



Charming Duo

For many hi-fi fans, the new retro looking Luxman tube-duo is guaranteed to be love at first sight. What about first listen? STEREO is testing whether the CL-38uC preamplifier and the MQ-88uC power amplifier will please nostalgics in particular or whether they can satisfy modern demands just as well.

Matthias Böde

No other Japanese large-scale producer has existed as long as the Luxman Corporation whose origins date back to 1925 and to the launch of broadcasting in the Land of the Rising Sun. Since then, the Osaka-based company has enriched hi-fi history with countless highlights. Hardly any other brand cultivates its tradition so lovingly and competently – also and especially under the umbrella of the „International Audio Group“ (IAG), of which Luxman has been a largely independent member since 2009.

A current example is the 2011 introduced CL-38u/MQ-88u tube pre-amplifier/amplifier combination, which has been thoroughly updated in comparison to its predecessors. Now, it is also available as a „C“(ustom)

version in the design of days gone by, based on Luxman's CL-35/MQ-60 amplifiers from 1970/'69. The power amplifier in particular perfectly resembles its famous ancestor. However, also the preamplifier with its beautifully „antiquated“ toggle switches, has been enclosed into a traditional wooden cabinet and is retro through and through.

Certainly, anyone who doesn't know their way around will think the duo is a vintage system in immaculate condition. Especially so, as the infrared sensor for the simply equipped remote control is hidden inconspicuously on the finely brushed, shimmering front panel of the preamplifier.

Phono with tubes & transformers

It has been an utter pleasure to fiddle around with the three-stage switchable tone controls, which can also be turned off entirely. Such features are very rarely to be found nowadays! The fact that the „mute“ button operates a modern relay remains unnoticed until you press it. There is a tape output with tape monitoring and a filter against subsonic interference, which tubes hate even more than transistors.

In addition to its five high-level inputs – one of which is a complex transformer-balanced, invertible XLR input – the Luxman-Pre also offers a tube-based phono MM/MC stage of excellent sound quality – at least when operated correctly. Those who prefer MMs should make sure that their output voltage is high enough, as the CL-38uC likes its phono stage to be fed rather generously.

Otherwise its colors turn somewhat pale and its vibrancy gets muffled. We therefore don't necessarily recommend high-output MCs. Ortofon's 2M Bronze, on the other hand, was a perfect match.

The performance turned even better when using a suitable MC. As if it weren't traditional enough already, the Luxman increases the tiny MC currents with two sets of transformers that aid the tubes. They thank the support with an improved noise and distortion behavior. On the front panel there is a toggle lever for „High“ or „Low“, which apparently indicates the termination resistance, as the amplification is higher in „Low“.

In „High“-mode, the playback was comparatively slim and less vibrant. This restrained character changes instantaneously when switching to „Low“. Now music from records had the punch and expression that the titles of the parallelly played CDs radiated. However, you should choose an MC that works with the „Low“ impedance due to its low internal resistance. The CL-38uC becomes a captivating vinyl expert with one of the „tested devices“ mentioned on the side.

Quality tubes from JJ

The eight employed double triode tubes (3xECC83S/ 5xECC82) come from the Slovakian quality supplier JJ and should easily last two decades, if not longer, in normal operation. Afterwards replacement is

The fixed and variable inputs of the power amplifier can be individually switched. There are separate terminals for four, eight and 16 ohm speakers.



THREE BUTTONS

The remote control supplied with the CL-38uC has only buttons for volume control and mute.



BEHIND BARS

The MQ-88uC comes out of the box with a grid that protects not only children's hands from the hot tubes and vice versa. If desired, it can be easily removed.



easy. Luxman uses the tubes in the phono, tone control and main amplification circuits in **SRPP** arrangement, which is intended to produce a particularly low output impedance through the serial connection of two tubes at a time – very important for controlling the following output stage. Luxman indicates a good 300 Ohm here. Our laboratory even measured a significantly lower 130 Ohm, which is close to spectacular for a tube pre.

The CL-38uC features two cinch outputs, which simplifies possible bi-amping, and it can of course control any type of power amplifier or active speaker. However, of course, it is predestined for the MQ-88uC, which also has two inputs to choose from. The „Direct“ input is intended for operation from a preamplifier. The input named „Variable“ is connected to a volume potentiometer. You can, therefore, connect the MQ-88uC directly to a high level source, like for example a CD player, and adjust the level on the device.

This worked perfectly in our experiments, but in terms of sound the performance was more airy, lively and spacious when the CL-38uC played the music, which is anything but unusual. A result of tube-typical influences? The excellently low distortion values of the Luxman-Pre (c.f. measurement

results) clearly contradicts this assumption.

