 speakers, our jaws dropped and we turned to each other in disbelief. Presence, impact, three-dimensionality -- the Zero and Bob's SUT put forth an intense, immense soundfield that was truly enthralling.

The Bob's Devices Sky 30 has proven to be a keeper as the interface between my cartridges and my preamp, whether the latter is the phono stage of one of my Shindo Laboratory preamps or the phono stage of my Luxman integrated. However, the Sky 30 has only two switches for modulation, and can accommodate only one cartridge at a time. So when the Luxman EQ-500 arrived, I was flummoxed and intrigued at the sheer number of settings it made possible.

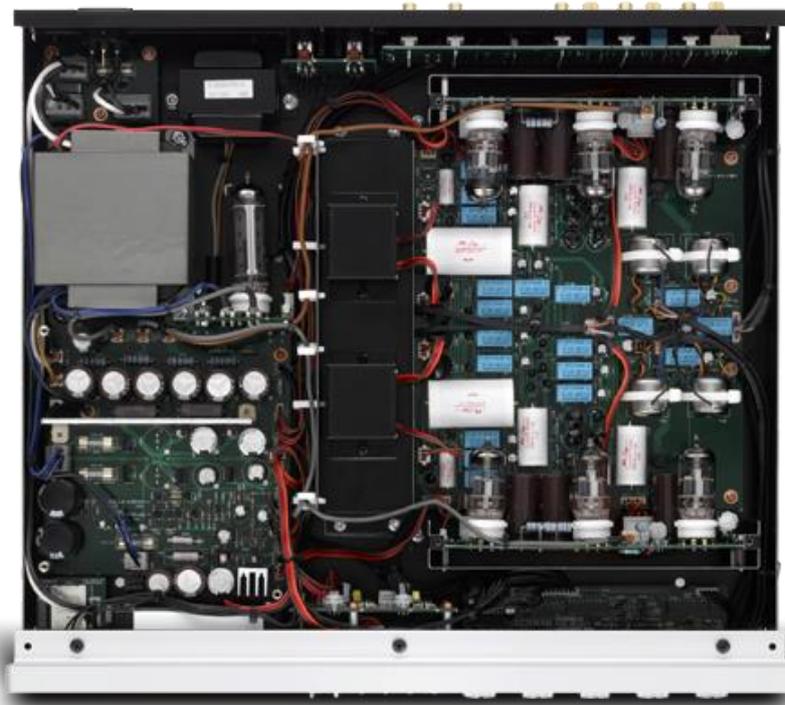
Business in the front, party in the back

The description of a mullet haircut is also apt for the Luxman EQ-500: eight switches, five dials, and two luscious Luxman VU meters on the front mean that you have all kinds of options to tweak, and that this Luxman may never meet a cartridge it can't tame. Three pairs of RCA inputs and three outputs (one balanced XLR, two single-ended RCA) mean it can handle the most complex of analog rigs. Set the cartridge type by choosing among MM, high-output MC, and low-output MC, choose the appropriate impedance setting with the rotary dial (30k to 100k ohms), adjust the gain setting (36, 38, or 40dB), and you're good to go. Yeah, boyee!



And as boss as the EQ-500 is on the outside, it's also got the goods inside, with an international all-star cast of parts: German Mundorf capacitors, Japanese Takamisawa capacitors, and Slovakian JJ vacuum tubes. Two of the eight switches are filters: Low Cut (20Hz/-3dB) lets you roll off subsonic rumble, and High Cut (8kHz/-3dB) lets you gently tamp down any overhanging high-frequency crispiness.

Yes, that's right: the Luxman EQ-500 uses tubes -- seven of them: four ECC83s, two ECC82s, and one EZ81.



Review system

The components I mostly used for this review were: a Spec Corp. RSA-717 integrated amplifier, Horning Eufrodite Ellipse and Vivid Audio Oval K1 speakers, Skogrand Ravel speaker cables and interconnects, and a Garrard 401 turntable on a Woodsong Audio plinth, with an Ortofon TA-210 tonearm with removable headshell. Cartridges were the Ortofon Xpression, Miyajima Shilabe and Zero, Koetsu Rosewood Signature Platinum, and Dynavector 10X5. Digital files were streamed through a Luxman DA-06 DAC.

