

Luscious Luxman



Luxman's new flagship L-590AX MKII integrated amplifier looks retro – but its sound is right up-to-date, says Jon Myles.

For music lovers back in the late 1970s and early 1980s Luxman was an aspirational hi-fi amplifier brand – a beautifully-built slice of Japanese exotica festooned with buttons and featuring just about every facility you could want. And Luxmans sounded good at a time when this wasn't guaranteed by other brands.

Predominantly Class A operation meant an inherently smooth sound with none of the sonic nasties that

plagued some cheaper amplifiers of the time. No wonder the name Luxman became a by-word for quality.

Somewhere along the road though, the company managed to lose its way as it made an ill-judged foray into the budget end of the market – a move that cost it dear. Luxman withdrew from all territories apart from its home market of Japan as it sought to rebuild its reputation.

Since 2009, though, the firm has enjoyed something a renaissance

under a partnership with the IAG audio group.

So much so that I gave the Luxman L-550AX integrated amplifier our full five globes back in the July 2015 issue of *Hi-Fi World*, it was so good.

Now there's a new flagship model in Luxman's integrated range in the shape of the L-590AX MKII. Priced at £6495 it's essentially a step-up from the L-550AX (which still remains in the range) offering greater power and upgraded components.

Not that you'd immediately notice it from the exterior as the new L-590AX MKII mirrors the L-550AX in terms of design – meaning it resembles those battleship-grade Far-East amplifiers many of us lusted over way back when. So it's big and glossy with an array of buttons on the fascia below two big, illuminated power meters. As you expect, it is beautifully made and finished, the rotary controls moving with silky precision.

Features include a switchable MM/MC phono stage, bass and treble controls, a loudness button, line straight, balance control, two pairs of switchable loudspeaker outputs, plus a high-quality headphone circuit.

Round the back are the Phono inputs for a turntable, four line-level inputs, and two balanced XLR line inputs. A well-finished and admirably easy to use remote control completes the package. The only thing missing is any form of digital input; this is an all-analogue amplifier.

Not surprisingly, with all these features the L-590AX MKII is big, measuring 193mm x 440mm x 463mm (H/W/D) and weighing just over 28kg – heavy. You'll need a decent sized rack with plenty of clearance for the top-mounted ventilation grilles.

These are essential as the amplifier operates mainly in Class A, meaning it gets warm to the touch after a while – although never enough to cause discomfort or burn.

Luxman says the L-590AX MKII is a pure Class A design – although this isn't strictly accurate. Instead it is Class A up to 30 Watts from where it moves into Class B to give a quoted peak power performance of some 160 Watts (see Measured Performance).

To be fair, though, you'd have to be using this amplifier in a ballroom the size of the Strictly Come Dancing set with a pair of pretty insensitive loudspeakers to get anywhere near pushing it to its limits into Class B operation.

SOUND QUALITY

The Luxman may be handsomely equipped and bedecked with controls – but at its heart it is a wonderfully no-nonsense performer.

This is one piece of equipment that simply gets on with the job of music-making in a thoroughly engaging manner.

Connecting it to a pair of Spondor's big SP200 Classic

loudspeakers (see review Hi-Fi World May 2016) and queuing up 'Whole Lotta Love' from Led Zeppelin II, first impressions were of a smooth, rich sound with plenty of clarity and life.

The bass line was punchy and tuneful but never overly-dominant. Above that Jimmy Page's classic guitar riff stopped and started with no sense of smear while Robert Plant's vocals had lovely purity.

