

Audiodrom

LUXMAN C-900u & M-900u

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The quantum leap

It was at the High End Munich Show where I bumped to them. At one of the atrium rooms there was unusual peace – unlike the overcrowded neighbouring rooms - and the sound of the music that was played back was like 'Hey, this sounds natural!' I looked at the rack and saw two Luxmans I had never seen before. This was my first encounter with the M-900u and C-900u amplifiers.

Luxman is not new to Audiodrom's team. I had the personal luck to audition and scrutinize their great SACD players, the D-05, D-06 and D-08, the M-600A power amplifier and C-600f preamplifier, and a big part of Luxman's integrated portfolio - the L-509u, L-550All, L-505uX, L-507uX and L-590AX. Not all received a review as differences between some of our evolutionary small in both sound and design. Important to say, that although small they are evident and easily heard – similarly to the Luxman's biggest rival, Accuphase, stepping up from the lower-in-the-range models to a new or a higher-in-the-range models *always* means some degree of improvement. Yet all exhibit the very same basic nature - they are smooth, refined and induce a sense of luxury. That's why we nicknamed Luxman to high-end *aristocracy* in one of our reviews.

Not so long ago (time flies) Luxman celebrated its 80th anniversary and launched the ultimate amplifier combo of B-1000f and C-1000f. A decade later and a decade smarter, which means *this* year, there has been a new offering – the new anniversary models of the M-900u power amplifier and the C-900u preamplifier. I volunteered for this review with excitement.

My initial impressions? After I carefully positioned a pair of loudspeakers I removed my usual pink noise CD and replaced it with music. The room was flooded with Beethoven's *Seventh* and my jaw dropped – not only is the new Luxman's combo a two-generation leap but it also comes with performance that hardly has a competition at its asking price.



Luxman C-900u + M-900u

The design tricks that Luxman uses in its amplifiers are well known yet they slowly develop through time like facets of a diamond that is carefully polished. The benefit of an online magazine (like Audiodrom) is that the text remain online – no need to travel to a garage and open cardboard boxes to find a review in a publication. Should you have never heard acronyms like ODNF or LECUA please refer to already published descriptions of technical solutions in Luxman's amps that were discussed for the L-507uX, L-590AX or M-600A. The new 4th generation of the ODNF 4.0 uses Darlington circuit in one stage of both the amplifiers to boost the current gain and provide high output impedance which consequently improves the overall system sensitivity. Combine this with the feedback that utilizes only 'waste' signal, that is distortion, and behold the amps that sport, at least on paper, high dynamic capabilities (126dB for the C-900u and 117dB for the M-900u) and *'better extension and clarity on high frequencies'*, according to Luxman.



The proprietary Luxman's volume regulator, the LECUA system, can be found in 4-parallel – left and right channels and bi-amping mode. The all new LECUA 1000 increases the number of steps so with the C-900u it is possible to regulate volume in 88 increments between 0 and -87dB.



The C-900u provides usual and sufficient connectivity on its rear panel: 3 RCA inputs, 3 balanced XLR inputs, 2 RCA and 2 XLR outputs, one RCA input for a control amplifier that helps to make the Luxmans a part of AV system, and remote link connection. The main power switch is placed next to the IEC inlet - the front power button only brings the amp to STAND BY.

The front panel of the preamplifier is quite busy: big volume and input selector knobs, tone controls, line direct and balance switches, an output mode selector and even a button for external control amp. Unlike many I do not mind the tone controls – if they do not affect the performance when in signal path they can help to improve tonal balance of an imperfect

source, tape recorder for instance. Personally I prefer the uncluttered front view of the C-1000f to the crowded C-900u look – delegating some controls to the remote controller would help.



The M-900u's façade is much simpler: two needle type VU meters and their control plus a switch to select either balanced or single ended mode. I loved the oversized speaker terminal knobs that were spaced well so I could connect even the thickest and stiffest speaker cables from my arsenal with ease.



