

SoundStage!
ULTRA
Sound to the Xtreme

LUXMAN L-509X

INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER

Written by Jeff Fritz

I begin forming strong opinions of an audio component at the unboxing stage. While some audiophiles will tell you that they pay only for sound quality, and that any black-anodized case will do, anyone in the real world of 2019 knows that high-end audio components costing close to five figures also need to look like luxury audio gear if they're going to succeed in the marketplace. Consumers pay enough money for this stuff — they want to have their cake and eat it, too. The Luxman ticks both boxes with bold pen strokes.



As I unpacked the Luxman L-509X integrated amplifier (\$9450 USD), I found myself instantly attached to it. It's retro in the way McIntosh Labs products are — output meters, tone controls, interesting casework that draws the eye — but it also has a precision feel that underscores its quality of assembly, parts, and industrial design. It makes you want to operate it not with the remote control, but up close and personal, the old-fashioned way: at its front panel, pushing buttons and twisting knobs.

INTRO

The L-509X measures 17.3"W x 7.6"H x 18.2"D and weighs a manageable 65 pounds — a single person can lift it onto a shelf, but it's heavy enough that those who do will feel they've bought something that has some guts. As you unpack it, you'll likely first notice its top — running from front to back on each side of the L-509X's thick, brushed-aluminum top plate are two rows of ventilation holes of two different sizes. Under these vents, a screen of metal mesh protects the circuitry from the world while allowing ample airflow to cool the interior.



Next your attention will be drawn to the front panel's two power-output meters, one per channel and calibrated in decibels, a thick pane of glass providing just the right amount of sheen to highlight the meters' brightly lit faces behind it. Just below the meters, under the same glass pane, is a row of small LEDs labeled Monitor, Subsonic, Mono, Stand By, Loudness, Line Straight, and Separate. Below the glass is a row of six knobs: Cartridge (MM, MC), Rec Out, Speakers (Off, A, B, A+B), Bass, Treble, Balance. To their left are a small Monitor button and a larger Operation button, the latter for toggling the L-509X from Stand By to On. To the right of the six knobs are two more small buttons: Line Straight bypasses the tone controls for a shorter signal path, and Separate lets the owner use only the L-509X's preamp or power-amp stage as an individual component. (The rear panel has corresponding Pre Out and Main In jacks.) And in the corner at lower right is a Phones jack. The L-509X's most prominent controls are the two big dials flanking the meters: Input Selector on the left, Volume Control on the right. Input Selector switches among four single-ended inputs (RCA), two balanced



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(XLR), and phono (RCA). The L-509X also has a Loudness contour, but that's accessible only with a button on the remote-control handset (included).

The rear of the L-509X is neatly organized. From left to right are: the Signal Ground post, the Phono inputs, Line inputs 1 through 4, Rec Out and Monitor, and Pre Out and Main In — all on RCA jacks. At far right are XLRs for the balanced Line-1 and Line-2 inputs. Running along the bottom of the rear panel are the four pairs of binding posts for Speakers A and B. The AC inlet is in the lower right corner.

As you've probably surmised, the L-509X is an entirely analog device, with no option for a built-in DAC. While this means that any system in which it's

used as a control center won't be quite as integrated as it would be with one of the many integrated amp-DACs now on the market, don't assume that the L-509X isn't rich in features. Its numerous adjustments make it possible to get the best sound from your recordings — and that's the point, right? The Bass and Treble tone controls operate within a range of $\pm 8\text{dB}$ at 100Hz and 10kHz, respectively, and the Loudness contour adds boosts of 7dB at 100Hz and 5dB at 10kHz — massagings of the frequency response whose value will depend on what recording is played and who's playing it. The Line Straight option is for those times when you want to hear the recording “flat,” as presented by the source to the Luxman's inputs.



The L-509X is accompanied by Luxman's RA-17A remote control, a nicely weighted, aluminum-clad model with which the user can adjust basic functions (volume, source selection, etc.), as well as Line Straight and Separate. Available *only* with the remote are switching between mono and stereo, turning the meters and their backlighting on and off, and Loudness.

Design highlights include an EI-core transformer, backed up by eight 10,000µF capacitors in the power supply. Luxman makes internal connections using their own oxygen-free copper (OFC) wire, and they use heavier-gauge OFC to connect the speaker output board. Signal routing is optimized with Luxman's Beeline construction, in which the audio signal takes the shortest possible route from input to speaker output. Luxman publishes many other details about the L-509X's circuitry on their website.

