

TENDANCES ÉLECTRONIQUES & DESIGN

# TED

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**SYSTÈME AUDIO À MOINS DE 3 000\$**

La simplicité économique et de bon goût  
Audiolab, 6000A & 6000CDT et Mission, LX-2+

*Look vintage, technologie  
d'aujourd'hui, performance assurée!*

Luxman, préampli CL-38uC et ampli MQ-88uC



Ortofon, MC-1 Turbo, DR Acoustics, Antigone, Micromega, M-150  
Panasonic, DP-UB9000, Paradigm, Defiance X10  
Thorens, TD-309, Panasonic, FZ1000



# *Vintage Look; Modern Technology;*

## *Guaranteed Performance!*

THE LUXMAN ELECTRONICS COMPANY WAS FOUNDED IN 1925, THE YEAR IN WHICH RADIO BROADCASTS WERE FIRST INTRODUCED IN JAPAN. SINCE THE LAUNCH OF THE LEGENDARY SQ-5A INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER IN 1961, LUXMAN HAS GAINED FAME DUE TO THE MANUFACTURING QUALITY OF ITS TUBE AMPLIFIERS AS WELL AS ITS FAMOUS TYPE OY OUTPUT TRANSFORMERS. AFTER CHANGING HANDS A FEW TIMES AND EXPERIENCING A FEW DIFFICULT YEARS, LUXMAN - WHO WILL SOON CELEBRATE THEIR 100TH BIRTHDAY - RETURNED TO ITS HUMBLE BEGINNINGS. THE COMPANY ONCE AGAIN OFFERS HIGH-FIDELITY DEVICES OF IMPECCABLE QUALITY. IN THIS PRODUCT REVIEW, I HAVE THE PLEASURE, FOR THE FIRST TIME, OF TESTING LUXMAN COMPONENTS INCLUDING THE CL-38UC PREAMPLIFIER AND AN MQ-88UC STEREOPHONIC POWER AMPLIFIER. THESE TWO NEW RETRO-LOOKING VACUUM TUBE COMPONENTS WERE LAUNCHED EARLIER THIS YEAR. EVEN IF THEY SEEM TO COME DIRECTLY FROM THE PAST, IS THEIR SOUND PURELY NOSTALGIC? I INTEND TO ANSWER THIS AND OTHER QUESTIONS WITHIN THIS ARTICLE, SO ALLOW ME TO GUIDE YOU THROUGH A VIRTUAL JOURNEY TO THE HEART OF MUSIC.

By Michel Dallaire

### **The CL-38uC Preamplifier**

Encased in varnished wood with a brushed aluminum faceplate, the new Luxman CL-38uC preamplifier has a vintage look inspired from the CL-35 introduced in the late 70's. But the similarities stop here, because the CL-38uC's circuits and vacuum tubes are totally different. This new Luxman offering boasts three ECC83S vacuum tubes with five ECC82 tubes laid out symmetrically on a circuit board along side beautiful electronic parts. After forty years as an audiophile, it warms my heart to see a preamplifier like the Luxman CL-38uC with adjustable tone controls, each on three central frequencies, i.e. 150, 300 and 600 Hz for bass and 1.5, 3, and 6 kHz for treble. Add to these controls a left / right balance

button as well as a mono / stereo switch and you have everything you need to come back to the future. The phono input - which has now become indispensable with the renaissance of vinyl - is switchable between Moving Magnet or Moving Coil cartridges (MM / MC) with an adjustable impedance (High / Low) for the Moving Coil option. For this purpose, a subsonic filter (below 30 Hz with a slope of - 6 DB per octave) is provided to avoid unintentional movement of the woofers when they are excited by the skips of the tone arm / cartridge combination on a lightly warped vinyl disc. Other than the phono input, there are four line inputs, including a pair of balanced XLR inputs with their own transformer and a phase inversion switch. There is also an input / output loop for a recorder, and two variable-gain line outputs that allow the signal to be routed to other amplifiers. The volume control is motorized and can be operated by the superb remote control supplied with the CL-38uC.

