

*Luxman L-590AXII Integrated Amplifier*



# 2 X 30 W OF PURE CLASS A JAPANESE HIGH-FIDELITY AUDIO

» By **GEORGES POULIN**

Practically fallen into oblivion in the late 1980's following a series of bad trade decisions, the Japanese company **Luxman** gradually raised from its ashes some twenty years later, after an essential and necessary re-focussing on its traditional clientele: music lovers and audiophiles looking for a no compromise sound and solid construction.

## **First Love**

It's been so long. It was at the end of my adolescence towards the end of the 1970's I think. Somewhat thunderstruck, my audiophile life began, my search for beautiful sound. I already loved music passionately, and I occasionally attended **Orchestre**

**Symphonique du Québec** concerts in Québec City. I was still unaware however, that a good audio system could also take you to 7th Heaven.

And then one day, the owner of an audio shop in Québec City made me listen to a small **Luxman** integrated amplifier with about fifteen watts of output power. It was a revelation to me. And when I got out of the shop, I was well determined to one day purchase my very own **Luxman** integrated amplifier.

**Luxman** was greatly respected back then by audiophiles who particularly reveled in their famous tube-powered amplifiers.

But then, the brand was going to know very dark days. **Alpine Electronics**, which acquired **Luxman** in 1984, leveraged the brand in a market share war against its Japanese rival **Yamaha**. The quality of the products declined and they were found even

in the big-box stores. At the same time, we see a steady decline in the presence of **Luxman** in specialty shops, which were not interested in carrying products found in large distribution chains, and the brand disappears almost completely from the North American European markets in the late 1980's. Then, the Korean electronics manufacturer **Samsung** acquired it in the mid 1990's, and resold it to private interests in 2000. Finally, in 2009, **Luxman** came into the hands of **International Audio Group** (distributors of **Wharfedale**, **Quad**, **Audiolab**, **Mission** and **Castle**). It was from that moment on, that the rebirth began.

Helpless witness of the ups and downs of the brand, I had finally believed that my dream would never come true. So then, the first pictures of the next generation of **Luxman** products revived the hope in me. But the products were not going to be available in North America for some time, while **Luxman** partnered with a well-established and recognized distributor. In the meantime, it was necessary to go through the grey market (grey market, – components sold by individuals or small businesses usually based in Japan or Asia, without warranty, and not designed for our voltage) in order to purchase their products – a fairly risky choice.

No specialized audio shop in the province of Québec offered **Luxman** yet, but once the distributor for the North American market was known, **Franco**, the publisher of **mag@zine TED** and I contacted them to see if they would be willing to lend us one of their new integrated amplifiers for a product review. Positive response. A few days later, I received a copy of the *L-509u*, which sat at the top of the **Luxman** integrated amplifier family. At that moment, I had the impression of seeing my first love reappear in my life.

The 2 x 120 W integrated amplifier proudly displayed the new signature look of the brand's integrated amplifiers: a faceplate with a completely assumed retro look, at the centre of which were two imposing VU meters that brought us straight back to the golden years of High Fidelity.

The *L-509u* product review appeared in the August-September 2010 edition of **mag@zine TED**. Already, some reviewers had come forward claiming that *L-509u* was one of the best integrated amplifiers in the world. From my own experience, I was conquered by the highly addictive sound of this component, by its impeccable quality of construction, and by its aesthetic that made every traditionalist fiber in me vibrate. Once the product review was finished, I bought the amplifier, thus realising this dream that I had had a good thirty years earlier. It's still at the heart of my audio system today, and I doubt it will ever come out.

And then, just before the 2018 **Salon Audio Montreal** (**Montreal Audio Fest** as known in English), **Franco** asks me if I could write an article on one of the new **Luxman** integrated amplifiers which, incidentally, was represented at the show. And so, I found myself a few days later, with the *L-590AXII*, an integrated amplifier boasting 2 x 30 Watts operating in pure Class A.

## Presentation

If **Luxman**'s current product lineup is not yet well known to us, it is certainly not because the product offerings are fragmented or incomplete. **Luxman** offers four digital players (CD/SACD), including the *D-380* equipped with a tube output stage; a vinyl turntable (*PD-171A*, and its *PD-191AL* version delivered without a tonearm); the *C-700u* and *C-900u* preamplifiers accompanying the *M-200*, *M700u* and *M900u* power amplifiers; three digital-to-analog converters; the *P-750u* headphone amplifier; two phono amplifiers, and even **Luxman Audio Player** software for Windows. Finally, and this is what interests us today, no less than five different integrated amplifier models.