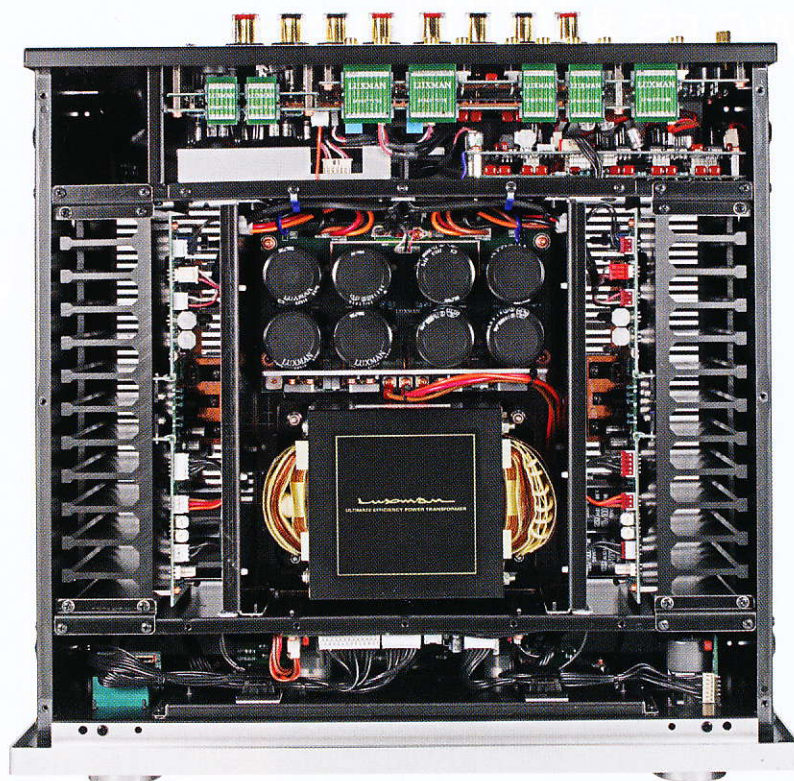
It may be a transistor amplifier but Class A operation means there's none of the hash or slight blurring of detail. Instead the Luxman just cuts right to the very heart of the music.

Playing John Coltrane's 'One Down, One Up; Live At The Half Note' and the drums, piano, saxophone and double bass were all anchored in their own instrumental space, stage left and right, even the sound of the audience's conversations and clinking glasses coming through loud and clear between tracks. This isn't the clearest or most high-fidelity of recordings but through the Luxman that ceased to be a concern, the amplifier dredging up every last bit of detail.

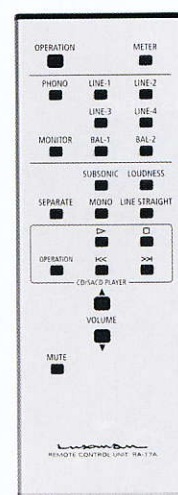
That clarity extended to whatever I played and was combined with an innate musicality that

brought timing to the fore. Ike and Tina Turner's 'River Deep, Mountain High' and Phil Spector's orchestral wall of sound production swelled from the 'speakers. The Luxman kept a firm grip on the Spondor's twin 12-inch bass drivers to create a giant soundstage in front of me.

Switching from the Spondors to the new Opera Prima standpoint loudspeaker (see review this issue) was interesting. They require more power than the Spondors to come on song and obviously – because of their smaller cabinet – do not have the absolute low-end authority of the Spondors. But pairing them together introduced a certain synergy. The low-end on John Campbell's rendition of 'Down In The Hole' was firm and potent, providing a solid foundation for the guitar and rasping vocals which give so much



Internally, the Luxman L-590AX MkII demonstrates this company's immaculate build quality and attention to detail. At lower centre is the mains transformer and above it rows of circular smoothing capacitors of the power supply. At left and right are large heatsinks to keep the output transistors cool under Class A operation.



The remote even has a Mono button to lessen hiss on LPs.

atmosphere to the track. This is where the Luxman really shines – it's happy enough powering a pair of giant standmount loudspeakers but adds life to small standmounts.

This was all with the Line Straight mode engaged to by-pass the tone controls. Switching them in I could gently tailor bass and treble. I did find there was a slight loss in absolute detail, but they were useful in taming some of brightest recordings I have. Oasis's 'Live Forever', for example, benefitted by having the searing treble diminished. They are there, can be used if needed but left out if not.

Moving on to vinyl through the built-in phonostage it was clear this also is no mere cosmetic addition. It shares the same overall tonal clarity as the line-level inputs with an extremely low noise floor. Playing Leonard Cohen's 'First We Take Manhattan' there was body and depth to the vocals while the electronic backing track had weight and definition. Also noticeable was a refreshing absence of background noise. I've heard some standalone phonostages costing a good third of the Luxman's total



The rear panel of the Luxman shows the range of inputs available – balanced XLR sockets at right, plus unbalanced RCAs including a single switched MM/MC input at far left. Gold plated speaker terminals accept bare wires, spades and 4mm banana plugs.

price which don't sound as good – which just goes to show how good in every area this package is.

