

If Luxman isn't on your radar, (and they should be) this Japanese manufacturer has always made fantastic components. Over the last decade they continue to produce exquisitely finished components, that not only sound fantastic, but offer a perfect feature set that is well implemented.

Where many audio manufacturers turn out redundant products, in a vain effort to seem relevant, Luxman stays steadfast, making new products only when they feel it is a major update from one past. A few of their amplifiers have been in production for decades.

The EQ-500 phono preamplifier here, is a relatively new product, but it combines outstanding sound, vacuum tube delicacy, and build quality like few others at any price – yet this three input phono preamplifier only tips the scale at \$6,495. There is nothing else available that is even close to this price that offers the flexibility, functionality and sheer beauty of the EQ-500.

Audio intimacy

Luxman products are so magnificently packaged, removing one from its carton is almost an intimate act. I've packed and unpacked a lot of gear over the years, and nobody does it better and with more care than Luxman. While this may not matter to some, I always feel the care putting said object in the box is a direct reflection of the care going into the product inside. Much like buying products from Apple, Herman Miller, Rolex, or Louis Vuitton, there's always a warm, satisfying feeling that comes with unboxing a new Luxman component.

The EQ-500 weighs a little over 30 pounds. Some power amplifiers don't weigh that much. Viewing the quality and quantity of parts inside the EQ-500 reveals a chassis packed with a massive power supply and top shelf components. We've seen more than one \$6,495 phono pre with a lot of air inside the box. Not here.

This all vacuum tube design uses a pair of ECC82 tubes, two pairs of ECC83s and an EZ81, dual diode rectifier. Transformers are used to step the gain up from MM levels to MC, with a 55db and 63db setting, so all but the lowest output cartridges will be no problem.

The finer points

Often overlooked, one of the simplest, yet most impressive features the EQ-500 offers is three separate grounds – one for each individual phono inputs. If you've ever tried to wrap grounds together from more than one turntable, you know what a major pain this can be. In case you aren't using all three inputs yet (but you will, just give it time), Luxman includes plugs for all unused input and output jacks, to keep RF fully at bay. It's a tidy look, too. Attention to the finer points doesn't stop there, it's only the beginning. All functionality is controlled from the front panel. Because of the step up transformers, only a MC-Low and MC-High setting is available.



Luxman
EQ-500
\$6,495

luxmanamerica.com

MM enthusiasts will rejoice in the level of adjustability that the EQ-500 offers. With the ability to set MM input impedance from 10k ohms all the way up to 100k, those of you with NOS Audio Technica and Shure cartridges can now unlock a level of performance that you didn’t realize was possible.

The fun doesn’t stop there. High and low cut filters are available, something that comes in handy with 78s and less than stellar pressings. Last, but hardly least, there are those cool output meters, finished in the same hue as many of the Luxman integrated amplifiers. Perhaps the only regret here is that the meters aren’t bigger, like the output meters featured on Luxman’s class-A integrated amplifiers, but then the EQ-500s chassis wouldn’t be as sleek as it is.

A built in MC cartridge demagnetizer is an added bonus. It is marked “articulator” on the front panel, so don’t nudge this to the on position while your volume control is set to a playback level. It may cost you a tweeter, so perform this operation every 100 hours or so, with your power amplifier off. Doing this will keep your highs sparkling.

Finally, balanced and single ended outputs assure compatibility with any system. This is selectable from the front panel as well.

Best of all, the sound

With a wide range of phono preamplifiers here to compare, the Luxman stands on its own. It’s not quite as dynamic as a few of the five figure boxes we’ve used, but the overall sound of the EQ-500 is very organic and engaging. Most transformer based designs have a slight softness to the presentation that the solid-state or FET/Tube designs lack, but this is not a bad thing. Our analog master, Richard Mak is exploring various tube rolling options, and that is sure to unlock even more performance in the EQ-500, but for the purpose of this review, we are going with the supplied vacuum tubes. However, he has already hinted that there is a higher level of involvement available with said tubes.

Sonically, the EQ-500 reminds us a lot of the Nagra VPS, which costs nearly twice as much, so the Luxman is in very good company, and it has three inputs, instead of the one or two most other tube designs offer.



By comparison, the Audio Research PH9 (which costs the same price) is only a single input, single gain setting design.

Like so many of the other Luxman products we’ve had the pleasure to use, the EQ-500 has a sound that is resolving, yet ever so slightly warm and relaxed. You might even call it inviting. There is more than enough resolution on tap to enjoy your prized recordings, and tell the difference between them and mediocre recordings, yet it is never fatiguing.

The biggest difference between the EQ-500 and say, the Audio Research REF 3Phono, or the BAT VK-P12SE (again, nearly twice as expensive) is in the final level of resolution at the highest and lowest end of the frequency spectrum. The BAT and the ARC both offer a bit more grip and slam on the deepest bass notes.

It’s worth mentioning here that the Luxman is quieter than a few of it’s much more expensive rivals and approaches the \$20k+ level of quiet that the Nagra VPS/Classic power supply offers. Damn good for phono, even more so, for an all tube design.

Choices, choices

What it all comes down to is how you serve up your vinyl. If you are a music lover that views your turntable/cartridge combination as a paintbrush, and enjoy using more than one to achieve the ultimate result, nothing but the EQ-500 will do. The level of versatility it offers is outstanding.

We enjoyed using it with our vintage Technics SL-1100/NOS Audio Technica, Luxman PD-171/Kiseki Purple Heart, and AVID Volvere SP/SME/Hyper Eminent Ex tables. The ability to contrast and compare with a single phonostage is one of the sheer joys of analog playback. The more diverse your record collection, the more you need two or three tonearm/cartridge combinations.

Quite the destination

For all but those possessing three mega tables and cartridges, the Luxman EQ-500 will be a fantastic final destination phono preamplifier. (And if you use it with one of their integrated amplifiers, you’ll have four phono inputs at your disposal – how great is that?)

Combine vault-like build quality, great sound, and nearly 100 years of experience building gear and the Luxman EQ-500 is an excellent addition to your system. And worthy of one of our Exceptional Value Awards for 2019.