The **Luxman L590AX Mark II** (or *L-590AXII*) is presented as an improved version (25 % more powerful transformer, higher damping factor) of its predecessor, the *L-590AX*.

Even if, at the outset, my *L-509u* and the *L-590AXII* are very similar, the attentive eye will immediately notice that the new amplifier is slightly narrower, higher and deeper. Personally, I think that this new slightly more compact look – fits it very well, even if, in fact, this component is far from compact: it is rather impressive, thank you. The *L-590AXII* is 440 mm wide, 193 mm high and 463 mm deep. As it tips the scales at 28.4 kg (nearly 63 pounds), ideally it would be necessary to have two people to carry it. A first physical contact leaves no doubt about the seriousness of the construction. This amplifier is heavy and massive, and seems built like a tank – a qualifier often used to qualify high-end Japanese components, especially those of **Luxman** and **Accuphase** – the natural competitor of **Luxman** in the Land of the Rising Sun.

## Front and Rear

The Japanese are fond of VU meters, and all of the **Luxman** integrated amplifiers have them. Even the large power amplifiers (*M-700u* and *M-900u*), which have a more contemporary look, are now equipped with VU meters. The **Luxman** integrated amplifiers also feature tone controls, as well as large circular source selector and volume control knobs that were prominent in the past.

The power button is located at the bottom left of the faceplate. Just above it, is a very high quality source selector switch knob of good dimensions. The volume control, located on the right side, incorporates the **LECUA 1000** (**Luxman Electronically Controlled Ultimate Attenuator**) technology borrowed from the *C-900u* reference preamp.

(Despite the undeniable quality of these controls, I admit to having a preference for the selector and volume control knobs of my *L-509u*, which give an impression of even superior quality, – the kind of typical Japanese madness that we will probably not ever see again. However, the new amplifiers come with a remote control, which the *L-509u* controls did not allow.)

Just below the volume control is the headphone jack. The two VU meters with their yellow lighting are located in the middle of



the faceplate; just below them, you see the phono input selector (MM & MC) and tone controls (bass, treble, balance).

One can find it paradoxical that a component of this price and of this quality, with a resolutely audiophile vocation, has tone controls. The fact is that if the quality of the amplifier (and these controls) is indeed irreproachable, the quality of the recordings is not always optimal, and the listener can also have his or her own calibration preferences. These controls can be completely disabled by pressing the *Line Straight* button.

The *L-590AXII* is an analog integrated amplifier, offering no digital input. However, it offers no less than four non-balanced RCA inputs, two pairs of balanced XLR inputs, *Rec Out* and *Monitor* jacks, *Pre Out* and *Main In* jacks allowing the component to be used as a preamplifier or as a stereo power amplifier and finally, a *Phono* input. We have two pairs of speaker terminals that can be used according to the configuration A, B, or A + B if you wish to bi-wire your speakers.

## Inside the unit

The design is a dual-mono type, a feature common to the vast majority of amplifiers offered in this price range. In order to optimise the *S/N* ratio (the signal to noise ratio, an indicator of the background noise produced by the component), the inside of the unit has been divided into sections (Amp section, power supply, output and display blocks) isolated from each other with RF compatible shielding.

The fins used to dissipate heat are located on either side of the unit under the top cover.

The *L-590AXII* doubles its power under 4  $\Omega$  loads, which is relatively rare and usually the sign of a very high quality power supply.

The engineers at **Luxman** have the reputation of leaving absolutely nothing to chance, and the internal components of *L-590AXII* have been selected with ultimate care. The amplifier

section of this component features some circuits found in the *M-700u* power amplifier. The inside wiring consists of OFC copper. In order to optimise the electrical current flow, the shortest routes with rounded rather than right angles were used. The *L-590AXII* also benefits from version 4.0 of the *ODNF* circuits (**Only Distortion Negative Feedback**), a **Luxman** patented distortion reduction circuit that does not degrade the audio signal. This reduces distortion levels, especially at high frequencies, as well as the level of noise produced by the component.

The power is generated by means of a 680 VA transformer located in the center front of the unit, and just behind it, are eight capacitors (four for each channel) with a capacitance of 10 000  $\mu$ F each.

## In Context

*L-590AXII* replaced the *L-509u* in my system. The latter was well run-in, a distinct advantage; the *L-590AXII* for its part, was probably fresh out of the box. My experience with *L-509u* has made me realise that these components are constantly improving over time. The new component was obviously not going to reach its big brother's running-in level in this review, and I could see how this 'disadvantage' in the honing process would manifest itself (see below).

