

# Luxman MQ-300

High price, low power – Luxman bucks the trend with the ultra-retro MQ-300 all-valve amplifier, a glorious, modern take on traditional Japanese purist amplification  
Review: **Ken Kessler** Lab: **Paul Miller**

It's appropriate in this anniversary year for the now-nonagenarian Luxman to look to its past, and – indeed – high-end audio's earlier ventures. No, make that 'Japanese audio's earlier ventures', because the MQ-300 celebrates a cult that started in Japan before travelling to the rest of the planet. As one who noisily opposed the single-ended triode's lack of useable power, the oft-fat bass and the typical fragility of the main practitioners' creations – I am perhaps not the ideal candidate to review the MQ-300.

## HOMAGE TO THE 1980s

And yet... I respect and even covet Luxman products so much – and have since the 1960s – that Editor PM must rightly have assumed I would be even-handed in dealing with an amp offering one of the worst £/W ratios of any to grace the pages of *HFN*. Look at the maths: £15,000 for 2x8W/ch equals £937.50 per watt. Although a bargain compared to an Audio Note Ongaku, value-for-money is clearly not the MQ-300's role in life.

Paying homage to the MB-300 monoblock of 1984, the MQ-300 uses the same period circuit and a similarly-styled chassis to house two channels. Its back section contains three exquisitely attired transformers, with metalwork that would impress a collector of period Contarex or Rollei cameras. The visual impact of a brushed, 12mm-thick slab of aluminium on a rosewood frame identifies it immediately as Luxman (the rest of the structure includes a 1.6mm-thick steel chassis, with 2mm thick bottom board).

Also making reference to the MB-300, the heart of this amp is a single 300B per channel, but not a Western Electric. According to Luxman, the Takatsuki Electric Industry Co Ltd direct-heated TA-300B triode is the only tube still manufactured in Japan, which, given their impressive build

quality, automatically makes the MQ-300 an exemplar of peace-of-mind.

As for the rest of the tube complement, Luxman has fitted two Sovtek 5AR4s as the rectifiers, with four Tung-Sol 6SN7GTBs for voltage amplification. The valves sit in the most impressive tube bases I can recall – ceramic with a floating suspension (a urethane gasket material called PORON).

In keeping with the elevated price of this amplifier, probably aimed at Japanese connoisseurs and global Lux-ophiles, the parts are carefully selected and the amplifier bound up with point-to-point hard wiring. The recipe includes proprietary oil-filled capacitors and Dale non-inductive metal-clad resistors in the output stages.

At the back are superlative multi-way binding posts which accept large spade connectors, with separate taps for 4, 8 and 16ohm loads – Luxman rates this as 8W/ch into all three loads. Input is strictly via RCA phonos, but I wonder what balanced XLRs might do for it?

Because of the power requirements, I was unable to use my Wilson Alexias [*HFN* Mar '13], and the KEF LS50s [*HFN* Jul '12] were only suitable for medium level (yet

acceptable) playback, just loud enough to allow for critical listening.

