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LISTENING BY ART DUDLEY

THIS ISSUE: From a time before man buns, beard oil, and spray-on tans comes the Luxman CL-1000 preamplifier. Art Dudley takes one for a spin.

Luxury you can (almost, sort of) afford

It may come as no surprise that the two Recommended Components issues we publish every year, in April and October, are *Stereophile's* most popular. Both go hand-in-hand with increases in single-copy sales and subscription requests, and it's worth noting that equipment and record suppliers line up to get their ads into those issues.

I'm glad our Recommended Components issues make people happy, because they're a pig-faced, needle-toothed, Bosch-ian hell of a miserable job to produce. As I write this, it's one day after the April 2020 *Stereophile* went to the printers, and I scarcely know my own name. Jim Austin and I work even longer hours than usual during January and July—the months when we're writing and editing product blurbs, tabulating ratings, chasing down updated information from manufacturers,¹ putting all the categories and blurbs in order, and proofreading the whole damn thing—and when it's all done, I always look back with fondness on the summers I spent driving a dump truck and working as a busboy.

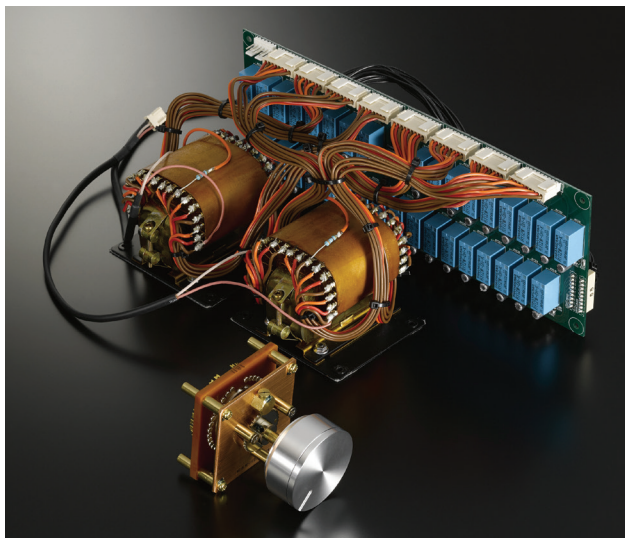
But the post-RC wrap party, which isn't a party at all but is actually eight hours of sleep followed by one day of summarily deleting all incoming emails and phone messages, is also a time for taking a second look at the reviews we've published over the past six months and looking for trends in our equipment coverage. And this time out, the first thing that jumped out at me was how very few preamplifiers we reviewed in the months since our last Recommended Components feature. In fact, there was precisely one: the Dan D'Agostino Momentum HD (\$40,000). Heck, during the same period of time we reviewed more *tonearms* than that.



So I'm happy to start my next work cycle by reviewing not just a preamplifier but a *preamplifier*—a big, heavy, wood-wrapped, multifunction beast of a thing. The Luxman CL-1000 (\$19,995) is that company's new

flagship preamp, heir to the throne once occupied by the classic 1970s-era Luxman C-1000. The CL-1000 uses vacuum tubes for voltage gain, and its volume and source-selection knobs are supplemented with a brace of controls that include a balance knob, a mono switch, a phase-inversion switch, bass and treble controls, and a demagnetizer. *A demagnetizer, for God's sake.*

But let's back up to that volume knob, which itself deserves more than passing attention. For the CL-1000, the manufacturer has chosen what they refer to as a LE-CUTA: a Luxman Electronically Controlled Ultimate Transformer Attenuator. The 34-step rotary switch behind the CL-1000's volume knob selects from 34 relays, all outside of the signal path, which



¹ Thanks are due to Laura Atkinson, who comes by every January and July to help us with this task.

in turn select from 34 taps on matching left- and right-channel transformers, which have Hitachi FineMet cores, the nanocrystal structure of which is said to allow high saturation levels, high permeability, and low core loss.

Transformers are also key ingredients in the preamp's first line-level stage, which uses high-permeability Permalloy-core transformers for buffering and, I believe, some amount of voltage gain. Between those and the preamp's output transformers, which are used to lower the unit's output impedance—I think we've homed in on the reason for the CL-1000's 54lb weight—are a total of six E88CC dual-triode tubes from JJ Electronic. But the CL-1000 is not all-

tube: The phono stage uses field-effect transistors and an op-amp, and all power-supply rectification and regulation is accomplished with solid-state devices.

The CL-1000 is the antithesis of a bare-bones, "purist" preamplifier. Not only are there Bass and Treble tone-control knobs, but each is governed by its own three-position rotary switch, to select the frequency ranges over which they function. There's a Low Cut switch (aka "rumble filter") that applies a 6dB/octave slope with a hinge at 30Hz. A rotary switch selects between Unbalanced and Balanced outputs, and separate toggles allow the user to invert signal polarity within those two settings. A Line Straight switch allows the audio purist to bypass altogether

Rear panel rotary switches control phono gain, impedance, and capacitance.



the tone-control stage—as well as the Balance knob—for the least (presumed) signal degradation.