The Japanese company emphasizes that the MQ-88uC is designed very close to the model MQ-60. Of course in the process of „C„ustomization, i.e. the adaptation to today's requirements and possibilities, the signal paths were shortened compared to the original. Modern metal-film high-voltage capacitors from Nichicon and other quality components offer a standard that was simply impossible 50 years ago.

Two triodes of type KT88 from JJ share the work per channel, each driven by a pair of ECC82/ECC83S from Mullard and delivering 25 watts of continuous power to four, eight or 16 ohms, for which individual taps are available on the rear of the MQ-88uC.

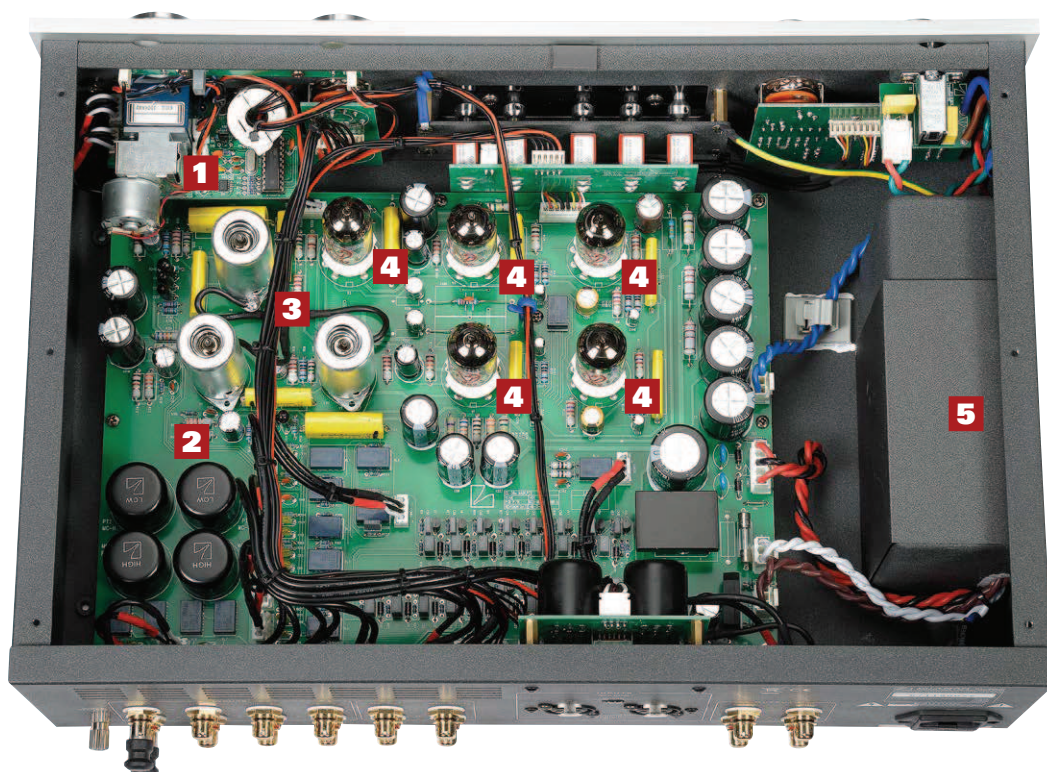
„Adapted“ Oldie

Of course, the MQ-88uC requires careful consideration when selecting a loudspeaker. Models with low efficiency and/or a nasty impedance curve should be immediately ruled out. Because they were already in position, we initially combined the tube amp with B&W's large 800D3, on which it played surprisingly relaxed. Nevertheless, they were not really a dream team, as the tubes simply aren't meant for continuously operating woofers the size of a frying pan.



NEW CABLE

Luxman launch their own cable series. We tried the made of high-purity 7N copper JPR-15000 (1.3m for 1000 Euro) between the tube duo, which is also available as an XLR-version at the same price. It performed great in terms of dynamics, even kept up with our top NFs in this respect, which was also due to the offered directness and immediacy.



The volume control in the preamplifier is done traditionally via a, here, motor-driven potentiometer **1**. In the Phono-MC stage, two pairs of transformers switchable from the front panel **2** raise the currents for the following tubes **3**, which are shielded against interference. The main amplifier consists of five double triodes of type ECC82 **4**. The mains transformer **5** is encapsulated to protect against interference.

Although it is only average in sensitivity, the combination with DALI's extremely good-natured Epicon6, for example, worked much better, as it has an impedance curve constantly around five ohms. On the Dali the MQ-88uC sparked a proper audiophile firework in conjunction with its Retro-Pre. Our tip: try the amp's eight-ohm also on normal four-ohm speakers. This can make it sound even more opulent and sovereign – don't worry it can't harm the power amplifier.

