

Luxman C-900u/M-900u

Still nursing his back from setting it up, our intrepid reviewer revels in Luxman's flagship high-end solid-state combination, the 900u-series stereo pre and power amplifiers

Review: **Ken Kessler** Lab: **Paul Miller**

Luxman is – deservedly – on a roll, thanks no doubt to the brand now being handled by IAG, also responsible for Quad. Indeed, *HFN* didn't have as many Luxman products to review in the previous two decades as in the past three years! This review of the C-900u preamp and M-900u power amp is in some ways a 'Part II', in that we reviewed the (slightly) smaller C-700u and M-700u pre/power combo back in Sept '15.

LUXMAN'S PERIOD FLAVOUR

Like the '700s, the C-900u preamp and M-900u power amp are part of the wave of retro-flavoured hardware that has captivated the big Japanese houses, including Technics [*HFN* Feb '15] and Yamaha [*HFN* Nov '13]. Many of these 'period-look' units eschew digitalia entirely, clearly championing analogue during a period of both vinyl and tape resurgence, though some brands incorporate DACs 'just in case', while also differing in whether or not to include a phono stage. As Luxman offers separate DACs and phono stages, there's no need to fit them internally [see also PM's 'Opinion' p103].

To put it another way, and not discounting the ultra-modern internal construction and circuitry, the primary nods to modernity are that the C-900u offers only line inputs and full-function remote control, with an informative display on the preamp, while the meters on the power amp are resolutely analogue. Otherwise, the pure essence is 'period', ie, circa-1975, so the inclusion of tone and balance controls on the preamplifier and styling for both units would not have shocked audiophiles 40 years ago.

Despite all-but-identical styling and only a 30W increase in specified power, the '700s did not prepare me for the '900s. The C-900u/M-900u duo is simply in another class, but it shares so much with

the smaller siblings. It's easier to list the '900's omissions – for example the C-900u preamp has dispensed with a tape monitor facility, thus removing one button (labelled 'Monitor' on the C-700u) from the front panel, although ample outputs will still allow users to hook up a tape recorder.

Otherwise, both preamplifiers provide pushbuttons for power-on, 'Line Straight' bypass mode, a choice of balanced or single-ended output modes and external preamp selection, with large rotaries to set the stepwise volume, input selection, bass, treble and balance.

Both of the preamplifiers' displays show level, input, loudness on/off (accessed via remote) and the assorted modes, eg, balanced or single-ended. A nice touch is

the 'zoom' function on the remote that increases the size of the numbers on the display to make the level (in dB) visible from across the room.

