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Pass Labs XP-22 Preamplifier and XP-27 Phono Preamplifier | REVIEW

October 3, 2021 | Marc Phillips | Analog, Components | Review



They've been here for a long time, this **Pass Labs XP-22** preamplifier and matching **XP-27** phono stage combo. Months, maybe even a year. They've watched other amps and preamps and integrated amps and phono stages come in and out of the system all summer long, and they waited quietly to do their job—recalibrating my ears back to a more neutral sound so I could figure out what to scribble down about the other review gear. We're not talking about sherbet between the courses of a meal. We're talking about returning home to where everything is right with the world before you venture back out into the great unknown for another adventure.

When I reviewed the [Pass Labs XP-12](#) and [XP-17](#) for [The Occasional](#) a couple of years ago, the next step down in the line from the XP-22 and XP-27, I really had to examine my thoughts about neutrality, of having components that simply got out of the way of everything. As I mentioned, it's hard to write a review about nothing. As an audiophile who has always gravitated toward a colored sound—lush, warm and romantic is usually my goal—I started wondering if the secret to audio

happiness was to go for a neutral sound in your amplification and allow your sources to supply the personality. Phono cartridges, I'm looking in your direction.

That's what this Pass Labs gear does to me. It makes me reconsider the concept of sonic neutrality and how important and useful it is to me as a reviewer.

I did enjoy the XP-12 and XP-17 and recommended them highly, and I wound up holding onto that pair for a while, too. Then **Bryan Stanton** of Pass Labs had an idea. I'm paraphrasing here, but he said something like, "Since you enjoyed the XP-12 and XP-17 so much, I thought you should go up to the next step, the Pass Labs XP-22 preamplifier and the XP-27 phono stage. Maybe you could compare them and talk about the differences." He mentioned that I would be the first person to compare the two sets, at least outside of Pass Labs personnel and maybe a few hardcore Pass Labs fans who buy one of everything they make.

The Pass Labs XP-22 preamplifier looks almost identical to the XP-12, but the front panel controls on the XP-27 phono preamplifier are far more elaborate and sophisticated than XP-17, which has no front panel controls at all. Another important and somewhat obvious difference is that the XP-22 and XP-27 are two-chassis preamps. All six boxes, however, are identical in size and finish. Having them all together on one equipment rack looks *very* serious, and I dig it.

Those extra two boxes on the XP-22 and XP-27, of course, are external power supplies. I've been reviewing so many products lately that have external power supplies, and in a few isolated cases I've been able to hear clear improvements in the lowering of the noise floor—specifically with the Merason Frerot DAC and the Innuos Zen Mini Mk. 3 music server. But the Pass Labs XP-12 and XP-17 were already remarkably quiet and neutral and invisible. Are the Pass XP-22 and XP-27 going to be *more invisible*?

Do I even know what that sounds like? Let's find out.



Pass Labs XP-22 and XP-27: The Basics

The Pass Labs XP-22 preamplifier (\$9,500 USD) and the XP-27 phono preamplifier (\$11,500 USD) currently occupy the middle spots in the company's line-up, just under the flagship XS models. Both are designed to be ultra-quiet, with the external power supplies using double-shielded low-noise toroidal dual-mono transformers. Each power supply is connected to the main unit via "aviation grade circular connectors using silver over oxygen-free copper."

You also get Toshiba transistors, the company's favorite, and a larger high-bias output stage that was first used in the XS preamp. That output stage makes it far easier to drive longer multiple cable runs for the single-ended output circuitry. You get five inputs, two balanced and three unbalanced, and the same single-stage volume control as the more expensive preamps in the line.



The XP-27 phono preamplifier, like the XP-22, was designed primarily to reduce distortion and noise in the signal path. "Switching and loading is done at higher signal levels," the Pass website proclaims, which improves dynamics, minimizes noise and improves low-level performance. (Both the XP-22 and XP-27 excelled at providing plenty of music information at relatively low volumes.)