No somewhat enlightened hi-fi fan would still believe today that tubes have to sound cosy, round and mellow anyway. However, what this combination had to offer, even in lower frequency ranges, in form of tight accuracy, was apt to overturn even most stubborn worldviews. So it let, for example, Ray Brown's bass strings in „Exactly Like You“ snap with pure passion.

Musical Top

The hearing test turned out to be an absolute pleasure. The longer we listened to Luxman's old looking but very fresh sounding duo, the more we loved it. They created a large, perfectly staggered horizon, played with punch and radiated brilliance as well as momentum in all pitches. They could decorate the musical firmament with an abundance of hi-hats

but equally precisely outline instruments and built up a vividly differentiated bass relief.

However, other amplifiers in this price range succeed in doing the same. The really impressive thing about Luxman's tube combination is its fascinating „authenticity“. Whether Lyn Stanley or Allan Taylor: voices had a „personality“ about them as well as an aura that directly appealed to the listener. They more easily got under your skin and for this reason often enough directly touched our soul – more so than some transistor rivals. This led to musical presentations with tingling conciseness, musical understanding and depth.

The midrange was delicately accentuated, while violins and cellos appeared with their characteristic dry, wooden tone, revealing a diverse palette of nuances. In spite of the pronounced transparency and broad stage, the performance of the duo showed no signs of artificial brilliance or exaggerated orientation towards the front. Quite the contrary, its performances were distinctly natural and „untechnical“. Excellent!

Plug back into something else? What for? These with competence, love and perfection developed and produced amps make not only retrophiles happy. It is wonderful that they still exist – or rather again! ■

KEYWORD

SRPP

In „Shunt Regulated Push-Pull“ mode, the tube systems (in the double triodes used here, two systems operate inside the same glass bulb) are connected in series for the DC voltage, but in parallel for the AC voltage. The anode of the first tube, which serves as voltage source, is connected to the cathode of the following tubes.

THE RETRO-DUO AND ITS FAMILY

In spite of the excellent performance of this tube preamp/amplifier: the „Luxmen“ of course also have other hot amps. We were interested to see how the double from CL-38uC/MQ-88uC would perform against the LX-380 integrated amplifier, which also comes from the Japanese retro series (left). After all, there as well four KT-88 from JJ are employed and the 1900 Euro cheaper integrated even uses Luxman's progressive „LECUA“ volume control, while in the CL-38uC a conventional potentiometer adjusts the level.

However, in older days there was, of course, no LECUA, which makes the Retro-Pre seem more authentic, while, moreover, the LX-380's could not surpass the pre-/power amp combination. It is great, no question, sounds as homogeneous as lively, but the more expensive duo sounded clearer and even more vivid in the lower registers, developed the more expansive and „real“ three-dimensionality and provided more brilliant trebles. It also

succeeded in structuring the sound images a little better. It is, thus, absolutely worth the required surcharge.

Luxman's new top integrated amplifier

LX-509X is in every respect on a whole other level from the LX-380: the 30-kilo giant effortlessly provides impulse powers of up to 270 watts with minimal distortion from the power amp's transistors. At a price of 9990 Euro it costs even one thousand more than CL-38uC and MQ-88uC together. Nevertheless, it is absolutely not obvious that owners of the tube duo would gladly exchange it for the big integrated. On the contrary!

At high volumes, the power house – unsurprisingly – had the edge. However, tube listeners are usually connoisseurs for whom mere „power“ has a subordinate role. The transistor amp always played very smoothly, neutrally and pleasantly at „normal“ – but in no way hesitant – levels, while the tube double was more focused on charm and character. It thus not only seemed more real, but also brought the music's emotional aspects closer to the listener. In this area, the LX-509X's perfectionist noblesse seemed almost distant, gave less access to the music. An accomplishment that CL-38uC/MQ-88uC, on the other hand, succeeded in with casual ease, hence emphasizing its independence.

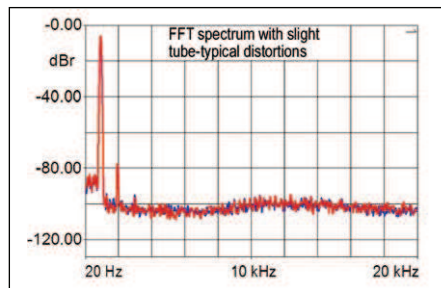


Luxman CL-38uC

Price: around 4290 €
Dimensions: 44 x17 x31 cm (WxHxD)
Warranty: 2 years
Contact: Luxman Corporation
 www.luxman.com


Not only due to its vintage look a picture book tube preamplifier, in which Luxman relies on traditional technology of the finest quality down to the MC-pre-transformers. First-grade sound: open, fast and of beguiling authenticity, especially in the mid-range.