### **The MQ-88uC Amplifier**

This stereo power amplifier is inspired by the MQ60 that was introduced in 1969 or thereabouts. Its circuit is centred on a pair of ECC83S vacuum tubes and as well as a pair of ECC82 reserved for the input stage which adopts a so-called Mullard topology. The output stage is provided by a quartet of KT-88 tubes working in a class A / B (push-pull) configuration. The 25 watts of power per channel are available on 4, 8 and 16 ohm impedances that have their own dedicated loudspeaker terminals at the rear of the unit. These terminals are also of impeccable quality. All these tubes come from the Slovak manufacturer JJ Electronic. The two output transformers are OY15-type models manufactured exclusively by Luxman. They are hermetically encapsulated in a molded aluminum casing designed specifically for this purpose. Hitting them with my fingers, I feel like hitting a totally inert block of stone. Connections are provided on the top to adjust the polarization (bias) of the KT-88 tubes. But since this involves the use of a multimeter and a screwdriver, it is better to leave this maintenance operation to an accredited technician.

The power supply comprises an EI power transformer, coupled with very high capacity condensers. Unlike other manufacturers, the size of the MQ-88uC is relatively compact, with a width of 440 mm and a depth of only 230 mm. With the protective grille in place, the height is limited to 184 mm and its weight remains reasonable at 16 kg. The entire electronic part is protected by a solid monocoque aluminium base. The MQ-88uC has been designed for use with the CL-38uC preamplifier, but can also be used in a stand alone mode using either one of its two variable gain inputs. The





latter can be controlled by a small volume button at the front of the unit.

### Installation and Test Environment

I installed the CL-38uC preamplifier inside my audio cabinet while the MQ-88uC amplifier remained in the open air on top of my cabinet to allow it to breathe better. I abided by the manufacturer recommended warm-up period of at least 30 minutes before any serious listening. This duo of Luxman components seemed completely new and fresh out of the box, but the sound was already excellent even without a break-in period. What I found surprising is the quiet operation of the vacuum tube circuits. With the volume button at its maximum, you need to put your ear directly on the speakers in order to hear a faint, hardly noticeable soft hiss. Vacuum tube circuits often tend to be susceptible to microphonics. Even when I vigorously strike either of the two components, I hear absolutely no noise from the speakers. As a first step, I used the amplifier alone by directly plugging in my CD player or headphone amplifier as a preamplifier. The results were interesting, but it was by matching the Luxman CL-38uC preamplifier to its companion MQ-88uC power amplifier that the magic of their synergy

manifested itself. In this configuration, the Luxman duo demonstrated a better openness and amplitude of the stereo image that convinced me to continue my listening tests in this way. My main source consists of my music server paired with my headphone amplifier used as a digital-to-analog converter. Although the latter is a relatively affordable device, the results were so conclusive that I could not imagine what they might have been if I had a high quality converter in hand.

### Listening To Thermionic Music

This term is not new and it means an electron emission by incandescent metals. I started my listening tests with the album entitled Nes Ahlam from the Act Label. These are three musicians of different backgrounds, gathered in a style of music that varies between traditional Arabic songs, World music, Jazz and Pop music. Singer and cellist, Nesrine Belmokh, is of Franco-Algerian origin. She is accompanied by a French colleague Matthew Saglio who also plays the cello. In this trio, the percussions are provided by David Gadea from Spain, from Valencia in fact, where these musicians met. Nesrine Belmokh can sing as well in English and French as in Arabic. From the first notes of this CD, what strikes



me is the unusual magnitude of the stereophonic image, unequaled with transistor driven devices. The depth of the sound stage, a feature more or less obscured by some high-fidelity components, suddenly becomes more palpable with the CL-38uC / MQ-88uC pairing. The treble range is beautifully rendered with a beautiful extension without any hint of harshness. The midrange follows suit with full transparent harmonic textures that pay homage to the timbre of the voices and the instruments. Incidentally, the singer's voice is suave, warm and placed precisely in the sound stage. Subjectively, there is space and airiness between the instruments that do not appear to be compressed to only two dimensions. The two cellos are easily detected, the one played by Nesrine Belmokh being electric - without resonance box. The percussions are subtly reproduced with a real and very credible impact on the cymbals that scrupulously retain their metallic character.