The L-509X is specified to output 120Wpc into 8 ohms or 220Wpc into

4 ohms — it should be able to drive all but the most power-hungry speakers, producing a claimed 0.06% distortion from 20Hz to 20kHz into 8 ohms. In a nice touch, the L-509X is shipped with its RCA and XLR input jacks protected with plastic caps, to prevent dust from entering any connectors left unused. The binding posts are plastic-shrouded metal jobs that accept spades or bare wire from directly above or below, but not at an angle, and are also compatible with banana plugs. The amp's four feet are cast iron, their bottoms covered with a layer of unspecified vibration-damping material.

For almost ten grand, you should expect superior build quality and attention to detail, and that's exactly what Luxman provides in the L-509X. The joins of my review sample were perfect, the metalwork luxurious, and I could tell that whoever assembled it took pride in their work. For instance, those little caps covering the input jacks — a small symbol is stamped on the end of each, and though the caps on the RCA jacks rotate freely through 360

degrees, whoever installed them made sure that all of these symbols were oriented in precisely the same direction. This sort of thing has no effect on sound quality or long-term value, but I'd bet that a similar obsession with detail was applied to the L-509X's interior construction. Someone — probably multiple someones — cared, and it shows.

In a world where, increasingly, we don't seem to get our money's worth in the things we buy, isn't it nice to see a company that sweats the details so that we'll feel good about our high-end audio purchase? Based on what I've seen in the L-509X, Luxman is one of those companies.

SETUP

I connected the Luxman L-509X to review samples of EgglestonWorks' Kiva loudspeakers with Siltech Explorer speaker cables, and to a Hegel Music Systems HD30 digital-to-analog converter with Siltech Explorer interconnects. I'd been using the Hegel's built-in volume

control with my Coda Model 11 stereo power amplifier, but of course the L-509X is an *integrated* amp — I switched the Hegel's volume control to its fixed-output position so that I could use the L-509X as Luxman intended. My primary source was my Apple MacBook Pro laptop running Roon and Qobuz, with an Oppo Digital BDP-103 universal BD player as a secondary.

IMPRESSIONS

In my years as an audio reviewer, some components have so challenged my powers of observation that I had a hard time finding defining characteristics of their sound to write about. That can be good or bad. Anyone who's been doing the audiophile thing long enough knows that some components appeal more to the head than to the heart, even as you have a hard time putting a finger — er, ear — on which attributes are causing that lack of love. Can a product's sound be uncolored, neutral, and



But despite the sound's transparency, it was still easier for me to focus on the music, and that would be a theme that continued throughout my listening. One thing was clear: Unless the recording demanded it, the midrange was never thin or see-through, but full and dense.



utterly transparent, but still not “sound” good? No matter how little sense that makes, experience audiophiles will tell you that, yes, you can respect a hi-fi component's sound, and even admit that it might be the most neutral thing you've ever heard — and still not want to listen to it.

The Luxman L-509X was not one of those products. In fact, this integrated amplifier first appealed to my heart. Right off the bat, even before I could describe its sound, I knew that the L-509X sounded *right* as it drove the EgglestonWorks Kivas. But to responsibly write this review, I then had to take a step back and, as objectively as possible, assess its sound. What I really wanted to do was just enjoy the tunes I was playing. Instead, I sat down in my chair and dove into *what* made the Luxman sound so good. *Why* did I like it so much?

The first characteristic I could put an ear on was the L-509X's gorgeous midrange. I listened to "Big Picture," from London Grammar's *Truth Is a Beautiful Thing* (24-bit/44.1kHz FLAC, Ministry of Sound/Qobuz), and considering what was emanating from the Kivas, the album's title was apt. Hannah Reid's voice was as pure as the driven snow. I could easily hear where in her range she seemed most

comfortable singing, and also where she seemed to reach too low. The Luxman was revealing enough for me to hear this, but it didn't spotlight anything to a degree that caused me to drill down into the sound without enjoying what I was hearing. The air around Reid's voice was also audibly revealed — it seemed real enough to inhale. But despite the sound's transparency, it was still easier for me

to focus on the music, and that would be a theme that continued throughout my listening. One thing was clear: Unless the recording demanded it, the midrange was never thin or see-through, but full and dense. I decided to move on to some instrumental music.

