

MICHAEL TREI

Luxman PD-151 MARK II

RECORD PLAYER

Luxman occupies an unusual place in the hi-fi world. While many of the brands chasing ultimate performance will battle it out in the bleeding-edge design stakes, Luxman makes what I like to call *luxury* equipment. Everything they produce is beautiful, not just to the ear, but also to the eye and hand. Their design aesthetic keeps one foot firmly planted in the style of classic audio equipment from decades past—for example, many of their amplifiers have tone controls and big power meters, features reminiscent of topflight gear from 40 years ago—while the other foot is up to date with the latest technology.

Because of this focus on luxury, the typical Luxman buyer is someone who likes to consider the complete ownership experience when making equipment choices. Merely *sounding* fantastic isn't good enough; everything about using the product needs to exude quality, from the feel of the switches and ease of operation, to its styling and fit and finish. As a result, Luxman equipment tends to appeal to a wider group of owners, well beyond the hardcore audiophile crowd. Their traditional design language makes Luxman appealing to people who like to own beautiful things with a dash of nostalgia for the audio gear they lusted after when they were younger but perhaps couldn't afford until now.

The PD-151 MkII record player (\$5695) is an excellent example. If you had a time machine and could go back and slot a picture of the PD-151 into Luxman's 1978 product catalog, nobody would think that they were seeing a turntable from 45 years into the future. Its timeless design makes it instantly recognizable as what it is—it doesn't look like a chrome wedding cake, for example—so you won't have to explain it to most visitors. The MkII is even available with a traditional, clear, hinged dust cover (\$795), something



increasingly rare on today's higher-end turntables.

To maintain its discreet, classic appearance, the PD-151 MkII hides most of its working parts inside the chassis: Most of the turntable's business parts, including the motor, power supply, speed-control circuitry, main platter bearing, and tonearm, are attached to the 10mm-thick slab of "diamond-cut" aluminum that forms the top surface of the structure. This plate is mounted onto the boxlike

SPECIFICATIONS

Description PD-151 MARK II: Nonsuspended, mass-loaded, belt-driven turntable. Speeds: 33 1/3, 45, and 78rpm. Platter: 11.9" (300mm) diameter, 1" (25mm) thick, 8.8lb (4.0kg). DC motor. Wow and flutter: <0.04% WRMS. LTA-309 tonearm: Pivoted, aluminum armtube, knife-edge bearings. Effective length: 222.5mm; pivot-to-

spindle distance: 204.5mm; overhang: 18mm; offset angle: not specified. Effective mass: Not specified. Compatible cartridge weight: 4–10gm. VTA adjustment range: 15mm. **Dimensions** 18.3" (465mm) × 7.4" (189mm) × 15.1" (383mm). Weight: 34.75lb (15.8kg), 37.8lb (17.2kg) with dustcover. **Finish** Diamond-cut aluminum

and black paint.

Serial number of unit reviewed M20100001.

Manufactured in Japan.

Price PD-151 MARK II \$5695.

Optional OPD-DSC151 dust cover: \$795. Approximate number of dealers: 78. Warranty: three years, parts and labor.

Manufacturer Luxman Corporation, 1-3-1 Shinyokohama,

Kouhoku-ku, Yokohama-shi, Kanagawa 222-0033, Japan.

Tel: (81) (0)45-470-6980.

Web: luxman.co.jp.

US distributor:

Luxman America Inc.,

27 Kent St., Suite 105A,

Ballston Spa, NY 12020.

Tel: (518) 261-6464. Email:

Sales01@luxmanamerica.com.

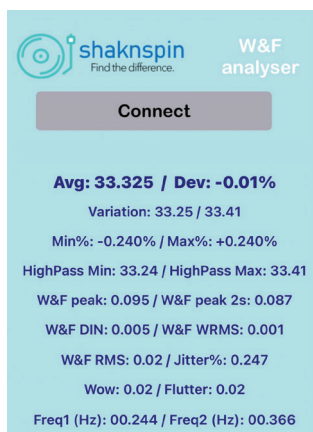
Web: luxmanamerica.com.

lower half of the plinth, the front panel of which is home to the power and speed controls, while an IEC power inlet connector is around back, and four adjustable isolating feet are on bottom.