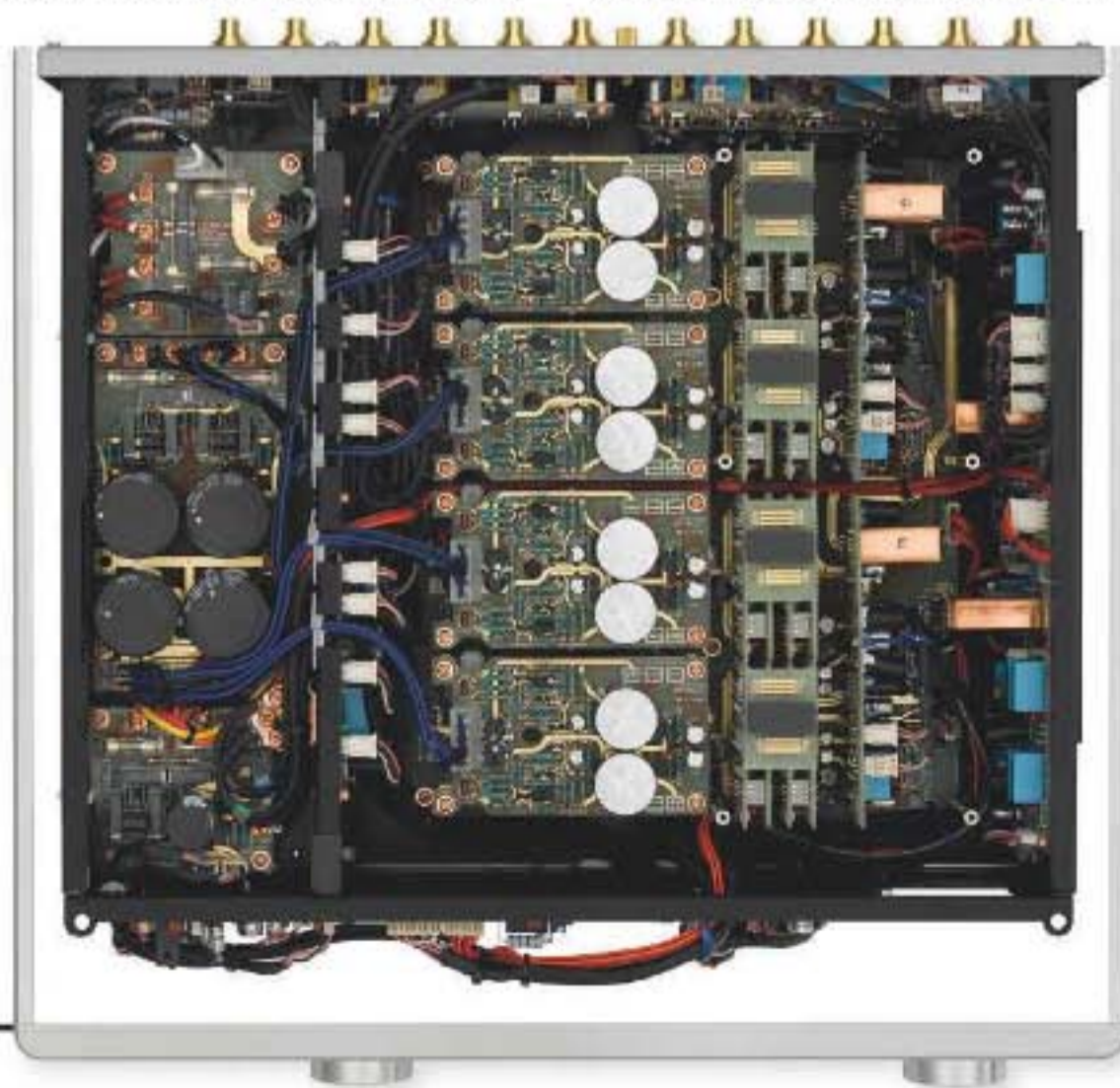
A WEIGHTY QUESTION

At the back, those differences are greater than on the front. While the C-700u pre

offered two sets of XLR inputs and five single-ended via RCAs, the C-900u changes that to three balanced and three single-ended, while – aside from the now-absent tape loop – both offer two sets

of balanced and single-ended outputs, an external preamp input for integrating with AV systems, earthing posts should you add an external phono stage for LP, and a couple of Ethernet remote comms ports.

'The new Luxman package sounds almost as tube-y as the MQ-300'



RIGHT: The C-900u's core circuitry is fully balanced and includes its LECUA 1000 volume control which switches banks of attenuators to achieve 1dB steps over a full 88dB range



LEFT: Two huge rotaries flank Luxman's display, governing input and volume as well as navigating through the set-up menu. Our lab tests show the power amp's analogue meters are calibrated with 0dB = 68W/8ohm [see p39]

bizarre to learn of someone using *three* – much as I love SACD. That said, my main listening was with a legacy Marantz DV-8300 SACD player, as well as LP via an SME Model 30/12 with Clearaudio Goldfinger MC [HFN Jan '15] into an EAT E-Glo phono stage. Speakers included the Wilson Alexias [HFN Mar '13], and KEF LS50s [HFN Jul '12], and for a real ear-opener, my 11ohm Spondor LS3/5As – more of which anon.

For the music diet, I went straight to 'Rock The Boat' by

Wattage, weight and dimensions separate the M-700u and M-900u power amps. The former is nominally rated at 120W/8ohm and the latter 150W/8ohm [see PM's Lab report, p39, for the real figures], while size and mass signal the fact Luxman has upped the ante from within: 440x190x427mm (whd) and 27.5kg, versus 440x224x485mm and 48kg.

I'm bound to say the latter gave me pause to question the need for this. I asked one engineer notorious for making products that should come with the loan of a crane, 'why are high-end amps now so absurdly heavy?'. He looked at me like the weakling that I am and said, 'Because the best transformers and casework and hardware make it so.' Thus silenced,

I suffered the task of unpacking the M-900u by myself, resorting to lateral thinking so as not to inflict any damage on the pristine amplifier, my back or my feet.

