

Description

Pass Labs make two levels of preamps, the Xs and the XP. The Xs level, which is their ultimate level, consists of their Xs Phono and the Xs Preamp. The XP level has five preamps; the XP-10, 12, 20, 22 and 30. I like most think of the 12 and 22 as replacements for the 10 and the 20 which are no longer in the line. Pass Labs doesn't change their products very often so when a new one comes out it is significant.

A significant upgrade from the XP-10, the XP-12 has a beefier power supply that results in a quieter output stage and transformer. The XP-12 uses the single stage volume control borrowed from the preamp in the Xs line. This provides one hundred 1 dB steps with lower noise and distortion while removing some signal path parts. Like the XP-10, the XP-12 is housed in a single chassis.

The XP-12 is a balanced Class A preamp. The front panel has a small concave channel which runs all the way across the XP-12's front. On the left side in this channel are four aluminum buttons for mute, mode and two buttons for scrolling left and right through the modes. Next in line is the IR receiver and then a black-on-blue display. On the far right of the front panel is an endlessly rotating aluminum volume knob.



The rear panel has an IEC power cord input with a self-replaceable fuse and the main on/off switch. There are two outputs (1 x RCA and 1 x XLR) and five inputs (3 x RCA and 2 x XLR). It also comes with a very nice remote control. As the industry has come to expect from Pass Labs, the build quality is world-class and this preamp looks expensive but not overdone.

Review System

My review system has gone through some changes lately; the speakers are now the DeVore gibbon Super Nines. The source was my AMG V12 turntable with an AMG 12JT Turbo Tonearm and the DS Audio Master1 Optical Cartridge System. The preamp was the XP-12 (replacing my LTA MZ3) and the amp was the Pass Labs XA30.8. The cables were a mixture of Audience FrontRow and AU24SX and the power distributor was the HB Cables Marble.

Listening

In my review of the Pass XS Preamp for **Dagogo** a few years ago, I said, "If you come from the audiophile cult that prefers the sound of "you are there" versus "they are here," then I am also certain the Xs will be the finest preamp you have ever heard." The XP-12 is not in the same league with the \$38,000 XS, but it presents music in much the same way. It also had a similar tonal balance.

With the XP-12 in my system, it portrayed a sense of air around instruments and vocals. The system created a realistic soundstage; It was not the very best I have heard but very realistic. It had a nice

sense of detail providing cues about the performance. The overall sound of the preamp is on the warm side compared to my reference preamp.

The bass and mid-bass were fast, dynamic, tight and powerful. The speed and dynamics carried on into the midrange and top-end. I have heard some comments that the XP-12 wasn't as warm as the XP-10. I have never heard an XP-10 but I found the XP-12 to have a rich and warm tone.

I could go on writing in audiophile terms about how this preamp allowed my system to sound. I'll save you the time. In traditional audiophile terminology, this is an exceptional preamp. Let's move on now and talk about how my system reproduced music with the XP-12 as the preamp.

Listening to String Instruments

When listening to recordings of guitars, basses, harps, and other plucked strings, the instruments were well placed in the space of the hall or club. The leading edge was as good but not as fast as it is with some preamps. The sound was seductive and rich with real decay and air inside and around the instruments. The sound of the instruments was emotionally engaging and suggestive of the real thing.

Violins sounded very sweet and again exceptionally well placed in the orchestra. Massed strings were very visceral, and extended. They could swell and float within the orchestra. Cellos and basses were very quick, tuneful, tight and powerful.

On Ray Brown and Laurindo Almeida's "**Moonlight Serenade**" album, the first song starts with over 30 seconds of "*Moonlight Sonata*" being played beautifully on the guitar by Almeida. Then Brown comes in with Monk's "*Round Midnight*." It may not sound like it would work, but it does. When Brown's bass comes in, it should sound deep and powerful, and it did with the XP-12 in my system. The upper areas of his standup bass sounded ever so sweet with a nice dose of shimmer. The two musicians sounded a little more distant than they do in my reference system. This is very pleasant indeed, but it does make it more difficult to hear the air inside the instruments or the fingering of the threads than I am used to.

Woodwinds and Horns

To enjoy woodwinds your system has to have a great balance from the upper bass through the top-end, but it is necessary to have more than balance. These instruments move small amounts of air on some instruments and lots of air on others. This air is an essential part of their sound. If your system doesn't let you hear these nuances, then the music will sound nice but not alive. I was very pleased with how my system pulled all this off with the XP-12 as the preamp.

Horns, on the other hand, are very demanding in both frequency range and dynamics. It is often difficult to get the explosive dynamics, the bite, and the body of a horn without sounding edgy and bright. With the XP-12 my system sounded superb with the bloom I like to hear but not quite as detailed as in my reference system.

Drums, Cymbals, and Percussion

I have shared this example before that explains how hard it is to know if your system is accurate when playing drums. One night during intermission at a Pops concert, they changed the setup on the stage for the guest artist who was performing next. This included a new drummer and drum kit. The resulting difference was between what we audiophiles would call slow, overdone bass with the first drum kit and tight, fast bass with the second drum kit. This difference was huge. Now, I ask you, how would you know this if you were listening to a recording?

There was something in common about both drum kits and drummers; they both carried the rhythm and the pace of the music. So, I think that's what we always have to listen for when we talk about the ability of a system to play drums. It's easy to rob all the weight and substance from your system if you try to get every recording to have fast and tight bass, but I feel drums should always convey real rhythm and pace. With the XP-12 in the system the pace, rhythm, and timing came across very naturally. Cymbals had a nice shimmer and tone.

Piano and Human Voice

I listened to classical and jazz solo piano recordings for this review. I was very pleased with the balance from top to bottom. I could hear the wood tones and the natural reverberation of the strings being struck by the hammer. My only complaint was that there wasn't quite the immediacy I am used to.

The XP-12 did a great job with voices, especially female voices. There was air and space around them. The singers had a nice sense of space. Female voices were never shrill or overly edgy. Male voices had a natural timbre and body.

Conclusion

The Pass Labs XP-12 makes music easy to enjoy for long periods of time, and it has a very natural presentation. It would mate very well with the Pass Labs XA-25 as their sonics are cut from the same cloth. I think it matches even better with the XA 30.8, which brings a little more bloom and life to the system. The XP-12 is an exceptional preamp and highly recommended.