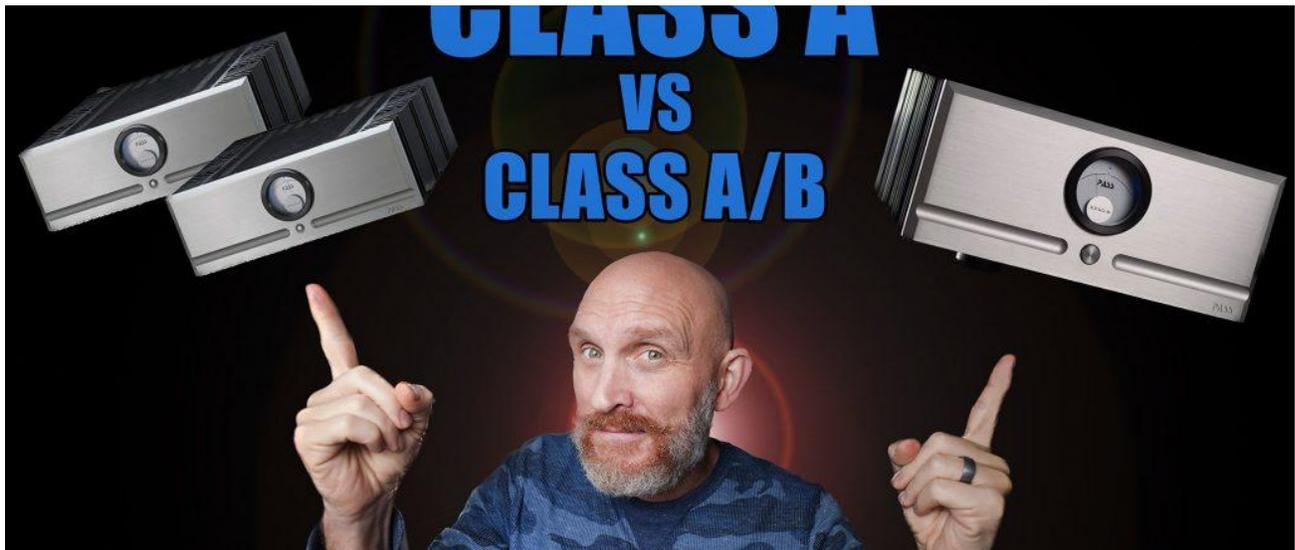




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## Pass Labs X250.8 Amplifier Review. Oh So SWEET!

January 11, 2023



**By Steve Huff**

For the last two years I have had the pleasure of having a pair of Pass Labs XA60.8 Mono amps in my system and let me tell ya, they have spent hundreds of hours playing sweet music in my space. I love these amps but I do not love **everything** about them as no HiFi Product by itself is perfect.

*So what do I dislike about the XA60.8 amps?*

First off, they are large and heavy and there are two of them. Being a guy who reviews gear, it's tough having to move these "88lb a piece amps" in and out when I have comparisons to do.

They also run crazy hot, and in the summer I can not really leave them on for long as my listening room is not connected to our homes A/C. Third, the Pass XA 60.8's have a sound character that is warm, full and rich. While this is a sound I love, it's not a perfect match for every speaker made or every speaker that I test (even my own reference).

Even with these three things I dislike about the XA 60.8's *they still managed to become my favorite amps of all time* due to the build quality, longevity, customer support from Pass, style/looks and most importantly the sound that these amps have brought to my room.

The Pass Labs XA60.8's excel at warmth, texture, weight and spatial qualities yet they are not the last word in treble extension or even transparency. Rather they thrill me with their richness and timbre. Over the last two years or so with them I have sometimes wished for more oomph, slam, dynamics and excitement in my listening sessions. As good as these amps are, *and they are end game amps if you use the right speaker*, I feel like I just wanted to see what a different flavor of Pass Labs would sound like.

I reached out to Pass Labs and asked if I could review their larger Class A/B stereo amp which resides just under their massive 350.8 stereo amp. They obliged and after a couple of months I received a massive box that UPS placed on my front porch (with the use of a dolly).



### **Enter the X250.8 Stereo Amp**

This amp is larger than one of the XA60.8 mono's but there is only one of them and it comes in at around 100lbs ; ) This is a heavy beast of an amp, and it looks even nicer in the flesh than the Class A mono's. A larger power button along with a larger Class A bias meter tells me this amp means business. It looks super sexy in the flesh so in the looks department I am already sold.

