

Audiodrom

LUXMAN L-590AX integrated amplifier

author: MJ (Audiodrom) | 1.10.2011



"It was as if the L-590AX could render also the cigarette smoke, heavy curtains and a worn out carpet, fingers dancing on the strings and the ice, slowly melting in the last glass of whiskey..."

La délicatesse intégrée...

Japanese Luxman may seem to be overprivileged to have another amplifier submitted for the audiodrom review, on top of that another Class A amplifier. I should probably say something about a coincidence but it was not definitely a coincidence that have brought the brand new L-590AX into my listening room. In the course of last two years I auditioned several Luxman's amps and always with excellent results – no wonder that I was eagerly looking forward meeting the L-590AX.



The Luxman L-590AX successfully evolves the sonic philosophy of its predecessors - that is to flood a listener with washes of the sound that caresses, soothes, heals and brings nothing but pure enjoyment. You may have heard of Orpheus – the ancient gifted lyre layer and singer from Greek mythology. The legend says that when Orpheus touched his lyre’s strings then shepherds forgot about their daily worries, wild animals were enchanted and tamed coming near people’s dwellings, and birds ceased to flap their wings in the sky. Unfortunately many centuries have passed since then, however, if our ancestors have had the L-590AX available, it is likely they would not have mourned for Orpheus.

It is easy for the Luxman to make a proof of the presence of Class A circuitry inside the amp as you will feel it few minutes after switching the L-590AX on: the substantial waste heat does not cause the Luxman to glow at night, however, I would not recommend to build the amp in a bookshelf or closed rack still you are free to use it keep you cup of coffee or tea reasonably warm in winter months. For the L-590AX Luxman had to adapt the case’s ventilation to achieve proper convection and the dissipation of the heat.

Technically speaking...

...the L-590AX builds upon renowned L-590A II and improves on it especially with the new LECUA 1000WM attenuator (the LECUA stands for Luxman Electric Controlled Ultimate Attenuator and the WM stands for Weighting Matrix) and the circuitry that has been adopted from Luxman’s flagship C-1000f control amplifier and B-1000f mono power amplifier. Luxman claims the LECUA 1000WM to be the ‘ultimate attenuator’ that aspires to be the first absolutely lossless attenuator ever. It converts the music signal from a voltage into a current, controls gain, and then reconverts the current into a voltage. A position of the volume knob is detected by sensors to be consequently evaluated by processor board that controls the current switches combinations, not unlike Accuphase’s AAVA volume control works. As the LECUA does not imply any impedance changes there is no deterioration of S/N ratio and frequency response remains totally uniform and there is virtually zero tracking difference between both channels. The entire process is carried out in analog domain including electrical suppression of RFI and EMI interferences.

Authentically speaking...

...Homesick James is one of the masters of southern delta blues and so called bottleneck guitar. The eerie sound of the guitar comes from the broken neck of a bottle that a player used put on one of his fingers and by sliding it up and down the guitar’s neck the strings generated a wide range of tones, including quarter-tones and semi-tones that cannot be played using standard guitar playing technique. Homesick James was a self-made man: no one showed him how to play the guitar so he went through somewhat painful learning process to reveal the instrument for himself. At his teenage he often used a pocket knife to slide his guitar’s strings – on *Blues on The South Side* (Prestige, 00025218052924) the pocket knife cannot be heard, however, the recording is as old as from 1964 (!) and was fortunately carefully remastered by Kirk Felton of Fantasy Studios. I was also fortunate to have the L-590AX on hand to dig maximum out of the album.

