



Pass Labs XS Phono Preamplifier | REVIEW

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March 15, 2026 | By Garrett Hongo

When I hear that a piece has a “cost-no-object” design, right away I think two things: 1) Yeah, but what’s it sound like? and 2) This has gotta be something! Well, now I’ve heard the Pass Labs XS phono preamp, and I can tell you it is indeed something! It’s been the front end of my electronics system for a couple of months now and my listening experience has never been more pleasurable, its sound sweeter and more explosive than ever and exceptionally revealing of every recording I’ve played. Designer Wayne Colburn has created such a wondrous piece of equipment that it will be very hard to go back to anything lesser—even to another excellent Pass Labs phono like the XP-27 I have used as my reference for the past six years.

Late last November, the new Pass Labs XS phono came in a tall, oversize box (25” L x 17” W x 23” T) of thick cardboard that weighed in at 95 pounds. But, as I was traveling when it was scheduled to arrive, I’d ordered it to get dropped at my local FedEx. I knew my Tesla Model 3 sedan could not accommodate its size, so, once I returned home, I enlisted my son and his Volkswagen Golf GTI hatchback to go with me to pick it up and haul it back to my house. The heavy box barely fit into his car, but we wrestled it under the hatch, closed it up, then drove back with it. Then, the two of us got it out of the car onto a dolly and rolled it into my garage. There it sat for over a month, I confess, as I was away to India for most of December and the early part of January. Moving from Mumbai to the far reaches of Rajasthan, I witnessed great

splendor, abject poverty, scores of beautiful temples and myriads of fascinating wildlife, expansive urban populations,



Exploring the Pass Labs XS Phono Features

Nine years ago, Nelson Pass, founder and past president of Pass Labs, thought the company needed a preamp and phono to match with the outstanding XS power amplifier series he'd designed. The charter was to look at what could be done without paying attention to cost. His partner Wayne Colburn, after designing the Pass Labs XS preamp, next concentrated on the phono, choosing materials for the circuit boards and other passive parts, then deciding on the dual-mono circuitry. Within a year, he came up with the Pass Labs XS phono.

In an exchange of emails, Colburn wrote me about its development. He told me that, somewhat unusually, signal amplification from the phono cartridge inputs occurs prior to any input switching in the Pass Labs XS phono pre. He feels that this pre-amplification of the incoming signal prior to routing greatly reduces corruption of the low-level analog information. The circuit boards designed for this are made of gold-plated, high temperature ceramic composite (seven times the cost of standard boards) suspended on elastomer mounts and hand-

assembled—the kind of quality of parts used and care of assembly that is practiced in rocket science. The ceramic boards are much more stable and moisture resistant than polyimide boards and ceramic solders better than polyimide too. And its copper traces don't lift with heat as with other, less costly board materials.

“This is important,” he wrote. “When amplifying low frequency signal, the errors are multiplied almost 100,000 times, so we'd better get it right.”

The transistors, too, are very special, as they are new old stock Toshiba FETs that Pass Labs stockpiled many years ago, recognizing their rare quality before they ceased to be manufactured. These are hand-matched and trimmed for all six of the input cards in the phono, totaling 84 FETs in all. Colburn claims that the noise performance and consistency of these Toshiba parts are second to none. This high-gain section is direct-coupled and feeds into quad Toshiba MOSFETs in an auto-bias circuit Colburn claims maintains optimum operation due to their higher voltage and current capabilities.

This gain section then feeds Vishay resistors, and, for the first equalizer section, Colburn selected custom-made REL capacitors, expensive parts that he feels work well together, maintain stability, and can last twenty years or more. It is a time-consuming process to coordinate all these selections so they can complement each other, but Colburn's near thirty-five years of experience made all this go smoothly.



The circuit boards are dual-mono and sit side-by-side, just as does the oversize power supply with its twin boards and 120-watt, shielded toroids that are three times the size of what are in the XP-27. Finally, Colburn said that the Pass Labs XS phono pre uses multiple stages of regulation with electrolytic and film capacitors in an all-discrete cascade circuit.

In all, there are 13 circuit boards and 1500 parts in the Pass Labs XS phono, whereas the XP-27 uses only 6 boards and about 400 parts. The XS is indeed an all-out design targeted for the person who loves vinyl and wants a complete Pass Labs system competitive with the most expensive gear available. Colburn compares his phono to a topline Aston Martin but says,



wanly, “You can use it more hours in a day, unless you’ve a long commute.” Indeed, it is a product of genuine excess.

