

PASS LABS INT-30A

(hifimedia – Croatia, issue 81, May 2010.)

“Pass's philosophy that simple circuits are the Holy Grail of the audio world proven right (again)”

“Having the audacity to include in his recent catalogue not one but two integrated amplifiers, Pass demonstrated what it is exactly that makes him great. He does not follow trends; he creates them. And INT-30A will do more than simply enhance his well-deserved reputation”

Written by: Neven Kos

Around two years ago, we had the privilege of being the first print media outlet in the world to publish a review of the first integrated amplifier from the Nelson Pass's workshop. It was the INT-150 model. In the meantime, Pass Labs have gone through certain organizational and managerial interventions, which resulted in very radical changes in the US distribution network, and somewhat less radical changes among the distributors in Europe. During that period, Pass focused on the electronics, as well as administration – the 2010 CES saw the official presentation of an amplifier called X260.5 – a monoblock amplifier delivering 260W per channel, based on the upgraded Super-Symmetry topology, which has now for years been the most important feature of a Pass amplifier.

In addition to the monoblocks, Pass also presented a new integrated amplifier, INT-30A, which is the subject of this review. History repeats itself: the article you are reading is among the first in the world to review the INT-30A – the second integrated amp in Pass's catalogue. Although the exterior will bring to mind the, among the audiophiles and critics, well-established INT-150 model, this integrated amplifier is in fact based on the XA30.5 stereo amplifier – one of the most prestigious Pass's amplifiers apart from the Aleph 3 classic. In terms of the exterior, which is identical to that of the INT-150 model, there is nothing new to say so we will simply revisit the description we brought to you for the old integrated amp: “on the outside, the amplifier has very little to brag about: the front is dominated by a large volume pot (some will regret having to part with Pass's older 'anti-design'), and the information display with basic info on the status of the amp, showing the volume levels for individual channels and the selected input. Pressing those tiny buttons will bring the device back to life from the standby mode, mute the sound, or select an input. All the functions are also copied on the remote, in terms of appearance and functionality a major improvement over the previous one, enabling, lo and behold, a direct selection of the input.

On the rear side, we found four single-ended and two balanced inputs, as well as the preamp out through the same type of connectors. The main power switch is also located on the rear side of the amplifier, which is supposed to suggest that it should not be touched too often. Any criticism ought to be directed to the speaker terminals, which are too small and too cheap for this class of amplifier, and aggravate the task of connecting stiff speaker cables, or those with thicker cross section. Ehm, unfortunately, the criticism we voiced at the time continues to be relevant – the speaker terminals are too small and not at all a match to the reputation and the price of the integrated amp, making it very difficult to connect massive speaker cables.”

As we have already said, in terms of the design, the INT-30A is identical to the INT-150 model, although conceptually it relies on the XA-30.5 power amplifier, with an additional input buffer with control electronics (this buffer is identical to the one in the INT-150 model, which is clear from the marking on the printed plate). In terms of what it's based on, the technical specification is virtually identical to that of the power amplifier, which guarantees at least a sound similar to the XA-30.5 power amplifier, putting a smile on a face of a many happy listener. As INT-150 and INT-30A are identical in the input and preamplifier part, we will quote the words of Kent English (of the Pass Laboratories Technical Department), who described to us this part of the INT-150 model. "Nelson believes that a simple circuit, with a minimum of parts, is the Holy Grail of audio, naturally with a common sense relationship between a good sound and accurate results of measurement. Which is why the number of active stages of the integrated amplifier was reduced to an absolute minimum. It helps to retain transparency and smaller dimensions of the circuit. Accordingly, the section of the preamplifier comprises, in this order, the following: input switches, an analogue attenuator (a digitally controlled network of resistors), which is followed by a low-noise output buffer. Then the signal goes directly to the output stage of the amplifier. The volume control is completely passive, analogue, but digitally controlled... the amplifier has only two gain stages in addition to the buffered port". This concept proved to be an excellent one already in the INT-150 integrated, where we were persuaded by an audio test, having compared the integrated amp and a combination of a Pass power amplifier and a preamplifier. We were convinced already at the time that the integrated amplifier was at least a decent match for the more expensive combination, or even surpasses it when it comes to musicality. Pass therefore probably did not have a hard time convincing himself not to let go of the winning horse. As we have already mentioned, the power stage of the INT-30A is identical to the one in XA-30.5, which means that the circuit is also of a Super-Symmetry structure with a declared strength of 30W per channel at 8 ohms, and 60W at 4 ohms, all in A class, while the maximum power delivered by an amplifier is even several times greater, which is evident from the measurements published for the XA-30.5 model in some of the world audio publications (see www.passlabs.com). This amplifier is envisioned as a device which combines the high-end sound quality with the simplicity of use of cheaper equipment. Just like in a more powerful model, this amplifier has four line inputs (two of them balanced) and two line outputs (one balanced). The power switch is found in the back, which underscores the idea of an amplifier, which is continuously left turned on. The switch on the front panel sends the amplifier into the standby mode, keeping the basic circuits "warm" and enabling them to be ready when needed as soon as possible. This makes sense because the amplifier takes approx. fifteen minutes from the standby mode to get to the full-blooded sound. When turned off, it takes 4 times as much.