You have three gain settings for the XP-27, accessible by a large knob on the front for 56, 66 and 76 dB. There are two separate controls for capacitive and resistive loading. The Pass Labs XP-27 also features two separate inputs, making it ideal for comparing the Technics SL-1200G and the Technics SL-1210GAE turntables, and you also have controls for the high-pass filter and muting.

Despite their larger-than-average sizes as two-chassis components, both weigh around 40 pounds each and are easily moved around when you separate the power supplies. Still, Pass Labs

recommends that you don't stack the main units on the power supplies—you get better results when everything is spread out on the rack. Even with my big Fern & Roby equipment rack I don't have quite that much shelf space, so I was careful and stacked them with care.



Pass XP-22 and XP-27 vs. XP-12 and XP-17

Since I was asked to do this comparison between the Pass Labs XP-22 and XP-27 with their smaller brethren, I started off with a wonderful system with Pass gear everywhere, rows and columns of gleaming aluminum boxes. Since the 22/27 is a bit more than twice the price of the 12/17, and because the most obvious difference between the two pairs is the external power supplies, I went in thinking I would observe lower levels of noise—like I said, even more silence and perhaps that pitch black, somewhat viscous level of quiet that we audiophile—especially analog lovers—often prize.

After learning a few things about lowered noise floors with all that advanced grounding gear I've evaluated from AudioQuest, Nordost and Atlas Cables, I knew to look for more than just quiet. Less noise and distortion in the signal often sound like a sharper edge has been honed in regards to transients. The music stands out in greater relief to the background and therefore sounds more immediate and natural.

Yes, those same improvements were heard when I switched over to the Pass Labs XP-22 and XP-27, a feeling that I was getting more music and less mechanical and electronic artifacts. This wasn't a huge difference, mind you, because the XP-12 and XP17, as I've already mentioned, were super quiet and composed in the first place. It was simply a matter of degree—all the things I enjoyed with the lesser pair were amplified (pun intended) with the XP-22 and XP-27.

I also heard gains in the size of the overall soundstage in all directions. That was enough to prompt me to pack up the 12/17 and concentrate on the Pass Labs XP-22 and XP-27. But I also have to state that the essential character of both pairs of gear were very, very similar in tonal balance.



Set-Up

The Pass Labs XP-22 and XP-27 were here in my listening room for so long that once again it's tough to talk about all the gear I used. This pair saw it all, especially the XP-27 phono pre which was used with Sumiko, **Koetsu**, ZYX, Hana, and Goldenberg cartridges—I know I'm forgetting something—and I found the front controls of the Pass Labs XP-27 phono stage to be superb when it came to adjusting both loading and gain. I had a distinct sensation of really dialing in each cartridge, especially when using the AnalogMagik Mk. II software. Easy, precise and incredibly sophisticated.

I will mention one system where the Pass Labs XP-22 and XP-27 truly blossomed into something magnificent. It's hard not to compare and contrast the Pass Labs gear with the Allnic Audio gear—I constantly switched between them because they were both compelling for different reasons. (It goes far deeper than just solid-state vs. tubes.) But the Allnic gear included an integrated amp, and I wound up using the **Pureaudio Duo2**—my only stand-alone power amplifier—with the Pass Labs. Still, the price of both sets of gear were similar.

The magic settled in and held court once I used the Pureaudio amp with the XP-22 and XP-27. I had a perpetual sense of rarified performance, that I was really bumping up against the ceiling of what I consider ideal sound in my current listening room which, as we just saw with the MC Audiotech

Forty-10 loudspeakers, has its challenges and limitations. I had it all, though, a big open sound with lots of detail and a smooth and confident delivery that you only get from the really good stuff. When I thought the sound of my system couldn't get any better, a shiny and mysterious guest appeared in the doorway—the Brinkmann Taurus direct-drive turntable with 12" arm.

Things got even better, but ever so briefly since it was time to stop hogging the Pass Labs gear.

The Pass Labs gear also loved working with the **Technics SL-1200G** (and **SL-1210GAE**), and I was all set to pair up the Taurus with the **Brinkmann Edison Mk. 2** phono preamplifier that's been waiting patiently in the wings, but the Pass gear kept yelling, "Gimme some sugar, baby!" So I did. It was an illuminating and exhilarating few weeks.



