

A close-up photograph of a hand holding a small, dark, rectangular electronic component. The component is held between the thumb and index finger, with the rest of the hand and fingers blurred in the background. The component has a brushed metal or plastic finish and is labeled 'XA25' in a light-colored font near the bottom edge. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting the texture of the component and the skin of the hand.

# The Pass Labs XA25: A Pass You Can Lift!

You heard right. After years of lifting incredibly heavy power amplifiers from Pass Labs, the new XA25 arrives, and the label on the shipping carton says “51 pounds.” Wow. Don’t let the compact (by Pass standards) fool you. The XA25 is a serious amplifier. Using a single pair of high current output transistors, the XA25 only has three push-pull gain stages, resulting in an uncluttered signal path.

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## The Pass Labs XA25

Nelson Pass is an interesting guy. Meeting him at this year's "Burning Amp Festival," he's still got a twinkle in his eye, kind of like Santa Claus. He's still learning and remains very excited about building amplifiers – it shows in his creations. When he could simply rest on the reputation established by the massive XS monoblocks and XA.8 series amplifiers, this jewel exists.

Rated at 25 watts per channel into an 8-ohm load, the XA25 doubles its output into 4 ohms and again into 2 ohms, able to supply 200 watts of peak power per channel into a 2-ohm load. So you can say the XA25 has an incredibly robust power supply.



Priced at \$4,900 the XA25 isn't cheap, but it's not a ton of money either. Especially in comparison to the XS300 monoblocks that I've been using as my reference for years now. The delicacy, musicality, and control that I'm used to with those \$90,000 amplifiers is right here with the XA25. And much like the early Pass Aleph or First Watt amplifiers, there is a level of inner detail retrieval that even the mighty XS300s can't quite muster – though they are exceptional for big amplifiers. Nelson Pass has always been about the quality of the "first watt," and all his designs have it, in abundance – but this little amp is special.

Size isn't always everything

I'd be tempted to tell you that you need efficient speakers with a sensitivity rating of 92db/1 watt or better, but I'd be wrong. Putting the XA25 into a system with the 86db/1 watt Magnepan .7s proves a brilliant choice, and believe it or not this system really moves some air. Magnepans with a 25 watt per channel class A amp? Ever experience a pair of Mark Levinson ML-2s with Tympanis?

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## The Pass Labs XA25

Switching from the limited LF range of the Raidho and the Magnepan to the seriously full range Focals' illustrates the sheer drive of this small amplifier extends beyond the mere midband. Played within its limits, the amount of sheer bass thrust the XA25 offers is nearly unbelievable. The thick bass grooves punctuating The Art of Noise's *The Seduction of Claude Debussy* are intoxicating, revealed with power and detail. In addition to everything else that is wonderful about the XA25, it also offers a rock-solid sense of musical pace. Instruments are locked down tight in their respective portion of the soundstage, whether you're listening to a string quartet, or Lynyrd Skynyrd. Speaking of Skynyrd, you've never heard all three guitarists in this band as clearly defined as they are playing through the XA25.

Vocals are positively dreamy. If *Louis and Ella* isn't your thing, spin Lady Gaga and Tony Bennett's "Dancing Queen." Gaga's voice floats in and around the backing orchestra, with Bennett popping in and out of the mix. Ditto for Crosby, Stills, and Nash. Feel the emotion in Ani DiFranco's "Gravel" from her *Living in Clip* disc. The XA25 takes you right to the third row – there isn't even the slightest touch of grain in the presentation. That's what tricks your brain into forgetting about the gear.

### The right preamplifier

The XA25 responds to cables that offer high resolution, but it isn't negatively affected by cable as some amplifiers can be. The same can be said for your choice of preamplifier. It will mirror what it's sent; the more resolving your preamplifier, the better the result.

We put the XA25 through multiple listening sessions with everything from a rebuilt Dyna PAS3 preamplifier, up to the top Pass XS Pre/XS Phono preamplifiers. The single ended design makes it easy to try a number of things, and try we did, with preamplifiers from McIntosh, Nagra, Robert Koda, Audio Research and a few others to see where the XA25 would fall down. It never does.