Ten things I loved about the Luxman EQ-500 phono stage

Recently, when my daughter came home for a weekend visit from her freshman year of college, we watched *10 Things I Hate About You*, a 1999 teen rom-com that featured poignant and touching roles for an already charismatic Heath Ledger and a young Joseph Gordon-Levitt, as well as a hilarious scene-stealing turn for Larry Miller as a worried ob/gyn determined to warn his daughter about dangerous boys. (Yes, I chose the movie.) In that spirit, here are ten of my favorite songs about life, love, and loss that illustrate ten things I loved about listening to the Luxman EQ-500.

The level of information retrieval was extraordinary. The detail I heard in the title track of David Bowie's *Heroes* was remarkable (LP, RCA AYL1-3857). A boatload of auditory information rides in on this tidal wave of a song, and the Luxman-Ortofon combination was unflappable in extricating all its nuances -- Robert Fripp's jagged guitar, Brian Eno's atmospheric keyboard treatments, and Bowie's progressively disintegrating lament are all masterfully woven together, leaving the digital file sounding congested in comparison.



The EQ-500's midrange was typically lovely Luxman: magical and enchanting. In "Sometimes It Snows in April," from Prince and the Revolution's *Parade* (LP, Paisley Park 25395-1), the Luxman-Koetsu combo captured Prince's enormous vocal range, highlighting his glorious falsetto and coloratura in trenchant detail while showcasing his exquisite and tasteful musicianship on acoustic guitar and piano. Prince had the third widest as well as the highest vocal range of modern male recording artists, according to an interesting chart I came across, and the Luxman-Koetsu spotlit and showcased his incredible gifts.

The Luxman's high-pass filter had a way of softening and cleaning up older records without artifice or loss. "Oh Yeah," from Roxy Music's *Flesh+Blood* (LP, Atco-SD 32-102), could be the most played song of my misspent youth -- my LP of it is well worn. But the Luxman revealed that there was still mileage in those grooves. As beautiful as this song is, the instruments and

recording can sound a bit crispy and clinical -- but the Luxman's reproduction of it sounded very natural and organic.

The depth and soundstage were immense. "I Just Want to See His Face," from the Stones' *Exile on Main Street* (LP, Rolling Stones CG 40489), was a foot-stomping, rafter-raising good time. I closed my eyes and the Luxman-Shilabe combo placed me in the middle of a gospel church revival. The Shilabe has a rich, round tone with meaty bass retrieval, and the Luxman highlighted that skill set to great effect with this song, immersing and enveloping me in the congregation.

The EQ-500 was quick and lively in pace and timing. With "Ever So Lonely," from Sheila Chandra and Monsoon's *Third Eye* (LP, Mobil 1 812 897-1), the Luxman-Koetsu combo was simply imperturbable as it digested, synthesized, and spun out the complex swirl of hybrid East/West beats, polyphony, and orchestration.



The Luxman's tubed sound was voluptuous but controlled. It sparkled with "Paradise," from Icehouse's *Measure for Measure* (LP, Chrysalis BFV-41527), displaying an enchanting blend of tubey phatness and firm grip. Eno's treatments of this gorgeous song shimmered, and the Luxman's tubes seemed to breathe new life into this ancient (1986) record from my college days, even with the relatively modest Dynavector cartridge.

Gotta love dat bass. “Love Alive,” from Heart’s *Little Queen* (LP, Portrait JR34799), was the song I wanted for bass energy, and the Luxman and Shilabe nailed it. I found myself eagerly awaiting the gigantic bass drum that shatters the mid-song silence at 2:10. The Luxman harnessed the Shilabe’s prodigious bass reproduction, and the dancing VU meters did not disappoint.



The Luxman was dead quiet -- its noise floor was vanishingly low. When I played “The Past and Pending,” from the Shins’ *Oh, Inverted World* (LP, Sub Pop SP-550), the spaces between James Mercer’s angst-ridden voice, his nylon-string guitar, and Niels Galloway’s elegiac French horn descant were sublime. With this much sonic “blackness,” one has more time to decipher the weight and meaning of the Shins’ delightfully obscure and arcane lyrics.

The Luxman’s Mono/Stereo switch makes possible a nice addition to the sonic options. Yes, it’s true -- you haven’t really appreciated the Beatles until you’ve heard their mono mixes played through a system built to deliver the goods. With “While My Guitar Gently Weeps,” from *The Beatles* (aka “The White Album,” LP, Parlophone PMC 7067-8), the Luxman and Zero squeezed every last ounce of searing, heart-rending sustain from each plaintively bent string of Eric Clapton’s guitar -- the mono-mixed Les Paul just had more presence and punch than I’m used to hearing. And by the way, you haven’t really seen the best live guitar solo

ever recorded until you've seen Prince crushing Clapton's solo on this song in the all-star tribute to George Harrison, filmed during the 2004 induction ceremonies at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame.