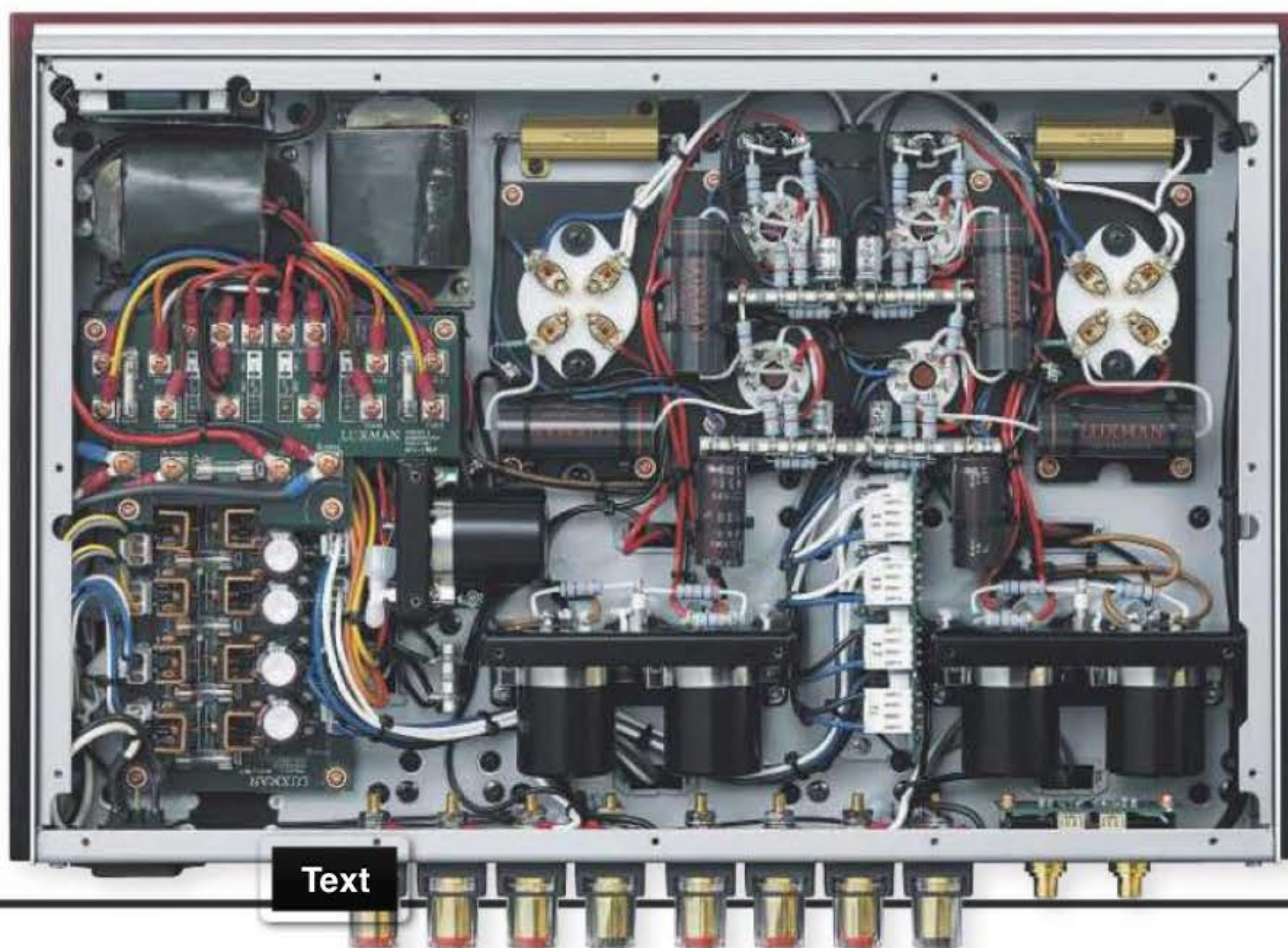
As there are no horns in my arsenal, I used an array of LS3/5As and, crucially, original Quad ESLs. The biggest surprise was the sound through the MartinLogan Motion 15s, which, at circa 92dB/1W sensitivity, positively sang with the MQ-300. As older readers know, I was never a fan of single-ended triodes, whether 300B-equipped or not, because of the power issues. Neither, though, am I a headbanger, and I maintain that – by my own preferences – all of the greatest amplifiers I've ever heard are under 100W/ch, some as low as 15W/ch (aah, Radford...).

## SEDUCED IN MINUTES

It was though, I must admit, difficult adjusting to this amplifier for review. I would imagine an automotive journalist, spoiled with supercars, would feel the same being handed the keys to a vehicle with a 600cc engine.

But I learned that prejudice is a dangerous thing, in spite of my own hidebound biases that are too late to change. So instantly lush and downright

**RIGHT:** The pristine underbelly of the MQ-300 reveals PCB-mounted power supplies and hard-wired tube circuits. Note the bases of the single-ended, cathode-biased TA-300B triodes



Text





gorgeous is the sound, that within only two minutes of switch-on, I was seduced irredeemably by the Luxman MQ-300, despite its SET status. It was as uncharacteristic a romance as I can imagine, but then, this is for me all about sound quality.

While my points score in the verdict [p47] might seem low, it's only because we must factor in value, and no amount of purple prose can obscure, let alone alter, the implications of nearly a thousand quid per watt.

As none of you wants to read about buying something simply because it's also an *objet d'art*, and as £15,000 will buy you a real sculpture, please do not think I'm being an apologist for Luxman. I simply want to stress that you need a completely different set of criteria for this product. For the same money, hundreds of other

companies make £15k amps that will drive any speaker on earth.

The romance began with an album I have in both CD and LP formats, to ensure that what I was hearing was the Luxman's own 'personality'. The choice was made easy because the CD was in the player from a previous listening session. 'Rock The Boat' by The Hues Corporation [*The Very Best of The Hues Corporation*, Camden 74321 603422 (CD); and *Freedom For The Stallion*, RCA APL 1-0323

(LP)] has become a touchstone for me because it oozes with the clean, high-tech sound of post-digital recordings, yet it is completely analogue in origin.