The XA25 has the ability and resolving power to allow the listener to discern between anything at their disposal. However, in keeping in the spirit of extraordinary performance at thinking man's prices, their own HPA-1 makes a perfect combination.

Further listening reinforces what an incredible amplifier the XA25 is. Nothing is off limits, and like Pass' top designs, the standout feature of the XA25 the way it plays music in a way that is highly resolving and articulate, yet completely non-fatiguing. Kind of like your favorite tube amplifier. Without the associated care and feeding that tube amplifiers require. Only drawing 240 watts, the XA25 won't tax your carbon footprint, requiring major dedicated lines like the premium Pass offerings do to deliver their best performance.

The XA25 paints such an expansive three-dimensional picture; it's easy to close your eyes and feel immersed in sound. Paired with speakers that keep the XA25 in the sweet spot of its power band will reward you with cost no object sound reproduction, provided the rest of your system and software are up to task. Best of all, that picture is viewed through an exceptionally clear window. This amplifier is a ninja – it sneaks up on you.

**You're so wrapped up in the music it's like getting out of a bed that uses a Tempur-Pedic mattress. You've been sucked in so deep you almost can't get out. It's that enveloping.**

### The rest of the picture

Like every other Pass amplifier I've used, the XA is easy to use. It sounds great out of the box, yet does improve a bit after about 50-100 hours of continuous play. If you have inefficient speakers in a large room and need to play music at rock concert levels, this is not your amplifier. You will need the big XA or XS to achieve your goals.

But for those of you with a modest room, careful selection of the right ancillary components will find the XA25 delivering a musical experience that few systems at any price can match. This is one of the most nuanced hi-fi components I've had the pleasure to use, and after living with it for a while, I'm convinced that Nelson Pass is even more of a genius than I previously thought he was. Much as I love the big, bold, blue meters on the XA200.8s, I don't need em here. Every choice made in this amplifier is to serve the music. The amplifier's circuit is simple, yet well executed. The chassis and other ancillaries are of high, but not overkill quality.

The most engaging automobiles I've had the pleasure to drive were not necessarily the most powerful ones. What this incredibly short list of vehicles all have in common is an incredible sense of balance. That's what the XA25 offers. Everything you would want in an amplifier exists in this design: incredible dynamic range, lifelike tonal accuracy, the ability to paint a three-dimensional sound field and incredibly high resolution. In short, this amplifier reveals as much music as anything I've heard at any price. It just doesn't give you 300 – 1000 watts per channel of it like the big Pass or big Boulder amps do. So it won't be the answer for everyone.

I'm giving the Pass XA25 our first Masterpiece award. This amplifier is beyond even what I'd consider a product of the year or exceptional value – of course, it's all of that. But this is a \$4,900 amplifier that doesn't offer a mere "glimpse of the high end," it lets you have one of the world's finest amplifiers for just under five grand.

[www.passlabs.com](http://www.passlabs.com)

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# You sit on the couch and ask yourself, “How can something sound that big and dynamic?”

That kind of thing. Equally impressive results are achieved with the slightly inefficient but highly resolving Raidho X-1 mini monitors.

My limited experience with the First Watt amplifiers is that they are some of the most revealing I've heard, yet are slightly sensitive to speaker choice. If the match isn't perfect, the overall presentation can lean towards the thin side of the sonic spectrum. (not sure if Mr. Pass will agree with me on this..) Tough as it is to quantify this kind of thing, the XA25 comes within a molecule of the resolving ability of the First Watt amps, delivering a bigger, bolder, beefier presentation. The amount of sheer control that this modestly powered amplifier brings to the table is incredible. Moving on to the 92db/1 watt Focal Sopra no.3s that I use in my reference system, now powered by Pass XA 200.8 monoblocks, the XA25 is nearly indistinguishable from the big amps at low volumes. If you can live without the cool, blue meter from the XA30.8 and a touch less power, the XA25 is your ticket to audio excellence. I suspect this simple circuit that is not fully balanced also helps keep the cost factor down.



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