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THE UNIQUE ALL-ROUNDER

The Luxman LX-380 Integrated Amplifier

By Marc Phillips

We've all used high-end audio products that we consider great "all-rounders." It might be a solid-state power amplifier that has sounded great in all types of systems over the years. It might be a pair of speakers that are unusually forgiving when it comes to room placement. It might be a cartridge with a stylus that has an unusually long life expectancy and a reasonable re-tip fee. These are the components we trust, the ones we depend on to do the job, a known variable in most situations.

When I first received the Luxman LX-380 for review, I thought it was a very specialized product with narrow applications, an integrated amplifier that would only appeal to a certain kind of audiophile. Since it has tone controls, switches for a subsonic filter and loudness, and a selector for two pairs of speakers—just like most '70s receivers—it probably wouldn't appeal to purists. Since it has styling cues such as a wooden cabinet and toggle switches, it wouldn't appeal to those who eschew vintage equipment and would prefer something a little more modern. Because it's a tube integrated with only 14-20 watts per channel, depending on load impedance, it wouldn't appeal to audiophiles who need more power. I can think of many reasons why you wouldn't call the LX-380 an all-rounder.

That's what I thought, anyway. After a few months of steady reviewing, however, I've noticed something strange. I have plenty of integrated amplifiers on hand, everything from a

14wpc single-ended parallel to a 25wpc pure Class A solid-state to a 220wpc hybrid to a high-current model that puts out more than 500 watts per channel (albeit into 2 ohms). I have an amp for every type of speaker that passes through my listening room, and there have been quite a few loudspeakers in my listening room since last fall.

Yet the LX-380, miraculously, has stayed in place. I don't feel like taking it out of the system unless I have to, and I haven't had to yet. I've had speakers in here with sensitivity ratings between 84 dB and 93 dB, and impedances between 4 and 8 ohms, and the LX-380 has made sweet, passionate nookie with each and every one of them. It has quietly become the most interesting all-arounder I've ever encountered in the world of high-end audio.



A New Old Luxman?

Luxman describes the LX-380 as "a new era in golden '38' series vacuum series integrated amplifiers." The 38s started appearing a few years ago with styling cues borrowed from the old "28" series. You're basically talking about a look that's straight from an integrated amplifier from the '60s and '70s, with a full complement of switches, knobs and buttons crowding the faceplate. It's basically a '70s receiver without the big tuning dial dominating the top third.

This re-introduction of that retro look was a big hit for Luxman, but this new generation of 38s are quietly implementing modern technologies such as the computer-controlled Luxman Electrically Controlled Ultimate Attenuator (LECUA), which is said to enhance the "dynamism of each performance." The main circuit of the LX-380 has also been redesigned to maximize the performance



of the 6L6GC output tubes. A Mullard-type driver stage is linked to a push-pull final stage, which "adopts a fixed bias type to maintain constant grid voltage." This also helps to increase the life expectancy of the four 6L6GCs as well as the three ECC82 tubes. Much of this circuit re-design is borrowed from the excellent L-590AX integrated amplifier.

The Luxman LX-380 is jam-packed with all kinds of features—some that I need, and others that are still cool even if I don't. There's an inboard MM/MC phono stage, also borrowed from the L-590AX, that comes with both a mono switch and the aforementioned subsonic filter. It's a semi-conductor design, but it has such a warm and sweet tone that I used it throughout the review period (albeit with step-up transformers from Miyajima Labs and Bob's Devices since I was using some very low output MCs at the time).

The LX-380 also comes with a built-in headphone amp that, again, was decent enough to use while reviewing such headphones as the Focal Clears and the AudioQuest NightHawk Carbons. This amp didn't quite replace some of the awesome standalone tube amps I've had over the last few months such as the Moon Audio Inspire Dragon, but the convenience of having it all in one relatively compact chassis is compelling enough to forget that last little bit of detail—there's still plenty of warmth to go around.

The tone control set-up is also unique and flexible, almost to the point where it might be called an equalizer. The treble control can be set to switch over three different frequency ranges (1.5 kHz, 3 kHz and 6 kHz) and the bass control can be set to 150, 300 or 600

Hz. I only played around with these controls sporadically, as I'm not really a tone control guy, but once or twice I enjoyed a slight boost in bass when using smaller 2-way loudspeaker designs with relatively low sensitivity ratings.

The Sound

As I've mentioned, I've used the LX-380 with a wide variety of loudspeakers over the last few months—even when logic dictated a need for something more powerful. My preferred pairing was with the splendid EgglestonWorks Emma EVOs, which are also reviewed in this issue—this was an amp/speaker match I could live with for a very long time, noteworthy for a combo that retails for just \$14K. I also used the LX-380 with my reference Brigadier Audio BA-2 monitors and the Trenner & Friedl ART monitors; neither are what you would call high-efficiency designs. I did conclude the review period with something that was easier to drive, the 93 dB Fern & Roby Ravens. This was also a magical pairing, but I only spent a couple of very quick weeks with this combination.

The LX-380's basic signature came through with each pair of loudspeakers—very relaxed, open and seductive. While the Luxman's styling cues are meant to evoke the past, this was not an overall sound that was too warm, too romantic and too lush. I was always treated to a tremendous amount of detail when the LX-380 in the system, but it was delivered in an easy, thoroughly charming way. The structure of the soundstage was a bit distant overall, but wide open and mesmerizing like a huge panoramic window that reveals a lovely landscape each and every time.

Even the low bass was substantial and tight enough for me to be quite satisfying, a rare occurrence with a tube amp without a lot of juice. With warm, natural recordings such as MA Recordings' 45rpm pressing of *Sera una Noche*, the thumping of the percussion bloom and expanded and energized the room in a very realistic manner. I could hear the deep sounds created by the room, the floorboards and the walls, and how each boundary resonated at a slightly different frequency. That's not easy to do.

Conclusion

It's clear that Luxman wanted to blend the old with the new in its design of the LX-380, and there were times I could feel those considerations deep in my bones. On the other hand, there's something about the basic sound of this amp that I find so welcoming and friendly, a tone that relaxes you and makes you content—which hopefully is the reason why you've entered this hobby.

I've been faced with this conundrum before: do I want a purist amp that offers very little in the way of conveniences and features in the service of ultimate sound quality, or do I want all the bells and whistles in a single box in a product that isn't quite the head of the class when it comes to fidelity and realism? I spent a lot of time with the LX-380, and after a while it became clear that I had absolutely no qualms with the sound quality. The Luxman became a great friend, a close confidant, something that I trusted to tell me the truth and always be on my side. It's one of the best examples of an all-rounder I've found, but it also has a distinct personality that's charismatic and engaging.

You get a lot for \$7500, even if some of you might balk at the low power ratings. Those are quality watts, and I couldn't find a load that prompted the LX-380 to struggle. I'm really going to be sad when this amp goes away. Highly recommended.