The mix of voices and strings, the proto-disco emphasis on the beat, the harmonies – it's become a quickie method

'The MQ-300 is to mainstream amps what a Purdey rifle is to an Uzi'

**ABOVE:** Instantly imposing, the MQ-300 avoids every cliché by having no flaws: perfect finish, top-quality tubes, superior terminals – even the on/off button screams 'luxury'

for me to ensure a valid initial impression. Swoon... if ever a sound deserved to be described as 'sexy', the MQ-300 has it.

As much as I admire it here – the silkiness, the lack of aggression without a loss of punch – too much of it would be a case of recidivism, to the saccharine, overly gushy, detail-obscuring sound of old-school SETs and wonky 300Bs, and other devices that served only to make similarly old-school horns sound tolerable rather than screechy. But two wrongs don't make a right, and the only *raison d'être* I ever found for SETs was driving Quad ESL-57s.

#### A SINGING DUO

OMG!, as the texting illiterati would gush. The '57s are as bass-shy as can be, *sans* modification, and mine aren't modded, so one is predisposed toward not expecting much mass. Shock! Horror! The pairing of the MQ-300 with Quad's electrostatic was one of those magical couplings to rank with Audio Research/Magnepan or Krell/Apogee three decades ago. I kid you not, for despite sounding nothing like a Quad II, the Luxman made the '57s sing.

It was the smoothness of the strings that made the sound so alluring. I know one shouldn't trade detail or precision for pure euphony, but age dictates otherwise, just as I drink red with fish because I hate white wine. (There. I've said it!) I loved the Luxman/Quad pairing because it is ➔



#### TRIODE TUNES

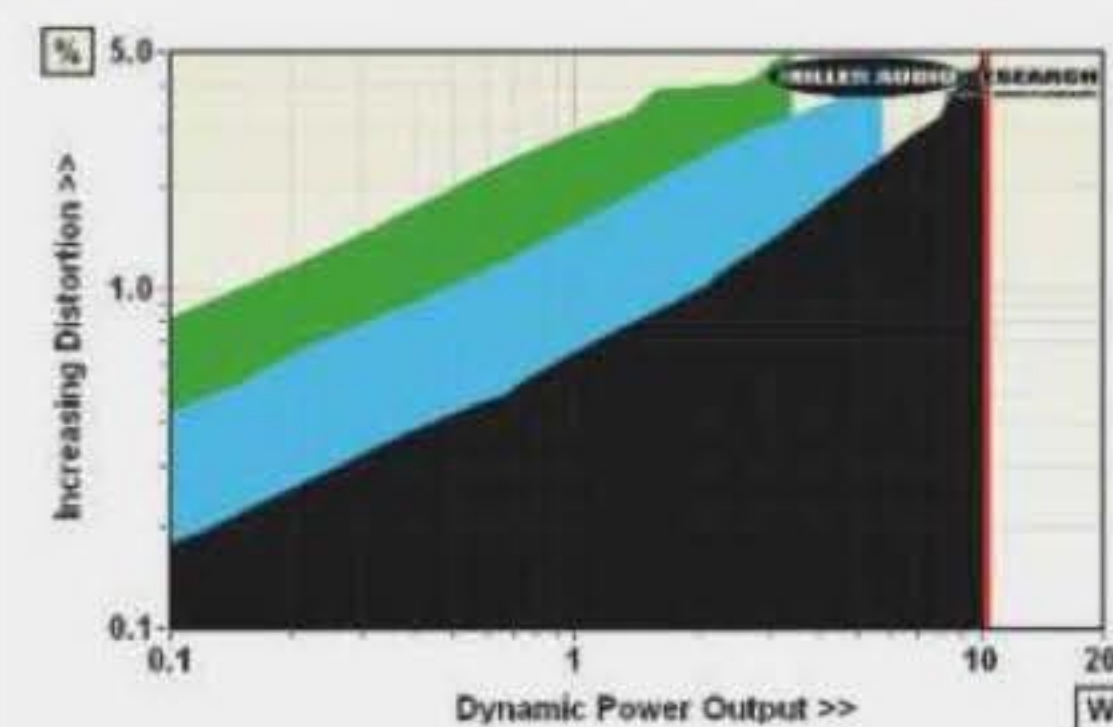
Horns 'n' triodes and I do not get along. By that, I mean their Western cultists. For the Japanese, it was a phenomenon that was once explained to me to indicate that a foreign listener could not grasp the cultural significance any more than a vegetarian could comprehend the French love for *steak tartare*. In the USA, the UK and Europe, it attracted a very vocal fringe, with neither practical nor sonic justification in my view. High-sensitivity horns were merely the enablers. Anti-establishment? Perhaps, but its poster children would habitually prefer anything just because it wasn't mainstream. At the pinnacle were the Japanese-made offerings, preferred because of their superiority in every way to occidental offerings. In 50 years as an audiophile, though, I can count on one hand the Single-Ended Triodes (SETs) I would actually like to own – Air Tight, Wavac and the like. And this Luxman is one of them.