Sound

After the INT-150 test, it did not take me long to decide that this amplifier should become a permanent component of my system. In the meantime, the circumstances dictated that the INT-150 leave my listening room, so I was all the happier to once again hear the Pass integrated amp. Generally speaking, I am a fan of integrated amplifiers, particularly those at the top level, because the difference in sound in comparison to the pre/output combinations at the similar price level is minimal, if any, and the buyer will be spared the cost of providing the interconnects and at least one power cable. This translates into a savings of at least several thousand kuna. Not to mention the saved space. The INT-30A came from the

distributor not fully broken-in, primarily due to delays in flight schedules caused by the volcanic dust in the European airspace. Accordingly, the time for the test was somewhat shortened, because the print deadlines were nearing. The environment in which the new Pass integrated amplifier found itself consisted of, among other, my permanent CD player and a speaker (see the frame) and Sonus Faber Liuto Tower speakers, and two speaker cables which are not part of the permanent setting - Wireworld Solstice 6 and the ultimate Cardas Clear Beyond. The test started with casual listening to a live CD of Patricia Barber *Forthnight in France*. Even through such casual listening, it was clear that the INT-30A shares its basic sound characteristics with the firstborn - the INT-150 model. Namely, the audio stage expanded with depth and width, but not only that – the definition and the authenticity of music were somehow the most convincing features. Realizing that recreational listening will not come to pass, I directed my more serious attention to what the Pass integrated amp has to offer. And I realized how interesting and convincing a reproduction of the double bass could be. Bearing in mind the declared power of 30/60 W per channel, the listener somehow expects to see this reflected in a size, volume and impact of bass reproduction. However, even at louder listening levels, the Pass never became breathless. True, with notoriously sluggish and demanding Magneplanars, a slight compression and several warning signs of the potential soundstage collapse could be observed, particularly during the sudden rise of the massive brass orchestra, just like in certain episodes of on the CD where Milt Jackson joins forces with the Clayton/Hamilton Orchestra. Although, in such cases, the several remaining decibels of the available power in the INT-150 model comes in very handy, at normal listening levels, the 30A confidently rules the music material. Moreover, it could be said that it is almost standing aside, letting the music pass through and reach the speakers undisturbed and undeterred. The difference between these two amplifiers is best described as the difference between a strong engine, which shows its best features at high revs, and the mighty V8, which from the low revs is toying with the mass of the car, whatever that is. And such is the attitude toward the music material this integrated amplifier shows, in A-class. Independent and powerful, never pushy, it follows the music, adding just a small piece of its character – reduced to finesse and politeness. The main characteristics emphasized in the INT-150 are definitely present here, too, although some of them are a little more distinct. This certainly relates to the ultra clean but never boring high frequency range, outlined with rich layering and fine reverberation decay, and a musical and natural midband area. To those who have had a chance to socialize with the INT-150 model, perhaps after a longer listening they could begrudge the amplifier for small deficiencies in the timbre of string instruments, and a loss of the physicality in reproduction of the piano. With this model, Pass significantly redefined, if not altogether pushed the envelope, and only the most ardent fans of tube amplifiers could still ask for more texture or timbral purity. An interesting shift occurred when a Cardas Clear Beyond speaker cable found itself between the amplifier and the speaker. With its massive appearance and fully refined sound, Cardas Clear Beyond raises the bar of the possible by several steps, primarily by introducing an absolutely silent and dark background, and a fantastic quiet-loud dynamic ratio, enabling the sound, music and tones, as well as everything else recorded on the sound carrier to reach the listener, or beyond, undisturbed and unrestricted. The emotions and everything else that is part of music and yet not physically written down in the notes and pits on the polycarbonate of the CD, in its fullness and ease gush from the membrane of the speaker in the direction of the listener in a manner that makes even the insane price suddenly almost appropriate. Also, the Pass INT-30A knowledgeably participates in such transfers of halftones that make it, apart from the

listening to the music, a perfectly suitable instrument for its dissection. Luckily, the Pass integrated amp knows how to present its benevolent nature and unobtrusive character even when the system comprised a few cables of totally down-to-earth price, without sacrificing much of its musicality, precision and attention to detail. And that is its good feature.

In conclusion

The cult status held by designers such as Nelson Pass is mostly based on actual merit and past achievements. By having the audacity to put not one but two integrated amplifiers in his recent catalogue, otherwise focused on the top range components and targeting an audience made of predominantly demanding and spoiled audiophiles, Pass demonstrated what it is exactly that makes him great. He does not follow trends; he creates them. And INT-30A will more than simply enhance his well-deserved reputation. Here is an amplifier that is capable of driving the vast majority of loudspeakers at serious volume levels, without neglecting those elements that make the reproduced music a pleasure and a basis for enjoyment.