

Luxman LMC-5 Phono Cartridge | REVIEW



There's a saying among high-end audio reviewers: "*They don't need reviews.*" This saying usually pops up when a writer is interested in a certain brand or product, considers reaching out, and is told by a publisher or an editor that a review is unlikely. In some cases, the brand has been burned before by shoddy or uncomplimentary reviews. In others, the manufacturer has discovered that good reviews aren't necessary for sales because the products already enjoy great word-of-mouth. In Luxman's case, business has been so good that they haven't been able to get enough review samples out to everyone who wants one. That's why I feel particularly lucky that I've received the new Luxman LMC-5 phono cartridge, the **company's first in 40 years**, in for review.

Words and Photos by **Marc Phillips**

When I first joined *Part-Time Audiophile* full-time back in 2018, one of my first reviews was for the Luxman **LX-380 integrated amplifier**. I was thrilled to do it—I've been a Luxman fan for some time. (I even owned, up until recently, a vintage R-1040 receiver from the '70s.) I said to myself, "this is great! I'll be able to review all of these

Luxman products I've been coveting." I loved the LX-380, gave it a rave review, and then sent it back. If I knew it would be close to five years before I had a chance to review another Luxman, I might've purchased the LX-380 and kept it around as a reference. I was foolish enough to think I'd be able to try all the Luxman amps over time and pick the one I loved the best.

At **AXPONA 2023** back in April, I visited the Luxman America room and reported on the new PD-191A turntable, which was fitted with the new \$2,695 Luxman LMC-5 phono cartridge. As usual, I tried to conclude my visit with a sheepish pitch to review anything they wanted me to review, and Sue Toscano of Toscano Communications mentioned this to the exhibitors and they thought they might have an extra LMC-5 floating around somewhere. Before you know it, I was handed the tiny box with the cartridge inside.

Finally, I had my Luxman to review. It even fit easily into my carry-on bag.