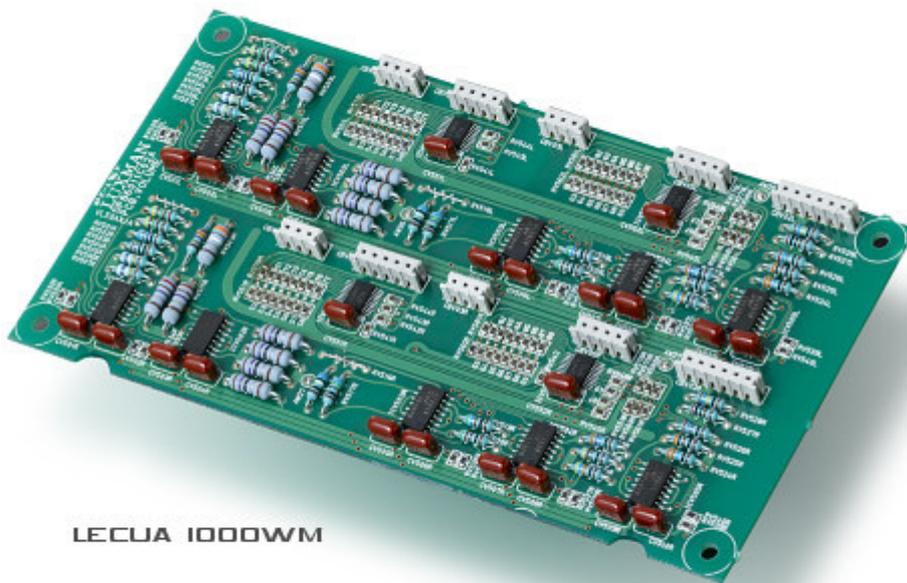
One would not say that it can play *so good*. I auditioned many amplifiers that declared *the truth* and very often I got sick of the truth after a while. I auditioned amplifiers that were *neutral* but their neutrality was uninspiring and uninvolved. I also auditioned amplifiers that were so kind to sound to the extent that anything that passed through them was altered to euphonic infidelity. The L-590AX is truthful enough not to miss the tiniest detail, timbral accuracy, harmonic richness, powerful dynamics and transient speed. At the same time it is sophisticated enough to enchant you and invite you to share the deepest spirit of the music.

With the L-590AX you would rather move your dining table to your listening room than miss a single second of the performance. The L-590AX is *not* forgiving and let you know readily that the guy behind a mixing console had a bad day but it says so in very understated way. With 45 years old *Homesick Shuffle* it says something like *oh well it's 1964, but check the piano, isn't it beautiful?* And indeed, the honky-tonkish piano in the background of the track is ringing with unique clarity and creates an ever changing baseline for soft interplay of cymbals, punchy drums and Homesick James's guitar equilibrium.



Also the Luxman's rendition of Michel Legrand's *Digue Ding Ding* was a great listening experience. The recording is not top notch (I believe it has not appeared on CD apart from *In Laws* soundtrack but I have the original *Violent Violins* album digitalized) but who cares when the Luxman reconstructs the recording venue in my listening room so beautifully? No matter how big is the room it creates its own ambience with long reverb of an underdamped studio, vivid colors and analogue smoothness. The stereo of the *Digue Ding Ding* is the early one: some sounds on your right, some on your left and something in the middle, but it is extremely entertaining through the L-590AX. To exclude the synergy of both Luxmans (the D-05 player and the amplifier) I used also 24bit/192kHz Audio Analogue Maestro Rev 2.0

player. The entertainment factor stayed put also with the new source. I did not expect differently having had the experience with the L-550All last year.



The L-590AX keeps on using unusual negative feedback (Only Distortion Negative Feedback version 3.0A) that virtually feeds back only distortion components generated during amplification to extend the bandwidth of the amplifier to 20-100,000Hz and increase S/N ratio to to 107dB which is among the best for an integrated amplifier. The beauty of such a solution lies in feeding back only a 'corrupted' part of signal – should there is no distortion present in the signal the ODNS circuitry remains idle.

Principally, the L-590AX is a bipolar amp with push-pull topology in pure class A, achieving 2x30 sweet watts into 8 ohm load or 2x60W sweet watts into 4 ohm load. For the sake of the new 'X'line of its components Luxman had to adjust the dimensions of the L-590AX to the new (and narrower) Luxman standard of 440 (W) × 193 (H) × 463 (D) mm – it will come handy should you already own a Luxman's SACD player to harmonize both components on your rack.