Normally when making a high-performance turntable, the designer will try to keep any parts that can create vibrations—the motor, the power transformer—isolated from parts that are especially sensitive to vibrations, especially the platter and tonearm. So it's unusual to see all of these components bolted together onto the same structural part of the turntable. To avoid the problems this might create, Luxman has mounted the motor and transformer using special rubber damping washers to keep vibrations from making their way into the main top plate—a time-tested approach. Furthermore, they have used a very quiet DC motor to avoid vibrations in the first place: DC motors typically run quieter than the AC synchronous motors used in most turntables, and the MkII's motor is among the quietest I've ever encountered. The downside is that they need very accurate voltage control and plenty of rotational inertia to maintain consistent speed under load. The PD-151 achieves these things by combining a sophisticated pulse-width modulation power supply—the basic technology behind DSD—with a proportional-integral-differential feedback loop¹ to correct speed variations. The high-inertia (heavy) platter and thick rubber drive belt also help to smooth out any speed anomalies.

What matters is the result, and even when I held my stethoscope against the top plate adjacent to the motor, I couldn't tell whether the motor was on or off. It's that quiet.

Front-panel buttons, switches, and LEDs allow the user to control the platter drive and speed. From left to right, there's a main power button for firing up the circuitry, a start/stop switch to turn on the motor, and a three-position rotary switch to select 33 1/3, 45, or 78rpm. On the right of the rotary switch is a multicolor LED that allows you to monitor the status of the speed-control circuitry; to the right of that are three recessed trim screws that allow you to fine-tune the three speeds individually. Luxman doesn't provide any type of strobe disc or other tool for verifying the speed, although these are easy to acquire. I used a Shaknspin wow and



flutter measuring device to adjust the speed, but you can also use one of the free (or cheap) apps that rely on your phone's gyro—or an old strobe disc, which I prefer to phone-based tools. I found the 33 and 45 speeds close to spot on out of the box. 78rpm was pretty far off, but correcting it was easy. Measured with the Shaknspin, wow and combined flutter were superbly low, at 0.02% WRMS, about half the factory-specified value.

What makes it 'Mark II'?

Normally, when a company introduces a new version of an established product, it's because further developments make it possible to improve its performance. That's true of the PD-151 MK II, but it's also true that a change was necessary: The earlier PD-151A used a tonearm supplied by Jelco; sadly, that Japanese tonearm maker announced in 2020 that they would be closing their doors for good after almost 100 years in business. That left many turntable companies scrambling to find alternatives and led Luxman to strike a deal with another Japanese manufacturer, SAEC, which, in cooperation with Luxman, created the LTA-309.

Founded in 1974, SAEC lacks the name recognition of Jelco but has enjoyed a cult following in audiophile circles since the 1970s. Most of their tonearms follow a design approach similar to that

¹PID controllers are often used in laboratory equipment. By providing feedback proportional to speed, acceleration (the time-derivative of speed), and position (the time-integral of speed), such controllers provide stable, well-damped feedback that behaves well.

—Jim Austin



employed in the 1960s by SME, with a detachable H4 bayonet-mount universal headshell and knife-edge bearings for the vertical pivot.

Knife-edge bearings work exactly as their name suggests, with a pair of narrow blades flanking the armtube at the pivot point, held by gravity to a pair of V-shaped blocks. The result is vanishingly low static and dynamic friction as the arm moves up and down and a certain robustness, or resistance to accidental damage from overzealous cartridge-bolt tightening and other mishandling. Older knife-edge designs were sometimes criticized as being prone to bearing chatter and poor energy coupling from the cartridge to the turntable's structure, but this isn't a problem with a higher mass design like the SAEC. As with any gravity-supported bearing, you can feel a little play between the arm and the base if you manipulate the armtube in a way that lifts the knife edges out of the V blocks, but on the Luxman/SAEC arm this movement is very tightly constrained, and anyway it isn't relevant during playback.