At the rear, the M-900u, like the M-700u, offers both single-ended and XLR-balanced inputs, remote power on/off via Ethernet, massive, multi-way binding posts – some of the best I've seen – and switchery for the mono bridging facility and balanced-mode polarity inversion. As with the preamps, the power-on rocker has been replaced with a small press button.

INSTANT SWEETNESS

Amusingly, the C-900u manual shows only SACD players as examples in the set-up diagram for sources, and I would find it

The Hues Corporation [*The Very Best Of The Hues Corporation*; Camden 74321 603422 (CD)], which was followed by Lou Rawls' *At Last* [Blue Note CDP 7 91937 2] and Detroit Emeralds' 'Feel The Need' [*Feel The Need*; Atlantic K50372 (LP)]. SACDs were Santana's *Abraxas* [Mobile Fidelity UDSACD 2152] and *Smiley Smile* by The Beach Boys [Analogue Productions CAPP 068SA].

My time with the Luxman combo took place after four major high-end hi-fi shows in five weeks, during which I heard so much astounding equipment – including this very combo at HFN's Hi-Fi Show Live [see HFN Dec '16] – that I felt as spoiled as a wine taster after a run of verticals. And yet... within seconds of hitting 'play', I was relieved of all the (audio) baggage.

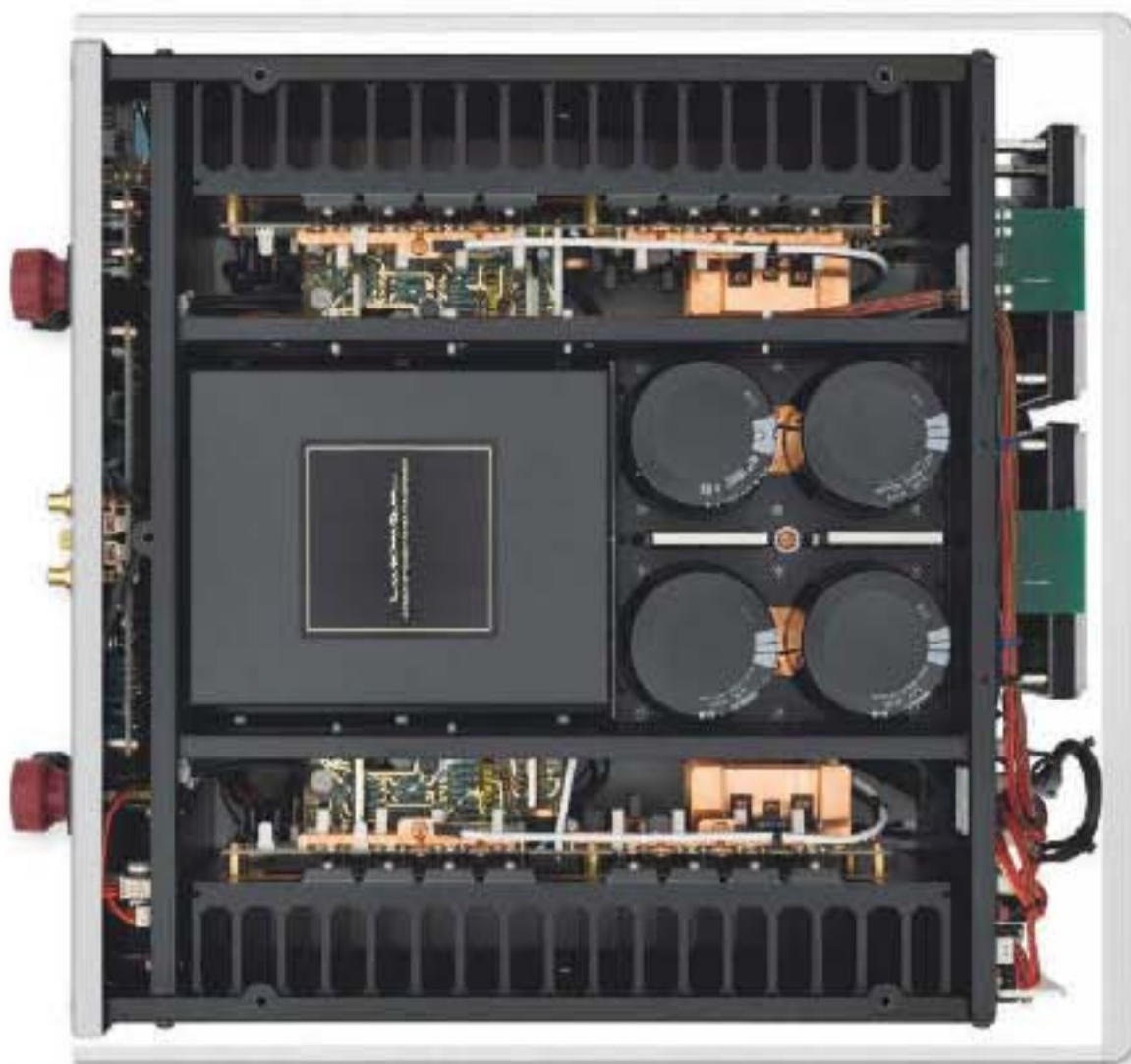
Having long ago decided never to listen to review equipment from cold, I had switched on the Luxman gear the day before I started my reviewing. It had cooked with a CD on repeat, so the validity of the first burst, as far as run-in was concerned, was assured. It was nothing short of chilling, especially as I had played 'Rock The Boat' so many times during the past 43 years that the total must be in the high hundreds.

