Luxury Lifestyle

Classic Japanese valve brand Luxman is now making its name with high end pure Class A solid-state designs. Noel Keywood auditions the lavish new L-550A integrated...

When my lovely shiny, super modern looking Cambridge P50 blew up - as most did! - I ended up with a gold Luxman. It felt lovely and sounded good, more svelte if less vivid than the Cambridge. Now, some thirty years later, the Luxman L-550A in front of me looks little different from the humble budget model I once owned, in detail at least. Yet the L-550A reviewed here is in truth no ordinary Class B like mine of yore, or the L-505f we reviewed in our April 2006 issue. It is an altogether more ambitious and specialised design, offering pure Class A operation, a difficult technology to domesticate.

Class A transistor amplifiers don't produce the low level mush from crossover distortion that lurks in the background with Class B. They have a reputation for sounding clearer and cleaner as a result. Our favourite Sugden A21a is a classic example of pure Class A: it streams heat, but boy does it sound good: clean, clear and very composed in a way that few rivals can approach. Curiously, the Sugden, producing 18 Watts per channel, appears to be a rival for the considerably more expensive Lux that is also rated at 20 Watts per channel. But Lux's figures are bafflingly conservative: we measured no less than 78 Watts from this amplifier, which is in line with a hefty weight of 22kg and an equally hefty price tag of £2,800; I'd expect a little more from it than the Lux Corporation!

The large heatsinks of Class A amplifiers always run burning hot, but in the L-550A they are inaccessible, lying inside the casework. Large bottom and top vents allow the heat to escape, but the casework stays cool, even after hours of use. Lux have always made a user-friendly hi-fi product, packed with every facility. This amplifier has tone controls with a bypass switch, provision for two sets of loudspeakers with switching between them and off, a record source selector, headphone output, an unusual mode selector that offers the option of left channel through both left and right, right channel through both, mono and stereo. There is one phono input, switchable for Moving Magnet or Moving Coil on the front panel, where Lux also provide a switchable warp filter - always a useful facility as it suppresses loudspeaker cone flap from warped LPs.

Unlike amplifiers of yore this one has two pairs of XLR socketed balanced inputs in addition to normal phono socket unbalanced inputs. They are both line level, one for CD and the other for general purposes. Why use these inputs? They are for the connection of sources fitted with balanced outputs, using an XLR lead. This avoids hum loops and provides

cancellation of induced noise and some distortions. I regularly get sceptical letters about this from engineers who know that running via balanced connections can mean going through two extra chips, suggesting worse rather than better quality. In the Lux L-550A however, our Rohde & Schwarz UPL spectrum analyser showed there were small but clear improvements available through the balanced inputs, from 0.0055% to 0.002% distortion for example at 10kHz, so scepticism is best suspended, I suggest! There is no balanced output from the preamp section, but Lux do offer an external bridging link between pre and power amps through phono sockets, so you can set up an unbalanced output from the preamp.

The large front panel meters actually show output volts in dB terms, full output (25V) being marked as 0dB and -20dB (ten times less) on the scale being 2.5V. The meters proved quite accurate in their calibration.

Lux amplifiers have a distinctive feel about them. The switches have a soft, almost springy action about them, rather than the hard click of a strongly sprung detent. It's nice enough all the same. The rear loudspeaker sockets are screw type that accept bare wire or 4mm banana plugs. Lux provide a remote control too, which is nicely made and controls all the basic facilities.

A Lux amplifier is always nice to use and I enjoyed my time with the L-550A. Those big, illuminated meters look the business and usefully warn of approaching overload if you really push it. This alone makes them a useful tool, rather than an attractive electronic bauble.

SOUND QUALITY

I spent some time with the Lux before really getting a hold on what it was doing; this isn't an amplifier to coat music with honey; quite the reverse it is ruthlessly revealing and of a dry, almost sparse nature that seems initially ungenerous. What the Lux reminded me about was recording quality and what might really lie on the discs I was listening to; by looking deeply into recordings it did not always come up with the loveliest interpretation; more it was frankly and sometimes brutally revealing.

With a nicely assembled and recorded performance from the Stranglers in 'You Always Reap What You Sow' however, I was enormously impressed by the L-550A. Kick drum was firm and Jean Jaques Burnel's bass guitar had a quality and presence that struck me as more characterfully comprehensive and plausible than I am used to. This amplifier really fleshed out the timbral character of instruments, yet it didn't artificially enrich them.

Horns rasped out strongly from a clear background in 'Mayan Skies' and Jet Black's drum work was sharply outlined, each strike of the kick drum coming over with a sharp crack. Against other amplifiers this one is an analogue delight in that it teases out every last nuance of complex performances and lays it out with a vivid clarity that is starkly revealing. In doing so the L-550A comes over as unusually tight at low frequencies, likely as a result of its unusual negative damping factor. It was much more retentive than a Naim for example, which has a low positive damping factor, and I chose to use our fairly rich sounding Eastern Electric Minimax

CD player to achieve a balance: more on this later.

The telling drum strikes at the start of Steve Earle's 'Copperhead Road' underlined the extreme grip of the Lux and - interestingly - this was apparent with LP also. Paired with our Pioneer PLC-590 currently sporting an Ortofon Rondo Bronze moving coil cartridge in an Audio Origami PU7 tonearm, the L-550A was again ruthlessly revealing, coming across as fast paced and totally in control. 'She's My Man' thundered out from the Luxman, sounding faster than ever from the Scissor Sisters, who I suspect have their studio material speeded up! All the same, the amplifier's grip on pace coupled with vast revelation make it a jaw dropper with modern 45rpm vinyl like this.