The H4 bayonet-mount universal headshell has a long history, going back more than 60 years to the Ortofon G-type headshell and the SPU series of cartridges. It's a good system, allowing for quick, easy cartridge swaps in just a few seconds, but it has a few limitations when it comes to ultraprecise cartridge alignment. The pin that locates the headshell vertically in the armtube will typically have some play, making precise, repeatable azimuth setting difficult, and the way the collar holds the headshell into the armtube can change the front-to-back angle of the headshell depending on how much the collar is tightened. I found that with the Luxman arm, tightening the headshell collar firmly resulted in the headshell surface being about 1.5° out of parallel with the armtube. This isn't really a big deal because you can easily compensate by raising the height at the back of the arm, but it's something to be aware of when adjusting the stylus rake angle.

Setup

Despite the PD-151 MK II's sophistication and high performance, Luxman has done a lot to make it very easy to set up and get playing. The table arrives with its tonearm preinstalled, the cable plugged in and secured, and the adjustable feet in place. Just place the turntable on your rack or shelf and level the chassis using the



ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

Analog sources SME Model 30/2A, Roksan TMS, SME 30/2, Brinkmann La Grange, Garrard 301, Thorens TD124, Linn Sondek LP12, and Technics SL-1000 Mk2A turntables. Graham Model 2.2; SME Series V, IV, Vi, 309, 3009; Brinkmann 12.1; Breuer Dynamic Type 8; Technics EPA-100; Linn Ittok LVII; Fidelity Research FR-64S; Eminent Technology ET2 tonearms. Dynavector DRT XV-1s, Grado Legacy Epoch, Ortofon Cadenza Blue, Koetsu Urushi and Rosewood, Linn Troika, Kiseki Purple Heart, Red Rose Petal 2, Denon DL-103, Audio Note IQ3 phono cartridges. Technics RS-1520 reel to reel, Nakamichi Dragon cassette deck.

Preamplification PrimaLuna DiaLogue Premium, Croft Vitale line preamplifiers; Parasound JC 3 Jr., Fosgate Signature, Vendita Research SCP-2B, Sutherland Little Loco phono preamplifiers.

Power amplifier Audio Note P2 SE Signature, Belles 150A, Conrad-Johnson Classic Sixty.

Integrated amplifier Pass Labs INT-150.

Loudspeakers Quad ESL-57 electrostatics with Gradient SW-57 woofers; PSB Synchrony One; HSU Research TN1220 (2) and SVS SB-2000 Pro subwoofers.

Cables Cardas Neutral Reference and Golden Reference interconnects; Hovland tonearm; Cardas Neutral Reference speaker.

Accessories Shunyata Denali 6000/S and Shunyata Hydra V-Ray power conditioners; ASC Tube Traps and Room Tune room treatments; Zoethecus Z4 rack; Sicomin platform, Target TT5T stands, and Goldmund cones; Audio Desk Systeme Pro and VPI HW17 record cleaning machines.—Michael Trei

four adjustable isolation feet, which have a 5mm adjustment range. Luxman says that all four feet should be lowered at least slightly to allow the isolation function of the feet to work as designed. Once the chassis is level, lower the platter onto the main bearing, put the thick rubber platter mat in place, and install the drive belt around the platter rim and motor pulley. A pair of handles helps lift the platter into place, and these screw into threaded holes on the platter surface. This helps prevent unfortunate platter-dropping accidents and keeps your mucky paw prints off the polished platter rim. Connect the power cable to the back panel socket and the turntable is ready to spin.

The LTA-309 tonearm presents no real difficulties in setup and fine tuning.² The arm is fully adjustable, with a wide height-adjustment range (for setting stylus rake angle), a rotatable headshell (to fine-tune azimuth), and a simple rotary dial for antiskating. For aligning the cartridge in the headshell, the manual says to use the old trick of measuring 52mm from the back of the headshell collar's rubber washer to the stylus tip. That will give you an alignment close to Stevenson, but to a fussy setup guy like me, it seems to lack precision. I used an Acoustical Systems SMARtractor alignment protractor to adjust the arm more precisely.

