

Pass Labs

Xs150

\$65,000/pair

passlabs.com

PHOTOS: courtesy of pass labs
COPY: Lawrence Devoe

The owner's manual accompanying the Pass Labs XS monoblock amplifiers opens with a reminiscence from company CEO and designer-in-chief Nelson Pass. "It seems like yesterday..." that segues into a brief chronology of Pass Labs' now-legendary power amplifiers, beginning with the Aleph 0 and culminating in the XS series you see here. A number of years ago, our publisher put the XS300 monos on the cover. This time we focus on the smaller XS150s.

The Making of the Mighty Monoblocks

Similar to the XS line and phono preamplifiers, a two-box solution is employed for the XS150 to enlarge the power supply and separate it from the control elements. The massive banks of output devices are increased from four (as in the X and XA models) to six with a ten-fold increase in bias current from constant current sources. The result is a 100-fold expansion of the single-ended power range. New power MOSFETs are incorporated in the output topology which also includes a small amount of feedback.

The front end of the amplifier is completely redesigned, employing cascode local feedback, described as "an alternative method of controlling linearity around a single stage without the usual trade-offs. This innovation allows arbitrary shaping of the relative distortion harmonics and is tweaked to precisely complement the character of the output stage." The XS150 remains in Class A operation throughout its stated output range of 150 watts/channel @ 8 Ω and 300 watts/channel @ 4 Ω . The Martin Logan CLXs used in this review have a nominal impedance of 6 Ω , so, by my calculations, with these speakers, the XS150s would max out at 200 watts/channel.



Yo, Heave Ho: Out of the Box

When four very large and heavy cartons appeared on my doorstep, I knew help would be needed to unbox them, let alone to mount them on Sound Anchors amp platforms. One hour later, with considerable assistance from two friends, these mini behemoths (230 pounds total weight for each channel/power supply chassis) were hoisted onto their respective platforms. Soon two large illuminated meters were beaming right back at me.

Set-up is straightforward. Hoist the amplifier chassis (the one with the meter) on top of the power chassis. Connect the huge Neutrik Powercon cables to their designated receptacles on the rear of each chassis. Attach the input and speaker cables to the channel chassis. Insert the power cord and add a 12-volt trigger wire for remote operation, if so desired, into the power chassis. Flip the power switch on the back and the power button on the front of the power chassis and you are good to go. The bright light on each meter where the 12-noon position indicates all is well can be turned off (which is what I soon did) by pushing the button on the front of the channel chassis. Be sure to allow plenty of open space around the XS150s, since Class A amplifiers generate plenty of heat. The XA monos require a lot of juice (700 Watts continuous); if possible, I would also recommend a dedicated line for each unit or, if not, at least one for the pair.

The Sounds of Silence

After a break-in period of about one hundred hours, my initial impressions were as follows: a completely noise-free, black background from which music, studio reverbs, musical and mechanical sounds of instruments, and human voices effortlessly emerge in their respective glories. Imaging was holographic—this was a bigger, more dimensional experience than I've had in my system. The openness of the soundstage, the palpable presence of the performers, and the tightly controlled bass lines on great recordings must have been exactly what the engineers intended as they were laying down the tracks. Regardless of the music selected, the total sound experience far exceeded my previous experience with the Pass Labs XA-100.8 monoblocks that the XS150s replaced. Extensive listening sessions not only confirmed these initial impressions, but improved over time.

And My Birds Can Sing

I confess being a sucker for female singers and the XS150s brings out the best in some of my favorite female vocal tracks. The remastered Fairy Tales SACD opens with the seductive voice of Radka Toneff and the reverberant chords of her pianist Steve Dobrogosz on Jim Webb's haunting "The Moon Is A Harsh Mistress." In "So and So" on her eponymous CD, Holly Cole's voice runs a dynamic range gamut from full out to a barely audible whisper, again perfectly displayed. I have been listening to the hypnotic voice of Singaporean singer Jacintha for more than two decades since I got my hands on her Groove Note CD Here's To Ben: A Vocal Tribute to Ben Webster. A recent acquisition of the limited edition 45 rpm 2-LP set reacquainted me with her rendition of "In the Wee Small Hours of the Morning," opening with her voice and an acoustic bass fully fleshed out and standing right in front of me. In all of the above vocal cuts, there is an uncanny naturalness, again showcasing the high resolving power of the Pass amplifiers.

Kittens on The Keyboards

Piano lovers will be impressed by how the XS150s nails the overtones, pedals, heft, and dynamic range of the grand piano in Joel Fan's *West Of The Sun* (Reference Recordings DVD-A WAV 176.4kbps/24b), featuring a potpourri of Western Hemisphere solo piano works. Dick Hyman's paean to boogie-woogie specialist Fats Waller took a pre-recorded program from the Bosendorfer Reproducing Piano to the digital domain on a "better than live" rendition of "Ain't Misbehavin'." Every note, every pedal point, all of the stride-left hands and melody-right hands are there. No piano session would be complete without the genius of Keith Jarrett. On "For All We Know," Jarrett and bassist Charlie Haden (ECM digital download 44.1k/24b) generate musical synergy that only comes from having spent much time together. The low ends of both instruments are well-defined, as are Jarrett's occasional background moans.

Go Big or Go Home

Antal Dorati's London Symphony Orchestra 60-year-old recording of Igor Stravinsky's *The Firebird* (Mercury LP) has long been considered a demonstration quality recording. However, I have always found the LSO strings to sound a bit strident. While I have listened to this LP more times than was probably good for me, there were now warmer-sounding violins, sparkling woodwind details and low string pulsations that are completely new to my old ears.



Speaking of 60-year-old recordings, Sir Georg Solti's ground-breaking rendition of Richard Wagner's Das Rheingold (Decca LP) concludes with Donner's sonorous hammer strike, followed by a beautifully balanced array of singers and a massive orchestral flourish. Overwhelming would truly be an understatement!

What Is the Price of Happiness?

To reach this level of performance, you will lay out a good chunk of change, in this case, \$65,000.00. Yeah, it might have been great to have gone all in for the big brother XS300s for only \$20K more but their sheer size made this impractical from the start. So, if you "settle" for the XS150s and decide to mate them with their XS line and phono preamplifier stablemates (for which they were clearly intended), you will be writing a check for just south of \$150K. Good sound can be had for a lot less cash with other fine Pass Labs amps, like those in my other audio systems but if you want to go for an ultimate audio trip, then the XS150 will surely fill that bill. These massive monoblocks have given me the most engaging sound I have ever experienced in my main listening room. Period.

As I listen again to Jacintha soothing my ears with "In the Wee Small Hours of The Morning," I am thinking, if this is what heaven sounds like, just take me now

Pass Labs XS 150 Monoblock Amplifiers

MSRP: \$65,000 (USD)

www.passlabs.com

PERIPHERALS

Preamplifier Pass Labs XSPre

Phono Preamplifier Pass Labs XSPhono

Analog Source VPI HW-40/VPI Fatboy/Clearaudio Statement V2

Digital Source PS Audio Directstream DAC and Transport, Esoteric K01-X CD/SACD player

Speakers Martin Logan CLX (2), Martin Logan Balanced Force 212 Subwoofers (2)

Power Conditioner Running Springs Maxim, Dmitri

Cables Nordost Odin