At first, the sensation was disconcerting because this Luxman package has its own, unforeseen sonic signature, for it sounds almost as tube-y as the MQ-300, but with 25 times the wattage and a far more clearly-delineated bass. While the track isn't particularly overripe down below, it

LUXMAN'S LISTINGS

When I said Luxman was on a roll, I didn't just mean the hyperactivity of attending every hi-fi show, because its catalogue is bursting at the seams with everything from low-power, extreme high-end valve amps to a selection of cables and accessories. Delightfully, Luxman references much of its output to its rich past, and even the limited selection offered outside of Japan includes four solid-state integrateds, two preamps and three power amps (one, the M-200m is a 2x25W 'mini'), three SACD players, two headphone amps and two DACs. While the C-900u/M-900u combination – the lack of an internal DAC aside – represents the company's solid-state ideal, Luxman produces ample valve-ware to seduce me, not least the recently-reviewed MQ-300 stereo amp [HFN Nov '15] and the KT88-equipped MQ-88, both suitable for the CL-38u preamp which reeks of classic Luxman design. Given the line-only nature of the C-900u/M-900u, analogue has not been forgotten, as Luxman imports two record decks and two phono stages into the UK, and one is all-valve. Respect? You better believe it.

PRE/POWER AMPLIFIER



ABOVE: Four pairs of high-current output transistors are mounted on both the M-900u's left/right channel heatsinks and supplied via Luxman's 'Ultimate Efficiency Power Transformer' – an EI type with flat, square-shaped copper windings, rated at a substantial 1250VA

is a dance track – all-analogue, pre-disco funk minus the swagger of, say, Earth Wind & Fire or Parliament.

DAZZLING SEAMLESSNESS

How schizoid can it get? Here we have cool, loping bass, gorgeous harmonies, whucka-whucka guitar, punchy brass and, soaring above it all, strings that wouldn't shame the sound for a classical-only purist if heard via Quad ESL-57s – sweet enough to worry your dentist and warm enough to place a lump in your throat.

'Feel The Need' is more of the same, but with richer, more Motown-y vocals and stronger drum

activity. Moving to vinyl, the strings grew even sweeter, but the saccharine never intruded because the '900s possess such balance, with true equanimity from top to bottom that it always seemed of a whole.

It was this seamlessness that dazzled so much. Sure, the detail was as painstakingly retrieved as a macro shot taken with an Alfa while spatial concerns were genuinely panoramic, but the coherence overruled

any notions of wallowing in forensic listening. With sheer hedonism steering me toward simply listening for the sheer joy of it, the Editor's voice hectored me through some form of astral projection, dragging me back down to earth. And to the reviewing task...

Thanks to a double-dose of disco, I was drawn to mixed percussion irrespective of the rest of any chosen recording: Santana's

'Oye Como Va' did the trick, with the congas, woodblocks, guiro scraper and other paraphernalia. But then how weak could it possibly sound through a pair of Alexias? About as weak as Hulk Hogan,

for here the weight, the power, the flow, all conspired to make my feet tap – critical listening be damned! And that is as high a compliment as one can pay.

