

REVIEW

The XP-17 Phonostage

Pass Labs produces an incredibly deep line of power amplifiers and source components. Though the founders name graces the front panel, Mr. Pass only designs the power amplifiers. Preamplifiers and phonostages fall to the talented mind of Wayne Colburn.

The XP-17 is Pass Labs entry-level phonostage, replacing the outgoing XP-15. There is only a slight price increase between the two, with the XP-15 having an MSRP of \$3,800, and the new XP-17 now \$4,300.

In Pass world, the higher model (in their preamplifiers) number translates to greater sonics and less noise. Like the XP-15, the XP-17 is a one-chassis component.

**Solid-State silence
makes for
vinyl bliss.**

**Another precision
phono instrument
from Pass Labs.**

By Rob Johnson

The XP-25, like Pass's flagship Xs Phono, comes in two parts: one enclosure dedicated to the power supply, and another for the delicate phonostage circuitry. The Xs Phono represents the pinnacle of their phonostage achievement to date. Pass Labs proudly refers to it as an "all-out assault on the state-of-the-art in vinyl." That's a tall order indeed!

Regardless which phonostage fits your audio budget, much trickle-down technology benefits all the designs. Pass Labs describes several internal improvements which provide the XP-17 with greater capability than its predecessor. A shielded, low noise toroid and input filter module combined with an extra level of RC filtering reduces potential noise



REVIEW: Pass XP-17

A new input circuit reduces distortion and further squelches noise. These advancements combined create greater dynamics and resolution. A short listen confirms they have indeed done their homework.

Lookin' good

As with the rest of Pass's component lineup, the XP-17 sports an elegant, yet unassuming appearance, that matches the aesthetic of their other pieces. A thick, silver-anodized aluminum plate graces the front. Aside from its beveled top and bottom edges, a left-to-right, precision-routed "feature stripe" about a quarter inch deep accentuates the otherwise-smooth metal façade. Centered within is a tiny blue LED indicating power up.

With close-up inspection, no one will ever accuse Pass Labs of "underbuilding" a product. Like all other offerings in their component lineup, nothing about the XP-17 appears flimsy. The substantially built 19 - pound phono pre has a 17-inch width, a four-inch height, and a depth of 12.5 inches.

Don't let the XP-17's spartan front plate fool you, all the adjustments on the rear panel. After checking their cartridge's impedance, a user can manually set gain, loading, and capacitance (if using an MM cart vs. MC) via a tiny set of DIP switches on the back panel. The XP-17 accommodates both moving magnet and moving coil cartridges, offering a wide range of cartridge loading, from 10 Ohms to a maximum of 47kOhms. Depending on the load parallel capacitance ranges from 10 pF to 750 pF. With the first set of switches optimized, the second group adjusts the XP-17's output gain. Most MM carts will only need the 56db setting. Most MCs should be just fine with the 66db setting and there is a 76db option for the lowest output MC cartridges. The optimum setting will depend on the overall gain of your system. Too much and you risk distortion on the loudest passages; too little and the phono signal lacks dynamics. Unlike most vacuum tube phonostages, the XP-17 is dead quiet no matter which setting you choose, so let dynamics be your guide.

For more details, you can download the XP-17 manual [here](#), from the Pass website. This will also further explain the circuit and design of this model.

The XP-17 offers balanced XLR and single ended RCA outputs, with an output impedance of 220 and 110 ohms respectively. Thanks to the high output drive of the XP-17 either set of outputs will drive 20-30 foot interconnects with ease, handy if you'd like to have your turntable located somewhat remotely from the rest of your system. A sole pair of single ended RCA inputs accommodate a single turntable. A flick of the rear panel power switch is all that is needed to turn the XP-17 up and because of its low power draw, it can be left on continuously.

Let's Spin!

While the XP-17 benefits from a few days of break-in time, it sounds quite good from initial power up. It will open up in terms of tonal ease and dynamics a bit after the first 50 hours. Because the XP-17 sips power, it does not generate any significant heat. Added to my reference system, the Pass delivers the goods. While it is a solid-state design, lush and smooth sound pours forth, with no hint of edge or stridency. Vocal performances like "Sixth Sense" from Imelda May's *Life. Love. Flesh. Blood.* reveal all the subtleties which make her voice beguiling. At the same time, the powerful crescendos render with beauty and grace, without a trace of sibilance, delivering a stunning performance. Rarely do I halt a record to hear a track a second time, but with the XP-17, the musical enjoyment demanded an instant reprise - more than once. LP's centered around male vocals, like those on *Roman Candle* by Elliott Smith, offer a stunning portrayal of his soft-spoken style.



Cap/Gain



REVIEW: Pass XP-17

The XP-17 never truncates the soundstage presented in a recording. Music surrounds the speakers in all directions without bunching up at the speaker bodies themselves. Minute ambient cues on fantastic pressings appear to extend beyond the rear wall of the listening space, wrapping forward into the room. Musically-speaking, this means instruments and vocals never compete for attention in the flat plane between the speakers. On tracks like Pink Martini's "Let's Never Stop Falling in Love" the XP-17 proves its ability to layer elaborate soundstages including piano, strings, horns, several percussive instruments, and more with clear definition between all the tracks.

Beloved albums like *Copper Blue* by Bob Mould-led Sugar may not offer an "audiophile" level of sonic perfection captured in the recording and resulting vinyl pressing. However, through the XP-17 the audio chain takes "If I Can't Change Your Mind" a significant step closer to what I would expect from a high quality remaster.

At \$4300, the XP-17 represents an investment. However, its build quality, marvelous sonics, and extreme adjustability make it a component likely to reside on its owner's component rack for many years to come. It offers much to love for the serious analog enthusiast.

Additional listening – Jeff Dorgay

Having had the good fortune to borrow a friend's XP-15 back to refresh the sonic memory cells, the XP-17 shows, like with other Pass products their evolution. As their own Desmond Harrington is fond of saying, "you know we're always trying to make things better..."

If you already own an XP-15, it doesn't suck. The XP-17 is a few clicks better than what you have now. It's a little quieter, a little more dynamic, a bit more revealing. Much like the new .8 series of XA power amplifiers, Pass has gotten closer to the XS series with this new model, applying what they've learned. Comparing the XP-17 to the reference XS Phono raises an eyebrow or two. If you are looking for a statement phono stage and only require one input, the XP-17 is a tremendous value for \$4,300. Swapping my Brinkmann Bardo/Koetsu Jade Platinum reference table between the XP-17 and the XS Phono, shows the flagship still having more dynamic swing, ultimate LF grunt, and HF resolution.



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