Inside the Luxman LMC-5

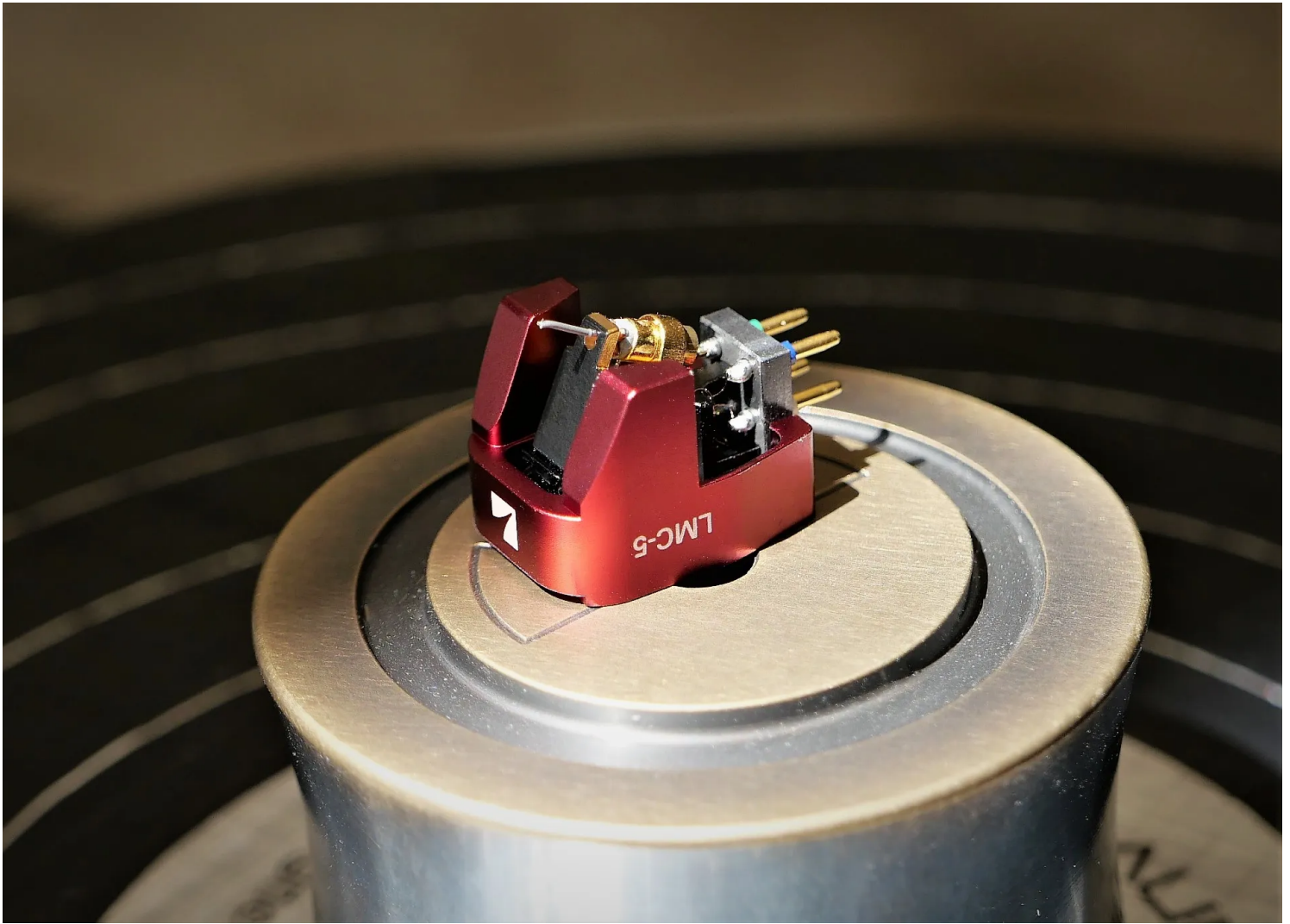
The first question I asked after the folks from Luxman **America** handed me the Luxman LMC-5 was whether this phono cartridge was made for them by another company. OEM, after all, is extremely common with carts, with most of the engines sourced by one of only a handful of companies. In many cases, the manufacturer takes an

existing design and adds a new body, or perhaps places a couple of strategic dabs of adhesive for additional damping. In Luxman's case, the LMC-5 was designed and built from scratch by two Luxman engineers, Mr. Hagiwara and Mr. Nagatsuma.

The first thing you'll notice with the Luxman LMC-5 MC phono cartridge is that beautiful, unique body, which is made from a solid piece of Aluminum 6068. That unique shape is created as an alternative to a box-like body, which Luxman equates to "putting a microphone in a tunnel." In addition, the shape of the cartridge body is designed for superior visibility—mounting the cartridge and using a protractor for proper alignment is unusually easy, as is lowering the stylus onto the correct grooves. One more benefit from the shape of this cartridge is those body extensions that flank the stylus, which are designed to prevent damage to the stylus during a calamity such as a clumsily executed cue.

The prime objective of the unusual body shape, of course, was to reduce resonances, and the Luxman team spent a lot of time perfecting the shape until everyone was satisfied with the results. What's remarkable is that this form-follows-function approach resulted in a drop-dead gorgeous cartridge, featured in a deep red color that's inspired by the Luxman logo.

The Luxman LMC-5 uses a diamond stylus with a Shibata profile, with an aluminum cantilever that was chosen for its neutral sound. Luxman found materials like boron, ruby and sapphire to add an "accentuated, hi-fi sound." The coils are four-nines copper, with the number of coil turns kept secret. The output of the Luxman LMC-5 is 0.4mV.



Set-Up

You know what? It's a truly wonderful experience mounting and aligning a phono cartridge that has been designed for easy mounting and alignment. It's easy to hold and grip the body of the LMC-5 while tightening the screws, and having the screws set into the threaded inserts in the cartridge body is, in my humble opinion, always the way to go. The cantilever, needless to say, does stick way out. But the way the body is shaped, it doesn't seem nearly as precarious as some I've dealt with over the last couple of years. I had the Luxman LMC-5 installed on my **Pear Audio Blue Kid Howard** turntable and Cornet2 arm in no time, and I didn't need to go back and fiddle with the fine-tuning for longer than an afternoon. I sat down and started listening, and I never looked back.