The tonearm comes with a standard counterweight suitable for cartridges weighing up to 10gm, while a heavier weight—part number OPPD-HW2—is available as an option for cartridges that weigh between 9gm and 19gm. I used two cartridges during the review, an Ortofon Cadenza Blue and Luxman's own LMC-5, and found the standard weight suitable for both. Luxman provided an extra headshell, the OPPD SH2, which allowed me to switch easily between the Ortofon and Luxman cartridges with minimal recalibration.

The OPPD-DSC151 dustcover is offered as an optional extra; at nearly \$800, I guess it's nice that Luxman gives you the option of

² However, I was puzzled by Luxman's decision to provide no alignment tools; perhaps they assume your dealer will do the setup, or that you or your setup guy will have their own tools.

going without it if your budget is tight. That's a lot of money for a dustcover, but you get what you pay for: This beautiful, thick, crystal-clear cover really completes the package visually. To install it, unscrew two plates on the back of the turntable and replace them with the two hinge brackets provided with the dustcover. The cover then slips easily into place.

Performance

Willy DeVille is probably best known for his late '70s, early '80s band Mink DeVille, but it's his debut solo album *Miracle* (A&M SP 5177) that floats my boat. Recorded in England by Mark Knopfler and an all-star cast, the album sounds a bit like Dire Straits if they had made an album of bluesy American rock. One standout track is "Assassin of Love," which, through the MkII with the LMC-5 cartridge installed, sounded tonally vivid and three-dimensional with a soundstage that was wide and deep but tidy. Willy's voice was right up front and center, far more dynamic than a typical rock vocal track. The MkII kept everything sounding smooth and clear.

Ray Brown's *Soular Energy* (Concord Jazz CJ-278) is one of those jazz albums that sounds impressive on just about any system. Perhaps for that reason, I find it to be a good benchmark. Ray's definitely the boss here; every twang, pluck, and thwack on his stand-up bass will get your speakers pumping. Comparing the MkII to the vastly more expensive SME Model 30/2A may seem unfair, but it allowed me to zero in on the differences. The Luxman couldn't quite match the tautness and bottom end slam of the big SME, but it more than held its own in most other areas.

As a kid, I spent many years living in England, which may explain why I have such a fondness for the Lyrita Recorded Edition label and their deep dives into more obscure 20th century English music. One of my favorites is Walter Leigh's *Concertino for Harp-*

sichord and String Orchestra (Lyrita SRCS 126), which juxtaposes harpsichord, which by 1936 (when the piece was composed) was pretty much forgotten, with a thoroughly modern (circa 1936) compositional setting.

Sonically, this record provides a rich contrast in tonal textures, the sharp bite of Trevor Pinnock's harpsichord set against the lush sweep of the London Philharmonic Orchestra's strings. In contrast to baroque harpsichord music, Leigh's composition calls for plenty of sustained chords, which can be a torture test for a turntable's speed stability. On the PD-151, the chords never wavered and were always perfectly in tune, while the transient attack of the harpsichord was clean, clear, and fast, never becoming etched or edgy.

Between the two cartridges, I found that the Ortofon's slightly lean bass best suited the Luxman's character, while the richer sounding LMC-5 provided a more relaxed presentation, with a little added bloom around the string players' pizzicato.

Summing up

There's a funny *New Yorker* cartoon by Alex Gregory in which a man is showing his friend his vinyl-based stereo and says, "The two things that really drew me to vinyl were the expense and the inconvenience." If that's how you feel, the PD-151 MK II may not be the right turntable for you. Turntables can be a bit diva-like, sounding off some days and demanding attention and tweaking. The PD-151 MK II is the opposite of that. And while it isn't exactly cheap, it's affordable by current hi-fi standards, and it is convenient and easy to live with. Once you have it set up and dialed in, you can expect it to be about as unfussy and long-lasting as turntables come. It just plays your records superbly, without fuss, bother, or artificial pizzazz. It looks beautiful, feels beautiful, and is beautifully made; but most importantly, it also sounds beautiful. ■