The fun continues around back, where the Luxman's single pair of phono inputs—curiously not labeled Phono but rather Ext In—is governed by two six-position rotary switches. The first of these offers three settings for moving-magnet cartridges and three for moving-coil types, providing different combinations of input impedance and gain, the latter with a range of 38 to 66dB. The second rotary switch, geared toward the MM enthusiast, allows the user to select between six different settings of phono-input capacitance. Also provided on the rear

panel are four line-level inputs—three single-ended (RCA) and one balanced (XLR)—plus two single-ended (RCA) and two balanced (XLR) output jacks. Among the Luxman CL-1000's other features is an "articulator" function. This is essentially an oscillator that demagnetizes the preamp's many transformers every time the unit is powered up—a luxury not unlike having a dog that walks itself at least once a day. There is also an Articulator switch for users who want to supplement that regimen with occasional manual demagnetization. Cast-iron isolation feet, a walnut "wrap" with a glossy red finish, and rubber circuit board dampers are also included.



A look inside the Luxman CL-1000.

One of the best things about the Luxman preamp is something it *doesn't*

have: a remote handset. I detest those things. Every time a review sample arrives with a remote handset, I feel like going for a drive and throwing it out the window the way Americans used to do with their lunch bags and soda cups before the TV commercial with the crying Indian. Caveat venditor.

What really completes the picture for me is something that Luxman has been adding to their products for as long as I can remember: an owner's manual that suggests a manufacturer who gives a shit about the customer and who realizes that anyone who spends this much money on a single audio product might be presumed to have more than a passing interest in how the thing works. To that end, the

CL-1000 manual, like every other Luxman manual I've ever seen, includes a block diagram: not a schematic that might show enough details to give away the store, so to speak, but a simplified if technically savvy diagram that outlines the designer's basic vision for the thing. Nice.

Getting started

After hoisting the CL-1000 atop my Box Furniture equipment rack—the preamp's 17.9" deep chassis, not including jacks, barely fit—I warmed it up by playing a few LPs and CDs. For the former I preceded the CL-1000 with my Hommage T2 step-up transformer, driving the Lux's MM phono input set for 50k ohms/38dB and 100pF; for the latter I used my Hegel Mohican CD player into one of the Lux's line inputs.

I came to the early conclusion that, with line-level inputs, there were more similarities than differences between the Lux's tonal character and that of my reference Shindo Monbrison preamp, but that their phono sections sounded very different. In a nutshell, and speaking off the cuff—these are pseudo-technical impressions made without technical evidence—the Shindo's phono equalization sounded less accurate than the Lux's, with a low-frequency boost in particular: It sounded more exciting on double bass, orchestral drums, and the lowest notes on the piano. The Lux, for its part, appeared to have flatter frequency response and sounded altogether more serene, if you will—but along with that was also a sense that the Luxman's audible range was a bit more spread out, from bass to treble, in contrast with the Shindo, where my attention was more drawn to those bassier sounds. The Shindo sounded more exciting and engrossing on most LPs, but a bit over-rich on a few; the Luxman, for its part, approached but didn't quite match the Shindo's level of excitement on the best LPs, but neither was it ever less than listenable—in addition to which, the Lux was more explicit, in a very pleasant and nonfatiguing way.



The CL-1000's very unusual but no doubt useful Articulator switch.

As for that last quality in particular: I can't imagine how long it took Sir John Barbirolli to work with the musicians of the Philharmonia to achieve the nuances of tempo and dynamics evident in his 1963 recording of Elgar's *Enigma Variations* (LP, EMI ASD 548). However they were accomplished, the Luxman laid them bare, to an extent that escapes even the Monbrison. Listening to this record through the CL-1000 was a spellbinding, wholly engrossing experience: The house could have come down around me and I might not have noticed. Indeed, while listening to that LP—as with Barbirolli's famous recording of the Elgar Cello Concerto, with Jacqueline DuPre (LP, EMI ASD 655), there is no reason to own another version—I found myself *inhabiting* the recording to such an extent that it seemed almost possible to imagine the players' individual performing styles. That was especially true in Variation 7 ("Troyte"), the very brief Variation 8 ("W.N."), and the famous Variation 9 ("Nimrod"), in which the majesty of the music—not to mention Sir John's uncanny ability to coax from his colleagues/players just the right *shapes*—was almost overwhelmingly beautiful. And I would be remiss not to mention the Lux's spatial prowess in that last passage, as the sizes and sheer physicalities of the various string sections successively grew and receded in response to the crescendi/diminuendi.

In a very different vein, The Move's brilliant *Message from the Country* (LP, EMI/Harvest SHSP 4013) is one of those wonderful, God-blessed

releases where a recording company appears to have allowed a few very young, technically green performers to come into their studios and essentially muck about—and the results, although technically/sonically uneven, are brilliant. But key to those results is a production in which some sounds—the vocal in "Ben Crawley Steel Company," the electric bass in "The Minister," and so forth—sound almost frighteningly direct and unadulterated and *there*. Those sounds emerged from the Luxman with colors, flying

and otherwise.