The rear panel of the the L-590AX shows typical array of connections: four RCA line inputs, two XLR balanced inputs, MM/MC inputs, a recorder inputs and a PRE-OUT option. With the L-590AX it is possible to use two pairs of speakers connected to switchable binding posts that accept any type of a speaker wire's termination in case you manage to remove a tiny plug that seals them. I can tell you it is not an easy task but I succeeded in the end and so I could use WBT terminations of my Krautwire Fractal. The laziness of a listener is supported

through a headphone jack output on the L-590AX' s front panel and through an aluminum remote control that works well also with Luxman's CD players.

For the auditioning I used Luxman' s D-05 SACD player as well as Audio Analogue Maestro Rev. 2.0 CD player, competitive Accuphase E-560 and Accuphase E-450 integrated amplifiers, Dynaudio Confidence C1 standmounted speakers, Homegrown Audio DNA and Accuphase interconnects, the Krautwire Fractal speaker cable and power leads from Vincent. I started with moody blues numbers so lights were dimmed... by the way have you ever considered the influence that lights do have on our listening experience?



Atmospherically speaking...

...*Ode to Billy Joe* is a living proof of music minimalism attached to a talent. The voice of Patricia Barber, the sound of fingers snapping and the bass of Michael Arnpol are the only ingredients necessary to make a seductive cocktail of moods and atmospheres (Patricia Barber, *Café Blue*, Premonition 66917 90760 27). The track provided a learning base to compare the L-590AX with the most serious challenger, the all brand new Accuphase's E-560.

With the equipment of such a grade a listener can enjoy the snaps of fingers being reflected by walls of a studio, mighty and enveloping sound of the bass and everything that you would expect from natural ambience. And this is the ambience that is much more spacious with the L-590AX than with the E-560. Not always the spaciousness is the good thing as some amplifiers tend to overdo it, with the L-590AX I was receiving more natural ambient clues, however. The L-590AX did the magic and completely erased the loudspeakers from my listening room so that with my eyes closed I was not able to identify their positions. Instead, I could identify the musicians within the three-dimensional soundstage and that was why (with the lights still dimmed) the listening turned out to be a be-there experience. As if the L-590AX could render also the cigarette smoke, heavy curtains and a worn out carpet, fingers dancing on strings and the ice, slowly melting in the last glass of whisky. The Accuphase

exhibited deeper bass extension that lent a tad more richness to the Arnopol's instrument. The Luxman stroke back with a tad better resolution and the already mentioned soundstaging capabilities – when combined these two traits add an extra thrill to the listening.

Well, I mentioned the simplicity and effectiveness of *Ode to Billy Joe* – then Suzanne Vega's *Tom's Dinner* from her groundbreaking *Solitude Standing* album (A&M CD 395 136 – 2) brings the simplicity to ultimate terms. It is the wonderful example of the fact that human voice is the most powerful of all instruments. Apart from that it is the only thing you need to test a component's capability to create an illusion of Suzanne in a listening room.

Through the Accuphase's E-560 the voice sounds very natural with sweet articulation and with precision that invites you to try and guess the distance of Suzanne's smacking lips from a microphone. However, the silence in between verses is what makes *Tom's Dinner* so special as it creates tension and anticipation what's coming next. On top of that, the silence also allows a listener to catch faint reflections of the sound from the studio's walls – some of them are almost subliminal in their nature and this is exactly what sets an excellent audio component apart from the standard one. I believe that the way a component handles *the silence* between notes reveals sometimes more than music.

The L-590AX' s background in *Tom's Dinner* does not show the pitch blackness of the Accuphase and comes with a livelier presentation. Therefore the voice of Suzanne Vega is more present and forward in the room and renders more believable appearance of the artist in front of my listening chair. Both ends of human voice's bandwidth are slightly rolled off to my ears which causes the sound to be very embracing and comfortable but also very intimate and 'just for you'.