But that's the beauty of the L-590AX MKII. It seems to do everything very well without drawing too much attention to itself. Instead it just enables music to flow in a purely effortless way. Yes, it's reminiscent of Japanese amplifiers from the 1970s in terms of both looks and features but its sound is right up-to-date, being both vibrant and utterly involving. In short, this is

one piece of equipment that cannot fail to put a smile on your face.

CONCLUSION

The original L-550AX was a very good amplifier by market standards. But Luxman have taken all its essential elements and improved on them for the flagship L-590AX MKII. It has more power and detail yet retains the same easy-going musicality and foot-tapping sound. It's an absolute gem, to both look at and use.

MEASURED PERFORMANCE

The Luxman L-590AX MK II produced 90 Watts into 8 Ohms and 156 Watts into 4 Ohms. Working substantially into Class A it passes a lot of current through the output stages and gets quite hot after a while, independent of whether it is producing music or not. All the same, this is plenty enough power to go very loud irrespective of loudspeakers or room size.

Distortion was low at all levels, although at high frequencies there was a rise to 0.2% or so at very low outputs, below 1 Watt – a little crossover distortion.

Line input sensitivity was high, just 180mV from both the unbalanced phono socket inputs and the balanced XLR inputs, so the unit matches all outside sources with ease.

Frequency response (Direct) measured flat from 3Hz to 52kHz, so this is a wideband amplifier. The tone controls gave +/-8dB lift or cut and reasonably good resolution, although subtle levels of change of 2dB or so needed very little control movement. Lift and cut acted over a wide frequency band centred at 1kHz; the controls don't adjust just spectrum extremes.

The MM and MC phono stages differed slightly. MM gave an essentially flat response with just a small of bass

shelf loss of -0.2dB, whilst the MC input was the opposite, with a similar amount of lower frequency lift below 1kHz. Subsonic cut from the optional Subsonic filter was extreme, rolling off deep bass fast below 60Hz (-1dB), curtailing deep bass as well as warps – somewhat drastic.

Phono sensitivity measured MM 3mV and MC 0.3mV, the latter suitable for low output MC cartridges. With low equivalent input noise value (IEC A weighted) of 0.12µV, MC hiss was minimal; this is just 3.5dB higher than input transformers (0.08µV).

The L-590AX MK II measured well in all areas. It is powerful, runs heavily in Class A and has low distortion. It has a very good moving coil (MC) cartridge input stage with high gain and low noise that will suit expensive MC cartridges.

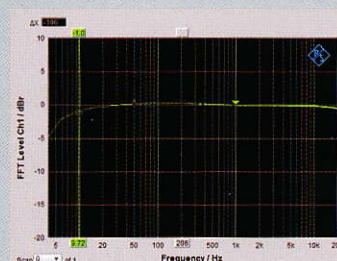
NK

Power	90watts
CD/tuner/aux.	
Frequency response	3Hz-52kHz
Separation	87dB
Noise	-105dB
Distortion	0.04%
Sensitivity	180mV

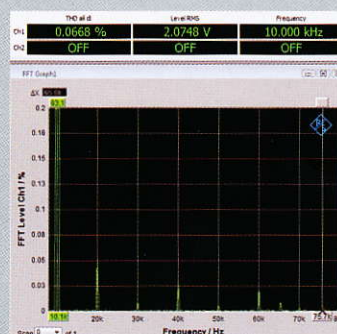
Disc (MM/MC)

Frequency response	6Hz-20kHz
Separation	87dB
Noise	-87/-68dB
Distortion	0.06%
Sensitivity	3/0.3mV
Overload	12/120mV

FREQUENCY RESPONSE MC



DISTORTION



LUXMAN L-590AX MKII £6495



OUTSTANDING - amongst the best.

VERDICT

Class A operation, retro looks and a host of features add up to one of the best integrated amplifiers you can buy at the price.

FOR

- foot-tapping sound detail
- smooth delivery
- MM/MC phonostage

AGAINST

- looks might not be to everyone's taste

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