Listening

I was startled by the depth and realism of sound the Pass Labs XS phono added to my system. The soundstage was incredibly spacious—wider than my room and as tall or taller than the 8’ ceiling too. Not only that, images were so precisely located, it was as though the jazz and rock musicians and instruments on the LPs I played were spread lifelike along the short wall of my listening room and beyond the edges of my Ascendo M speakers. A piano player was on the right outside my window, comping on the keys. A tenor sax was center stage and in my face sometimes, and an electric guitar was hugging the left wall. There was another dimension of depth to the stage too, as on orchestral music, the layering front-to-back was as though a symphony in superbly scaled miniature were in front of me. It’s a cliché to say it, but I was blown away. And this says nothing about the richness of sound the XS provided, the liveliness of the music, the gorgeous sonic textures, and precise timing it afforded my system that seemed supercharged into a new dimension of sound.

To illustrate the capabilities of the Pass Labs XS phono in terms of subtlety and sophistication, I point out how it rendered the musicianship of the sextet led by Charles Mingus on “Purple Heart,” a tune from *Jazz Workshop* (Savoy 12059). There was an organic, tactile beauty in the shape of every note John LaPorta played on clarinet, the horn choruses behind him punchy and airy both, instrumental textures rich and interwoven in gorgeous threads of sound. On occasion, Ted Macero on baritone sax doubled LaPorta’s notes, sweet and fluid at times, others explosively sharp and insistent. Then, weaving both together and apart, they’d create aching legato, then swift inflections in gorgeous cascades of bebop notes. The genius of Mingus’s composition reflected influences as wide as Armstrong’s Hot Five, Stravinsky’s *Histoire d’un Soldat*, and Parker’s “Ornithology” and the Pass Labs XS phono rendered with clarity every quotation, the fleet and subtle interplay among the players, and an overall rich tapestry of sound.

In terms of naturalness of timing, sensate and powerful dynamic shifts, and plain foot-stomping rhythm, Allen Toussaint’s rendition of “St. James Infirmary” on *The Bright Mississippi* (Nonesuch 480380-1) could not be beat. His jazz ensemble swings hard on the tune, trumpet and piano making the mournful opening statement, giving way to a rousing blues rhythm, the ensemble falling into a slow and loping strut, with sidemen providing coordinated applause in time with the beat. I heard bountiful harmonics in the chordings of the piano, sometimes strenuous, oftentimes subtle dynamic shifts in its tasteful strides. The ambient space around each instrument—acoustic guitar, drums, and bass as well as piano and trumpet—was live and palpable, their presence almost breathing in front of me, the overall character sweet and swaggering. Images were stable but not opaque, ever dimensional and organic.

But it wasn't only with combo jazz that the Pass Labs XS phono excelled. It was great with the baroque music of Bach as well. I played *Concerto for Violin, Strings, and Continuo in E major, BWV 1042* as performed by soloist Hilary Hahn with Jeffrey Kahane directing the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra (DGG 483219). The Allegro first movement sounded clear, sprightly, and open, energetic without brightness, Hahn's violin silky and articulate. The continuo sound was rich and grave, other strings clean and vibrant with fine attack transients and speedy transitions on the brisk music. But I loved the Adagio second movement even more, the strings lush and mournful in an achingly slow pace with Hahn's delicate solo shading to richness at its dramatic points. There were deeply affecting pulses from the continuo while the strings sustained a kind of keening drone through much of the movement. Again, the soundstage was broad and deep with a presence as though live.



For all its prowess on acoustic sound, electronic music sounded maybe even more impressive via the Pass Labs XS phono. I played *Mylo Xyloto* by Coldplay (Parlophone/Capitol 509990 87553 1 5) with its huge, Brian Eno produced electronica sound. On "Paradise," the hit tune from the album, there was a huge tsunami of sound. First came a gothic organ intro, followed by synth strings, a fuzzed keyboard bass, and a plaintive lead vocal backed by catchy drums and echo synth too. Yet this quickly morphed into a gigantic vocal within a magnificence of electronica sound, thick with synth keyboards, an acoustic piano, and layered vocals that sounded like the Gorgon Tabernacle Choir. The sound environment in my room was immersive, more like a light show of acoustics rather than humble stereo playback—an arena theater's experience in 4-D. I felt as though I were in an infinity pool of post-progrock deeper than the floor under my feet and wider than the walls of my listening room.

For the pure rendering of vocals, great examples are Janis Ian's "All Roads to the River" on *Breaking Silence* (Analogue Productions APP 027) and Jonas Kaufman's "friendship duet" with baritone Franco Vassallo on "dio, che nell'alma infondere..." from Don Carlo on *The Verdi Album* (Sony Classics 88765492041). While Ian's singing is agile, airy, and emotive, full of subtle shadings and a dulcet tone with smoky timbres to her alto voice, Kaufman's tenor is stirring and penetrating, his famously brilliant top shining. In this stirringly heroic (and naïve) duet with Vassallo, detail was such that the voices, both close-miked and (I assume) recorded in a studio, were nevertheless perceptibly distinguishable in their spatial placements. Ian's voice was unfailingly pliant and lyrical, with emotional dynamic swells and diminuendos. As soothing as her vocal textures were, Kaufman's were silvery, bold, and, well, operatic.