Roughly speaking...

...I'll lay off female vocals to move to raspy voices. Tom Waits' *Goin' Out West* (Tom Waits, *Bone Machine*, Island, 512 580 – 2) can be a tricky track. It is underproduced in the typical 'waitsian' fashion and may seem to be made from rough ropes rather than fine fabric. If the resolution of an audio system is not sufficient a listener would end up with homogenous and

muddled sound that is difficult to untangle. Fortunately, the Luxman L-590AX never allowed this – the dirty drums and cymbals of the track retained their dirtiness yet they became rich in colors and the accompanying guitar, that sounds lumpy through most amplifiers, attained juiciness and drive. The L-590AX also poured extra energy into hardrocking guitars in *TNT* (AC/DC, *High Voltage*, Atlantic, 7567-92493-2). Still, you could track back the typical touch of elegance and smoothness with which L-590AX handled the highs of the track. As a result the album was very listenable (I'm talking about the remastered version that is surprisingly well done) and glowed with comfort and joy. Those who have ever experienced *High Voltage* on vinyl will especially rejoice – the Luxman somehow allows the analogue feel to shine through which is a very valuable feature considering the omnipresent loudness war and clipping.

Elegantly speaking...

...I cannot but praise the Japanese attitude towards tone controls. I have heard many times before that tone controls are something inappropriate for a high end amplifier. It seems, however, that when done right there is no harm to the delicate audio signal. I tried and repeatedly switched the Luxman's LINE STRAIGHT button on and off with no meaningful result. Quite opposite: I learnt that with sensitive hand I could really adapt a recording to my taste by either finely highlighting or rolling off treble or bass. Even when you turn the tone control knob rudely you will not receive that shock in tonal balance that we are used to receive with commercial amplifiers. The L-590AX's tone controls can be used to enhance listening experience and fine tune a particular recording to a listener's taste. Thus I did not object to cast extra light to both frequency ends of notoriously known *Ride Across The River* (Dire Straits, *Brothers In Arms*, Super Bit Mapping Remaster, Vertigo, 824 499-2) to better delineate the flute and rattles of the track and to increase the power of drums. By the way, it is not only the aural pleasure you would receive by turning the L-590AX's tone control knobs – they are so precisely machined that it is a worthwhile experience itself.

The Luxman L-590AX is superbly built no matter which observing angle you use. It is big and heavy (28kg) and its finish represents today's top standards. I suspect that most potential buyers will love especially yellow-lit VU meters (by the way available for download to your mobile phone) but it would be shame to miss really wonderful casework. Just check the hairline finish of the cover or knobs that are CNC-machined to utmost perfection. Should you pay hard earned money for a component you want it to be impeccable: the Luxman provides it in abundance and not only with their amplifiers – I challenge you to check the loading mechanisms of Luxman's SACD players for instance if you do not believe yet.

Resume

The market price of the L-590AX extends to €8,500. I do not think it is too much as a future owner will get a state of the art integrated amplifier with no reason to change it in next few years. He or she will have no choice anyway as there are no serious contenders. Adding extra €2,000 will buy you the Accuphase E-560, however, apart from its slightly deeper bottom end, you will not get much more. I should also add that the L-590AX includes a very good MM/MC phono preamplifier so one can save substantial money having such a all-in-one solution. If you still want to boost your listening experience you would have to invest into

separate Class-A components (a preamplifier and a power amp) – indeed, it is a way, but not in this price segment.

Time really flies with the Luxman L-590AX so if you are in a hurry do not try to listen to it as you may miss your appointment by sitting glued into your listening chair. I managed to listen to the L-590AX in the course of few weeks and therefore I could test also a crowd of loudspeakers and speaker cables with it (this group review is available in other section of our magazine). I can say that there were no single combination that would get the Luxman puzzled and this is also why I am pleased to grant the L-590AX our 100% Reference certificate that is only reserved for the best.

