

*The Audio Beat***Luxman D-08u**

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Citizen music lovers, those not exposed to the audiophile world, often ask me if LPs are still being made. Incredibly, I'm now also asked if CDs are still being made. Even among audiophiles, the growing perception is that refusal to acknowledge the supremacy of computer-based audio makes you part of a conspiracy to prop up manufacturers invested in the dead art and mechanics of digital-disc playback.



Well, as a part of that conspiracy, I should preface this review with a few thoughts on disc replay -- and SACD replay in particular. Just as the low-quality vinyl of the oil-embargo 1970s primed many music lovers to embrace early digital sound on CD in the early 1980s, the

promise of easy, cheap access to a seemingly unlimited selection of music online caused many audiophiles to abandon their CD players. One of the most popular themes in file-replay mantra is that downloads are the future, so why waste time and precious resources on an antiquated medium? There's no doubt about it -- downloads and streaming are the future, and already a pretty significant part of the present. Global warming, water shortages and crowded cities are also the future, but not something I embrace or look forward to.

Back in the 1980s, CDs were the inevitable future of recorded sound, but it took decades for that future to deliver on its promise. Now, a fair selection of (admittedly) expensive players gives access to all that unfulfilled promise hidden among the digits on millions of CDs and SACDs. While many claim to have found nirvana with downloads and by ripping their CDs to a computer and playing them back through whatever DAC is today's special flavor, I've not heard these solutions come close the best disc-playback systems, even with high-definition downloads that were actually recorded at the claimed level of resolution.

Go purely by the numbers and the best downloads should offer the best digital sound, followed by SACD, with regular CD trailing the pack. Of course, numbers don't lie, do they? After all, the CD layer of a hybrid SACD disc sounds almost universally inferior to the SACD layer -- just as long as you are comparing them on the same player. Start comparing formats across different players and the results quickly become confusing. When SACD was in its youth, I was one of those who hoped that the superiority of this high-resolution format would trump the need for a high-end and high-priced player. If the format was as good as advertised, perhaps playback from an inexpensive all-format player would produce sound unmatched by even the best CD players. I know others shared this view, and now that even higher-resolution downloads are becoming a reality, much the same mindset has emerged yet again.

But my hopes were quickly dashed as I compared SACDs played through inexpensive multi-format home-theater players to the sound of CDs played with moderately priced high-end CD players.

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The Oppo and Marantz players of this world were (and still are) no match for any serious audiophile CD player, despite the fact that the cheaper players are capable of reproducing

the superior SACD layer of a hybrid disc while the CD players are restricted to a Red Book diet. Unless played with an SACD player built to high-end standards, SACDs pale in comparison to even a ten-year-old Audio Research Reference CD7 spinning lowly CDs (and that's before we take Glass CD into account). The conclusion is unavoidable: replay mechanics trump format every time -- and that's just as true of file replay as it is of spinning discs. High-resolution computer audio just replaces one set of challenges with another -- and that's exactly where SACD scores, because it benefits from over 30 years of research that has been expended and refined when it comes to reading optical discs. The reality is that if you really want high-end, high-resolution digital replay and a reliable source of high-quality recordings, then a decent SACD player still has a lot to offer. The problem is that these days the best examples all seem to be big, complex, multibox affairs that are space and cost prohibitive.

So, space poor but with plenty of hybrid discs in my collection and a healthy respect for their capabilities, I embarked on a search for a single-box CD/SACD replay solution. The two-, three- and four-box CD/SACD behemoths can certainly sound impressive, but I have no space for any superfluous hardware and I am loath to move into larger premises just to extract the most from digital recordings. How close can you come to the best SACD sound once you squeeze the transport, DAC, upsampling section and clock all into a single box? The number of one-box competitors is modest and it's getting smaller. That's a reflection of indifference on the part of both audiophiles and the wider listening public as well as the onrushing tsunami of digital downloads. Most major US audio makers no longer offer an SACD player, and even the one significant exception to that trend, Wadia, dropped SACD from its line some years ago.

One place where disc players are still the gold standard is Japan, which, when it comes to SACD, seems to almost own the market for everything except the very highest-end players. Many venerable but uniquely Japanese brands market extensive SACD lines, including Esoteric (which also offers discs), Luxman, Accuphase and TAD, and those are just the ones that are marketed in the US. Most of the SACD players available from other parts of the world use transports sourced from Japanese companies.