The recommended tracking force on the Luxman LMC-5 is 2.1 to 2.3 grams, with 2.2g designated as "standard." I wound up settling in with 2.12-2.15g—this is a cartridge where small adjustments in tracking force result in bigger than average gains in overall sound.

I had the Luxman LMC-5 in my reference system for quite some time—it's one of the few components that remained in the system during my move to my new house. That means, of course, that the LMC-5 partnered up with many components, although the Pear Audio Blue rig was a constant—with one brief exception. (More on that later.) I used the **Allnic Audio H-6500** phono preamplifier about 75% of the time, with my reference Pureaudio Vinyl filling in during various transitions from one side of Oregon to the other.



Luxman LMC-5 Sound

The first LP I played with the Luxman LMC-5 phono cartridge was the new Jazz Detective reissue of Chet Baker's *Blue Room*, which chronicles two different 1979 sessions in VARA Studio 2 in The Netherlands. The very first word that came to mind was "delicate," and not just because Baker's singing voice is always pitched higher than you expect. The delicacy that I heard was more aligned with the mystique of Japanese cartridges, the Koetsus and the Kisekis and their handmade brethren, where you hear a tonality that draws you in and makes you wonder if this is merely different, or specifically *right* and you're hearing it for the first time.

At the same time, the Luxman LMC-5 was never lightweight in balance, nor were the dynamics restrained. This is a cartridge that pulls you in, as I mentioned, and makes you point your finger at random locations within the soundstage to identify all the amazing things going on. But there is an underlying sweetness to the tone, an easy charm that remained intact throughout the break-in period.

Over time, that *mystique* developed into something more natural and relaxed and life-like. This is far from a bright cartridge, but it never comes off as soft or rolled-off. There's plenty of detail but it's teamed with a lovely tonality that blossoms into the type of sound where you develop a close personal relationship with it and the next thing you know you have expectations based on that deepening bond-like "this is good, but I gotta hear this on the

Luxman before I can know for sure.” That seems quite unusual for a cartridge under \$3K, much less one that is the first from the manufacturer in 40 years.

The more time I spent with the Luxman LMC-5 phono cartridge, the more I realized that I catered to my very specific tastes. It’s warm and smooth without compromising on inner detail. (I tend to mention this trait often during my reviews, because it’s something that creates an enthusiasm within me.) There’s a romantic sweep to the sound that I find mesmerizing, and very much reminiscent of those Koetsu cartridges I used to own. I often pull out that word *mystique* when I mention my old Koetsus, because it reminds me that music may contain many secrets that it’s more than willing to reveal—if you’re paying attention. The Luxman LMC-5 stirred up many of those old and cherished impressions.



Listening Sessions

After so much time with the **Audio Note UK** analog rig, it was interesting to suddenly switch back to my reference, one that’s only been in place for about a year. In other words, the Pear Audio Blue Kid Howard turntable with the Cornet 2 tonearm can still sound new and unfamiliar to me if I haven’t heard them in a while. Compared to the Audio Note UK rig, the Kid Howard is quieter and more relaxed and open, while the AN gear had more energy and drive. I like both ‘tables almost equally, however, because their similarities are greater in number than their

differences. They are, after all, both based on classic British designs—SystemDek for the AN and Nottingham for the Kid Howard.

It might seem that the Luxman LMC-5 cartridge, when mounted on the Kid Howard 'table, might represent too much of a good thing. Both the cartridge and the turntable/arm combo are so calm and poised that I was afraid the pairing might lack the same energy that was so welcome and, eventually, taken for granted during the Audio Note system review. My instincts were incorrect, however—the Luxman LMC-5 on the Pear Audio Blue rig did not double down on the richness. In fact, I preferred the Luxman's sound on the Kid Howard over the Audio Note UK TT-Two Deluxe turntable and Arm Three/II tonearm—which was auditioned briefly—since the LMC-5 subtracted from the classic tonality of the Audio Note gear. That's not the Luxman's fault; Audio Note UK gear, as I've concluded, always sounds better together.