However, something possessed me to do something stupid. Here I was with enough power to eviscerate the poor things, but the LS3/5As were sitting there, and I am not averse to audio perversity. (Hey, I love Decca Golds after all!) But

'The weight, the power, the flow, all conspired to make my feet tap'

TATSUYA SUEYOSHI

Tatsuya Sueyoshi, Executive Officer at Luxman Corporation, kindly provided us with a glimpse of what is in store for the brand.

'Luxman is a company of great tradition' he reminds us, 'and our intention is to continue to draw on our heritage to make high-quality audio components that uphold our values in terms of performance, design and build quality, to bring pleasure our customers. There is still plentiful demand for high-quality audio components around the world. Customers rightly demand exceptional quality and that is what we are determined to give them.'

Asked which is Luxman's favoured direction for the future, Sueyoshi-san replies 'Classic technologies like vinyl, valves and Class A amplifiers remain important parts of our high-end future. I can reveal that in 2017 we will strengthen our current line-up with a particular focus on new integrated amplifiers.'

Globalisation has enabled the audiophiles' access to a world of diverse products, so how does Japan's home market compare to those of the USA and the UK? Are regional differences still important?

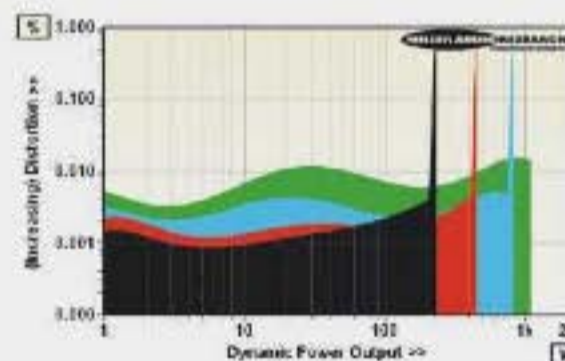
'As you know, we make a wide range of products for music lovers and, of course, sales patterns can differ from region to region. For example, UK customers have a particular taste for our solid-state amplifiers, both integrateds and pre/power separates. But Luxman customers are really not so different around the world and we will continue to strive to make products that meet their demands.'



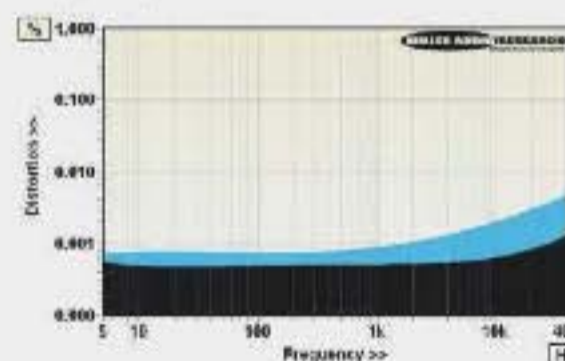
LUXMAN C-900U/M-900U

Fitted with Luxman's sophisticated LECLUA 1000 stepped attenuator (eleven 1dB steps in series with eight 10dB steps), the C-900u's calibrated volume is accurate to within $\pm 0.05\text{dB}$ over the top 60dB of its range and $\pm 0.3\text{dB}$ between -60dB and -80dB (muting is activated at -87dB). This is where the C-900u parts company with the C-700u however, for the former is a far lower coloration design offering a very low and uniform 0.0005-0.0008% THD from 5Hz-20kHz [see Graph 2, below] with a maximum 27V output from a reduced 85ohm source impedance. Gain (balanced in/out) is $+11.8\text{dB}$ and the A-wtd S/N ratio is improved by 2-3dB at 99dB (re. 0dBV) while the response is flatter at $-0.1\text{dB}/20\text{kHz}$ to $-2.3\text{dB}/100\text{kHz}$ versus $-0.2\text{dB}/20\text{kHz}$ and $-4.3\text{dB}/100\text{kHz}$ for the C-700u [MFV Sept '15]. This falls to $-3.8\text{dB}/100\text{kHz}$ with the tone circuit engaged.

