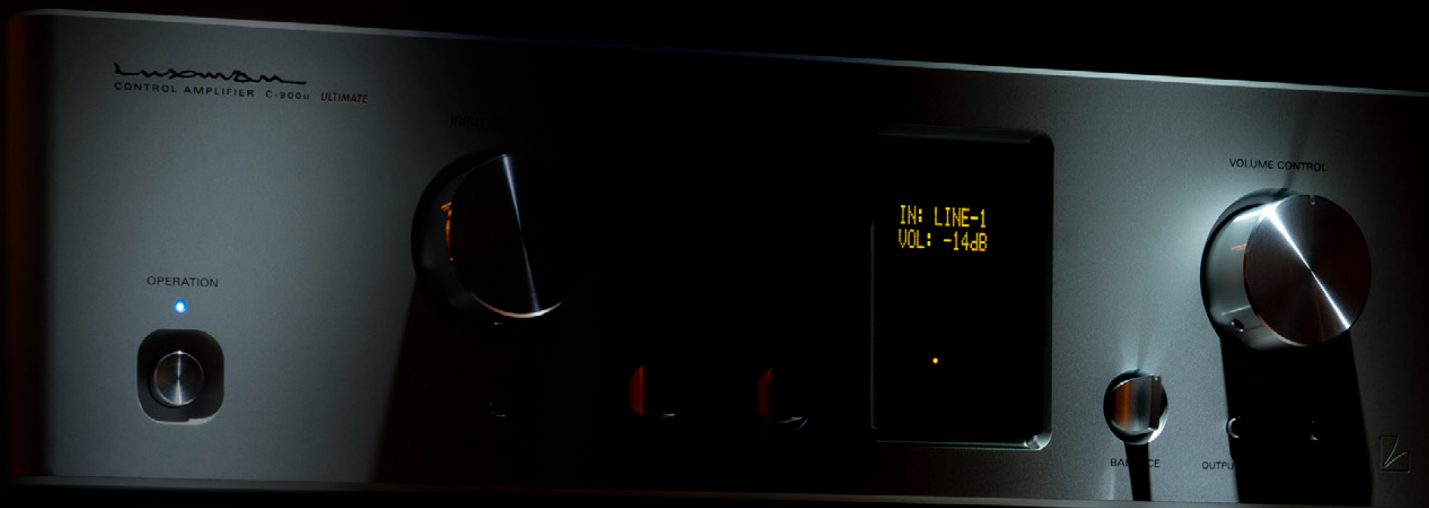




T O N E

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Luxmania!



COVER STORY

Luxman: Stunning separates

\$14,995 each

luxman.com

Look at them, right up there on the front panel, bass and treble controls. I know real audiophiles don't need tone controls (actually, you probably do) but the +/- 8 dB at 100 Hz and 10 kHz work incredibly well when you've got that recording that's ever so slightly bright, or thin, or... I don't know about you, but I've got more than my share of records that could use a little bump or cut. Switching them in and out at least a hundred times, I can't hear a sonic difference, but goosing the bass a tad on Deep Purple's *Made In Japan* rocks. "Smoke on the Water" never sounded better. Almost all of my Todd Rundgren albums sound flat and thin, but 1db of treble cut and 3db of boost on the bottom end makes it a lot easier for us to be friends. Weather Report's *Heavy Weather* needed some help too. Once you get used to this increased flexibility, you may never go back.

My favorite thing about Japanese culture is the attention they pay to even the most minute detail, and the way that things are always done in a purposeful manner. Those of you that are equally detail-oriented will love Luxman products - and their C-900u control amplifier and M-900u power amplifier (which can be used as a monoblock as well) are fantastic examples of this philosophy.

Much like Luxman's PD-717 turntable that we reviewed last year, just taking it out of the box is somewhat of a ritual. I've never unpacked components that have been put in their boxes with the level of care that Luxman components are packed - not even Apple products are at this level.

Tactile and functional excellence

Getting past the initial excitement of unboxing these components, the way they genuinely integrate into your system, into your life is what makes them so lovely. Around the back panel of the M-900u sits the most useable speaker binding posts ever made. Where a few other premium manufacturers use winged binding post knobs, these are knurled round items. The most massive cables you can think of will work effortlessly with the M-900u. However, you can't use banana





ends with these binding posts, only spades.

Where a few other manufacturers that do offer power output meters go big, and Nagra goes really small, the M-900u offers modest sized power output meters, tucked off to the left-hand side of the faceplate, gently lit and just big enough to see from the other side of the listening room. Thoughtfully, a switch is on the front panel to turn them off, but why would you want to?

As you move both pieces to your equipment rack, pay careful attention to the metalwork. The precision in the cuts of the ventilation vents, the openings for the power meters and the control knobs are exquisite. Only Boulder and Burmester produce casework with this fine of a finish, and they are both considerably more expensive than these two pieces from Luxman, which both have an MSRP of \$14,995.

The C-900u offers the same level of fit and finish, along with a high level of human engineering. In addition to the tone controls, the front panel has the input selector and volume control larger in size and more centrally located for ultimate convenience. Even the remote control is just right in terms of size, with nothing left to chance. All inputs have a volume trim and phase preset and can be adjusted via the remote.