Sound and Listening

So I've already discussed the unbearable lightness of being a Pass Labs preamplifier, and how it's so difficult to pinpoint a lack of flaws or even "personality," but here's the thing with *that*. I did notice an improvement in the quality of the silence produced by the XP-22 and XP-27. How does one differentiate between two levels of nothingness? The answer, I suppose, is with measurements in stead of the human ear and yet—here's the amazing part—I could easily hear a difference between the basic nature of the two silences.

Miles Davis' comments about the spaces between the notes aside, the Pass Labs XP-22 and XP-27 were easily able to determine more than the quality of that silence. They carved out the space in which it exists. I found this spaciousness to be equally present in both the line and phono sections, which was clear when I played a couple of the latest releases from 2L Recordings—Trio Mediaeval's *Solacium* and the brand-new collection of concertos from Norwegian composer Stale Kleiberg.

If you're familiar with 2L Recordings, you know the lengths producer Morten Lindberg takes in achieving a total unique sound for his recordings. They're almost always recorded in big Norwegian churches with open beam ceilings, with careful attention paid to the positioning of performers and microphones to create a truly memorable collection of complex and evolving sounds. Lindberg even goes as far as to place a pile of wooden logs on the floor near the performers and their instruments because it adds something.



With the Pass Labs XP-22 preamplifier in the system, all those details were highlighted, all the things that are done in service to the music. You can feel the space, but you can also easily hear the room boundaries and even the wood that was used to build them. The tiniest of details became fascinating because they were not only audible, but easily heard and studied. Of course we're reviewing the Pass Labs XP-22 preamplifier with the Pass Labs XP-27 phono preamplifier, the flashier component of the pair, so let's move on from the excellence of the line stage alone and play some records.

The Pass Labs XP-22 and XP-27 were also one of the stars during my summer-long survey of various phono stages and cartridges. We're talking about some truly remarkable performers, of course, more than one deserving my personal recommendation in the form of a Reviewer's Choice award, but over time I started to feel like the Pass Labs XP-27 was the grown-up of the bunch, the stoic one who watched and listened to the others play before taking the stage and closing the show. This phono preamplifier always seemed to deliver the final word on what music should sound like on a recording. It had a truly uncanny way of merely presenting the music without the recording

artifacts. I was reminded of the very first time I ever heard a CD on a CD player and how the music appeared suddenly out of nothingness, and how exhilarated I felt the first time it happened.

With silence, you get dynamics. You get contrast. You get excitement. You get everything the performers intended and felt deep in their hearts without any sort of mechanical editorializing.



Pass Labs XP-22 and XP-27 Conclusions



Here's why I'm giving the Pass Labs XP-22 preamplifier and XP-27 phono preamplifier each a Reviewer's Choice Award. I think back upon my favorite amplification over the years, everything from my Yamamoto Sound Craft single-ended triodes to LFD's Brit-Fi masterpieces to those alive-and-breathing Mactones to Vinnie Rossi's amps hooked up to QIn speakers and even those astounding Allnic Audio pieces that spent summer vacation in my home, and each choice sounds different but still faithful to the original performance.

In other words, I've always depended upon the amplification to do its part when it comes to putting a fat and happy grin on my face. But the Pass Labs XP-22 and XP-27 offer me yet another choice, and that's for them to serve as a perfectly level playing field for all the pieces of gear that come and go. But don't we all want our amplifiers to act as perfectly clean windows? As a reviewer, don't I want something that gives me a clearer and more organize way of listening and evaluating?

Let's put it one more way: I had so many random epiphanies about the music I was playing, so many ideas that I ultimately wrote down, with at least some level of clarity because the Pass Labs gear allowed me that space to do the deep thinking about music. That's the best way to summarize these two sterling performers, by thinking about how their neutrality opened up my mind to new ways of thinking about our hobby. **Highly recommended.**

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