The partnering M-900u power amp has -1dB points of 2Hz-48kHz (falling to a not unreasonable $-3.7\text{dB}/100\text{kHz}$) while the 0.012ohm output impedance, rising to 0.04ohm/20kHz, will only cause a further variation in response with the toughest/most undulating of speaker loads. Gain is appropriate at $+28.7\text{dB}$ (balanced input) while distortion is also very low at 0.0007-0.0009% from 20Hz-1kHz and rises only very gently to 0.003%/20kHz (at 10W/8ohm). Distortion also only increases mildly with output to 0.0025%/100W and 0.003% at the rated 150W/8ohm. In practice the M-900u's power output is more substantial, reaching 2x212W and 2x380W into 8 and 4ohm, increasing to 230W, 450W and 825W into 8, 4 and 2ohm loads under dynamic conditions. Protection limits its output to 1.09kW/1ohm or 33A, but this should be sufficient to drive any likely partnering loudspeaker [see Graph 1, below]. PM



ABOVE: Dynamic power output versus distortion into 8ohm (black trace), 4ohm (red), 2ohm (blue) and 1ohm (green). Protection limits current at 33A



ABOVE: THD vs. extended frequency; C-900u (1V XLR out, black trace) versus M-900u (10W/8ohm, blue)



ABOVE: The preamp (top) offers six line inputs (three on RCA, three balanced on XLR) together with an external preamp input, and four line outputs (two each on RCA and XLR). The power amp (below) has huge 4mm speaker posts plus balanced and single-ended (RCA) inputs. The M-900u can be bridged as a mono amplifier

that's how I managed to hook up the Luxmans to a speaker that shudders at the thought of 25W forced into it, like corn on its way to becoming *foie gras*.

Miraculously, in 35 years of using them, I have never blown a driver in an LS3/5A, either by accidents with amps going nuclear or with irresponsible use of the loud pedal. I hooked 'em up, reloaded 'Rock The Boat' and sat back. The little gems 'disappeared' and I was reminded of why I had worshipped them for so long. Stone me: the soundstage bordered on the epic. And, no, I wasn't playing them at a whisper.

MASTERFUL COMBO

It was a little 'n' large love affair, like that wee dog Tyke who hangs around Spike in the *Tom And Jerry* cartoons. I'm not suggesting for a millisecond that an amplifier has a soul, a conscience, but the '900s chose not to 'abuse' the LS3/5A. I didn't whip out the SPL meter, yet I'm pretty sure it was louder than would be wise when B110s and T27s are only slightly less valuable than are NOS Bugatti T59 camshafts.

What clinched it for me, though, was neither the punch nor the percussive majesty of the above tracks, but the subtlety of 'At Last' from Lou Rawls in tandem with Dianne Reeves. It made me sit down and take stock. I am not going to

pretend that the LS3/5As surprised me – yet again – despite the decades of familiarity. Neither am I going to tell you I heard information never retrieved before. And, no, I am not about to tell you that I'm ditching my Audio Research REF 6/REF 75SE/ Wilson Alexia system, which is more open and even more commanding.

What I will say is that I was pleasantly caught unawares. Renewed passion for the LS3/5As aside, the Luxman combo is so masterful yet so ear-friendly that I have no qualms in describing it as the ideal solution for those blessed with a spare £20k but no desire to deal with cottage brands or tweakers. The units worked faultlessly, the remote is a joy to handle, the sound is blissfully natural and, as a bonus, the units are gorgeous and made with the sort of finish that's as cool as Swiss air. ☺

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

Although I've always admired Luxman and lusted after a number of its components, I wasn't prepared for the mix of silkiness, authority and detail on offer here. But £20k is an insane amount to spend on hi-fi by any measure, even if it is *bubkes* compared to some of what's out there. So I'll refrain from calling this a bargain lest I offend the sensitive. Instead, let's just say it's worth every penny.

Sound Quality: 87%



HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Power output (<1% THD, 8/4ohm)	212W / 380W
Dynamic power (<1% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)	230W / 450W / 825W / 1.09kW
Output imp. (20Hz-20kHz, pre/power)	85ohm / 0.012-0.040ohm
Freq. resp. (20Hz-100kHz, pre/power)	+0.0 to -2.3dB / +0.0 to -3.7dB
Input sensitivity (for 0dBV/0dBW)	258mV (pre) / 103mV (power)
A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBV/0dBW)	98.8dB (pre) / 84.6dB (power)
Distortion (20Hz-20kHz, 1V/10W)	0.0005-0.0008% / 0.0007-0.003%
Power consump. (pre/idle/rated o/p)	31W / 190W/555W
Dimensions (WHD in cm) / Weight	44x13x43/44x22x49 / 20/48kg