Where their relevant Japanese competition employs MOSFETs and toroids, Luxman uses bipolar transistors and EI/CI core transformers. There are many good reasons from each camp why one solution is superior to the other - to me it is like a question whether it is more important to have strong arms or strong legs for a triathlon athlete. The athlete is as strong and dynamic as is the sum of his parts and so is an amplifier. Some not-that-good amps are collection of superior solutions that do not work together when assembled. The successful amps developers know how to compensate strengths and weaknesses of the technical solutions and make them work well. And those few industry leaders have found the way how to transform the weaknesses into strengths for a perfect result. Luxman can be the example. It is nice to see the attention to detail they give to the parts that others leave unnoticed –

like the square copper wires they use for transformers or double-side gold plated bending curves of printed circuit paths that imitate the constant section and flow of classical wiring.



The M-900u boasts of nice damping factor (710) and the power output that drops in linear fashion to 1 ohm. In result it will be breeze for it to drive most speakers. The specified output power 2x150W into 8 ohms doubles down to 2x300W into 4 ohms and ends with 1x1,200W into 1 ohm. Luxman's specifications are usually on safe side so in actual use I would expect 10-20% higher values. Still, if your listening room is really big or your speakers are difficult to drive – Magico or Lansche – give the Luxman combo try before you buy.

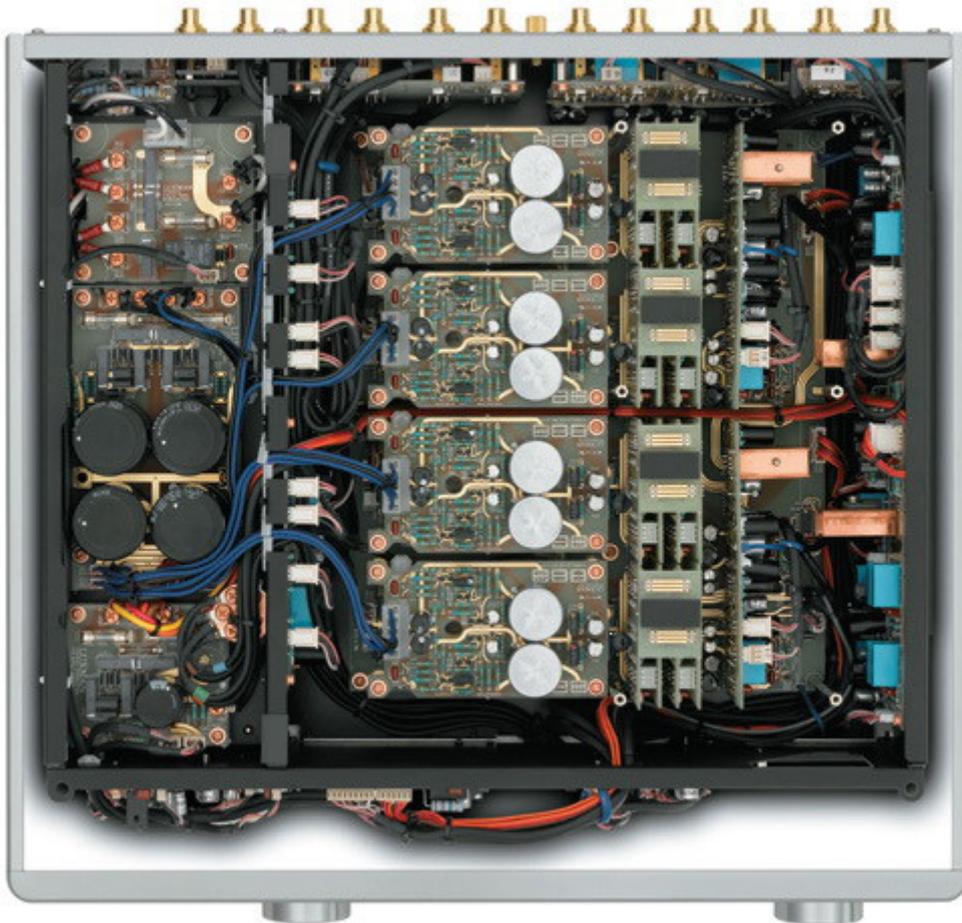
I auditioned the Luxmans, the C-900u preamplifier (14.900€) and the M-900u power amplifier (14.900€), at a familiar control room surrounded by usual suspects: Luxman DAC DA-06 (5.000€) connected with Audioquest optical cable to SACD D-05 (4.700€) used as a transport for red book mode, Usher Dancer CP-8571 speakers, Neyton Nuernberg XLR interconnects and Audioquest Mont Blanc speaker cables. The power loom was headed by IsoTek Super Titan and proprietary power cables.