I have heard the Pass Labs INT-250 integrated amp and I have declared it the best integrated I have ever heard or had here, [see my review of that piece HERE](#). I had a Luxman 595 ASE that almost beat it but after months of back and forth I do prefer the Pass sound vs The Luxman sound for my personal tastes. It was close but as I always have in the past, when I try something new I always end up going back home to Pass Labs.

Again, it's really speaker and room dependent. The Luxman is sharper and more detailed sounding while still retaining magic in the mids where the Pass is more organic, fluid and textural in its quality. The Pass sounds richer, the Luxman sounds more like an audiophile piece.

After 30 years in HiFi these last few years have shown me that Pass Labs makes amps that truly speak to my heart and soul. I have heard amps from almost every other manufactures (say up to

\$20k) in my never ending quest for the Holy Grail but nothing has made me sit up and want to step away from the Pass Labs sound.

When it comes to Pass Labs, I have had the INT-25, INT-250, XA60.8, and now the X250.8 when it comes to modern day amplification from the brand. All wowed me with their big powerful sound, warm and rich midrange and beautifully rendered treble and bass. Even so, *each model was slightly different in sound.*

The INT-25 had a dynamic and lively sound with that mid warmth I have come to expect from Pass. The INT-250 was more airy and holographic and felt even more spatial and delicate when it comes to the details. The XA 30.8 and 60.8's are the warmest of this bunch with a superbly refined smooth as silk sound but with less treble extension.



All of them sound like a Pass Labs but each have differences in the way they present treble and bass. All are super refined sounding.

My ears have gotten used to this refinement of sound. The way there is no noise in the system at all, the way the music floats in space and has depth, weight and transparency. Pass does the details as well but without hardness or harshness.

I was so ready to hear this X250.8 along with a Pass Labs XP-22 Preamp (both in for long term review and comparison use).

When it comes to the pre-amp I have an XP-10, XP-12 and XP-22 here from Pass and can easily say that I have enjoyed them all but the XP-22 is in another league when compared to the older 10 and more recent 12. The Xp-22 is the best preamp I have ever heard in my life, even besting my previous favorite, the Nagra Classic Pre.

It's quiet as a mouse, very transparent and neutral but again, brings out that midrange magic from the Pass amps. It's paints an impressively large soundstage and within that stage, magic happens. It's dead silent and I mean dead silent, which is one of the 22's claims to fame.

The Pass XP-22 is a low gain preamp though, and quite the opposite to something like a Cary SLp-05. The Cary is full of gain, and only a small turn of the volume dial brings big volume. The Pass usually sits at around 65 on the volume dial when I listen mid day and around 55 at night for low level listening. This helps keep any noise away as well and within this system, even at midnight listening at low levels there is not a peep coming from the equipment or speakers I regards to noise.

When I hooked up the XP-22 to the XA 60.8's I felt as if it was the first time I heard what the XA60.8's could really do. It opened them up vs the XP-12 and just presented each detail with a delicate beauty. This was as close to a tube sound that I have heard from solid state *but I feel it is even better*. No tube maintenance and with better bass extension while retaining those big transparent yet full sounding midrange.

When I placed the X250.8 in with the XP-22 I heard a much different presentation vs the XA60.8's. ***These amps do NOT sound the same.***

Where the XA 60.8's were more plump, warm and subdued with my Fleetwood Deville SQ's the X250.8 woke them up, ignited them with more dynamics, bigger bass slam and a more extended *sweet silky treble*.

The soundstage became more transparent as well. Vocals were not as full as they were with the 60.8's but they were just slightly leaner, and I mean slight. Even so, the midrange was magical on the X250.8's just as it was with the 60.8's and the 250.8 b right more transparency within that midrange allowing me to hear through the voices.



The system was sounding rather special with the X250.8 and XP-22 in place but they also synergize well with my front end gear. I run a lovely DCS Lina DAC and Lina CLOCK and these pieces ended my DAC search for my reference system.

After trying 15 DAC's over two years I really preferred the Lina sound to the others I have heard, no matter the cost or brand. There are many superb DAC's out there from many brands these days and I could have found a much more affordable DAC but the Lina just seems to do well with my

gear and once I had it in place I never removed it, rather I added the clock, so it's staying for the long haul.

I also run a [REL S/510 Sub](#) and this has also been something that has truly transformed my system, though it took a month for me to get it dialed in and locked in perfectly.

I use Nordost Red Dawn LS cables for speaker and IC. Power is supplied from my wall into a [Puritan Audio PSM156](#) (which is another piece I could not live without) and I recently upgraded all of my power cords to the [Puritan Ultimate cords](#) (8 of them).

My speakers are the [Fleetwood Deville SQ's](#) so the Pass XP-22 and X250.8 fit right in to the system cost wise.