Listening to "Piano/Drum Episode," from Joe Lovano's *Trio Tapestry* (24/96 FLAC, ECM/Qobuz), I marveled at how



deeply I could hear into this music, such are the quality of the recording and the subtlety of the playing — and the transparency of the Luxman. I could easily differentiate the nuances in Carmen Castaldi's cymbal work, even as I reveled in the decay of each stroke. But there was no denying that, in this track, the day is carried by the beautiful tone of Marilyn Crispell's piano. The quality that came through above all others was the completeness of each note she plays, and the reverb

added to the recording, giving it a spacious, resonant sound. The Luxman L-509X walked that fine line between retrieving lots of detail — of which it was very capable — and reproducing the big picture as a consonant whole. It did not miss the music for the notes. In this sense, the Luxman wasn't unlike the big class-A amplifiers I've so adored through the years — it wasn't all about hyper-resolution at the expense of beauty. At the same time, it didn't gloss over sounds that make a recording such

as this the rare beauty it is. Speaking of which . . .

In the next track, "Rare Beauty," the power of Castaldi's drum intro in the first five seconds illustrated the Luxman's ability to kick it up a notch. I listened to this track several times, each time at a higher volume. The L-509X maintained its composure at every level, and its control of the Kivas' woofers never faltered. More important, the beautiful tone of the piano about 90 seconds



in also retained its quality. This told me a couple of things. First, the Luxman could deliver the power needed to get loud, at least with speakers like the Kivas. Second, it could do so without changing its character as it delivered more juice. And that character was the character of the music itself: The L-509X revealed the gestalt of the performance *and* its details.

Next up was jazz singer Melody Gardot's *Live in Europe* (24/48 FLAC, Decca/Qobuz). The sound of the strings of Gardot's acoustic guitar in "Over the Rainbow" was thick and rosy, and the reverberant space in which this performance was recorded was re-created in my room in full measure. The spatial qualities — the reverb, the crowd noise — make this a track you'll be able to really sink into if your amplifier can simultaneously reproduce well-controlled low frequencies and subtle highs. The Luxman passed with flying colors.

In the next track on this album, "(Monologue) Special Spot," Gardot describes how her amplifier died just before the performance, as she assesses the sound of her replacement amp. As Gardot ad-libs, affecting a British accent (she's a New Jersey native), and adjusts her amp, a man in the audience asks for "Less treble, more bass." The guitar sound was burnished and tonally full through the Luxman, while Gardot's voice was uncolored; the space around her was fully developed on an immense soundstage.

LISTENING THROUGH THE MONITOR AUDIO STUDIOS . . .

I'm still learning the full capabilities of my new listening space. My room is newly treated, and I'm using speakers — the EgglestonWorks Kivas — that, while they've been here a couple months now and I've grown pretty familiar with their sound, don't belong to me. I haven't listened to tons of components through them. And the Kivas have soft-dome tweeters — for



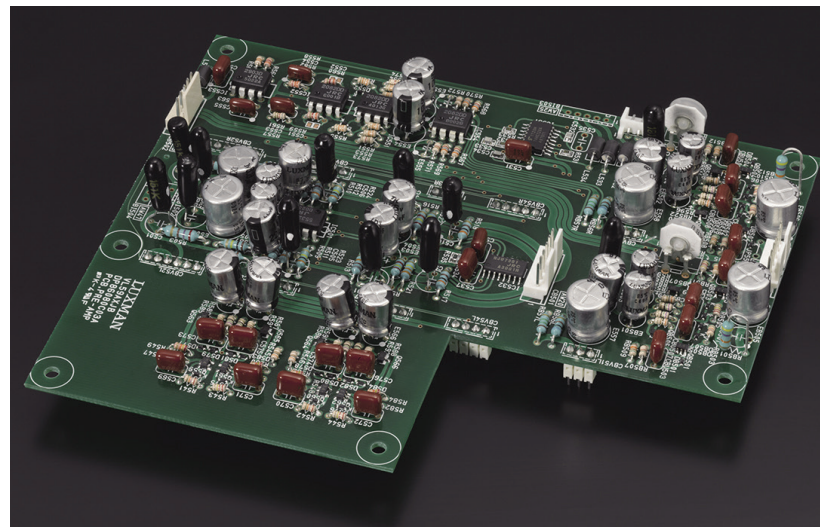
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The L-509X also admirably controlled the little Studios' woofers, producing healthy dollops of tight midbass that added some meat to the music's bones.

years, I've used only speakers with hard domes. So I decided to connect the Luxman to my Monitor Audio Studio stand-mounted speakers (\$1400/pair), to hear if its character would change when driving the Studios' MPD tweeters.