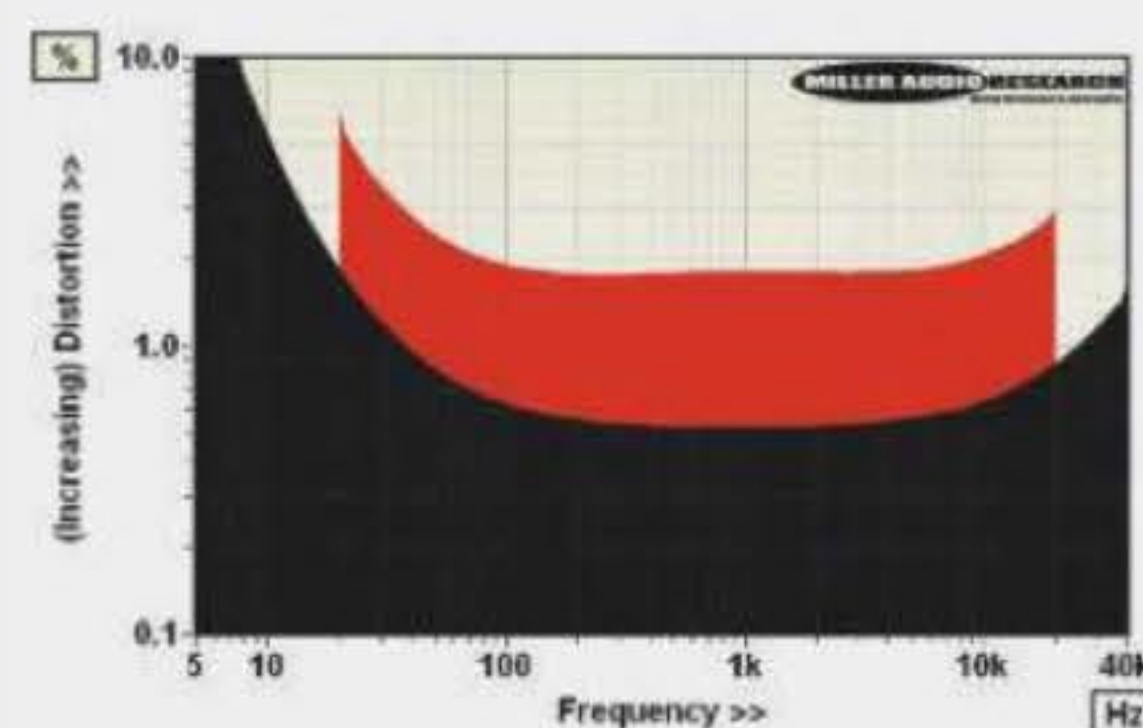
## LUXMAN MQ-300

Regular readers will remember our review of Luxman's L-590AXII [HFN Apr '16] whose 30W/8ohm and 60W/4ohm specification turned out, in practice, rather closer to 2x95W and 2x165W into 8/4ohm. And this time around with the 8W/4-16ohm MQ-300? In this case, Luxman's specification for a single-ended 300B triode amp is pretty accurate provided we 'relax' the distortion limit somewhat: the MQ-300's distortion scales with output from 0.2%/0.1W, 0.65%/1W, 1%/2W, 1.5%/4W to 3% at the rated 8W/8 & 4ohm and then to 4.5% at 10W/8 & 4ohm. This is clear enough from the output profiles into 8ohm (8ohm tap), 4ohm, 2ohm and 1ohm loads (all 4ohm tap) which describe the behaviour of the amp under both continuous and dynamic conditions [see Graph 1, below]. Power is evidently low and the maximum current is under 2A, but the design boasts a low residual noise of -70dBV and a gratifyingly wide A-wtd S/N of 95.4dB (re. 0dBW). So while the MQ-300 is best suited to super-sensitive loudspeakers at least the quietest of notes will not be found floating on a carpet of noise...