The Magic of Imaging

The lit needle type VU meters on the M-900u's frontplate show the amplifier's power output in dB scale. 12W equivalent, according to Luxman, should read around -10dB. This is a quite useful piece of information as up to 12 watts the M-900u operates into pure class A before it switches to class AB.

For the listening sessions I set the volume to the level that gave me approximately 75dB at the listening seat, which read as -15dB at the VU meters in dynamic peaks. I used Beethoven's 7th *Symphony* for that purpose (Bernard Haitink and London Symphony Orchestra, SACD LSO 0578, Red Book layer). Means that most of my listening (one never can be sure) was done in pure A. Given the modest size of the listening room I assume that in the

rooms of around 60 cubic meters we do not have to give up the class A listening even at loud listening levels.



Coincidentally, the day before my auditioning I was present at a general rehearsal of the Beethoven's *Seventh* at a small concert hall of Moravian Philharmony that also serves as a certified recording venue with beautiful and balanced acoustics. The hall is a bit on the live side which lends the music spark and clarity – the same spark and clarity I heard through the Luxman combo.

The M-900u and C-900u provide wide and deep look into the soundstage of the London's Barbican. The Luxmans excel in instrumental separation yet they manage to convey the wholeness of the symphonic orchestra. They can dissect if you want them to dissect – *Allegretto* begins with muted cellos and the Luxmans bring the smell of resin on strings to the listening room. You can *feel* how variable is the pressure of bows on strings, you *see* the incidental moves of the cellists, and if you wish you can just pick up *one* cello and follow it through the rest of the piece with its full front to back perspective.

Imaging of the Luxmans is pinpoint sharp. Not only within the depth and width of the soundstage but also in vertical space – tympani, for example, sit recessed in the soundstage at a level slightly above the orchestra. One of the best tests for imaging can be found at Chesky's *Jazz sampler*. Four musicians with percussive instruments (shaker, maraca, hand drum and wood blocks) are marching through a reverberant chapel, approaching a

microphone, making three rounds around it and disappearing through the gate in the back of the chapel.

Through the Luxmans the portrayal of the event was impressively precise and solid. As mentioned earlier, the sound did not disintegrated into small sonic events – the detail for the sake of the detail – as well as the LSO never lost its communication power as *an orchestra*. This is what the Luxmans continue pursuing with all grace and magic – they lure you into the music.



The Waltz of Snowflakes

The charm of any Luxman builds upon saturated and natural midrange. The sound of the M-900u is subjectively transposed a smidgen higher as if some part of its predecessor's romantic nature has given up to transparency and speed. It will be a listener's choice which sound he or she would prefer – it is suffice to say that the new Luxman lets you hear much deeper into the mix with more honesty.

I have recently spent few days with astonishing triplet of Van Medevoort amplifiers - PAQs/CAQ/DAQ. On the same track, Tchaikovsky's *Nutcracker* (*Nutcracker*, Telarc, SACD

60674, Red Book layer), the Luxman exhibited more even mids without any audible perturbation that were tonally and texturally *closer* to the real event. The Van Medevoort counterstruck with a grade higher dynamic contrast to make differences between pianissimo and forte much more dramatic and orchestral *scale* more believable. I assume that three times bigger power output of the Van Medevoort (2x300W in class A) makes the dynamics bloom. Is it a concern for the Luxman?