The new integrated amplifier was accompanied to home by a **Yamaha CD-S3000** (product review published in **mag@zine TED**, Sept.-Oct. 2017), **Verity Audio Amadis** loudspeakers (product review published in **mag@zine TED**, April-May 2010), using primarily **Furutech** connectors along with a **Vibex** power cable and a power conditioner. I used the XLR (balanced) inputs of the amplifier.

## The Listening Sessions

I listened to many albums with the *L-590AXII* in my system, but I focused on a few disks in particular. A CD of popular music:



the album *Colors*, by the Swedish singer (of Iranian origin) **Laleh**; *The Quintet for Strings in G Op. 77* from **Dvorak**, a multi-channel SACD/DSD from the **PentaTone Classics** label; **Bach's** *Partitas 2, 3 and 4*, performed on the piano by **Murray Perahia**; and another piano album: *Complete Waltzes* by **Chopin**, with pianist **Alessandro Deljavan**.

**Laleh** is a very expressive and original young singer with a voice like no other, who is not afraid to express herself in an original way, rather like **Bjork**. She can awaken the dance in us on one track, and move us to tears on the next. I really like this young artist.

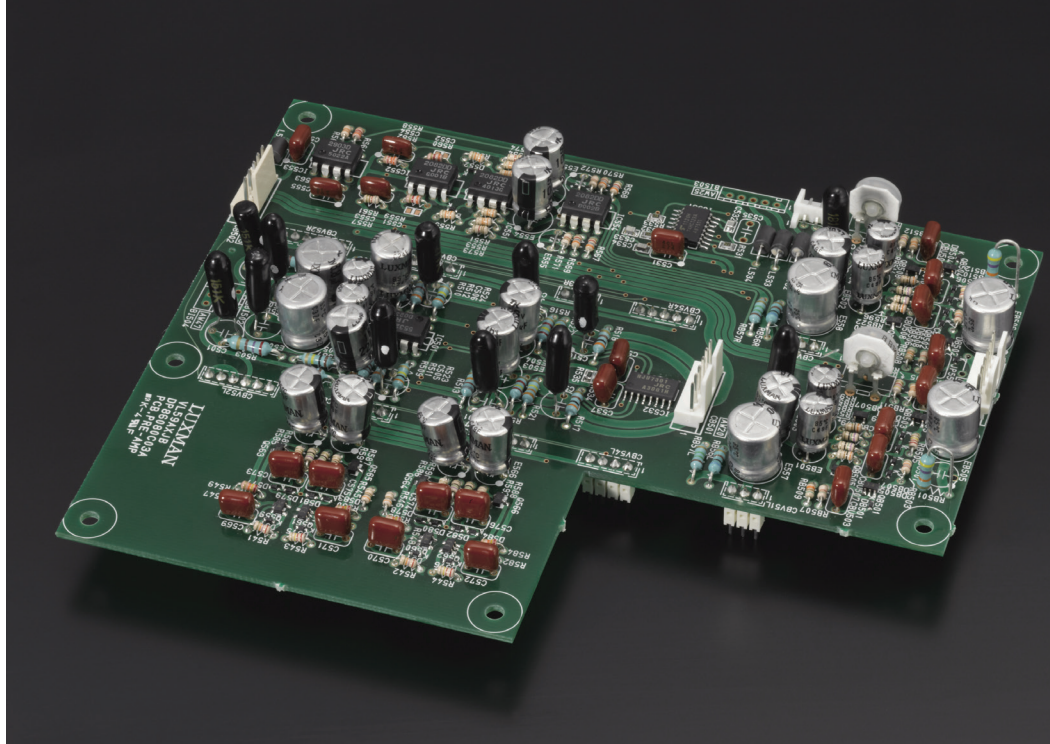
Paired with the **Verity** *Amadis* speakers, the **Luxman** integrated amplifier follows with the regularity and precision of a Swiss watch the rhythm and pulsations found in the *Colors* album. The general presentation is particularly dynamic, and the bass, well defined and controlled. The voice of **Laleh** offers good presence while refined and luminous, with characteristic timbre and intonations. Even when listening at high volume, the *L-590AXII* shows no signs of fatigue or clipping, – proving that the advertised wattage does not necessarily reflect the actual power of an amplifier.

### Oh! That Dvorak SACD

I then turned to the **Dvorak Quintet**, which obviously carries us into a whole different musical universe. For lovers of classical music in particular, a multi-channel SACD recording using *DSD* technology represents nirvana. That is exactly what this is all about.