With no one around, I put on a new 180gm vinyl of the Who and 'The Kids Are Alright', a song that brings quizzical stares from anyone not there at the time. This isn't the greatest of recordings: the question always is will I enjoy it? Through this amplifier the answer was a massive 'yes'. Moon's drumming was explosive and Daltrey's vocals as clear and convincing as I've ever heard them. Where other amplifiers tease little out of this old recording, the Lux brought everything out. The L-550A puts real life into vocals by revealing every little nuance, intonation and the full timbral signature, yet without warmth. 'Talkin' About A Revolution' went on as I wound the vinyl years on and again the Lux showed just what a supreme master it was at placing Tracey Chapman in the room, free from artifice. This amplifier constructs a tapestry of detail, one that's starkly presented but gripping. Here is Class A at its most vivid - and an utterly superb way of hearing what is on an LP, modern or from the past. This is an amplifier to silence those doubters of vinyl; it brings forth its glories without the slightest contrivance.

Finally I managed to secure a fully balanced CD player, an Audia Flight CD Two and this proved a whole step up for CD sound quality when connected with XLR leads to the L-550A's balanced CD inputs. Firmer and more forceful full left and right images than the Minimax via unbalanced inputs, it widened the sound stage considerably. The sound stage also fell back in terms of depth. Time domain events became particularly forceful: back to the Stranglers and both the strength and pace of Jet Black's drumming was superbly revealed in 'Was it You'. Sliding into 'You'll Always Reap What You Sow' and now instruments had a naked power and independence on the sound stage that is a rare occurrence. In my increasing experience of using balanced connections I find generally that there is usually a perceptible lessening of mush, better image focus and seemingly improved dynamics. This was very apparent with the pedal steel guitar that rang out from our Spendor S8e loudspeakers as the Stranglers track ended. The Lux's revealing nature capitalises upon the benefits of balanced connection to yield a breathtaking final result.

"Class A at its most vivid - a superb way of hearing what is on the disc..."

VERDICT ●●●●●

Powerful and revealing Class A sound allied to great build and useful facilities make this an extremely impressive amp.

LUXMAN L-550A £2,800
Select Audio
✆ +44(0)1900 813064
www.luxman.co.jp

FOR
- highly revealing
- balanced CD input
- fine phono stage

AGAINST
- dry bass
- stark presentation

CONCLUSION

The big Luxman is an expert's amplifier. More revealing and less flattering than most, it is challenging. But then this is Class A; Sugden's A21a isn't a shy performer either, it just has less power than the L-550A. If you want an amplifier that is almost frighteningly revealing and dramatic when partnered with top quality sources, this is it. I strongly recommend using a balanced CD player with it, and a high quality turntable combo, as then it can give a dramatic performance from silver disc and vinyl.

By managing to work successfully with both, and at the same time offer a wealth of facilities, this is a massively capable amplifier. Superbly honed, it is a top choice for those who are looking for the highest level of resolution from silver and vinyl discs.

MEASURED PERFORMANCE

Although a Class A design, which usually means limited power output, the L-550A produces a substantial 78 Watts into 8 Ohms and 114 Watts into 4 Ohms, so there's plenty of power available. Better still, it produces minimal distortion right across the audio band, and up to full power output where there is no sudden change of transfer characteristic that 'substantially Class A' amps show.

The balanced CD input gave even better results than the unbalanced phono socket input, with our analyser revealing that distortion fell to a minimal 0.002% when delivering 1 Watt output into 8 Ohms at 10kHz, contrasting with around 0.005% via unbalanced inputs - a revealing test. This is a low distortion design and should sound clean.

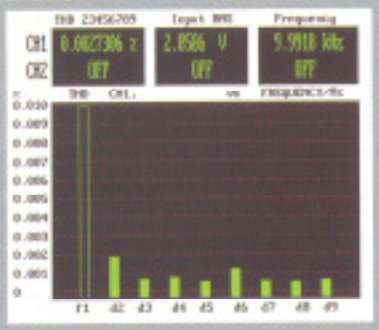
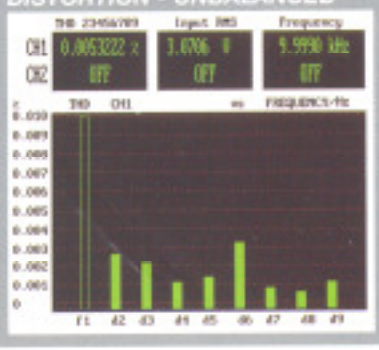
The amplifier has plenty of bandwidth via CD, and LP frequency response goes down to 8Hz on MC and 4Hz on MM, so Luxman wisely fit a front panel switchable warp filter. The MC stage is a little noisier than independent units, so it is best with higher output moving coil cartridges. With the ability to handle very low frequency signals and an unusual negative damping factor the L-550A will likely have a dry balance, combined with tight, deep bass.

All inputs, including balanced, were very sensitive, needing just 170mV for full output, so the volume control will be set fairly low most of the time.

The Luxman looks good under measurement, turning in an impressive set of results. It should give the classic clarity of Class A but with the added benefit of a healthy power output. NK

Power Output	**78watts**
CD/tuner/aux.	
Frequency response	1.5Hz-42kHz
Separation	66dB
Noise	-79dB
Distortion	0.002%
Sensitivity	170mV
d.c. offset	9/7mV
Damping factor	-46
Disc	
Frequency response	MM 4Hz-91kHz MC 8Hz-50kHz
Separation	65dB
Noise (MM/MC)	-64/66dB
Distortion	0.006%
Sensitivity (MM/MC)	2.7/0.3mV
Overload (MM/MC)	150/16mV

DISTORTION - BALANCED



DISTORTION - UNBALANCED