

Review Pass Labs XP-22

by aaeadmin | April 16, 2019



Intro

There are some devices you just need to hear. At least once in you 'audiolife'. Think of a Spectral system. Or a set of Wilson Audio speakers. Or what about Bowers & Wilkins' legendary Nautilus? In reference of the author in question: a Pass pre-stage is also part of this. We have the Pass Labs XP-22 in the listening room. The step-up of the '12'. Is it worth the extra 3000 euros and extra shelf space?

Well... over 10,000 euros for a pre-amp. The lucky few who can take the plunge to do this in this segment have a few difficult choices to make. Because lurk around the corner: Spectral, Pass Labs, Soullution, Nagra... or, for example: Ayre... that's a difficult choice to make! They're all beautiful. First world problems... But let's get on with the Pass.

Legends

If we type this piece, it's *Legends Month* at Radio Veronica. Everyone is allowed to pass on his or her legend in the field of music, acting, etc. They're making lists of them again. A nice hook for us to use Nelson Pass as a legend.



The best man has undoubtedly earned his spurs in the world of hi-fi and high-end audio. And not only by putting beautiful products on the market. An example: his diagrams of the Aleph series can be found everywhere and can be built for the *Handy Harries* this way. In this way he shares his knowledge and insights on the internet with other enthusiasts. It's beautiful.

In short: if you have time and the two right hands, you can build your own Pass Aleph. Of course, these are not the same schematics as XP-10, 12, 20, 22, 30, 32... Or other X-series. But beautiful!

XP-22

Okay. back to the XP-22. The Pass Labs XP-22 is a completely symmetrical pre-amp. The XP-22 is in fact an XP-12 with an external power supply. Of course, this external power supply is made in a nice box. This extra housing is easy to put away. By making the large – much more luxurious – power supply external, there is less negative influence from the power supply on the electronics of the front stage. Think of scattered fields.

Also, the power supply is heavier and easier to produce in the extra box, than the 'single box' solution. After all, there's more room. According to Pass Labs, this has clearly audible influences. More space, more punch, more control. We're gonna go through it.



Entrances and exits

Briefly about the XP-22. The inputs and outputs are the same as those of the XP-12. So 2 x balanced, 3 x single ended, a tape loop and balanced and single ended out. Then there is one extra input: the power supply. This is a thick, round plug that goes between the extra box and the pre-amp. Pass Labs supplies this cable, of course.

The test set-up



We place the XP-22 where the XP-12 should be. Changing the guard is easy: change the cables and... done. The Pass Labs XP-22 now controls the Bryston 4B SST3 which controls another set of Focal Sopra No1.

As source we use our Metrum Acoustics Ambre and Pavane. The Ambre is connected to the Pavane via I2S. The Ethernet connection is galvanically disconnected via an optical converter. Cables come from Audioquest, Grimm and Kemp.

The energy for the Bryston passes through an Isotek Titan filter. The rest of the set is connected to a Kemp PowerStrip 8Plus.

We've been playing with Pass Labs pre-amps for many, many years. There's a clear reason: we love the sound. Pass Labs is not purely technical or too analytical, as is sometimes the case in

the high-end. Pass Labs plays smoothly and transparently and still gives us the feeling of adding very little sauce of our own. Each component adds something. But Pass Labs does this without us feeling that we are listening to the interpretation of Nelson Pass. And that's important to us.



Then the step from the XP-12 (7200 euros) to the Pass Labs XP-22 (10,900 euros). Now we would like to temper expectations. Because don't expect a completely different sound, or a giant step in detail or punch. However: it is a very audible step for those who own an XP-12 and know it well. Pass Labs has in fact made profits in a few areas. And those few steps added together make for a significant step forward at the bottom of the line.

Larger image

We mainly hear a difference in imaging – stereo image – rhythm / talk and dynamics. Detail level is quite similar, although we sometimes hear a bit more texture. However, we find the

biggest difference is space. The XP-22 really knows how to create more space. More air. The '12' plays a little more laid back.

Energy

What also stands out is the punch and energy across the board. The XP-22 is remarkably energetic compared to the XP-12. Guitar strikes have more energy. Perhaps this is because the power supply is quieter than in the '12'. Because of this extra 'silence' there is more music and space for that kind of details. After all: a lower noise floor means a larger s/n ratio and therefore more music.

Long run...

How's that? A week or two of living with a Pass Labs XP-22. It's not giving up... The Pass plays easily, honestly and grabs you by the throat if you have to. So did the [dCS Bartok](#), but in a completely different way. The Pass comes across more neutral, the dCS Bartok a bit preferable. Both give unprecedented insight into the music. This is clearly a question of: what are you looking for? What kind of system do you have? What are your preferences? That's entirely up to the lover, of course.

For Whom?

The big question is of course: who is this high-end, 100% analogue pre-amp for? In these times of digital audio, that is a very good question. There are now simply amazingly beautiful digital devices on the market that losslessly control the volume. Think of the dCS Bartok, or the Metrum Acoustics Adagio. The answer is in our opinion: a small niche. It's as simple as that. But: there is a market for it. Think of people who want to listen to vinyl at a very high level. Or reviewers like us. We simply have to play with a good analog pre-amp, because we also have to test the analog outputs of a d/a converter.

But beyond that: there are still many enthusiasts with high quality equipment who are looking for an analogue pre-amp. A very nice pre-amp. And that's the XP-22 without a doubt.

Conclusion

The Pass Labs XP-22 preamplifier is another beautiful creation by Nelson Pass. To be honest, we are used to it. Nice about the XP-22 compared to the XP-12 is the gain in dynamics, tranquillity and spaciousness. This is clearly audible if your set allows it. The extra cost of 3700 euros is certainly worth it in our opinion.

Now a pure analog preamplifier in these days of digital audio is of course a niche product. But we are very happy that there are manufacturers who put time, energy, money and research into this. Because the fact is: a beauty like this remains beautiful. And there remains a market for it. Alpha Approved!