Here, our quintet is composed exclusively of string instruments: viola, violins (2), cello, and double bass. In addition to the depth and the sensation of weight it brings to the ensemble, the double bass offers solid foundations on which the rest of the orchestra is based.

Obviously, this SACD has been made with great care, and a high quality audio hardware will reveal all of its beauty and richness. Indeed, the *L-590AXII* transforms this recording into a veritable feast for the ear. The whole house is filled with a beautiful, irresistible, contagious energy. The melodic lines, superbly defined, cross and intersect like sea arabesques. In the lively passages (first scherzo movement), the sharp bows come to pierce and whip relentlessly sea and world;



the calmer passages of the 2<sup>nd</sup> movement (*Poco Andante*) are reproduced smoothly and in nuances on a background of silence. Overall, reproduction is very organic and convincing.

### Bach and Chopin

I wanted to oppose the discs of **Bach** and **Chopin** here to demonstrate how much the piano is an instrument of diabolical complexity, and the hardest to reproduce among all. A real orchestra in itself, the piano is a challenge for both sound engineers and audio systems.

With **Perahia**, no complaints, of course, in terms of the quality of the interpretation. As always, he fades away in front of the music with humility and elegance. In the case of *Partitas*, he plays them with an apparent ease that can make us forget that this music is much more complex than it seems. In fact, we sometimes have the impression, with **Bach**, that he has concentrated the spiritual part of the universe in seemingly simple mathematical formulas, but which quickly become hypnotic. Here we have a rather successful recording on the sound level; slightly muffled, the piano has a nice roundness and is solid seated in the bass. I note however a slight hardness and some harshness in the treble (absent when the same disc is played by my *L-509u*): there is nothing like a piano recording to highlight the (*relative*) lack of sound level when a component has not yet been perfectly run-in.

But above all, the recording of **Perahia**, which is still not without qualities, does not offer the same proximity, the same hallucinating presence as that of **Deljavan**.

Disadvantageous comparison, of course, because **Deljavan's Chopin** won best recording honours from **Classica** magazine, and not without reason. It proves to us that it is very possible to make a piano recording in the *Red Book* format with exceptional sound qualities. Here the reproduction is of a confusing realism. This disc literally makes the **Luxman-Yamaha-Verity** trio shine brightly. Clarity and transparency. The piano shines in full daylight, its nudity is palpable, sovereign and irresistible. It's all there: firmness and authority of the bass register, weight, roundness, rhythm, fluidity, and above all, this impression of presence almost unreal. The piano is there, right there, in front of you, and it's really as if we were suddenly in an excellent concert hall.