The D-08u is the top of Luxman's SACD line and a refinement of the D-08 player, which was introduced in 2009. The D-08u employs dual Burr-Brown PCM 1792A chips and Luxman's proprietary LxDTM drive mechanism. The drawer function is a thing of beauty -- it glides out silently and when it is fully closed a gate slides up to close the opening and, according to

Luxman, create a dust-proof "shutter." A lot of thought went into designing and perfecting the look and feel of this drawer mechanism. The disc drive takes between ten and nineteen seconds from the moment you hit the load button until the player reads the disc and begins playing -- slow, but not gratingly so.

The handsome metal remote control mimics the design of the player and allows you to select either the SACD or CD layer of a disc, select PCM or DSD filter and zoom the size of the display numerals if you are viewing it from across the room. Of course, it offers all the usual remote functions as well as a filter switch that allows you to listen to an SACD via either DSD or PCM decoding. The back panel supports one set of RCA and one set of XLR outputs. In addition to USB (B-type) digital inputs, the Luxman also accepts optical and coaxial inputs. The USB input supports sampling frequencies of 32kHz, 44.1kHz, 48kHz, 88.2kHz, 96kHz, 176.4kHz, 192kHz, 352.8kHz and 384kHz (at 16, 24 and 32 bits). While I did listen to stored files through the USB input, it was as a disc player, and primarily with SACDs, that I did the bulk of my listening to the D-08u.

The machine tips the scales at 50 pounds, and a look under the hood reflects the dramatically increased power-supply components compared to Luxman's D-05 and D-06 players, each of which weigh 35 pounds. The D-08u's published specifications are shared with Luxman's lower-priced SACD players, and the improvement over those models appears to come from the battleship construction inside and out. The interior of the D-08u is stuffed with components, the signal shielded from the power supply with metal caging. The IEC socket for the power cord omits the third, ground pin, no doubt for sonic reasons.

The first thing you will notice about the D-08u is just what a handsome package it presents. Set in the rack next to the traditionally styled Audio Research gear, it looked like Battlestar Galactica had joined forces with a fleet of Civil War ironclads. But this is not science fiction -- there is nothing speculative about the forward-thinking design of this Luxman player. Touch the open button on the remote and listen to the disc drawer open -- it's whisper quiet and smooth. Slip in a disc and watch the tray disappear just as quietly and smoothly. This is certainly one of the slickest components of any kind I've ever encountered.

That smooth operation carried over to the D-08u's sound -- not *smooth* as in lacking dynamics or *smoothing over* rough edges, but *smooth* as in sounding more like analog than the vast majority of competing products, whether they are reading discs or converting downloads. If I were to sum up the D-08u in a single word, that word would be *fluid*. Listen

to a familiar piece of music that you've heard time and again on all the available formats, and the advantages of the SACD format and the D-08u's playback of it become obvious. Mobile Fidelity's new hybrid SACD reissue of Miles Davis's *Kind of Blue* [Mobile Fidelity UDSACD 2085] is a pertinent case in point. The opening bars are burned into my memory from listening to countless versions, from the original vinyl with incorrect speed, through subsequent generations of vinyl reissues and countless digital versions, all listened to on a wide range of playback systems. The timing and delicate instrumentation of the opening bars of "So What" are fragile; also-ran masterings and playback systems are easy to weed out in just a few moments. It's a performance so simple and ubiquitous that any jazz fan or audiophile can hum it.

The Mobile Fidelity *Kind of Blue* joins the best of the digital versions and the D-08u nails the deceptively difficult-to-reproduce instrumental texture and pace of the piece. The piano on *Kind of Blue* is particularly problematic, often sounding wobbly and lacking in stability, but the D-08u produced some of the best piano sound I've heard from any playback of the recording in any format. It sounded a tad sweeter and fuller than usual and not just because I'm used to listening to the original LP, where the opening numbers were inadvertently recorded slightly sharp, a problem with a poorly adjusted tape machine that wasn't fixed until the second session. Engineer Frank Leico used an echo-chamber reverb to add what he referred to as "just a bit of sweetening" to the piano. Red Book CD all too often drains away the extra body added to the recording and although piano sound has always been digital's trump card, despite the pitch stability, piano can still sound threadbare. It's here that SACD can deliver solid pitch without robbing it of the overtones necessary to really sound like a piano. The D-08u preserved Leico's light touch perfectly and made that extra bit of sweetening taste better than ever before.

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CD layer. Too often the SACD treatment sounds just like that -- a treatment, or "improvement" imposed on the signal. It delivers 2.5-dimension rather than the full three-

dimensional image that well-recorded music, both recorded and replayed in high definition, should have. A comparison of the two layers on a hybrid CD/SACD all too frequently sounds like the instruments have been treated with reverb, resulting in a bloated, rounded sound that's a world away from the deft musical touch exhibited by Leico on *Kind of Blue*.