Back to the main system configuration—the Luxman LMC-5 with the Kid Howard. Despite using some bookshelf monitors with plenty of *oomph* such as the **Piega Coax 411**, the **Aretai Contra 100s** and the **Gershman Acoustics Studio XdB**, the Luxman still prodded me to choose musical selections that maintained a relaxed inner glow. For instance, I've been obsessing with Sarasate's *Carmen Fantasy* from Hilary Hahn's *Eclipse* LP, playing it far more often than any other track in my current LP rotation. With the LMC-5 in the mix, this piece kept flinging me capriciously into the world of daydreams because it evoked so many memories of long ago, back to when Bizet first presented *Carmen* to the world. If your hi-fi doesn't open windows into history for you, it's not doing its job.

Speaking of hypnotic tracks, is there a finer Svengali in modern music than "Yulunga"? In this case, I'm not even going to talk about my Yulunga Test from Dead Can Dance's *Into the Labyrinth*, where I wait for the first soft beat of the bass drum to assess a system's lowest frequencies. Believe it or not, I kept missing that aural cue because I was under a spell and kept losing track of time. (I don't want to say anything corny like "the Luxman LMC-5 cast a spell on me," but I do want to point out that listening to it is an excellent way to vanquish stress at the end of a difficult day.)

I'm not bringing up my sometimes controversial POV that I like it when music makes me fall asleep—**Scot Hull** once told me that some manufacturers might think I'm calling their product boring—but here's a surprise. As relaxing and mesmerizing as the balance of the Luxman LMC-5 could be, it didn't make me zone out into a blubbery state of mind. I didn't fall asleep. Instead, I feel deep into the music and started deconstructing it in a complete non-analytical way. I followed specific musical threads, themes and instruments to their logical conclusions.

You might walk into the room and see me in my listening chair, looking like I'm taking a nap. You might even call my name and I won't respond. But time after time I found myself focused, concentrating deeply on the music, with the LMC-5 in the record grooves. Just because I'm slumped over in my chair doesn't mean I'm not in the sweet spot.



Luxman LMC-5 Conclusions

There are two distinct reasons to get excited about the Luxman LMC-5 phono cartridge. First, it's only \$2,695. Some of you may not consider this to be a great value, probably because you still remember how shocked we were when phono cartridges started crossing the \$2,500 threshold back in the '90s, but in this day and age the Luxman is definitely mid-priced. Second, Luxman could have doubled the price and I'd still be talking about its incredible value.

In fact, the Luxman LMC-5 reminds me of my Transfiguration Axia cartridge, which has been waiting patiently for a re-tip for a few years. (Transfiguration is no longer in business.) The Axia cost \$2,495 at the time I bought it, and it was the entry-level model in the line, and yet nothing was entry-level about the sound. I feel the same way about this Luxman. There is no evidence of any design compromises or cut corners—it seems like a pure expression of the Luxman philosophy.

I've heard rumors that the Luxman LMC-5 is planning to expand their phono cartridge line, and I'll be curious to see if they go upwards or downwards in scale. This mirrors my experience with Hana cartridges in particular, that if they can build so much cartridge for a reasonable amount of money, what can they accomplish at the \$5K or \$10K price point? Then again, I think of the Luxman LMC-5 as a gift to audiophiles who feel discouraged when

they see the price of today's high-end, five-figure cartridges and wonder if they'll ever find anything truly special within their budget.

Here it is, folks, made by a legendary audio company that, after so many decades, is better than they've ever been. The LMC-5 is such a mature and successful design that you wonder why Luxman waited until now to bring back the Luxman phono cartridge. It just makes so much sense. Highly recommended.