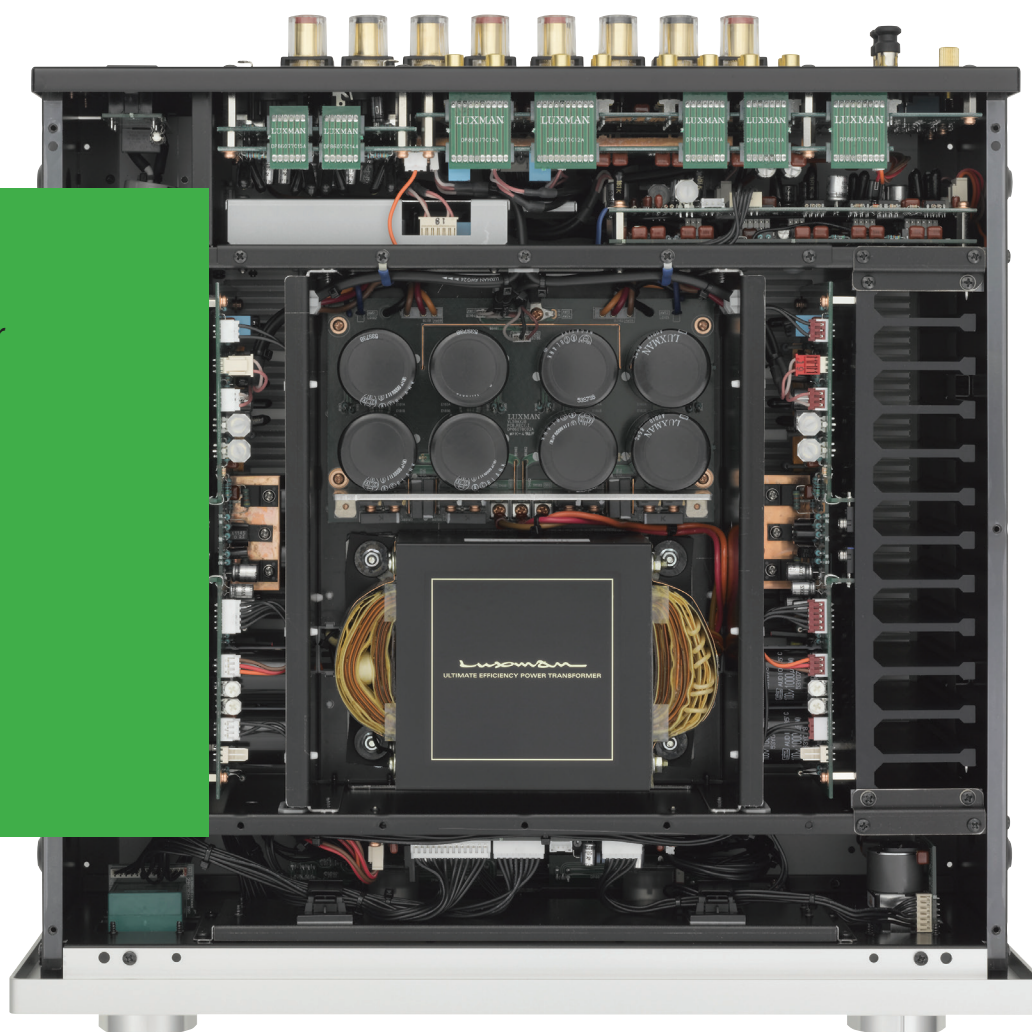
### Conclusion

The *L-590AXII* has demonstrated in my environment that its 30 watts advertised without false modesty, are largely sufficient to reproduce all types of music at pleasing or even high sound levels.

The people at **Luxman** have perfectly succeeded, in my opinion, in finding this fragile balance between transparency and musicality, focusing on listening pleasure rather than hyper-analyticity. It is a transistor component that nevertheless offers this hint of warmth that is usually found in *Vacuum Tube* components, and which makes listening very rewarding. If I had to sum up the **Luxman** sound in a few words, I would refer to the world of (electric) guitar and would say that it is more akin to that of **Gibson**, soft and slightly velvety, rather than that of **Fender**, which is usually more 'incisive'.



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Paired with a **Yamaha** source component (SACD) and *Amadis* loudspeakers, the *L-590AXII* has demonstrated its general qualities of balance and coherence, and its excellent control over the entire musical continuum: from the very firm and superbly articulated bass register, to the acute accurate and finely detailed, the amplifier infuses a highly appreciated energy and vitality to all recordings, whether they are popular music, rock, jazz or classical music. Its power reserve allows it to perfectly master the most dramatic dynamic differences, and its finesse is appreciated in the softer or nuanced passages. These qualities make it possible to allow an emotional connection between the listener and the music.

However the *L-590AXII* does not embellish the bad recordings, or so little, even if the tone controls allow in effect, to correct, at least partially, certain faults.

Operating in Class A, the *L-590AXII* does discharge heat which, without being excessive, commands that the unit be installed in a place where air circulates freely and where it can breathe.

The *L-590AXII* is a beautiful component. Expensive, certainly, which unfortunately makes it out of reach for many music lovers. However, there are other highly efficient and cheaper integrated amplifiers in the **Luxman** catalogue. But for those who might be interested in this component, the *L-590AXII* offers a *Cost is No Object* construction typical of high-end Japanese components, which is a guarantee of longevity and years of enjoyment. Lovers of beautiful objects will also appreciate its retro, uninhibited and timeless look, which should blend gracefully in all types of decor.

The *L-590AXII* will not replace my older *L-509u* with whom, I have explained, I have a long-term commitment. But if, for one

reason or another, I would one day replace my venerable companion, the *L-590AXII* would be my very first choice.

## GENERAL INFORMATION

**Price:** \$8,995 USD

**Warranty:** 3 years, parts and labour

**Manufacturer/Distributor:** Luxman America Inc., tel.: 518.261.6464, [www.luxman.com](http://www.luxman.com)

### Discography

**Laleh**, *Colors*, Warner Music, 2013, 5053105-9428-2-4

**Antonin Dvorak**, *String Quintet in G, Op. cit. 77*, by the **Berlin Philharmonic String Quintet**, PentaTone Classics, PTC, 5186 458

**Murray Perahia**, *Bach* partitas 2, 3 and 4, Sony classical, 88697226952

**Alessandro Deljavan**, *Chopin Complete Waltzes*, Brilliant Classics, 95208