But as good as the Mobile Fidelity *Kind of Blue* is, for many devotees it is classical music that fuels continued interest in SACD. Despite some support for the popular and jazz idioms (especially from Mobile Fidelity, Audio Fidelity and Analogue Productions), it is only classical music that affords the collector an extensive range of new recordings in the high-resolution format. PentaTone and Channel Classics have deep SACD catalogues, while BIS, BSO Classics, CSO, DGG, Harmonia Mundi, Linn, Ondine, RCA and Sony all have at least a smattering of SACD releases, perhaps not surprising given that orchestral recordings stand to benefit most from SACD's theoretical advantages. It's not just CD's many offenses against string tone that need to be considered here; it's easy to hear how SACD's greater harmonic and spatial resolution should handle the rich tonal complexity and scale of large orchestras far more realistically than Red Book recordings, but the precise tonal and timing demands of chamber music can be every bit as exacting.

The Luxman player excelled at demonstrating how much better the SACD layer sounds with most of the classical SACDs in my collection, and not just better than its CD reproduction, but significantly better than CD through my Audio Research Reference CD7. I've listened to a broad range of current CD players, and the D-08u's CD reproduction compares favorably to similarly priced CD-only players. The Luxman, however, includes an SACD player that increases its utility and sonic worth considerably. One of my favorite SACDs is Ondine ODE 1094-5, with Olivier Latry on organ and Christop Eschenbach conducting The Philadelphia Orchestra. The showstopper is the Saint-Saëns "Organ" Symphony No. 3. If any recording is going to have you lusting for an SACD player (and for speakers of unusual size), this is the one. The D-08u not only reproduced a three-dimensional quality to the performance that was missing on the CD layer, but also reached deeper into the organ's bass region.

With SACD after SACD, the Luxman player presented a high-definition signal that always sounded more fluid, more natural and more like the original event, without becoming weighed down with artificially body or wrecking the pace of the music. Blockbusters on RCA, like Reiner's *Scheherazade* [RCA 82876-66377-2] and Fiedler's famous version of Offenbach's *Gaîté Parisienne* [RCA 82876-66419-2], busted blocks instead of sounding like a busted pile of digits. Kleiber's wonderful live recording of Beethoven's Symphony No. 7 [Orfeo C 700 051

B] sounded as alive and expansive as it should, with the SACD layer clearly superior to the CD layer, adding presence, immediacy and vitality without a hint of softening or rounding. The SACD layer of Vivaldi's *La Stravaganza* [Channel Classics CCS SA 19503] made Rachel Podger's violin sound more like the Rachel Podger I've heard in concert than the CD layer on the same set of disc. Each time, the improvement was significant enough to make listening to the D-08u a dangerous proposition unless you were either prepared to seriously consider buying one or accept the serious sense of loss when you go back to a CD-only spinner.

Is the D-08u the best sounding SACD player on the market, price and complexity no barrier? For more than five times the price, the dCS Vivaldi stack is truly in another league. But then you could probably buy a couple of Luxmans just for the price of the extra cabling and dedicated equipment rack necessary to set up all four boxes of the Vivaldi. For €35,000 (no pricing in dollars exists), you can get the remarkable Neodio Origine that does such an extraordinary job of reproducing the CD layer that looking for the higher resolution of an SACD layer may seem superfluous. However, the Luxman gets awfully close to such audio nirvana at what is literally a fraction of the price of such groundbreaking and standard-setting products.

If your digital replay budget stretches to nearly \$20,000, the Luxman D-08u offers a level of performance, looks and functionality that is as good as it gets. For some listeners that still won't be enough. When it comes to digital source components for home audio systems, there are sweet spots, especially for computer-based audio, that cost a fraction of the Luxman flagship. But if you are willing to challenge the perceived notion that streamed high-definition music is the pinnacle of current sound (and you can't afford to sell your Malibu beach house or shell out the equivalent of a BMW or Ferrari just to spin discs), you should give this Luxman player a listen. Compare it to the competition -- *all* of the competition, including file-replay systems -- and the results may well surprise and delight you.

Best of all, the D-08u unlocks the hidden benefits of all those SACDs piling up in your collection, and you don't have to feel embarrassed in front of your audiophile friends. The D-08u looks so good and sounds so good playing discs or files via its USB input that at its price I can't think of a better or more versatile way to crunch bits into music.