Measurement results



Crosstalk Line 1 > Line 2	77 dB
Signal-to-noise ratio Phono MM (5 mV)	74 dB(A)
Signal-to-noise ratio Phono MC (0.5 mV)	72 dB(A)
Output resistance	130 Ohm
Maximum output voltage (1% THD)	22 V
Amplification factor from high level input	15.6 dB
Distortion factor at 0.03/0.3/1 V	0.03 %/0.005 %/0.007 %
Intermod. at 0.03/0.3/1 V	0.01 %/0.002 %/0.004 %
Signal-to-noise ratio at 0.3/0.03 V	86 dB(A)/66 dB(A)
Upper cut-off frequency	65 kHz
Volume control, synchronization error at -60 dB	0.2 dB
Stereo channel separation at 10kHz	66 dB
Power consumption Sby./Idle (at)	- W/28 W

Lab Comment

 If we didn't know this was a tube preamplifier, it would hardly be apparent from the measurements. Among these, extremely low distortions are coupled with high noise ratios, even in the phono-MC sector. Top!

Features

Five high level inputs, one of them in XLR; tape monitor; phono-MM/-MC input; tone control with selectable frequency edges; balance control; rumble filter; remote control

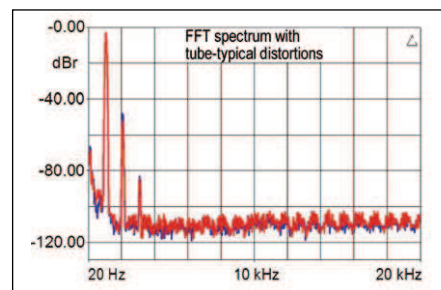
STEREO - TEST	
SOUND QUALITY PREAMP	87%
PRICE/PERFORMANCE	
★ ★ ★ ★ ☆	
EXCELLENT	

Luxman MQ-88uC

Price: around 4690 €
Dimensions: 44 x19 x24 cm (WxHxD)
Warranty: 2 years
Contact: Luxman Corporation
 www.luxman.com


Successful adaptation of the Luxman classic from the end of the sixties with carefully adapted optics and comprehensively optimized technology in a very clean, reliable design. Amazingly tight bass range and, moreover, lively, fresh and three-dimensional sound with a light tube touch,

Measurement results



Continuous power (8 Ohm / 4 Ohm)	22.5 W/23.3 W
Impulse power 4 Ohm (1kHz)	28.4 W
THD 50mW/5W/1dB Pmax	0.02 %/0.5 %/0.8 %
Interm. 50mW/5W/1dB Pmax	0.006 %/0.13 %/0.8 %
Signal-to-noise ratio at 50mW/ 5W	65 dB/86 dB
Upper cut-off frequency (-3dB/40hm)	25 kHz
Stereo channel separation at 10kHz	68.5 dB
Power consumption Sby./Idle (at)	- W/134 W/224 Volt

Lab Comment

 Sufficient power for efficient loudspeakers and everyday applications. The distortion remains pleasingly low in the normal power range. Good channel separation, high signal-to-noise ratio. Since the output stage already reaches its maximum level at an input voltage of just under 850 millivolts, it can be fully controlled with a standard CD player using its input level control.

Features

Switchable input level control; „Direct“ input for control via preamplifier; terminals for four, eight and 16 ohm loudspeakers; measuring contacts accessible from above for adjusting the tube voltage; removable protective grille

STEREO - TEST	
SOUND QUALITY	88%
PRICE/PERFORMANCE	
★ ★ ★ ★ ☆	
EXCELLENT	

TESTED DEVICES

Media player:
T+A MP3100HV

Turntables:
Transrotor Rondino nero with tonearms 5009 and 800-S

Cartridges:
MM: Audio-Technica VM760SLC, Clearaudio Maestro V2, Ortofon 2M Bronze
MC: Dynavector DV-20X2L, Hana ML, Ortofon Cadenza Red

Integrated amplifiers:
Luxman LX-380/ LX-509X

Pre/power amplifiers:
Accoustic Arts Tube PreampII-MK2/ AmpII-MK3, Octave HP300SE

Speakers:
B&W 800D3, DALI Epicon 6, Dynaudio Contour 20

Cables:
HMS Gran Finale Jubilee (NF/LS), In-Akustik NF-/LS-2404, Luxman JP-R (NF)w