Perhaps the IsoTek's Super Titan that was used for the M-900u bottlenecked energy for the power amp? I experimented with shuffling the power cord between the IsoTek and the wall and decided to keep the amplifier plugged in the Super Titan. Without it the sound lacked everything, gone was the imaging magic, definition, dynamics and highs became harsher. It is fair to say that the Van Medevoort PAQs is by 5000€ (30%) more expensive. When I compare to a direct competitor, the Accuphase A-65, the sound of the M-900u is more alive, more detailed and more defined at low octaves, yet it manages to keep the aura that is common for refined performances of both. The children choir in *Waltz of Snowflakes* came to life in the listening room through the Luxman combo and transformed the room into a real ballroom. Waltz is a royal dance and it needs to be reproduced like that so I appreciated a lot that the Luxmans, behind their high resolution, never sounded mechanic and uninvolved, although technically perfect, like many of high end esoterica amplifiers on the market.



A Journey into The Basement

Apart from the soundstaging capabilities and much improved transparency, there is something even more important that makes the Luxman combo so outstanding: bass quality is probably the area where the Luxmans made the biggest leap. The bass of the M-900u is deep enough for *any* recording and it has enough weight not to cause proportional misbalance in frequency spectrum. It digs deep to the basement yet the sound does not stay confined underground and swiftly gets back to daylight if music calls for it. On top of it the bass of the Luxman combo is miraculously delineated.

Master and Margarita (Malgorzata Zalewska, *Crater's Edge*, taken from Audio magazine sampler CD) is a brutal test for any piece of high end gear. A harp that is played live is accompanied by synthesized lines that start at subsonic extremes and extend up to supersonics. Ladies and gentlemen (though I already lost by faith that audio reviews are read by ladies), I have never heard better rendering of the bass in *Master and Margarita* than through the Luxmans. The only system that had bettered it in definition was all-digital based Lyngdorf Millennium, yet it lacked the Luxman's weight. The C-900u and M-900u not only managed to transfer the subterranean lows but they managed to keep them resolved across the octaves. No smearing, no mud, just impactful and strong bass lines, one by one. I *loved* it!

Notwithstanding all that was said the Luxman combo will most likely not appeal to anyone whose music collection favours rock'n roll. The electric guitar in *Sheer Heart Attack* (Queen, *News of The World*, 0777 7 894 9428) is precise and full through the M-900u and the C-900u, yet it lacks ultimate bite and electrifying presence I heard through the Van Medevoort, for example. I suspect it is a kind of tax for class A as the tonal purity and textural resolution brings (almost) always along the slightest touch of transient roundness. If you like your music hard and aggressive, look elsewhere. If you are looking for refinement and grace, Luxman is the right address and I am afraid that there is no other amplifier at the Luxman's asking price level that combines all the *positive* treats so skilfully.

The Message for Luxman

My summary could be pretty straightforward: the anniversary Luxman M-900u/C-900u combo is a fantastic piece of audio that signifies a new era for the company. I can say aloud that both amps are first *affordable* amps, however relative is this term, I can imagine to spend the rest of my life with. Actually, I am considering to replace my all Accuphase set up with them. Cannot be more enthusiastic.

One more thing. Those who already have had a chance to see and touch any Luxman's amplifier know that the way of how parts are assembled and surfaces finished borders fanatical obsession. Just try the sizeable milled volume knob that turns with dignified resistance, not unlike it was turning in a pot filled with thick honey. The aluminium panels are blasted white to silver satin effect, the case is precise to nanometers and they are heavy - 48kg for the power amp and 20kg for the preamplifier.

I would send two messages to Luxman Corporation – the first one is simple and unadulterated *Bravo!* The other is a question, why the lit needle meters reside behind the glass that with its facets looks like having 10 diopters? Perhaps this is only *my* impression...

The M-900u and the C-900u get our 100% Reference award and I am sorry that Audiodrom does not grant anything like 150% Reference, for example. They are that good.