This is a nice match. I often see some spend fortune on speakers and then skimp out on the amp and DAC. In fact, I know a guy who recently spent \$22k on speakers and he bought an AVR for under \$1k to power them as he assumed that all amps are the same (far from the truth).

He then added a \$300 DAC he bought from Amazon and some basic \$20 speaker cable. He hated how his system sounded but he figured if he invested all of his money into the speakers he could not go wrong. This is never the case and we should always power our speakers with quality power that matches the cost of the amp. This will always bring out the best from the speakers you choose. If you choose \$1500 speakers then a \$1k amp may just do the trick, but even those \$1500 speakers will come alive when power with a really impressive amp.

In HiFi the room is most important, then setup, then power, then speakers, then amp, dac, streamer, cables, etc. This is 100% how I feel after doing this for well over 30 years.



For fun I powered the \$1500 [Barchardt Audio P300's](#) with this setup and it made them sound like \$5k speakers. So investing in a really good amp or integrated means you will be set no matter what

speakers you start or end with. These days I recommend putting most of your HiFi budget into the Amp and DAC, and then the Speakers.

## SO HOW DOES THE X250.8 SOUND?

OTHERWORLDLY in my setup, that is how this amp sounds. It is that good.

No, my speakers do not need this kind of all out power. They are 94DB efficient and 8 ohms and I have powered them with as little as 8 WPC. Even so, they sound phenomenal with the X250.8 and better than I have ever heard them, and that is saying a lot.

The X250.8 brought more life to my Deville's. They opened them up further and improved on the treble, bass and even dynamic impact over the XA60.8's. Again, this is in my room with my speakers.

If I swapped speakers to the MoFi SP10's, the XA60.8's would win the prize for powering them as the very lively SP10's need warmth to sound their best. My Deville's need some sparkle to sound their best, and the X250.8 does this and more for the Fleetwood's and the Class A offerings do better with more lively speakers.



As I sit and listen to music from all genres...pop, rock, jazz, classical, etc I am in awe of what the X250.8 is doing in my space. The sound is uber powerful, wide open, rich, textured and has more transparency in the mids vs the XA60.8s. The bass is tighter and has more impact as well. The bass on the XA60.8's is not as tight and sounds just a hair looser but I am splitting hairs here really.

**I let the X250.8 stay on for 2 weeks straight before I started to really evaluate what was happening here.**

The X250.8 solidified for me what I love about Pass Labs and made me fall in love with the brand even more.

**Why am I such a fan?** Their build quality, longevity, the fact that Nelson Pass is known as an audio genius (and he designs the amps), the style, the big blue meter, the class A bias in most of their amps that bring that rich sound flavor and then there is the reliability. Pass amps last lifetimes. If they do not, they will fix it for you fast. None of this nonsense of waiting weeks for a reply, Pass Labs are one of the greats in Audio and take care of their customers.

I have heard my easy to drive speakers with all kinds of amps. Class A, A/B, B, and D. Tubes and Solid State. Push Pull tubes and SET amps. I have been trying to find the best sound for me and these speakers. This is a process that can take YEARS if you are a bit obsessive like I am ; )

Each amp sounded very good with my Fleetwood Devilles but a couple of these pieces stood out for one or two things they did really well. The X250.8 is the first amp I have heard that truly “completes” my Devilles. For the first time I am not wanting for more of anything. Some amps were too harsh, others too slow or dark sounding. Some amps wowed with excitement but then grew old after 6 months. Some sounded cold, some were hard and others were dull.



I can say with 100% ease that the Pass XP-22 and X250.8 is the absolute best I have heard the Deville's and I now run a REL S/510 with them to solidify the lowest registers down to 20hz (as rare

as that is to be in a recording). I want for absolutely nothing in this setup (besides a 2nd REL) as it can play anything with effortless ease, refinement and it does well at low or high volume.

The sound is smooth, fluid, wide open, detailed but in a way that brings those details out with grace and air. *The bass is solid, even without the subwoofer as the X250.8 really digs deep.*

I have heard conflicting reports on the X250.8. Some say that the first 25 watts of this amp is in Class A and others say it is the 1st 15 watts. Either way, I never leave class A with the X250.8 and my Devilles, no matter how loud I go on the dial.

With that said, the Class A sound from the 250 is quite different from the Class A sound of the 60.8's. Whoever says all amps sound the same (I still see this in forums from time to time) has never heard a bunch of different amps in a revealing system. The differences can be absolutely huge but when you find the right match, you will know it as the sound just locks in and you say 'There it is'!

I see no negatives to the Pass X250.8, at all but let's try.