Good as the casework is, the same level of detail is taken with the components used, from the 1250VA power transformer, all the way to the signal wire going to the speaker binding posts. Even the feet are machined and optimized for maximum vibration control.

Though the trend in front panel displays tends to be blue these days, the C-900u's fluorescent

that is very easy on the eyes. Again, it's a color you want to leave on when listening. An added benefit, Luxman offers a zoom mode, that makes it even easier to see volume level, no matter where you are in the listening environment. Finally, on the back panel of the C-900u, every single input and output jack is covered with a light grey cover bearing the Luxman logo.

Both components are fully balanced, with the M-900u offering XLR and RCA inputs, with the C-900u offering three inputs and two outputs, each having XLR and RCA options. There is also a set of RCA inputs labeled "external pre-in" to use in a theater setup. Onboard phono is not included, for that, you will need to use a phono stage of your choice or one of the offerings from Luxman. (hint, hint, their EQ-500 is on its way as you read this.)

Perfect synergy

Of course, the M-900u and the C-900u work perfectly together, as you would expect from any manufacturer. Should your Luxman experience not start with both amplifier and preamplifier, rest assured that both separates should work equally well with whatever else you have in your system right now. You can get the complete specs for input and output impedance here, on the Luxman website.

Suffice to say, we matched the C-900u with power amplifiers from Pass Labs, McIntosh, Audio Research, Conrad-Johnson, Nagra, BAT, and PrimaLuna - balanced and unbalanced, all worked perfectly together. The converse goes for the M-900u - trying it with about eight different preamplifiers, all yielded great results.

The sound

Both of these components sounded dynamic and alive right out of the box, opening up only slightly after being powered up for 48 hours, and not really changing much more with weeks of play. The last generation of Luxman flagship power amplifiers were full class-A, the current M-900u is now a class AB amplifier, but it offers more power than the model it replaces, producing 150 watts per channel into 8 ohms, and able to generate 1200 watts per channel into a 1-ohm load.

We were not able to verify this, but my vintage Magnepan Tympani IV speakers go down to about 3 ohms and are incredibly power hungry. The M-900u was able to play these problematic speakers to room-filling volume without issue, and without generating extreme heat either. Though the Quad 2812s are not terribly power hungry, they tend to give a more expansive performance with amplifiers that can deliver a lot of current, and present a somewhat capacitive load. Again, the M-900u sails through this torture test.

Where the past generation of Luxman Class-A monoblocks had a slightly warmer presentation, more like that of their 590 series integrated amplifiers, the M-900u/C-900u is more neutral in tonal value, with perhaps just a slight touch of warmth. All but those having incredibly forward sounding speakers or a room with an excess of high-frequency energy will feel right at home with these two components. Because of this voicing, they blend into the background, putting you right into the musical performance and serve the music - as it should be.

In my primary system with the mighty Focal Stella Utopia EM's and the Quad 2812 speakers



(with six pack of REL no.25 subwoofers - review in the works) the sound field generated is enormous in all three dimensions. Playing bass heavy tracks reveals power, control, and texture, and when listening to acoustic instruments, not only is the timbral information rendered accurately, the spatial information is as well. Nothing is bombastic, violins sound like violins, not six-foot tall violins.

Going all the way back to George Winston's December, on vinyl, his piano comes forward with the necessary amount of sheer acceleration to convince your brain that you are really listening to a piano (again, kudos to the Focal's for some help here) and the decay is breathtaking. This is what world class components offer, and that this level of fidelity is available at the price point of these two components is out of this world good.

Close to the edge

The Luxman pair does not lose composure when pushing the level meters to full output, and a little beyond. Even when listening to very dynamic rock and classical pieces at a reasonably high level, it was impossible to achieve clipping on anything but the Magnepans - and then it was not harsh, more of a flattening. On most speakers, your ears will relent in pain (or at least a little buzzing) before you push the M-900u too far. For those of you that need still more, a simple flip of a switch turns them

into monoblocks, capable of delivering twice as much power, with up to 2400 watts per channel available at 1 ohm.

Luxman mentions new gain stages that utilize a minimal negative feedback (they call it ODNF version 4.0) and the improved, LECUA 1000 attenuator circuit, that offers adjustment from 0db to 87 dB in single dB steps. It all works together to provide a neutral, yet airy rendition that is resolving enough to be engaging and smooth enough to be fatigue-free - a tough balance to achieve, especially for solid-state components. It has to be said that Luxman is one of the masters of the genre, no doubt depending on the same engineers that voice their tube components.

Understated value

While \$30,000 is not a pittance by any stretch of the imagination, in the greater context of what is available at the top of today's audio market, I consider both of these Luxman components an Exceptional Value, worthy of our award, but the pair together is even more. Taking into account the obvious synergy and similar voicing, this is an amplifier and preamplifier that is a solid "end of the audio journey." Thanks to the ability to turn the M-900u into a monoblock and expand the sound you love, should your taste in speakers change solidifies this even more.

Well done, Luxman.



The Luxman M-900u and C-900u

Peripherals

Analog source

Grand Prix Audio Monaco/Tri
Planar, Koetsu Jade Platinum,
Luxman PD-717/Kiseki Purple
Heart

Phono stage

Pass Labs XS Phono

Digital source

dCS Vivaldi One

Speakers

Focal Stella Utopia EM

Cable

Cardas Clear,
Tellurium Q Statement