I carry on with the second album from the Christine and the Queens group, entitled Chris. This electro-pop music with its synthetic basses is very catchy and as well always polished. The Héloïse Letissier albums are good tools to test the foundations of a high-fidelity system. The Luxman vacuum tube pair, with only 25 watts per channel of output power, surprises me pleasantly with the depth and control of the bass register. Here, the selection of the KT-88 tubes and the quality of Luxman's OY15 transformers are surely contributing to this performance. Although my speakers have a relatively low sensitivity of 85 or 86 dB, they benefited from the energy produced by the MQ-88uC stereo amplifier by demonstrating an almost perfect synergy. I did the majority of my listening without using the tone controls, and later on by experimenting with them, I was able to see their efficiency without affecting the transparency of the components nor the quality of the audio signal. For me, the tonal balance of this Luxman set is almost perfect, with a very slight physiological effect in the lower midrange, which adds a welcomed warmth to the era of digital music. The singer's voice is well presented without audible exaggerated whistling in any way. It is especially in the section of the mid and high frequencies that the magic of the vacuum tubes shines by humanizing the voices and rendering more tangible the tonality uniqueness of each instrument.

I finish my many auditions with the latest album from one of my favorite songwriters, Ani Di Franco. Her discography, on her own independent label, is considerable and her latest CD titled Binary does not escape the rule as to the quality of its production. Ani di Franco is a virtuoso guitarist and her music has such varied and



neat arrangements. Her folk-rock compositions offer lyrics that are often autobiographical and committed as much politically as socially. The second track entitled Pacifist's Lament begins with guitar solos spread over the left and right channels of the recording while the brass instruments gradually intercede in the center of the stereophonic image. The keyboards, the bass and the drums follow a little further to create a dense music that abounds in small sound details. Again, the low frequencies are well supported and the transparency of the Luxman CL-38uC / MQ-88uC pairing offers me a both luminous and organic reproduction of this album. Definitely, vacuum tubes still have a say in a time when the field of musical reproduction is being stormed by microelectronics and their multifunctional chips. Do not see here a plea for nostalgia, for I, myself, have stepped into the era of streamed music. Rather, I plead for well-built components like this pair from Luxman, which are a kind of ecological bulwark against the programmed obsolescence of our everyday appliances such as computers, tablets and so-called smart phones.

## Conclusion

Over the course of eleven years of chronicles for this magazine, I had the opportunity to test a good half-dozen integrated amplifiers using vacuum tube circuits. Some were huge, very heavy and radiated a lot of heat. I have obviously not been able to test everything on Earth, but the Luxman CL-38uC and MQ-88uC components are both remarkably elegant and efficient. The compactness and aesthetics of these objects are such that it is relatively easy to install them, why not, prominently within the living room. I experienced an unusual satisfaction while testing this duo and my only regret is that I could not test the phono input of the CL-38uC.



I no longer have a turntable due to space restrictions, but given the quality of manufacturing of these Luxman products, I have no doubt about this customisable phono input. For me, the fact that the CL-38uC preamplifier has no digital input is not a

***Le duo Luxman, doté de lampes de seulement 25 watts par canal, me surprend agréablement par la profondeur du registre grave et son contrôle. Ici, le choix des tubes KT-88 et la qualité des transformateurs Luxman OY15 contribuent sûrement à cette performance.***

decision-making factor in the purchase of this preamplifier, but I still would have liked it to be equipped with a headphone output.

The Luxman CL-38uC / MQ-88u system is certainly not given, but it is manufactured entirely in Japan and this is evident by its quality of construction. Their musical performances placed them in direct competition with legendary brands such as Audio Research, Conrad-Johnson, McIntosh or VTL to name a few. For these reasons, I think this Luxman system is offered at a reasonable retail price if one considers that it is certainly a reliable investment over time. Its vintage look warms the heart, while its updated technology produces a timeless sound. Even though my audio columnist needs require a more powerful and universal amplification with respect to connectivity, I could very well live with the Luxman CL-38uC / MQ-88u ensemble. And believe me, this assertion is not one that I give lightly to the devices of the month.

#### Renseignements généraux

##### **Amplificateur Luxman CL-38uC**

Prix : 5 995 \$ US

Garantie : 3 ans, pièces et main-d'œuvre

##### **Amplificateur de puissance Luxman MQ-88uC**

Prix : 5 995 \$ US

Garantie : 3 ans, pièces et main-d'œuvre

Fabricant : Luxman America,  
Tél. : 518.261.6464,  
www.luxman.com

#### Médiagraphie

Ani Di Franco, Binary, Righteous Babe Records, RBR087-D

Christine and the Queens, Chris, Because Music, LC (33186)

Nesrine Belmokh, Nes Ahlam, ACT, 9865-2

Marianne Trudel & Karen Young, Songs of Joni Mitchell, TRUD, 2018-1

Blue Heron, Anonymus Mason, Hunt and Sturmy, BHCD, 1007