The EQ-500 provides cartridge demagnetization on the fly. I bought my Koetsu RSP used and, over time, had noticed some loss of definition and detail. The technical explanation is that, eventually, an MC cartridge absorbs some of the charge from its exotic magnets, and this process of magnetization causes the coil to be less responsive to fluctuations in the groove. Luxman calls the EQ-500's built-in, easy-to-use demagnetizer function an Articulator. Flipping this switch on for 30 seconds effectively demagnetizes the cartridge in use. Tracking "One Tree Hill," from U2's *The Joshua Tree* (LP, Island U2 6), the demagnetized Koetsu delivered more exquisite color and shading from the already haunting string section, provided by the Armin siblings of Canada, while Bono's voice soared to the heavens, proclaiming the joy of resurrection. I found myself glassy-eyed at the freshness of this rendering of my favorite song of the 1980s.

This shouldn't sound like a criticism; it's a caution: The number of permutations of settings and tubed gain-stage options in the Luxman is a bit dizzying, and makes for the probability of a long break-in time. In addition, the skimpy manual assumes a good deal of comfort with setting up and fine-tuning an analog rig, and confirms my opinion that the EQ-500 should not be your *first* phono stage (though it could very well be your last). The Luxman isn't difficult to use or set up, but it will take a little while to optimize. It's not plug and play -- but that's not what you'd want or expect from a \$7490 phono stage.

Unlike my Luxman L-590AX integrated amp, the EQ-500 didn't get super hot or emit a strange smell during its hours of break-in. It sounded pretty good straight out of the box -- and positively luminous after about 100 hours. That's not really a huge amount of break-in, but even now, four months later, I'm still hearing further, small improvements in the sound.



This is the end

My analog grail has long been a component that allows me to easily switch among a relatively inexpensive cartridge (Dynavector 10X5) for my worn but well-loved LPs from high school and college, a great mono cartridge (Miyajima Zero), and my three higher-end cartridges. Through the Luxman EQ-500, each of these revealed different characters and shadings in the recordings I enjoyed this month.

In a previous review, I urged readers to search for audio components that would stand the test of time. Such components should be relentlessly musical, gorgeous to look at, easy to use, reliable, and provide state-of-the-art sound quality that's unlikely to be significantly bettered for years. The Luxman checks all of those boxes. A veritable Swiss Army Knife of analog reproduction, it fleshed out the special character of each of my treasured cartridges with ease and finesse. It's a grail-level component.

... Tom Mathew

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Associated Equipment

- **Speakers** -- DeVore Fidelity Orangutan O/93, Horning Eufrodite Ellipse, Jamo R909, Vivid Audio Oval K1
- **Amplifiers** -- Shindo Laboratory Cortese and Haut-Brion

- **Integrated amplifiers** -- Luxman L-590AX, Spec Corp. RSA-717
- **Preamplifiers** -- Bob's Devices Sky 30 step-up transformer, Shindo Laboratory Masseto and Monbrison preamplifiers
- **Digital sources** -- Aurender X100L 12TB music server streaming Tidal, Luxman DA-06 DAC
- **Speaker cables** -- Auditorium 23, High Fidelity CT-1 Enhanced, Skogrand Ravel
- **Interconnects** -- Auditorium 23, MG Planus 3, Sablon Panatela, Shindo Laboratory, Skogrand Ravel
- **Digital cables** -- Prana Wire Photon USB
- **Turntable** -- Garrard 401 with Woodsong Audio flamewood plinth and Ortofon TA-210 tonearm, Garrard 301 with Woodsong Audio burled-maple plinth and AMG 12J2 tonearm
- **Cartridges** -- Dynavector 10X5, Koetsu Rosewood Signature Platinum, Miyajima Shilabe and Zero, Ortofon Xpression
- **Phono cables** -- Bob's Devices Vintage
- **Power conditioners** -- Shindo Laboratory Mr. T, Silver Circle Audio Tchaik 6
- **Furniture** -- Kanso audio stands in Indian rosewood, maple burl, and amboyna; Symposium speaker stands
- **Tweaks** -- Acoustic Revive RR-888 ultra-low-frequency pulse generator

Luxman EQ-500 Phono Stage

Price: \$7490 USD.

Warranty: Five years parts and labor.