I cued up the same tracks I'd just listened to through the Kivas and had at it. Listening to Hannah Reid sing "Big Picture" was now a different experience. The lower part of her range was less accentuated than before, and the accompanying instruments were brought more to the fore. I entirely attribute this to the change in speakers — the Monitors have a brighter sound, and go less deep in the bass than the EgglestonWorks. What I do attribute to the Luxman was how it mated to the Studios' tweeters. Despite the increased energy in the highs and the decreased energy in the bass and lower midrange, the Monitors remained completely listenable, and I experienced nary a hint of listening fatigue — in fact, the Luxman encouraged me to raise the volume more than I usually do with the Studios. The L-509X also admirably controlled the little Studios' woofers, producing healthy dollops of tight midbass that added some meat to the music's bones.



MCINTOSH AND T+A

I've reviewed some of the most ambitious integrated amplifiers ever made, most recently the T+A Elektroakustik PA 3100 HV (\$23,500) and the McIntosh Laboratory MA9000 (\$10,000). The McIntosh includes a built-in DAC; the T+A is, like the Luxman, a straight integrated amp.

Like the Luxman, the McIntosh and T+A are built to incredibly high standards and have front-panel output meters. Each model is designed to act as the center of a high-end system, not as an afterthought in a bedroom system. They're serious components that demand to be compared to the best

separates. All three have many features and produce plenty enough power to drive most speakers. What differentiates them from each other are their sounds.

In my review of the McIntosh MA9000, I described its sound as “full, resolving, powerful, present” — the T+A PA 3100 HV had “tonal density,” while producing “vivid images on the soundstage” and controlling bass with sonic Vise-Grips. The Luxman didn’t sound as vivid as the T+A, but countered with a great listenability that I think would mate it to more speakers. Downstream from it, the T+A wants the best; the Luxman made the best of what I gave it. Depending on the associated equipment, either quality can be a strength.

The Luxman was closer in sound to the McIntosh MA9000, with differences. The Mac wore its power on its sleeve, never failing to sound in-the-moment and power-packed. The Luxman never failed to produce enough power for any situation I put it in, but was content to show its muscle only when it was called for. Call its sound a bit more relaxed.

Although it’s easy to say that any of these three integrateds would be the perfect choice for the right system, I think *your* choice — and keeping in mind the T+A’s high price — would come down to your personality and which *brand* fits you the best. Love the German precision of what’s sitting in your driveway? Get the T+A and relive that in your listening room. Want classic hi-fi looks and reputation with a muscular sound? Get the big McIntosh.

But if you get the Luxman, you’ll enjoy a number of attractive ualities: precision build; luxury appointments; classic integrated-amp features such as tone controls and big, turnable knobs; and a sound that doesn’t wow with pyrotechnics, but remains focused on the music and remains super listenable over the long term.

CONCLUSION

The Luxman L-509X is a beautiful component that produces eautiful sound. Sonically it does it all, in a way that doesn’t draw attention away from your favorite recordings; and in terms of user enjoyment, it will draw you right to it. Nor can I think of a commensurately priced combo of separate preamp and power amp that I’d prefer.

Which makes the L-509X a stunning bargain that should continue to satisfy you long after you forget what you paid for it — and that’s the best way to define the “value” of a high-end purchase. If I bought a L-509X, I can easily imagine glancing at it five or ten years later and finding that it still brought a smile to my face — very rare in high-end audio circa 2019.

... Jeff Fritz

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ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

SPEAKERS //

EgglestonWorks Kiva,
Monitor Audio Studio

AMPLIFIER //

Coda Model 11

SOURCES //

Hegel Music Systems HD30
digital-to-analog converter; Apple
MacBook Pro laptop running Mojave
10.14.2, Roon 1.6, Qobuz; Oppo
Digital BDP-103 universal BD player

CABLES //

Siltech Explorer interconnects,
speaker cables, power cords

LUXMAN L-509X INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER

Price //

\$9450 USD.

Warranty //

Five years parts and labor.

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