The other sources of 'colour' include distortion which increases at both frequency extremes but most vigorously through the bass, from 1.75%/1kHz/5W to 1.9%/100Hz, 2.5%/50Hz and 6.3%/20Hz [see red trace, Graph 2 below], and 6.5%/10Hz/1W [black trace] where the MQ-300's response peaks slightly at +1dB before rolling off to -3dB/6Hz and -10dB/4Hz. The amp/speaker system response rather depends on the value and uniformity of the speaker's impedance trend as the MQ-300's source impedance hovers between 2.1-2.7ohm (20Hz-20kHz) via its 8ohm tap. Into a 'flat' load, the response rolls-off in the treble to -1.5dB/20kHz and -13.4dB/100kHz. PM



ABOVE: Dynamic power versus distortion into 8ohm (black trace), 4ohm (red), 2ohm (cyan) and 1ohm (green) speaker loads. Maximum current is just 1.9A



ABOVE: Distortion vs. frequency from 5Hz-40kHz (1W/8ohm, black) and 20Hz-20kHz (5W/8ohm, red)

## HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Power output (<5% THD, 8/4ohm)	10W / 10W
Dynamic power (<5% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)	10W / 10.5W / 5.8W / 3.5W
Output impedance (20Hz-20kHz)	2.1-2.65ohm
Freq. response (20Hz-20kHz/100kHz)	+0.5dB to -1.5dB/-13.4dB
Input sensitivity (for 0dBW/8W)	154mV / 450mV
A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBW/8W)	95.4dB / 104.4dB
Distortion (20Hz-20kHz re. 5W/8ohm)	1.8-6.3%
Power consumption (Idle/Max. o/p)	120W / 120W
Dimensions (WHD) / Weight	460x237x340mm / 29kg



ABOVE: A lone set of single-ended inputs, on RCAs, are joined by loudspeaker outputs, on 4mm binding posts, via 4ohm, 8ohm and 16ohm transformer taps

as listenable as a decent Barbera is quaffable. But I will admit that I would have loved a pair of early Lowther Bicos 200s or elder Klipsch speakers to hand in order to test these mere 8W to their limits, yet the LS3/5As and MartinLogans, abetting the Quads, revealed what the next disc confirmed.

If, by now, you're tired of hearing about the grandeur of Harry Belafonte's sonic spectacular, *Belafonte Live At Carnegie Hall* [Analogue Productions CAPF6006SA SACD], my apologies. But, because it ranks with the *Casino Royale* soundtrack (the original, not the Daniel Craig version) and *Music For Bang, Baaroom And Harp* for sheer realism, it has now become my default listening tool.

The main quality – sublime performance notwithstanding – is the way it recreates the venue, and it is a fool-proof illustration for those new to audiophile jargon for understanding 'soundstage'.

### DISAPPEARING ACT

I have no idea what Carnegie Hall sounded like 60 years ago, but the actual location of singer-and-accompaniment is not the sole characteristic one wants to reproduce. For me, as important is the recreation of a clearly defined space within my own listening room, one that belies the room's actual dimensions and makes the speakers disappear. This the MQ-300 did, all the while retaining the impact of the famed percussion solo, the textures of Belafonte's voice, the sound of the audience...

Simply put, if you wish to hear the music with its full emotional impact, rather than a forensic dissection of the recording, the Luxman MQ-300 simply amplifies the signal in the most 'simpatico' way imaginable.

Which means that at the very worst, it is 'likeable'. But at its very best, as through the Quads, it simply sings (as I've said).

Due to the low power and insanely high price, this amplifier is targeted at a microscopically narrow slice of the market. Alas, I do not qualify as a customer because I do not tick any of the three boxes: a surfeit of money; abundant space; the perpetual usage of ultra-high sensitivity loudspeakers. And yet I am loath to see it go. That's because I fell in love with it after 15 seconds' worth of 'Rock The Boat'.

If you, on the other hand, are a profligate, nay, spendthrift horn user, or a high earner predisposed toward circa-1958 Goodmans or Wharfedale speakers with 3W-15W power handling ranges, this amplifier must leap-frog over all of those fire-risk alternatives from companies with two employees and one soldering iron between them. This is a *chef-d'oeuvre* of achingly specific purpose, but it is to mainstream amps what a Purdey rifle is to an Uzi. As I parcel-tape the box, I realise that I will miss it. Terribly. ☹

## HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

Despite its absurd gutlessness, I utterly adored the MQ-300. Yes, 8W limits it to the usual suspects, eg, horns and other high-sensitivity favourites, but the warmth and finesse will, for a certain type of listener, perform a rare service: provide the constructional security of a major manufacturer but with the refined sound of amps typified by minuscule cult brands. Luxman may just have pulled off a miracle!

Sound Quality: 80%



Text