**The price?** Well, this is not a cheap amp but you do get what you pay for here. It's \$10k or so and well worth it if you are a serious music lover. It's an amp that can be placed in and forgotten about and I can say that while I have had this amp I have not wanted to swap it for anything else. Even when a review piece comes in I hesitate to move the 250.8 out as I just love what it does for my system wether I use my Deville's, Dynaudio's or Buchardt's.

This is a lifetime piece, and many are enjoying it as just that today. Just read about this amp online and you will see why it's already legendary. There are many who own this amp and will never sell it and for me, those are the best kind of reviews. Those from long term owners who still love the amp after many years.

Going back to cost, for that \$10k you get a great warranty, amazing service, made in the USA build, and an amp that will drive anything. Some pay \$30k for a Rolex watch that sits on your arm but I would rather own a killer audio system that gets used, listened to and enjoyed every single day. It's good for the soul.

## **WITH HARD TO DRIVE SPEAKERS?**

I have some much harder to drive speakers here in the form of Buchardt Audio P300's and Dynaudio S40's. These are \$1500-\$3500 small bookshelf speakers with a big big sound and tremendous (no sub needed) bass.

The P300 are a tough drive though which was evident when I turned them up to dance levels and I saw the big Pass X250.8 Meter jumping up and down. This meant I was leaving that 15-25 watts of Class A and using more power, going into Class A/B. I have never gotten a Pass Labs needle to move like this but I did with the P300's!



The good news is they sounded AMAZING and like a much larger and much more pricey speaker. These little \$1500 P300's are insanely good for the money and provide a rich, deep musical presentation that has density and a large sound. The X250.8 drove these with ease and it sounded like a dance club in my music room when I turned them up.

When I hooked up my Dynaudio S40's the amp drove those with authority as well. Crisp, clear and impactful bass that shook the room on one occasion.

How about some Harbeth P3's? I have a set here and they sounded lovely with the X250.8. They brought more detail than the P300's but were lighter on the "oomph" which brought a more delicate detail retrieval to my space. The X250.8 allowed the P3's to play loud and proud, again, making me shake my head at the small size but large sound.

## **MY FAVE THING ABOUT THE X250.8**

What I truly love about the X250.8's sound character is the all out smoothness and way the amp brings forth the soundstage which is transparent yet has body. I love the treble that is extended but silky. I enjoy the deep controlled tight bass that at times can seem explosive yet fully controlled. The mids are also clearer, more detailed and yet have a glow and warmth in the vocals that make them sound so real.

**This is an amp I put in the "special" category.**



## **Conclusion**

I have heard a ton of HiFi amps in my lifetime. Most were fantastic, a few were not so hot. When it comes to "the best" I have heard well that is tough to talk about as "the best" doesn't really exist in

audio. Each amp will sound different with each speaker and room! Plus, your ears are different than mine, so are your tastes!

For me and my system, I have not heard a better amp. Period. I love the XA60.8's and have listened to them for over two years in this space but with my reference speakers (Fleetwood Deville SQ) I love the X250.8 above even those Class A beauties. I believe if I was running speakers that were more tipped up in the treble then the XA60.8's would be the more magical and better amp as they are indeed with something like the MoFi SP10's.

At the end of the day the fact is that the Pass Labs X250.8 is a lifetime amp. I know a couple of music lovers who have owned one since its release many years ago. They have no desire to change. I know a guy who has the XA60.8's as well and he says he wants for nothing and will never sell his amps. Pretty nice words for the Pass brand.

The X250.8 is nice to have on hand as it delivers 250 WPC into 8 ohms, 500 WPC into 4 ohms. That is a lot of juice but it doesn't sound like a monster beast kind of amp. Rather it can do that monster sound with some music but if you listen to something more delicate it can transform into an amp that sounds more like a 15 WPC tube amp. At idle it uses 450 watts so it is equivalent to running 4 1/2 100 watt light bulbs.

The X250.8 doesn't get nearly as hot as the all Class A Pass amps. It never gets HOT to the touch, just warm. It's a single stereo amp so I do not have two heavy boxes to move around.

This is an amp I can easily recommend if it is within your budget. It's not an inexpensive amp but it's also not an amp that is only for harder to drive speakers. This does as well with sensitive speakers as it does harder to drive speakers. In fact, if this puts out 15 watts of power into 8 ohms of pure class A sound, maybe we should look at this as a 15 WPC Class A amp with a never ending headroom.

It sounds magical, lovely, beautiful and yes it can reach the heart and soul within us bringing the emotion we seek from our music.

The best and most versatile power amp I have heard to date.