After all that I went in yet another completely different direction and spent an evening listening to some of my favorite bluegrass records. Doc and Merle Watson's 1978 album *Look Away!* (LP, United Artists UA-LA887-H), which is not terribly well-produced—the metronomically unnuanced electric bass playing of the otherwise estimable T. Michael Coleman is way too high in the mix—was more listenable through the Lux than my Shindo. On Tut Taylor's *Dobro Country* (LP, World-Pacific 1829), the brilliantly quirky timing of flatpicking guitarist Clarence White came across with exceptional clarity, physicality, and drive. Perhaps best of all was the album *Skaggs & Rice*, by Ricky Skaggs and Tony Rice (LP, Sugar Hill SH-3711), which sounded amazing through the Luxman.² This is a blessedly simple recording of two artists, singing and playing—acoustic guitar for Rice, mandolin and acoustic guitar for Skaggs—made without overdubs. And here, those sounds were just about perfect, in their lifelike tone as well as their uncanny spatial presence. The music had flow and, where appropriate, drive, and the rapport between the two musicians, as well as their enthusiasm for the program of old country and bluegrass standards, was unmistakable.

Speaking of hot guitar playing, my XRC of the 1973 album *Virtuoso*, by Joe Pass (CD, Pablo/JVC VICJ-60256)—which as far as I know was

² While listening to this album, I was reminded that audiophile Tony Rice himself listens through an old-style full-feature preamp—in his case, a Marantz 7T.

the first-ever *pop*-music album of just solo guitar pieces³—has never sounded better than it did through the Lux. It was easier than ever to hear and appreciate various elements of Pass's technique, such as his frequent use of alternating up and down strokes in playing arpeggios—that in contrast to the guitarist who most inspired him, Django Reinhardt, who relied mostly on downstrokes, in a quick raking motion across the strings—and his infrequent use of hammer-ons. And the tone of his big, hollow-bodied Gibson electric guitar was perfect, especially the rich but still crystal-clear sound of his lowest bass notes.

The last record I played before putting my Shindo Monbrison back in place of the Lux was the Universal Music reissue of Nick Drake's *Pink Moon* (LP, UMe/Island 1745697). First through one preamp and then the other, I played the album's last song, "From the Morning," and heard a couple of distinctions between the two. Strangely, through the Shindo, the image of Drake's voice on this stereo record physically overlapped the image of his fingerpicked acoustic guitar, whereas, through the Lux, there was a slight side-by-side separation between them, albeit not one of tremendous apparent width. Yet through the CL-1000, the lower of the two alternating bass notes that predominate during most of each verse wasn't as strong as through the Shindo, and the alternating pattern itself seemed less purposeful.

As for the sonic contributions (or not) of the Lux's various controls: As I noted above, the CL-1000's Line Straight switch is, in a manner of speaking, the doorway through which the listener must pass before availing him- or herself of any of the preamp's other luxury features. So I tried to get a sense of how its use affects the sound and in so doing discovered that the switch works by means of a less-than-lightning-fast relay—thus there's a second or two of silence between having the tone controls/etc. switched in and out of the circuitry. That made instantaneous comparisons a bit clumsy but not im-

possible. And as I came to realize in the days that followed, there are relays, and thus delays, in the functioning of other toggle-switched features, such as the mono and phase-inversion functions.

Anyway, yes: I soon came to realize that the Line Straight switch is there for a good reason. The sound of the

that the Luxman CL-1000 has only one stereo phono input; especially for this kind of money, that seems a glaring omission. Second, I wish this beautiful, traditionally styled preamp's wood wrap were available in a traditional walnut finish; to my eye, the red tint is rather too . . . well, *red*.

One more brief note before I close: During the past year, I heard someone in the industry suggest that Luxman's products are no longer made by Luxman and are in fact produced overseas—so I did what that person should have done and *asked*. According to Jeff Sigmund, the head of Luxman USA, all of the company's products are at the very least assembled in Japan, and the vast majority of them, including the CL-1000, are manufactured in Japan, at the Luxman factory, in their entirety. Which stands to reason: During the 20th century, Japanese industry distinguished itself for mastering the art of selling to Americans that which we already know and love yet have forgotten, and offering it back to us—only *better*.

One may regard the Luxman CL-1000 as part of that tradition—or one may sidestep the history and regard the Lux as simply a hell of a good product, at a high but not unreasonable price. Either way, it's a hell of a thing, and I loved every minute with it. ■

3 I welcome correction on this point.



Luxman CL-1000 with its various functions engaged is still good—but not *as* good. I could describe the distinction in audiophile terms by telling you that to kill the Line Straight function is to leach out some of the sonic color, to blunt the physicality and presence of sound images, and to make the sound as a whole a little grainier, quieter, and more distant than before. Or I could tell you the first thing that entered my mind when I first tried defeating the Line Straight function: that the sound with those extra functions out of the circuit was like having real sugar in my coffee, and the sound with those functions enabled was like a sugar substitute: flavors were a little more distant and chemically, and not as real. Take your pick.

Wrapping up

Regrets? I can think of only two. First, as someone who dearly misses the switchable twin phono inputs of my old Shindo Masseto preamp, I regret

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