Even though I couldn't get my mono cartridges to work with the Pass Labs XS phono, I still was able to enjoy very pleasurable mono listening via two stereo carts—the ZYX Ultimate Exceed 4D (on Raven 10.5 arm) and Kiseki Purpleheart NS (on Ortofon RS-309 arm). And the XS demonstrated a seriously refined ability to distinguish between the different sonic characters between the two. While the Kiseki sounded a touch brighter with more sparkle on the same LPs, both created fine inner textures with jazz ensembles. The ZYX sounded richer, slightly warmer, with plumier bass and a roundedness of character.



The Kiseki could have a tendency to produce more vibrancy, though, dishing out more color and touch on a complex track like “The Maids of Cadiz” from *Miles Ahead* by Miles Davis + 19 and a jazz orchestra directed by Gil Evans (Columbia Six-Eyes CL 1041). There was an exciting bite to the high notes of wind instruments like Yusef Lateef’s flute on “Metaphor” from *Jazz Mood* (Savoy CR 00866). But on piano, the ZYX created an impressive tonal richness, beautifully intricate trillings, and a loving legato as Bill Evans played “Make Someone Happy” on *Bill Evans at Town Hall, Vol. One* (Verve V-8683). There was real thump to Chuck Israels’ bass too and an even channel balance with no obvious centering in the soundstage that spread inside the inner edges of my speakers.

Nothing demonstrated the remarkable prowess of the Pass Labs XS phono, though, more than its performance with orchestral music in stereo on a grand scale. Hector Berlioz’s Romantic era

Symphonie fantastique is infamous for its difficulty for a stereo system to render in terms of complex instrumental textures, sweeping scale, and dynamic range. Yet the Pass Labs unit managed a completely convincing and aesthetically satisfying playback with this most challenging of symphonic works. I played the Boston Symphony Orchestra's version, directed by Seiji Ozawa (DGG Original Source 486 4507/2530 358). Throughout, I experienced fine orchestral spread and accurate section divisions, a sprightly clarity at times with a dark and lavish resonance of strings at others, dynamic shifts like oceanic swells with great thump and grieving from the double basses. French horns added pastoral punctuations of sound from the deep rear of the soundstage, rich with fanfares in hues of brassy colors. Timpani strikes came fast and explosively while oboes were appropriately plaintive and piercing.

There was grace and languorousness in lyric passages that were punctuated by delicate arpeggios from a harp, then grave portentous movements with ominous strings giving way to twittering woodwinds and then powerful full orchestral crescendos. The movement of woodwinds sounds in their placements throughout the orchestra was like birds piping in a thick forest, with occasional cold notes from a flute and a rich tolling of bells sending chills over my body. Instrumental tones were clear and definite, their textures rich, with spatial cues and layering that were realistic. In all my years of stereo listening, the performance of the Pass Labs XS phono gave me the most thrilling reproduction of orchestral sound I've ever experienced.



Conclusion

Wayne Colburn lifted the top of my head off with this Pass Labs XS phono. It's everything he claims it to be—the last word in analog equipment that money can buy. Go out and hear it. Not only does it look great and feel substantial, the quality of its parts and careful assembly are second to none.

In playback, you'll be amazed at its prowess, the magnificence of its subtlety, the monstrous soundstage and solid imaging, its authoritative bass and high frequency extension, and the intricate detail of all the sonic textures it can produce. I was plainly amazed that audio technology has come so far as to render what I'd thought was impossible—a satisfying stereo reproduction of a symphony orchestra in performance. As excellent with jazz, rock, blues, folk, and opera as it is with classical music, our audio clichés cannot adequately praise the pure beauty and perfection of analog sound that the XS phono has achieved. But something Wayne Colburn said when introducing his phono still sticks in my mind—"Once you hear it, you can't go back." The Pass Labs XS phono is indeed a *summa* of his career in analog electronics, a *ne plus ultra* of accomplishment. But giving in to cliché, I've got to say, It's the Bomb!

Garrett Hongo





<https://pt.audio/2026/03/15/pass-labs-xs-phono-preamplifier-review/>

Specifications:

Input impedance: 30 – 47K Ohms

Capacitance: 100 – 750 PF

Gain: 56, 66, 76 dB

Maximum output: 38 volts rms balanced @ .1% THD

Output impedance: 150 Ohms per leg

RIAA: +- .1 dB, 20-20 KHz

THD: less than 0.005%, 1mV in @1K Hz

Power consumption: 75 Watts

Dimensions (each chassis): 19" W x 14" D x 6.25" H

Weight: 80 Pounds

Price: \$49,500 (silver), \$50,000 (black)

Pass Laboratories

13395 New Airport Rd.

Suite G.

Auburn, CA 95602

Phone: 530.878.5350

Fax: 530.878.5358

Web: <http://www.passlabs.com>